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Cardinal Müller Criticizes 'Traditionis Custodes' in Preface of New Book

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Cardinal Gerhard Müller (Photo credit: EP)

Pope Francis' motu proprio *Traditionis Custodes* (Guardians of Tradition) that aims to severely restrict the traditional form of the Roman rite is "questionable in content and form," Cardinal Gerhard Müller has written in the preface of a new book.

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He has also said ecclesiastical authority “does a disservice to the Church with rigid insistence on blind obedience, which contradicts the reason of the Christian faith and the freedom of a Christian.”

But the prefect emeritus of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, writing in a foreword for the German edition of *Tradition and Living Magisterium* by Brazilian Bishop Fernando Arêas Rifan, also made a point of distinguishing between the person and office of the papacy.

He wrote that “criticism of the style of office of individual popes or bishops and of the professional-theological quality of their decisions and texts does not contradict the unbreakable loyalty of a true Catholic to the Pope and the bishops.”

The cardinal added that the most urgent task of the Pope and all bishops today is “to overcome the senseless opposition and power struggle of so-called traditionalists and progressives and, instead of pouring oil on fire, to prove themselves mediators of peace and servants of unity in the Church.”

Cardinal Müller’s words were more moderate than those he [wrote](#) soon after the motu proprio was published.

In a July 19 commentary published in [The Catholic Thing](#), he said the decree was “without the slightest empathy” for those attached to it, and that “instead of appreciating the smell of the sheep, the shepherd here hits them hard with his crook.”

The cardinal asked in that commentary for adherents of both old and new forms of the liturgy to respect each other’s qualities, but he also said that Francis’ clear intention was to condemn the old Mass “to extinction in the long run.”

Preface to the German Edition of Bishop Fernando Arêas Rifan’s book *Tradition and Living Magisterium*

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I came to know Bishop Fernando Arêas Rifan at meetings with the Catholic bishops of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro and their *ad limina* visits during my time as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2012-2017). I appreciate him as a very wise pastoral Apostolic Administrator of his community of St. John Mary Vianney, which adheres to the traditional liturgy of the Missal of John XXIII (1962). Thus, it is my honor and pleasure to present his *Pastoral instruction* on the relationship between "Tradition and Magisterium" to German readers and to recommend it for study.

Every theologically minded person knows that herewith the basic principles of the Catholic doctrine of knowledge are addressed, which Irenaeus of Lyon had already developed in the 2nd century against the allegedly sophisticated insights of the Gnostics and their knowledge of God. The Second Vatican Council, in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, once more clearly emphasized the constitutive and indissoluble connection between Sacred Scripture, Apostolic Tradition, and the Church's Magisterium, which is entrusted to the universal episcopate with the Pope at its head. "Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church. ... But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ." (DV, 10).

The liturgy, as the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of the same Ecumenical Council says, is a privileged *locus theologicus*, a source of life gushing forth from the sacramental mysteries and in communion with the Triune God "full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14): "In the liturgy, especially in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, 'the work of our redemption is accomplished,' and so it contributes in the highest degree to the life of the faithful becoming an expression and revelation of the mystery of Christ and of the very nature of the true Church, which is proper to be at once divine and human ..." (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 2).

The "substance of the sacraments" as signs and instruments of the effective communication of divine grace are foreign to change. For only God himself confers the grace which he communicates to us in Christ himself, its proper dispenser. The universal episcopate,

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with the Pope as the visible head of the universal Church, has only the competence to “order the sacred liturgy” (SC, 22, §1). This concerns its external ritual form. This statement is in complete harmony with the Council of Trent, which, in the decree on Holy Communion under both forms (1562), stated: “It has always been part of the Church’s authority to determine or modify in the administration of the sacraments – without damaging their substance – in ways that, in her judgment, are for the benefit of those who receive them, or for the veneration of the sacraments themselves according to the diversity of circumstances, times, and regions, is more conducive.” (DH, 1728).

There is no rupture between the previous tradition up to the Council of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II. Rather, the traditional continuity of apostolic teaching and Divine Liturgy becomes visible when, with regard to the Roman rite, “holy Mother Church desires to carefully initiate a general renewal of the liturgy” while retaining its dogmatic substance and its evolved basic form, i.e., the liturgy of the Word and the sacramental visualization of the Paschal Mystery (SC, 21).

The intention was not to design a product pleasing to the spirit of the times or a museum exhibit of ancient nostalgia from the theories of ambitious liturgical professors. Rather, the goal of the “full and active participation of the whole people of God” (SC, 14), the faithful and their priestly pastors, was “that in the sacred liturgy the Christian people might obtain the fullness of grace with greater certainty.” (SC, 21).

In my youth, the transition was taking place from the previous Roman liturgy, based mainly on the Tridentine reform, to the *Novus Ordo* (1970) of Pope Paul VI, initiated by Vatican II. Because I was a scientific assistant for four years to the well-known liturgist Adolf Adam (1912-2005) in Mainz, I am also well acquainted with the discussion about the renewed liturgy after Vatican II. As a priest (since 1978), I myself have always celebrated in the new form – with the one exception of an ordination in a traditional community. In dogmatic terms, of course, there is no difference between the “ordinary”, or new, form of Mass according to the Missal of John XXIII and the one that Pope Benedict XVI has called the “extraordinary” form.

To a genuinely Catholic mind, therefore, it must seem absurd that the two forms of the one Mass, which differ only in some external rites – including the direction and language of celebration (Latin or the vernacular), which do not belong to its substance – are raised to the level of dogmatics. To criticize the doctrine of faith and morality under their formal authority is as fruitless and harmful as to doubt the legitimacy of Pope Francis. For neither is Vatican II the cause of the misinterpretation of its teachings, nor should the new Mass be blamed for its – unfortunately often disastrous – use.

Bishop Rifan convincingly demonstrates that there are good spiritual reasons why some Catholics prefer to celebrate Holy Mass in the older form that has been handed down to them. But he also notes that this does not require a rejection of Vatican II and that a fundamental criticism of ecclesiastical authority is in principle incompatible with the attitude of a faithful Catholic. Just as every Catholic can fruitfully spiritually participate in the celebration of Holy Mass in another rite, so also within the Roman rite each of the two forms must be accepted by every Catholic without doubting the orthodoxy of the other or evading the obligation of all to obey the pope and the competent bishop in matters of faith and sacramental discipline.

In an addendum, Bishop Rifan, in view of *Traditionis Custodes* (July 16th, 2021), underscores these basic Catholic principles. With this *motu proprio*, Pope Francis abruptly and brusquely decreed the quasi-suspension of *Summorum Pontificum* (July 7th, 2007) by which his theologically brilliant and liturgically sensitive predecessor had made possible the unity with the Church of many Catholics who had drifted to the “Lefebvrians.” One of the most beautiful fruits of this reconciliation, by which one can see his good intention, was Pope Benedict’s success in restoring peace in the liturgy, “which is the culmination toward which all activity in the Church tends and at the same time the source from which all its strength flows.” (SC, 10).

The good Catholic, for the sake of the Church’s unity and trusting in the higher justice of God, humbly submits to decisions of ecclesiastical authority, even if he finds them unjust and weakly

justified by facts – apart, of course, from the demand of obedience to heretical teachings or immoral acts.

The assertions and evaluations in *Traditionis custodes*, which are questionable in content and form, admittedly touch on the old problem of the distinction between person and office. Criticism of the style of office of individual popes or bishops and of the professional-theological quality of their decisions and texts does not contradict the unbreakable loyalty of a true Catholic to the Pope and the bishops.

In the dispute over the date of Easter with the Quartodecimans and other differences in the fasting orders in East and West, no less a person than Irenaeus of Lyons, who had formulated the doctrine of Roman primacy – valid through today – against the Gnostics during the 2nd century, admonished Pope Victor I (189-198 AD) for neglecting his special responsibility for peace in the Church. The latter had overstepped his authority, unnecessarily humiliated his opponents, and even excommunicated the Orientals because of a mere disciplinary issue. Bishop Irenaeus reminded his Roman brother, apostle Polycarp of Smyrna, that despite “minor differences” in liturgical and disciplinary traditions with Pope Anicet, he nevertheless celebrated the Eucharist in communion with him in Rome. Therefore, it is the Pope’s special task to maintain unity in faith and liturgy, as well as to allow legitimate diversity for the sake of peace in the Church, and to even to protect them instead of suppressing them by force (cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History* V, 24).

Ecclesiastical authority does a disservice to the Church with rigid insistence on blind obedience, which contradicts the reason of the Christian faith and the freedom of a Christian. Rather, it is the task of good shepherds as “examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3) and of prudent teachers “with all patience and wisdom” (2 Tim. 4:2) to convince the faithful of the sense and necessity of certain decisions.

The eminent Doctor of the Church Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), who more than any other defended the divine right of the papacy against the Protestants of his day, told Pope Clement VIII during the “controversy of grace” between the Thomists and Molinists in all

frankness: "Let him beware of deception, and not think that he, who is not a theologian can penetrate by his own study into the understanding of so obscure a question." (Ludwig von Pastor, *History of the Popes XI*, Freiburg 1927, 564).

Formal authority claims obedience without the guarantee of the best possible theological quality of its written and oral exercise, it can only lead to the undermining of its credibility and, as the story of schisms and heresies proves, to the interior and exterior distancing of the faithful from the visible Church.

The most urgent task of the Pope and all bishops today is to overcome the senseless opposition and power struggle of so-called traditionalists and progressives and, instead of pouring oil on fire, to prove themselves mediators of peace and servants of unity in the Church.

Bishop Rifan's spiritual maturity and genuinely Catholic disposition is evident in his self-evident willingness, with regard to *Traditionis custodes*, "to accept this direction from Pope Francis" in conjunction with the declaration for all members of his Apostolic Administration to "adhere to the traditional rite of the Mass – not for irreligious reasons, but because it is one of the riches of the Catholic liturgy."

Thus, I wish Bishop Rifan's publication understanding and benevolent readers, who – despite all the burden of the all-too-human aspect of the Church, which is often difficult to bear – allow themselves to be shaped by the "spirit of the liturgy" as Joseph Ratzinger expressed it in Romano Guardini's footsteps (*Collected Writings* 11, Freiburg i. Br. 2008).

Liturgy is sanctification of man in the glorification of the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. In the Catholic Eucharist, man does not celebrate himself anthropocentrically and models the celebration according to his ever-changing ideas. The liturgy, especially in the richness of its ritual formation, is rather a theocentric worship of God and Christocentric mediation of salvation in his Word made flesh, in Jesus, the "Messiah of the Jews" and the "real Savior of the world," whose arrival all people await:

“But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:23).

By Gerhard Card. Müller, Rome

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Second Open Letter
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Thomas Sweeney

DECEMBER 7, 2021 AT 5:40 PM

As strong adherent to tradition, Pope Francis Moto Proprio was a punch in my stomach and head. Why is a shepherd scattering his flock? Where is he taking us? Our earthly goal is eternity with our Lord, why does he strew our path with barbed wire? With my limited insights I can only see a form of self-righteousness with disastrous results, until someone seeks to balance our ship.

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