

# Do you remember the liturgy before Vatican II?

Fifty years later, do you remember the liturgy before Vatican II?

We are quickly approaching the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, the most significant event in the history of the modern church, which opened on Oct. 11, 1962. The church has changed substantially since the council and perhaps, no change has been more noticeable than the alterations to the Mass.

As a historian of religious rituals and a practicing Catholic, I am deeply interested in how the Mass changed during and after the council. Surprisingly, only a few years ago, I was unaware of the Traditional Latin Mass, now referred to as the Extraordinary Form. I thought the “Latin Mass” was merely the Novus Ordo, the Ordinary Form, in Latin.

In college, I joined a schola that sang for a monthly Novus Ordo Mass in Latin. At one point, we were invited to sing for a Mass in the Extraordinary Form. I was in shock. I had attended Mass every Sunday since childhood, but I was completely lost. The priest was facing the altar, many prayers were inaudible, the choir and priest often recited the same prayers at different times, and many prayers were completely different from what I knew; this all beyond the use of Latin.

In addition to confusion, I also felt a profound sense of reverence and mystery, as if I was witnessing an ancient ritual. I am still surprised that less than 50 years ago the Extraordinary Form was the only Mass throughout the world. Even with its historical feel, it was the liturgy that my grandparents knew well and which my parents experienced during their childhood. In many ways, it is not too far removed from us today.

I have often wondered, why did not anyone tell me? Unexpectedly, only a few older Catholics discuss the changes and how people reacted to them. As a historian, I want to learn from these individuals before they are no longer with us. In addition to the lack of oral history, books on the liturgical changes focus mainly on church mandates from above and rarely look at implementation on the parish level.

I recently finished reading Timothy Kelly’s well researched *The Transformation of American Catholicism: The Pittsburgh Laity and the Second Vatican Council*,

1950-1972 , the sole book that examines the laity during this time period, but even Kelly relied only on church archives, neglecting people that experienced these events.

Through many discussions and review of relevant documents, I discerned that the changes to the liturgy were incremental and took nearly a decade to complete. Starting even before the council was over in 1964, the use of English was introduced for some prayers, such as the Gloria, Creed, and Lord's Prayer. Shortly after, an altar facing the people was introduced and communion was received standing (1965). Over time more elements of the Mass, the priest's prayers (1965) and the Canon (1967), were said in English. In 1968, three new Eucharist Prayers were approved and other musical instruments besides the organ were allowed.

The following year, the Vatican approved the missal of the Novus Ordo and a new liturgical calendar. In 1970, new rites for baptisms and weddings were introduced as well as a new lectionary. It took a few years for the American bishops to approve vernacular versions of the Latin texts released by the Vatican, and therefore, it was not until the early 1970s that all the changes were finalized.

The above timeline hides part of what happened in the parishes. In addition to being incremental, the changes were also irregular. They varied from diocese to diocese and parish to parish. Some traditional priests and bishops were reluctant to change and only made adjustments when absolutely necessary. On the other hand, some modernists went beyond the texts of the council and implemented their own ideas of reform.

Church architecture is a visual example of the different directions taken by the clergy after the council. Some historic churches were barely altered, excluding the addition of a new altar. Conversely, new suburban parishes that were built in 1970s hardly resemble churches. The different building styles mirror the varied liturgies held within their walls.

While the records allow us to make some general statements about the alterations to the liturgy, it is difficult to determine how people reacted to the new experience. A vocal minority heartily supported the council, and they found sympathetic church leaders. Another outspoken minority opposed the alterations and overtime, they were increasingly on the outside looking in. The vast majority were silent, accepting the new reality.

The last piece of the puzzle is the rapid decline in church attendance during the 1960s and 1970s. A Gallup poll in 1958 reported that 75 percent of Catholics regularly attended Sunday Mass, but by 1985, it had slid to 50 percent. Which begs the question, why did church attendance drop, if most people accepted the changes?

It is too reductionist to blame Vatican II. First, the 1950s were a highpoint for church attendance. Historically, church attendance was much lower than 75 percent, and it is unreasonable to use it as the sole comparison. In other words, the period between 1930 and 1960 might have been a bubble more than 1960 was a cliff. Second, there were hidden cracks within the late 1950s church even before the council, especially with young people. The openness of the post-council church gave these individuals a venue to express their opinions. That is to say, Vatican II was not the cause of religious dissent but an opportunity. Given these caveats, the new theology which deemphasized mandatory Mass attendance and the irregular and sometime confusing implementation of the new Mass also played a significant role in the decline.

Vatican II is a litmus test for Catholics. Where you stand on the council reveals where you stand on the Catholic spectrum from traditionalist to progressive. Moreover, positions are held in blanket generalizations, sweeping disregard or praise of the modern church. It is far more helpful to have a nuanced view of the changes to the Mass, learning from what elements worked and which ones failed.

Given this warning against impulsive statements, I am curious to hear what older Catholics have to add to this discussion. How were the reforms implemented in your parish? How did people react to the changes? Why did church attendance drop in their wake?