

Why the Attempt to Ban the Latin Mass Is Failing

The inability to shut down the traditional Latin Mass reflects the difference between power and authority in the papacy.



[Darrick Taylor](#)

There has been much chatter on the interwebs lately about possible further restrictions being imposed upon the celebration of the classical Roman Rite, or the Traditional Latin Mass, as it is often called. However, it appears that such **rumors** are not going to materialize for now, even as the Vatican liturgical office devises **new ways** to express its contempt for those who attend celebrations of the TLM, in addition to the continued banning of such celebrations in cathedrals and parishes.

Having said that, it does appear that the push to excise the older Mass from the body of the Church might be running out of steam. Recently, Larry Chapp, a conservative Catholic who is not necessarily a fan of the TLM, wrote an **article** for the National Catholic Register claiming the effect of Traditionis Custodes was to deepen divisions in the Church. Perhaps more surprisingly, two writers for the more liberal Catholic La Croix have **penned** separate articles claiming the restrictions imposed by Traditionis Custodes have actually sparked interest among young Catholics, having a sort of **Streisand effect** on the situation. There is still

more the Vatican could do to clamp down on the old liturgy, but as I write these words, the Vatican seems to be in a holding pattern.

However, even the rumored restrictions don't attempt more than to prevent it being celebrated in parishes and leave untouched the priestly societies that offer the Latin Mass. Perhaps they are hoping someone like Cardinal Parolin, who supports their cause, will succeed Pope Francis. For now, however, it seems they are content to "herd" TLM Catholics toward those societies and segregate them from the rest of the faithful. These measures, just as those preventing pilgrims from having the TLM celebrated in a cathedral, are "nasty and stupid" as one [source](#) has stated. But none of these abolish the celebration of the old Mass entirely, which Pope Francis clearly articulated as his goal in *Traditionis Custodes*.

One of the things I think this whole episode should demonstrate is, paradoxically, **the practical weakness of the papacy**. I know it may not seem like it to Latin Mass Catholics, but if the worst the Vatican can do to them is make them hold the Latin Mass outdoors rather than indoors, that is not a flex of its muscle. It is a revelation of its impotence. Those in the Vatican who want the old Mass banned are becoming desperate. [According](#) to journalist Damian Thompson, the undersecretary of the Dicastery for Divine Worship is begging Francis to promulgate a ban on the TLM in parishes, but Francis has not agreed as yet.

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Francis could change his mind at any moment, but even if he does, all of this activity suggests *Traditionis Custodes* is failing in its stated [purpose](#), which was to force "those who are rooted in the previous form of celebration...to return in due time to the Roman

Rite promulgated by Saints Paul VI and John Paul II.” How is that possible? After all, Pope Francis has created a cult of what my friend Peter Kwasniewski has called “hyperpapalism” around him and has removed bishops without explanation. How is it that he and his advisers cannot merely carry out this policy?

The reason for this might be hard for Catholics to understand. Often, when discussing the problem of heresy being taught by this or that official or cleric, one complaint I often hear is: “He is the pope—why doesn’t he just put a stop to it?” **Catholics revere the authority of the pope, which is divine, but they need to understand that there is a difference between authority and power. The former does not always translate into the latter, even if the former is divine.**

There is a saying that one can be “in office but not in power.” **The authority of the papacy is unchanging, but its power as an institution waxes and wanes throughout history.** Until the eighth century, popes were subjects of Byzantine emperors and papal documents bore the name of the reigning emperor rather than the pope. The papacy was nearly obliterated by Napoleon’s Italian conquests in the 1790s. In the Middle Ages, the papacy was one of the wealthiest institutions in Europe, with thousands of priests directly at its disposal. Today, it is an institution employing seven hundred and seventy-five people that is constantly strapped for cash and often operates at a financial loss.

What this means is that **the papacy, for all its authority, is more dependent on the voluntary cooperation of bishops and laity than at any point since before the conversion of Constantine.** In fact, the clergy are, as a body, almost wholly dependent upon the laity in terms of funding, either through donations or through government subsidies as in Germany. While it is true Francis has removed a few bishops as if

they are employees, he cannot do this to them as a body, since he is dependent upon their cooperation to carry out his wishes.

The fact is that the pope cannot really “govern” a global institution like the Church on a day-to-day basis, given the material limitations of the papacy. **The Vatican’s inability to impose its will is not unique to the case of traditionalists.** One only need recall John Paul II’s [Ex Corde Ecclesiae](#), his Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, and how it became a dead letter almost as soon as it was [promulgated](#), to understand why. The reason why is simple: neither the pope nor the bishops possessed the leverage to make Catholic university administrators and faculty, most of whom opposed the core tenets of the document, implement its principles.

Faithful Catholics rightly bemoaned this when it came to papal initiatives like *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, but the progressive prelates in the Vatican are currently experiencing the practical limits of papal authority as well. I am guessing they figured when a pope who shared their concerns was elected, all they had to do was get him to issue a document and people would naturally fall into line. The reality is very different. I don’t mean to suggest the Vatican is completely powerless; **it still possesses its powers of spiritual discipline, most obviously, and with its messaging ability, it can put pressure on the recalcitrant.**

Despite this, it cannot pressure those who are independent of the Vatican to act in a way they do not wish, especially those who are financially independent of it. The most obvious example of this is the German “Synodal Way,” whose coffers are filled because of the German church tax. Of course, Pope Francis likely doesn’t want to stop that runaway train, but could he do so even if he wanted to? He has accepted the voluntary resignation of an entire episcopate during his reign, but excommunicating almost the entirety of one is another matter. The Vatican is not only dependent upon their hierarchy

financially but is deathly afraid of schism. As much as it may gall serious Catholics, the Vatican doesn't have a great deal of room to maneuver if it wants to avoid a major schism.

This is not an ideal situation, to say the least. But the Church, for all that it remains a “perfect society,” will run on more voluntary lines in the future. **It simply lacks the coercive power to simply make people adhere to doctrines they dislike, or expel members who want to remain in the Church despite rejecting this or that teaching.** This is a serious problem and a very uncomfortable reality because the Church is not a voluntary institution. It means that instead of trying to herd together factions with contradictory ideas of what the Catholic Faith is, as it has done for many decades now, **the Church will operate more through the voluntary commitment of its members to a common set of beliefs than its ability to enforce adherence to its commands.**

Both sides in the post-Conciliar “unpleasantness” realize this at some level, and that is partly what the struggles over this or that doctrine are about—which set of shared beliefs will define the Church. In many ways, this battle is symbolized by the two local Churches that have the means to alleviate the Vatican's financial problems: the American and the German. (Though that may be [changing](#) in the case of the Germans.)

The Latin Mass is a symbol for one side in this conflict, and its adherents are unfortunate casualties of it. The good news is that this battle cannot go on forever, and by all accounts it appears it is being decided in favor of the American side. A recent [article](#) in The New York Times highlighted the “conservative” nature of most young priests and the lack of those who want to follow the agenda of Pope Francis. They are correct. The efforts of Catholic “progressives” to eliminate markers of traditional, orthodox Catholic identity could only succeed if they had something to replace them with. But they do not.

Some prelates who covet the papal throne, like Cardinal Parolin, may want to try and continue the Church-emptying path of the past decade-plus. But something tells me that most of those who share that ambition want to have a flock to lead if they manage to gain the Chair of Peter. If, as I hope, this means that orthodoxy and tradition will ultimately win out, those future leaders will still have to govern the Church in a manner far different from that of their predecessors.

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