

## Article

# Mass of the Ages 18–39: The Sudden Revival of the Tridentine Latin Mass and Lessons for a More Robust Post-Conciliar Theological Aesthetics in Liturgy

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**Abstract:** The Tridentine Latin Mass (TLM) is rapidly growing in popularity. The movement that has formed around it has grown so attached to it as to threaten the unity of the Catholic Church. I attended TLMs in multiple distinct settings, studied the worshippers' ordinary theology, and proceeded hermeneutically using the Circle Method. The most useful insight to emerge from this is that the theological aesthetics of the post-Conciliar Mass could be more deeply symbolic and synergistic with Conciliar intellectual theology. The TLM's aesthetics offer worshippers assurances of certainty, but these assurances are empty. Therefore, parishes should facilitate the self-expression of the faithful, both to foster engagement with mystery and to inspire liturgical aesthetics. From these expressions, contextually meaningful symbols will emerge, which, through communal discernment guided by the Holy Spirit, may prove worthy to the task of enhancing liturgical aesthetics.

**Keywords:** Latin Mass; Vatican II; aesthetics; traditional Catholicism; liturgical movement; synodality; art; inculturation; practical theology; hermeneutics



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## 1. Introduction

If one were to spend a single evening out at dinner with new traditionalist Catholic acquaintances, one may very well hear one young man describe his fantasy: high-rise concentration camps in the Australian desert, where all the globe's non-Catholics are to be housed until they should convert to Catholicism. All manner of criticism,<sup>1</sup> progressing from subtle attempts at correction to incisive quips and flabbergasted exclamations, may reveal that he is very seriously committed to this fantasy, ending the night with an apology only for how excited he is about the prospect. One might be chilled to find that one is the only person at this gathering criticizing this coercive vision.

### 1.1. *Worship, Community, and Faith Formation*

Faith is formed through worship. Human worship of the divine, though motivated in the first instance by human devotion to one's god, has the ultimate effect of edifying the worshipper, such that they more closely resemble the ideal that they worship. The worship action forms the worshipper, and the particularities of the worship action affect this formation.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus Christ instructed His gathered followers to do as He did at the Last Supper in remembrance. This instruction was accompanied by His prayer that His followers be one as God is one. In light of Christ's expressed desires, the norm for Christian worship is communal worship, specifically liturgical worship.

Faith is formed communally through this liturgical worship. In Eucharistic liturgies, such as Catholic liturgies, the community is also formed into one through the Eucharist.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.2. *The Tridentine Latin Mass Movement: A Story of Defied Expectations*

Nevertheless, for all of the unifying attributes of the Mass, the Catholic community is divided.<sup>4</sup> The deepest division is between traditionalist Catholics, who generally reject many of the developments in the life of the Catholic Church that have flowed from the Second Vatican Council, and the rest of the Catholic Church. Among these developments are the liturgical reforms implemented to accord with the Council's call for inculturation.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, by many definitions of "traditionalist Catholic", Catholics who prefer the Tridentine Latin Mass (TLM) are traditionalist. While not all TLM-preferring Catholics meet all of the potential criteria for classification as traditionalist, including ideological and theological traditionalism (Marx 2013, pp. 67–72), many, if not most, who attend TLMs are traditionalist in ways beyond simply liturgical preference, which is perhaps unsurprising given the social and informational forces.

Catholics outside of the traditionalist community, despite holding strongly to a wide range of ideologies and preferences,<sup>6</sup> have generally exhibited a "live-and-let-live" attitude toward other Catholics' ideologies and preferences. In the U.S., for example, the Catholic political ethos has been described as one of "inclusive loyalty and dissent" (D'Antonio et al. 2013, p. 56). This attitude befits a church whose name means "according to the whole,"<sup>7</sup> a church that sees all humanity as potential members, regardless of political, philosophical, or any other identity. This is not the case within the traditionalist Catholic community, which has a strong tendency to normatively enshrine their liturgical, political, and other preferences. The exclusive normative statements made by those who prefer the TLM incite reactions from those who are passionate about worship in the vernacular, which plant the seeds of their own normative enshrinements, and thence begins a cycle of disagreement that leads to disunity.

Besides the apparent defiance of the uniting effect of worship, the TLM movement defies expectations in a number of other ways. For one, one might expect the movement to be less popular among younger Catholics. During their formative years, the TLM was imagined as something entirely of the past, something their grandparents barely remembered, something their Catholic school teachers described to them as a dry, minimally engaging, even unpleasant experience.<sup>8</sup> For millennial Catholics, even with constant exposure to other Catholic families through all levels of school, extracurricular activities, and communal life, it was easy to have absolutely no idea that the TLM was still practiced.<sup>9</sup>

On the contrary, among committed Catholics, the strongest demographic for TLM preference is those aged 22–39. If one were to spend any amount of time in various Catholic young adult groups, even in a diverse, immigrant-rich, well-educated metropolis, one would find few groups that do not have a sizeable contingent of traditionalist Catholics who might, after the official meeting ends, discuss their discontent with mainstream Catholic doctrine and liturgy, bemoan any affront to reverence as they define it,<sup>10</sup> and invite newcomers to a "traditional Latin Mass." Some parishes' young adult groups would even be entirely composed of traditionalist Catholics. Even at Eastern Catholic parishes, Catholic young adults are becoming interested in the TLM.<sup>11</sup>

This is an emerging phenomenon. In the United States, it is a ubiquitous, still-accelerating, emerging phenomenon. It represents a discontinuity in U.S. Catholic life. This discontinuity is so pronounced that it prompts a reevaluation of the conceptualization of the reception of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>12</sup> And while it may be a phenomenon that is almost entirely restricted to committed Catholics, it is precisely young adult committed Catholics who will determine what the Catholic Church looks like later in the 21st century. The TLM movement is ubiquitous in North America, and it exerts through social and informational means a strong ideological influence on those within it. It will be a feature of U.S. Catholic life at least as long as millennial Catholics abide. To ignore it is akin to sticking one's head in the sand amidst a stampede. It must be understood.

This is no easy task for as counter-intuitive a trend as worship that appears to be willfully explicitly contextually mismatched.<sup>13</sup> To understand it, one must first understand TLM worshippers' ordinary theology.<sup>14</sup> That will allow an understanding of the

discontinuity and apparent counter-contextuality of the phenomenon. That, in turn, will aid an understanding of the significance of the TLM movement for the Catholic Church. Upon this understanding, a reasoned response may be proposed, enacted, reflected upon, and refined.

## 2. Method and Methodology

The Circle Method<sup>15</sup> is well suited to the task, since inserting, correlating, confronting, and empowering are absolutely necessary, but above all else, because a resolution requires Spirit-inspired, collegially deliberated, communally evaluated insightful action. This method answers the call for liturgical and sacramental theology that accounts for what is happening in the complexities, particularly the social complexities, of the context (Morrill 2021, p. 15). Any understanding of ritual praxis in the TLM prior to the discontinuity of the 2020s must be reevaluated, as liturgical study does not inquire into static ritual but ritual activity (Bell 1992, pp. 48–200).

The process began with insertion, specifically participatory research. The researcher attended 13 TLMs at six churches in six U.S. cities.<sup>16</sup> The social scientific study of ritual and performance appropriately complements the social scientific and practical theological study of the worshippers and the liturgical theological study of ritual and performance (see Morrill 2021, p. 13). Liturgy by its nature is about what the people do (Senn 2006), and this must be studied holistically. Two of the churches studied featured TLMs celebrated by diocesan priests, including one parish serving a Catholic university. Two churches featured TLMs said by the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX), which split from the Catholic Church over a dispute regarding the celebration of the TLM and remains in irregular communion with the Catholic Church. Two churches featured TLMs celebrated by the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter (FSSP), which separated from the SSPX to reconcile with the Catholic Church.

The TLM worshippers were observed as the researcher worshipped alongside them, including the mutual reception of Communion in churches known to be in full communion with the Catholic Church. Upon their exit from the worship space, 73 worshippers were interviewed.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1. Demographics of the TLM Movement

A summary of the demographics, recorded in detail, at these Masses may be of some interest for those interested in the TLM movement. Generally, daily TLMs featured four to five adult women for every adult man.<sup>17</sup> 90% of the adult women wore veils. Of the adult men, 50% were attending alongside an adult woman. Relative to the English-language Masses at analogous times and locations, the TLM congregants appeared to be more of European descent and less of Latin American and other descents. The generational distribution was fairly strongly bimodal, with a significant majority of attendees either retirement-aged or aged 22–35. At Sunday TLMs, these statistical patterns were directionally similar though attenuated in magnitude. To what extent they were attenuated is not clear, as with over 500 worshippers present at a high Mass, precise quantification was not possible.

Some worship contexts featured deviations from this pattern. At an early evening FSSP Mass, 80% of attendees were under 40 years old. The SSPX Masses were also unimodal in age distribution: more of the congregants there tended to be old enough to have had the opportunity to have experienced the TLM as a child or young adult before the introduction of the vernacular Mass than at non-SSPX TLMs. Social veiling norms were more permissive in the university setting: those sitting in the front pews were veiling, while those sitting farther back became increasingly likely not to veil. One group of five female friends featured three veiled women and two unveiled women. Taken together with the interview data, this seems to indicate a liminal curiosity in the TLM among university-aged Catholics. For many of these Catholics, the TLM is still an experiment, while, among Catholics who are older than them, fewer are TLM-curious relative to those who have built an identity around the TLM.

### 3.2. *Alternative Participation*<sup>18</sup>

In the TLM movement, worship is non-verbal. The vast majority of congregants did not verbally respond to the priest. He would turn to the congregation and say “*Dominus vobiscum*”,<sup>19</sup> but only a couple of people would say “*et cum spiritu tuo*.”<sup>20</sup> This seemed to indicate a general lack of understanding of Latin, and for many this held true, but some informants explained they knew the response yet deliberately refrained from saying it aloud, because they felt it was more reverent to stay silent.

They do not see this as a lack of participation, though. They feel that they are participating by following along with the Mass in their 1959 Missals. These books, which explain what is going on in the Mass by providing the Latin being murmured by the priest, the English translation, and a diagram of where the priest is standing and what his hands are doing, are the most reliable way for worshippers to ascertain their temporal position in the progression of the TLM. One informant visiting from out-of-town explained how she viewed liturgical participation at a TLM. She compared the priest to an airplane pilot and the gathered assembly to passengers, the idea being that the priest’s participation in making the worship successful was much more active and that the others present were therefore justified in taking a passive role.

As if on an airplane, the congregants acted as if oblivious to each other, despite being engaged in the same activity. No one responded to a sneeze by saying “*God bless you*.” No congregants were observed looking at other congregants. The congregants seemed to be possessed by a dogged determination to maintain tunnel vision toward the altar and their missals.<sup>21</sup> This was less communal worship than it was parallel worship.<sup>22</sup>

This may partially explain why the TLM movement has only recently exploded in popularity, and why the TLM is particularly popular among younger committed Catholics. A certain desensitization to the presence of others may make it more possible for many people to feel comfortable worshipping in parallel instead of in community. This desensitization may come from Zoom meetings, Zoom classes, and live-streamed liturgies, where the convention is to mute oneself as a presenter speaks uninterrupted, even when the presenter invites minor interruptions. For the generation that grew up texting to communicate, even when discussing intimate matters, participating in worship by silently reading a missal is a less uncanny experience.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, one who has a relationship with God will joyfully acknowledge God’s presence as they encounter it. The “willful ignorance” of the gathered assembly by many of its members<sup>24</sup> suggests that they fail to see God’s presence therein.<sup>25</sup>

### 3.3. *The TLM Movement and Mission*

The theological anthropology of TLM worshippers, which unbendingly subordinates the importance of and attention to their fellow human to the importance of and attention to God, ultimately limits their ability to mediate the *missio Dei*. God loves God’s human creation, so to serve God fully, the priorities of the faithful should align with God’s priorities.<sup>26</sup> TLM churches were observed to fall short of answering their missionary call.<sup>27</sup>

Many churches have less than an integral sense of mission;<sup>28</sup> however, this deficient sense of mission was particularly outstanding in the churches visited. One man who had been going to an SSPX church since the 1980s is a preciously rare example of a self-identified Catholic who saw no value in aid to the poor. He bragged that, at his church, “it’s not about redistribution of wealth. When we have collections, they don’t go to charities; we fix the place up and we pay for the priests.”

One FSSP church just so happened to be holding its lone fundraising event of the year. The purpose was to raise money to send the congregation’s children to a traditionalist Catholic summer camp over 2000 km away.

This makes some sense when one considers that the Society of St. Pius the X and the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter lack the economy of scale that comes with the sheer number of the faithful present in Catholic churches. While this may to some extent explain their lackluster mission, it does not excuse it, because it also serves to highlight the importance

of communion with other Christians, as Church, for Christians' endeavors to act effectively as Christ's hands and feet. When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers. Likewise, when the Christian Church divides itself because of pride and a Western fetishization of uniformity of belief, the Kingdom of God and its foremost beneficiaries, the poor, the marginalized, and those who need an introduction to the God who infinitely loves them, are robbed of their place at the table.

A comprehensive survey of the free literature at these churches, SSPX, FSSP, and diocesan, gave no indication of any outreach ministries. A diocesan parish featured the only observed evidence of any missionary endeavor: an old wooden box with a low-contrast bronze plaque that read "Food for the Poor." It seemed to be a holdover from a previous parish priest's tenure. One would donate through the top of this box, but it was being used primarily as a table. Upon it sat a bright seminarian donation box bedecked with large multi-colored polka dots.

Many Catholics at this parish were proud of the high Sunday Mass attendance, despite their parish's being located in a marginalized neighborhood. At this Mass, it was striking how different the inside of the church looked from the community outside—racially and economically, by education and by ZIP code—despite the parish's location next-door to low-income housing provided by the diocese.<sup>29</sup>

This is no wonder when any happenstance visitor to the church would find a room full of non-responsive people watching a priest murmur unintelligible language inaudibly. The TLM may attract Catholics seeking to deepen their experience of faith, but it repels, even frightens, many outsiders. An uninviting atmosphere acts as a bushel basket around the Light of the World present in the liturgy. History offers an empirical answer to the question of how to make disciples of all nations when the liturgy is unappealing: domination. Colonial domination is an obvious example, but not the only one. One SSPX congregant actually much prefers the Novus Ordo Mass. I asked her why, then, she only goes to TLMs. Standing next to her husband, she answered with a grim smile visible only to me: "marriage".

Liturgy is one of the primary spaces for mission.<sup>30</sup> This knowledge calls for a liturgy of encounter,<sup>31</sup> of encuentro, a liturgy that is deeply symbolic and relational (Guardini 1964, pp. 237–39).<sup>32</sup> The mystery of the liturgy should go deeper than language: it should point seductively at that relationality.

### 3.4. Ordinary Theology and Extra-Ordinary Theology

All 73 informants were asked what they liked so much about the Latin Mass. With few exceptions, they serenely answered, "the reverence." Many of them elaborated saying, "it's not about me; it's about God."<sup>33</sup> This is not an instance of a clever amalgamation of quotes typical when presenting qualitative research; a large majority of informants independently said those exact words. The number of informants who reported viewing the absence of some of the TLM prayers in the Novus Ordo Mass with a hermeneutic of suspicion has informed the researcher's approach, which views their reported ordinary theology with a hermeneutic of suspicion. Though I sought their ordinary theology, I found the theology of one or more shared thought leaders.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, some of the more unique responses were the most helpful hermeneutical keys for understanding the TLM movement.

One retired woman appreciated that she was taking part in the same Mass her grandparents took part in. She values the Latin Mass as part of a chain of memory (Hervieu-Léger 2000). Hers is a beautiful sentiment that imagines acting in unison with the Church of ages past. However, in the Eucharist, we also "remember the future." (Morriil 2000, p. 32). Therefore, an appreciation of diachronic communion<sup>35</sup> must also imagine the Mass her grandchildren celebrate, and the one their grandchildren will celebrate.

A couple of people expressed that the TLM feels to them like Eucharistic adoration. A tempting surface explanation may rest on the implications of worshippers' adoration of God's goodness that is inherent to their liturgical actions (Wolterstorff 2015b), but there

is a more fundamental explanation in the functional significance of these two worship practices. Practitioners of Eucharistic adoration find healing and receive the grace they need for their mission.<sup>36</sup> This is partly because adoration offers the faithful a precious space to practice listening in their prayer. God's word is transformative and life-giving. In a context characterized by constant technologically mediated distractions and a culture of compulsive constant labor, Eucharistic adoration allows many to hear God's word who would not otherwise have any occasion to (Thomas 2024). Eucharistic adoration and the TLM offer worshippers instances of occasion-based worship that allow for spiritual growth,<sup>37</sup> as well as transformation and flourishing, despite incessant demands on attention in every other moment of their week. Young Catholic adults would appreciate an extra 5–15 min for personal Eucharistic prayer following reception of the Eucharist for this purpose exactly.<sup>38</sup> Both practices supply a deep and widespread demand for hesychasm.

### 3.5. Liturgical Aesthetics

Both of these insights are potentially fruitful hermeneutical points of departure, but I will focus on what promises to be the most fruitful. One informant offered her perception as to why Catholics young adults choose the TLM: they are finding the Novus Ordo Mass boring, because everything means exactly what it says it means.<sup>39</sup> A young priest walked up, and she asked him what he thought. He sees them flocking to the beauty they find in the TLM.

This is a criticism the Catholic Church should take seriously. There is a deep synchronicity between the aesthetics of TLM worship and the modern<sup>40</sup> ecclesiology that prevailed before the Second Vatican Council.<sup>41</sup> Before postmodern questions began to accumulate, the Catholic Church could stand more securely in its stewardship of the truth, building on a Scholastic metaphysics using a deductive epistemology. The faithful could rely on the Catholic Church to have an answer to all of the questions posed to it by its modern critics on the basis of some other familiar modern philosophical framework. They could rest assured in institutional expertise, much the same way airline passengers rest assured in their pilot's expertise: they understand their role to be largely passive. Their missals offer the enthusiastic and curious a satisfying window into the mysterious work of the pilot in the same way the digital seatback map display might.<sup>42</sup> This paternal guide to Catholic practice mirrors the pre-Conciliar Church's implicit message to the faithful: "just trust the professionals, and you can follow along if you like." Their message constituted an allowance for comfortable ignorance.

This synergy ought to be no surprise. *Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi.*<sup>43</sup> Liturgical language transforms its members,<sup>44</sup> for better or for worse. Imagination from liturgy<sup>45</sup> links the two, shaping one's perception of reality, which influences one's actions.

### 3.6. Why Here?<sup>46</sup> Why Now?

The enduring features of U.S. culture are disproportionately rooted in the Victorian era and the Post-War years. Americans collectively experienced these times in a way that juxtaposed them to the years where survivors had to face the death of people they knew and loved in the U.S. Civil War and the Second World War. These periods' lasting influence on U.S. culture is particularly pronounced in cultural Christmas traditions. Christmas comes at a time when people across the higher latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere seek comfort from darkness and the depression and existential uncertainty it brings. It is precisely in this existential uncertainty and darkness that they most turn to traditions that form a chain of memory to the times of recovery from collective trauma. For a pattern-finding species like ourselves, that is how we experience winter, as we wonder "Will the sun, which allows my family to eat, ever return?"

The pandemic provoked a similar existential fear: "will I ever get to see my communities again, or will my social experience continue to wane? How long must this season last until I am gainfully employed?" These questions are particularly urgent for young adults given their stage of life.<sup>47</sup> The vast majority of interviewees had been attending

TLMs for three years or less, which, given that the research was conducted in April 2023, aligns exactly with the onset of the pandemic. The pandemic death toll in the U.S. is higher than that of the Civil War and World War II combined.<sup>48</sup> And in those periods of recovery from trauma, the Mass was celebrated in Latin.<sup>49</sup> In the midst of existential uncertainty, there is comfort in the certainty that a modern, pre-Conciliar Church would offer.

This certainty, however, is built on a foundation of sand. The Catholic Church cannot answer every question anymore, if for no other reason than because new questions are being asked more quickly than they can be adequately answered. To vanquish uncertainty, answers have to work in every epistemological foundation. But the fleeting nature of certainty ought to be no surprise to the faithful. Jesus warned His disciples that there would be plenty of discomfort because they were His disciples. To imitate Christ is to have nowhere to rest one's head, nowhere to rest one's mind (Mt 8:20).

What Christ did promise was an advocate. The Holy Spirit brings gifts that allow us to develop a mature faith, a faith that needs no basis for certainty, because that is the very nature of faith. **She** is a foundation of stone. On this pneumatological foundation, we can expand, empower, and imagine.

### 3.7. *Imagination for Liturgy*<sup>50</sup>

It bears repeating: the Catholic Church must take the aesthetic criticism of the Novus Ordo Mass seriously. The most recent three pontificates have taken different approaches in the hopes of encouraging a liturgical practice that accords with the spirit of the Council, and yet the movement not only persists but is at a numerical apex and continues to grow. The ineffectiveness of the three approaches suggests that something about the Novus Ordo Mass may underly the ongoing process in which worshippers discover their affinity for the TLM. The discontinuity of the TLM's popular resurgence recommends a response to liturgical traditionalism under a new paradigm.

Considering that aesthetics is the normative science of objective beauty (García-Rivera 1999), a theological aesthetic approach may be helpful. As has been empirically demonstrated through the research findings, worshippers are finding a certain beauty in the TLM that is not present in the post-Conciliar Mass. The Novus Ordo Mass may be able to benefit from the incorporation of deeper symbols, symbols which fully allow mystery while fully emphasizing the participatory call and true nature of the liturgy.<sup>51</sup> This is not to detract from the wealth of signals within the Novus Ordo Mass, nor its intricate web of Scriptural allusions. Increased awareness of these allusions and their beauty is part of an inoculation against modernist extremism and liturgical division. Thankfully, there are resources available to educate people about the depth of the Novus Ordo Mass.<sup>52</sup> Awareness may be fostered not only through cognitive pathways but through visually experienced liturgical performance. A partial remedy may consist of ancient symbols performed more grandiosely and expressively. The modernist enshrinement of the rational over the ritual, in ignorance of the ritual nature of human beings (Han 2020), is still culturally prevalent, at least in the West. This modern negligence of ritual explains the smallness of the gestures in the TLM but also the general absence of ritual in extra-liturgical settings, which makes the presence of ritual in the TLM all the more resonant. Ritual performed with undeniable commitment in the post-Conciliar Mass would be all the more resonant.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, there is room for even greater symbolic depth. The Mass should exude a synergy between Conciliar intellectual theology and liturgical theological aesthetics that is at least as strong as the synergy between the theological aesthetics of the TLM and pre-Conciliar intellectual theology.<sup>54</sup> *Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*. This causal sequence is providential and innate.<sup>55</sup>

These symbols should speak to the present context. They must, therefore, address the underlying unresolved uncertainty that pervades the present context.

Philip Salim Francis' work offers a model for how this may be done. He studied students at Bob Jones University, an academic institution that exemplifies modernist Christian thinking. These students participated in a program in which evangelical university stu-

dents expressed themselves through art in a natural area. He found that “the arts unsettled the evangelical practices of certainty, offering comfort and form to fledgling practices of uncertainty.”<sup>56</sup>

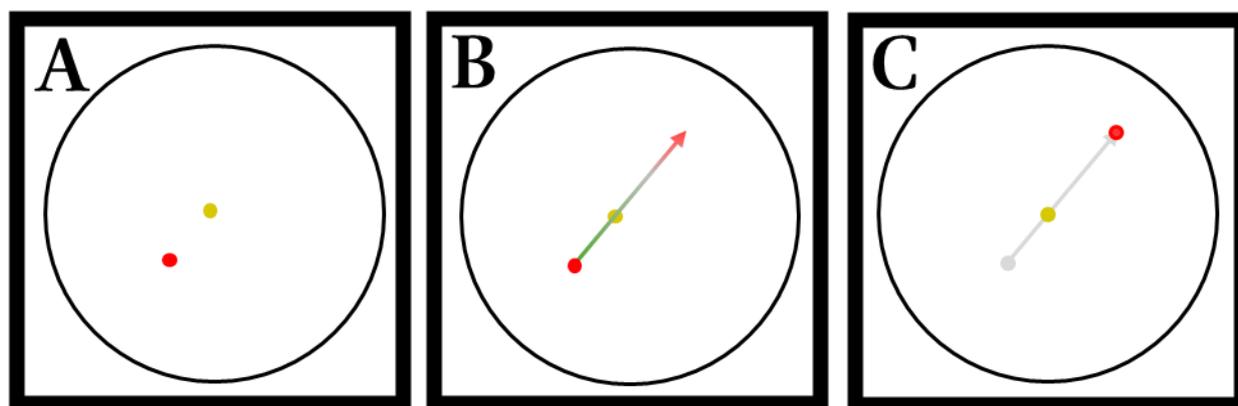
### 3.8. A Proposed Solution That Integrates Treatment, Prevention, and a Flourishing Liturgy

Faith communities are suffering from the division that can be traced to the faithful’s unresolved uncertainty. Catholic parishes should be organizing similar initiatives. This would be a meaningful step toward shepherding the faithful away from paths that lead to schism.

Lest the reader think this is hyperbole, a vignette from the research is in order. I developed a particularly close rapport with an older woman who goes to diocesan TLMs but not SSPX TLMs, even though they would have sometimes been more convenient for her. Her passionate desire to do the right thing by God shone particularly brightly. Seeing it in her helped me identify the same desire in other TLM attendees. Over breakfast, I asked her, as gently as possible, “if you were forced to choose between the Latin Mass and communion with Rome, which would you choose?” She thought about it carefully. After a few seconds of reflection, she said, “I would choose the Latin Mass. I would.” Despite her ardent desire to abide by the Catholic Church’s teaching, her attachment to the TLM prevails.

She is representative of the typical worshipper in the TLM movement. Where there is not already schism in this movement, there is a latent potential for schism.

The faithful enter the movement in an effort to live their faith more deeply, “to be more Catholic.” That is how the movement is being sold to them. The tragic result is that they become less Catholic (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. A Conceptualized Representation of the Path to Traditionalist Catholicism.** This figure shows a common trajectory for Catholics who grow attached to the TLM and the ideology of traditionalist Catholicism. In (Panel A), the gold dot represents the Catholic “ideal”,  $I_C$ , and the red dot represents a particular Catholic’s position in praxiological space (represented and arbitrarily bounded by the outer circle) relative to  $I_C$ . Notably, there is distance between them. Upon experiencing a particular conversion or receiving some education, the Catholic in question decides to reduce the distance between their position and  $I_C$ , proceeding along a vector in the direction of  $I_C$  (Panel B). They all too often continue to proceed along that vector even after they have passed  $I_C$ , to the point where they are farther from  $I_C$  than when they began their movement (Panel C).

In this moment of liquid modernity, as clearly defined societal roles become increasingly fleeting, people turn to identity for psychological stability (Baumann 2012). They have found identity as part of a counterculture, namely, traditionalist Catholicism. In an oft-repeated pattern (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 1997, p. 129; Adorno 1994), their counterculture is actually a recapitulation of U.S. culture. For example, they worship God as if individuals. Through social contagion within the TLM movement, they become extreme, even to the point of fantasizing about religious violence. They come as normal Catholics

curious about the aesthetics of the TLM. They stay because of the sense of community, formed through a sense of unity against the idea of Pope Francis and other imagined affronts and threats to orthodoxy. Nothing visible below the horizon of the future suggests any incentive strong enough to motivate them to leave.<sup>57</sup>

Therefore, the best solution available is to limit the influx of Catholics into this movement.<sup>58</sup> Parish initiatives for artistic expression to resolve uncertainty-based anxiety<sup>59</sup> are key in helping the faithful avoid the near occasion of schism. As these activities are conducted, and the faithful express themselves through art,<sup>60</sup> the Holy Spirit will have an opportunity to impart meaning through them. There is no better way to find symbols that speak to contextually prevalent stressors,<sup>61</sup> particularly symbols that act as a bridge from uncertainty to relationality, mercy, and joy in Christ.<sup>62</sup> The Holy Spirit will guide the propagation of these symbols, and, with the deliberate investment of effort, the often centuries-long process of grassroots development of adequate liturgical theological symbols can be accelerated.<sup>63</sup> In this way, the ideas from the parishes engaged in this strategy will aid other parishes facing the same issues. This is a relatively<sup>64</sup> safe<sup>65</sup> path toward imagining greater symbolic depth for the liturgy, as collective discernment aided by the Holy Spirit will determine which symbols merit liturgical inclusion.

#### 4. Conclusions

The resurgent attachment to the TLM is a threat to the unity of the Catholic Church. The aforementioned vignette suggests that overt attempts to roll back access to the TLM may threaten that unity as well.<sup>66</sup> The least harmful course of action is to address the root causes of Catholics' entry into the TLM movement.

The first factor is the prevalence of the idea that TLM Catholics are inherently more devout and that the progression to greater devotion happens primarily through worship. God tells God's people otherwise. Increased devotion to God is accompanied by increased efforts to do God's will. God expresses God's will thus: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Mt 9:13, quoting from Hos 6:6). God prefers that God's devotees prioritize works of mercy. The relative value of works of mercy to works of sacrifice is not clear, but this variable can be denoted as factor  $x$ , which is known to be greater than 1, so much greater that God feels comfortable speaking in prophetic hyperbole of  $x$  approaching infinity. The precise value of  $x$  may be left to personal discernment, but for those who are truly and informedly devoted to God, for every unit of increase they practice in works of sacrifice, they should practice a corresponding  $x$  units of increase in works of mercy. Closer adherence to the *lex orandi* is measured through closer adherence to the *lex vivendi*. Without more readily observable progress in the latter, one is right to question whether any progress made in the former is real or merely imagined.

God deserves our worship, but God desires our formation. Worship forms the worshipper to better serve God in God's desire for mercy. When they receive the Eucharist, worshippers become increasingly more like Christ, more able to act mercifully, to be the hands of God. An important aspect of imitation of Christ is Jesus' witness to God's love, even in the face of anxiety, remembering how Jesus witnessed to God's love by His crucifixion, in the face of the agony He experienced in the garden.

Worship should form Christians to witness to God's salvific love despite unresolved anxiety. Liturgical symbols contextually appropriate to the West, a global region wrought by anxiety, a negative emotion in response to uncertainty, should speak to this unresolved uncertainty, from which the TLM movement (over-)promises a refuge.<sup>67</sup> Beauty speaks to human emotions most effectively, so the most effective solution will be an aesthetic one. The findings above demonstrate that a superficial assessment of aesthetics will not suffice. A deep comprehension of aesthetics is needed because liturgical aesthetics have practical effects on Christian praxis. When parishes organize initiatives where the faithful express themselves in art, parishioners will resolve their anxiety not necessarily intellectually, but aesthetically. Some of these aesthetic resolutions will resonate more broadly. The Church can propagate these artistic responses, and collective discernment aided by the Holy Spirit

will determine which symbols merit adoption. These may be additions to the liturgy or simply modifications to the environment. It is not for this paper to suggest specific aesthetic modifications to the liturgy. Rather, this is a question for further theological conversation, empirical research into the resonance of specific liturgical aesthetic permutations with the faithful, and, above all, the creativity and discernment of the People of God.

Such human participation in the work of the divine is the essence of the spirit of liturgical worship. This work is ongoing, and the tasks called for continue to evolve with the needs of the day (see Mt 6:11). To do the work required of them as the hands and feet of Christ, the faithful must be nourished by the appropriate Food for the journey. Today the human–divine collaboration called for is to holistically craft that shared meal—food, environment, and dialogue—so that the faithful are formed and strengthened sufficiently to do God’s merciful work on earth.

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## Notes

- 1 This can be predicated on [The Second Vatican Council 1965](#) 5 or, if one prefers, an appeal to human decency.
- 2 Practice leads to reflection, which leads to revised practice. Humans naturally tend to operate in this way. This pattern forms the basis for a great deal of theological method; see, for example, ([Browning \[1991\] 1996](#); [Senn 2000](#); [Smith 2009](#); [Marx 2020](#)).
- 3 See Eucharistic Prayers II, III, and IV, as well as Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation I and II in *The Roman Missal* (2011).
- 4 Even as they are united; see ([Fink 1990](#)), who posits the intriguing idea that Christians are united at a deep level, even as they are divided on a surface level. The division is growing to be far deeper than is healthy, though, particularly within a shared faith tradition.
- 5 Of course, these reforms began well before the Council, which represented the foremost fruit of the liturgical renewal movement, though neither its beginning (1909) nor its end (as the centennial edition of *Worship* is sure to highlight, the movement abides); see, for example, ([Senn 2006](#), pp. 305–7, 319–23).
- 6 In explicitly political terms, this includes everything from ardent and active advocacy for policies in line with Catholic social teaching ([Thomas 2023a](#), pp. 354–62) to Catholic members of Congress whose politics are wholly libertarian.
- 7 The word “catholic” derives from kata (according to) + holos (the whole).
- 8 Of course, God is present in an especially real way in the Eucharistic celebration, even when, as is the case in the TLM, the Mass includes no epiclesis. God’s special presence in the liturgy only contributes to the paradox that is the division within the Catholic Church over the liturgy.
- 9 For an example of the complacency possible in this era before the precipitous ascent of the TLM’s popularity, see ([Pecklers 2009](#), pp. 23–46).
- 10 For the importance (and non-importance) of particularly held definitions of reverence, see ([Fagerberg 2023](#)).
- 11 There is stunningly little evidence in the academic literature to support this phenomenon that most U.S. (and, in all likelihood, U.K. and, to a lesser extent, broader global Anglosphere-resident) committed Catholic young adults are so acutely aware of. However, it is suggested by ([Cieslik and Phillips 2022](#), p. 50), as well as ([Rymarz 2022](#)).
- 12 A conceptualization gainfully communicated by ([Roy-Lysencourt 2022](#)).
- 13 For the merits of contextually tailored worship, see (Acts 10–11; [Pecklers 2009](#), p. 21; [Schreiter 1985](#), pp. 1–30); or nearly any other scholarly theological source on the subject, as it represents the resounding consensus.
- 14 That is, the theology postulated and held by ordinary Christians (or, more broadly adherents of any religion). This term and concept are developed by ([Astley 2002](#)). Worshippers’ own understanding of their liturgical practice must be included in any scholarly liturgical hermeneutical exercise, particularly one of such a puzzling phenomenon ([Morrill 2021](#), pp. 21–88).
- 15 ([Froehle and Koll 2019](#), pp. 181–203). This method involves five movements of paired actions: inserting and identifying, assessing and analyzing, correlating and confronting, expanding and empowering, and the collectively exercised evaluating and summarizing. This final step will take place once the strategy outlined below has been implemented by practitioners and parish leaders. For those who are open to collaboration and/or evaluation of the proposed measures, see the corresponding author details.
- 16 These cities were all in the same region, a region that will remain unspecified so as to restrict identifying information.

- 17 Obviously, these gender ratios exclude the very many dependent children present at daily Masses.
- 18 Much of the theology of traditional Catholics observed through this project is fairly common knowledge for the well-acquainted (e.g., their conviction that lay hands should not touch the Eucharist or their disdain for dancing priests and other congregants' attire; see Marx, "Ritual in the Age of Authenticity" for an in-depth treatment), so the focus here is on those aspects which cannot be ignored in a hermeneutical treatment of the TLM movement and on those that may be illuminated through this particular research.
- 19 The Lord be with you.
- 20 "And with your spirit". It is this, the celebrant's interactions with all who are present, that is intended to encourage the faithful's participation, as detailed in (Turner 2021, pp. 33–81). The concelebration of the faithful symbolizes the sacrifice of the Mass (Turner 2021, pp. 83–121), which the TLM movement views as the overwhelmingly primary characteristic of the liturgy.
- 21 This represents a mournfully flawed approach to the liturgy, the purpose of which is to not ignore the world (Fagerberg 2016, p. 96), much less those with whom one worships.
- 22 Parallel worship is still liturgical (Wolterstorff 2015b, p. 8), though it is obviously rare for liturgical action to be non-communal.
- 23 For a discussion of how intrapersonal and interpersonal skills are affected by the sudden onset of videoconferencing as a medium of social gathering, see (Joia and Lorenzo 2021, p. 2531).
- 24 This assertion is based in part on in-depth interviews in which TLM worshippers reported a certain cultivated lack of awareness of other worshippers present.
- 25 Of course, as Robert Feduccia explores further in yet-unpublished work, God's presence is in the church as it sings (psalit) and prays (supplicat) (The Second Vatican Council 1963, p. 7). It is questionable whether the people gathered in silence sing in the sense of psalit and pray in the sense of supplicat or if their prayer and song, internalized, formal, and solemn, are better described using the words "cantat" and "orat."
- 26 For more on the missionary orientation of liturgy, see (Fagerberg 2016, pp. 4ff).
- 27 Of the six elements of mission as prophetic dialogue (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, pp. 348–95), they were observed to excel at one (contemplative), pass in another (witness), and perform poorly in three (justice, inculturation, and reconciliation). The research conducted was inconclusive with regard to the sixth (interreligious dialogue).
- 28 For a sense of mission that is integral, see, for example, (Padilla 1986; Benedict XVI 2009).
- 29 This indicates a rejection of the sacramental grace that transforms the community of the faithful into one of prophetic disciples that is empowered to transform the oppressive structures surrounding them, thus uniting and reconciling those whom these structures have isolated (Bretanha Junker 2014, pp. 60–143). One such isolated person was observed at worship. A devout elderly Vietnamese woman attended daily TLMs because she lived in the adjacent diocesan-provided housing. She passionately loved God and appreciated the intimate encounter with God in the Mass. She had no car, but she lived next to the church. Despite her preference for Mass to be in a language she actually knew, she went every day. One day, her phone rang loudly and announced "Unknown Caller." This prompted a rare acknowledgment by a TLM worshipper of her fellow worshipper: an intentionally loud, disapproving smack of the lips, decidedly **not** a realization of this vision of God's sacramental grace.
- 30 Yet not in such a way that the liturgy is simply instrumental toward this end (Bretanha Junker 2014). In the liturgy, rituals serve as a moment to reflect on the incremental progress the worship community has made toward liberation and then to recommit itself, in a faithful communal ritual setting, to doing God's work in the world (Empereur and Kiesling 1990), or, put another way, to mediating God's sending of Godself to the margins.
- 31 For one conception of a liturgy of encounter, see (Morrill 2012).
- 32 This may be one path to the profoundly inter-relational human collectives that (Rogers-Vaughn 2016, pp. 211–28) calls for to remedy the "privatization of suffering" (100-3) that has increasingly come to plague the mental health of U.S. Americans.
- 33 The very inclusion of a single liturgical second-person address to God implies that God participates in the liturgy as listener. Intercession implies that God will hear worshippers favorably and bring the Kingdom and its fruits of flourishing (Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*). Thus, the "about-ness" of the Mass cannot be isolated to God, nor to the worshipper. In the liturgy, all exist in relation to each other.
- 34 The entire TLM movement seemed to care about the same thing at the same time, with the shared outrage or obsession rotating on a three-day cycle. Interviewees across the cities of the region were talking about the same thing as an extreme all-traditionalist Catholic young adult group in an unconnected region. The leaders of this group have since created a WhatsApp group that conglomerates other Catholic young adult groups on WhatsApp across the latter region. There is a similar group for all the traditionalist Catholics in New York. These groups explain some, but not all, of the TLM movement's collective awareness.
- 35 See (Morrill 2021, p. 53) for additional comments on the importance of considering communion diachronically and synchronically.
- 36 (Thomas 2023b). Those interested in citing this assertion should note that this source contains a foretaste of a fuller communication of the research into the lived theology of Eucharist adoration that is to come in the academic literature.
- 37 For more on this concept, see (Foster 1994) and (Morrill 2021, p. 101).

38 (Thomas 2024), as well as Thomas, unpublished findings. These findings support calls for greater emphasis on silence in the liturgy, such as that in Pecklers (2009, pp. 40–46).

39 Her criticism echoes that of Peckler, *The Genius of the Roman Rite*, 87: didactic efforts may come at the cost of disrupting the flow of worship.

40 A note on terminology may be important here, given that the traditionalist Catholic community often uses the word “modern” to denote what would in academic circles be described as “post-modern.” Here, the term “modern” refers to absolutizing worldviews that envision utopia as possible if complete truth as to how the world works is discovered and adopted by all. Modern thought prevailed in Europe roughly from the sixteenth century to the mid-twentieth century and is fundamental to scientific progress, but also to colonialism, fascism, and totalitarianism.

41 Authenticity is something many of the faithful are seeking in their worship. A particularly effective hermeneutical lens for identifying authenticity is harmony, particularly between inner and outer experiences. See Marx, *Authentic Liturgy*.

42 Those in the TLM movement love the knowledge they get from their missals that they would not otherwise have; there is a certain sense of initiation when they begin using them. They are happy to buy young inquisitive newcomers a monthly 1959 missal and initiate them into the knowledge of what is happening in the Tridentine Latin Mass.

43 This oft-repeated liturgical maxim was formulated by Prosper of Aquitaine, *Praeteritorum Sedis Apostolicae Episcoporum Auctoritates, de Gratia Dei et Libero Voluntatis Arbitrio* 8, with *supplicare* used instead of *orare*, and evolved as detailed in (Johnson 2013, pp. 1–23), including the common embellishment of “*lex vivendi*.”

44 Bretanha Junker, *Prophetic Liturgy*.

45 Thomas H. Schattauer has developed this concept, building from his (Schattauer 2019, pp. 44–45).

46 “Here” in this case refers to the United States, where the study was conducted. The TLM movement is by no means restricted to the United States. However, the U.S. elements of the movement currently possess a claim to global leadership that is difficult to dispute. Thus, an understanding of the TLM movement in the U.S. facilitates an understanding of the movement elsewhere, both because the movement elsewhere takes cues from successes in the U.S., and because societal factors in the United States that have created an environment favorable to the rise of the TLM movement may be present to various extents in many other global contexts.

47 This might be a factor in explaining the difference in attachment to the TLM between young adult worshippers aged 25–39 versus those aged 18–22. At the latter age, either one’s university offers social and (delayed) employment assurances or one has not left one’s community behind to go to college.

48 “COVID Data Tracker”, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed 20 December 2023, <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home>; “Death and Dying”, National Park Service, accessed 20 December 2023, [https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/national\\_cemeteries/death.html](https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/national_cemeteries/death.html); “Research Starters: Worldwide Deaths in World War II”, The National WWII Museum, accessed 20 December 2023, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-worldwide-deaths-world-war>.

49 Practice of the TLM as a romantic return to past worship makes even more sense when considering the traditionalist Catholic social imagination of history. Multiple informants claimed that the TLM constitutes Christian liturgy as originally celebrated. While this obviously reflects an incomplete understanding of early Christian history, as the use of the Latin language would have been totally nonsensical given the very demographics of the Church, not to mention the demographics of its persecutors, it also reflects a deep search for authenticity. In some ways, the traditionalist Catholic liturgical–historical imagination reflects a medievalist fallacy in the conceptualization of liturgy.

50 This concept too comes from Schattauer, building on his “Training Liturgical Imagination.”

51 As called for in (Pecklers 2009, pp. 40–46).

52 For example, (Turner and Martens 2023; Sri 2011).

53 Especially if that ritual is more contextually relevant. This point is developed in the following paragraphs.

54 For the as-yet incompleteness of the realization of the vision of the Second Vatican Council, see (Pecklers 2009, p. 39ff).

55 Humans reason emotionally and, when asked to explain their reasoning, backfill with logic (Haidt 2001, pp. 814–34). Emotions are more easily shaped by beauty than by reasoning.

56 (Francis 2017, p. 141). Original emphasis.

57 Nevertheless, there is hope on a personal scale in the short term and at a larger scale in the long term. Hope for change is predicated upon encounter, both in the liturgy and the liturgy outside liturgy (see Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, but also obviously (Fagerberg 2018)). Those who remain in their TLM community do so precisely because it is a community. The only way they will find their way out is if those Catholics on the opposite side of the divide offer them relationship and a place in their community. The path back to ecclesial wholeness necessitates a liturgical and extra-liturgical ecclesial disposition that is expressively ready for encounter.

- 58 As liturgical action leads to ethical action (Senn, *The People's Work*), stemming the flow, especially of young adults, into the TLM movement, will also address the crisis of chauvinism led by the traditionalist Catholic movement, which is more comfortable with violence as a means of religious persuasion than a healthy spiritual formation would have them be.
- 59 See the diversity of effects art has on human action in (Wolterstorff 1980) and the further development of this principle in religious, worshipping, and liturgical contexts in (Wolterstorff 2015a).
- 60 One can already imagine detractors ridiculing artistic expression in parish settings. To them, one might address a case on purely modernist terms. The idea that form and function are normatively causally related is a very modernist one. The Creator made humans an artistic species, as is empirically observable. It would be folly at best, sin at worst, to rebel against how we were made.
- 61 These symbols may richly express the wounded innocence (García-Rivera 2003) of a collapsed sense of certainty, and through this expression provide catharsis. These symbols may draw on Scripture, as the corpus of symbolism present in the Mass does (Daniélou [1956] 1964). Particularly resonant may be Scriptural instances wherein Jesus disrupts not only the disciples' theretofore unquestioned preconceived notions but also those of the powerful, who were prouder and less intimate with Jesus. This distinction is meaningful in how the faithful conceptualize attachment to certainty relative to a humble relationship with God and may thus constitute a foundation for such contextual liturgical symbolism.
- 62 Two ideas flow from a view of liturgy as divine datum. The first is that liturgy produces fruit by shaping worshippers' attitudes. The second is that it should not be subject to hasty manipulation (Daneels 2003, pp. 7–26). A pneumatological inspiration of liturgical symbolism is concordant with a view of liturgy as divine datum.
- 63 This progression from artistic expression to ritual is a natural progression, given that, as noted in (Morrill 2021, 145–159), the irresolvable ambivalences of ritual mirror those of life.
- 64 There are risks in both the pre-Conciliar and post-Conciliar liturgies (Marx 2013, pp. 372–24). These ought to be weighed in considering the risks of a liturgy that takes seriously the criticisms motivating the oppositional polemics by the supporter of each.
- 65 Pecklers, in *The Genius of the Roman Rite*, notes the consequences of hasty liturgical experimentation. These experiments loom large in the memory and historical consciousness—and even the propaganda—of traditionalist Catholics. This underscores the importance of an extra-liturgical space for experimentation.
- 66 Of course, a balance should be found in each local church, because the continued availability of the TLM will draw more Catholics into a potentially separatist movement.
- 67 This is the second factor. A third may be the desire of the faithful to participate in authentic worship (see (Marx 2013) and (Congar 2011)), a factor which needs no remedy, particularly when the other two factors are addressed properly.

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