

Pope St. Pius V and *Quo Primum*

Did the Pope Intend to Bind His Successors from Changing the Tridentine Mass?

by Jeffrey A. Mirus, Ph.D.

Everything the Church does bears some relationship to faith and morals, and the liturgy is surely a wonderful example of this. Nonetheless, the liturgy itself is neither more nor less than the particular form of the public worship of the Church as directed by proper authority in a particular time and place. The liturgical directives in force at any given time may tend to illuminate or obscure the fundamental mysteries which the liturgy enshrines, according to the wisdom and prudence (or lack thereof) of the competent authority (usually the Holy See). But liturgical directives remain human laws about how to do things, not definitions of faith and morals. As such, liturgical directives are not protected by the Holy Spirit in the same way that definitions of Faith are. To put this another way, liturgical directives are matters of policy that affect the Faith, but not matters of Faith themselves. There is no guarantee of infallibility for Church policy. This in no way implies that liturgical directives are "unimportant". They just aren't matters of faith in and of themselves; they can, in fact, be good, bad or indifferent.

A moment's reflection bears this out, for if they were matters of faith, then they would have to be, like the Faith itself, the same in all times. But this has never been the case. The liturgy (whatever degree of relative consistency one might see in it before a certain date, and whatever degree of relative inconsistency one might see in it after a certain date) has changed and evolved constantly and continuously throughout the Church's history, both before and after the Council of Trent, and including the period between Trent and Vatican II. This general process of change is indicated in *Quo Primum* itself, where the Pope states: "For, besides other decrees of the sacred Council of Trent, there were stipulations for Us to revise and re-edit the sacred books: the Catechism, the Missal and the Breviary." So *Quo Primum* itself is based on the obvious principle that the liturgy is capable of change.

Now, back to the papal bull *Quo Primum* of Pope St. Pius V. It was far more popular in the 16th century to use sweeping language in Church documents than it is today, for better or worse, and this has given rise to some confusion among those who wish to find in *Quo Primum* an authoritative warrant for what is essentially a Protestant position: namely, that their own private judgment about the best form of worship for the Church may take precedence over the decisions of the duly constituted Church authorities who stand in the place of Christ. The confusion is on two points. The first, which we have already dealt with, is the confusion about the difference between policy and dogma (or between discipline and doctrine). Liturgical directives are disciplinary and, therefore, subject to change. No theologian in the entire history of the Church, I think, has ever maintained the contrary position, and certainly the Church has never taught the contrary position which is, in any case, absurd on its face.

The second is the confusion about the binding force of *Quo Primum*. That is, whom did the Pope intend to bind? Clearly, from the text itself, we see that he intended to do exactly what we would expect (with a proper understanding of papal authority and the disciplinary character of liturgical law). That is, with some exceptions, he intended to bind the Church to his liturgical policy until such time as it was changed by competent (i.e., papal) authority, and therefore "in perpetuity" if it was never changed. We wouldn't expect any pope to attempt to bind one of his successors in a matter of discipline (a matter of human rather than Divine law), and the text makes it clear that Pius V did not intend to do this. First, the Pope again shows that he understands that there is nothing necessary to salvation or irreformable about the particular form which his new Missal takes. Thus, he allows certain liturgical practices to continue despite the new Missal:

This new rite alone is to be used unless approval of the practice of saying Mass differently was given at the very time of the institution and confirmation of the church by the Apostolic See at least 200 years ago, or unless there has prevailed a custom of a similar kind which has been continuously followed for a period of not less than 200 years, in which most cases we in no wise rescind their above-mentioned prerogative or custom. However, if this Missal, which we have seen fit to publish, be more agreeable to these latter, We grant them permission to celebrate Mass according to its rite, provided they have the consent of their bishop or prelate or of their whole Chapter, everything else to the contrary notwithstanding.

Clearly, if the Pope believed that celebration of the Mass precisely according to the new missal was necessary to salvation or a matter of Faith, then he could not have admitted any exceptions whatsoever. Interestingly, this passage also points to the various levels of authority in liturgical usage. Then as now, certain things were commonly under the authority of the local bishop or of an abbot or similar authority. *Quo Primum* takes this for granted and acknowledges it here, suggesting that liturgical law and custom were quite as difficult to get a handle in Pope St. Pius V's time as in our own!

Rather than pretend to issue a liturgical decree as if it were a Divine law necessary for the faith and salvation of all, the Pope was trying to do what many popes have tried to do in their own contexts both before and since: to put an end to what the Church regarded as an excessive variety in the liturgy. To end, in other words, a certain sloppiness or lack of control over the rite, as evidenced by various changes and adaptations which were of relatively recent origin or were associated too much with particular localities, thereby marring the desired universality of the Roman Rite for an insufficient reason. Indeed, this context is very similar to our own. Pius doesn't want anyone adding to or subtracting from the Missal as promulgated by proper authority. John Paul II could say much the same about any of the missals currently permitted for use today. And in doing so, John Paul II would definitely not mean that no future Pope could make any changes.

Indeed, Pius again makes this limitation of his own prescription clear when he specifies exactly who is bound by the new Missal: "We specifically command each and every patriarch, administrator, and all other persons or whatever ecclesiastical dignity they may be, be they even cardinals of the Holy Roman Church, or possessed of any other rank or pre-eminence, and We order them in virtue of holy obedience to chant or to read the Mass according to the rite and manner and norm herewith laid down by Us and, hereafter, to discontinue and completely discard all other rubrics and rites of other missals, however ancient, which they have customarily followed; and they must not in celebrating Mass presume to introduce any ceremonies or recite any prayers other than those contained in this Missal." In other words: An administrator of a regional Church might consider himself above this law; not so. A patriarch might also think himself exempt; again, no so. A Cardinal of the Roman Church might consider himself exempt; nay, even one so high as a cardinal must obey the directive. In fact, everyone with a status less than the Pope himself must follow the rules. But there is clearly no intention to bind a future Pope, which would, in any case, be impossible.

Now, I'm not saying that recent liturgical policy has been particularly good or successful, nor that the liturgy is a matter of small consequence. But ultimately, this is an argument about authority, and too often those who call themselves Traditionalists (as opposed to Catholics, who necessarily must have a profound respect for tradition), elevate Tradition over the living authority of Christ in the Church, exercised through the Pope and the Bishops in union with him. Authority in the Church is living authority, by real people (the popes) who can settle real questions in real time. As Newman pointed out, it is inconceivable that there could be so great a difference in dispensation between the first Christians and ourselves that they should have a living infallible authority (Christ) and we should not. The problem with Traditionalism (that is, Tradition made into an "ism", which is to say, in effect, an ideology) is precisely the same as the problem with what the Protestants did with Scripture (one might change the name "sola scriptura" to "Scripturism"). In brief, the problem is that it elevates (what appears to some to be) a self-evident body of data over a living authority.

The result is the same: private judgment. In fact, elevating Tradition over the living authority of the Holy See is even worse than elevating Scripture over that authority. At least with Scripture, there is some way that everyone can identify a stable source of data. With Tradition, this is far more difficult, and, in fact, it cannot be done apart from the living authority of the Church — any more than the Canon of Scripture could have been established by anything other than that same authority.

Whether the Tridentine Mass has really been completely overturned is an open legal question, and is not what I meant by the abrogation of *Quo Primum* by the promulgation of the *Novus Ordo*. Suffice it to say that the legitimate authority of the Church has, at the very least, approved an alternative rite for use. There is not the remotest theological justification for suggesting that this newer rite is any less valid than the previous rite. (Of course, some abuses of it may render the Eucharist invalid, but this would be true of any rite.)

We are not arguing about prudent policy here. It may be that the *Novus Ordo* was a colossal error in judgment, but that isn't the point. Indeed, we can multiply a thousand instances of theologians, saints, commentators, and even Church documents which speak of the importance of the Mass as it was known, loved and revered in an earlier time. Of course, in our own time they might say the very same things, for we still have the Mass, and it still of

incomparable importance. But neither is this the point. Finally, we can certainly work obediently for the kind of liturgy which we think will be best for the Church. But again, this is not the point either. The point, ultimately, is that the Church is governed by a living authority, and all appeals to Scripture, tradition, emotional attachment or personal preference (however sound and certain these appeals appear to those who make them) must ultimately bow to that living authority or cease to be Catholic.

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