

Pope Benedict's Masses are imitated, debated around world

VATICAN CITY - Even before he became pope five years ago, Pope Benedict XVI frequently was dragged into what some people have called "the liturgy wars."

His pontificate has been marked by increasingly solemn Masses with more silence, more kneeling, more Latin and the use of both old and new vestments and liturgical furnishings.

While he has not changed the rules for celebrating Mass around the world, papal liturgies are seen by many people as setting a standard to imitate.

The one liturgical change Pope Benedict mandated for the church at large was the greater availability of Mass celebrated according to the 1962 Roman Missal, the Latin-language liturgy often called the Tridentine Mass.

After two years of study and consultation with the world's bishops, Pope Benedict in July 2007 issued norms saying that while the post-Vatican II Mass was the ordinary form for the Catholic community's eucharistic celebration, the Tridentine Mass - the extraordinary form - should be available wherever the faithful request it.

But as his fifth anniversary approached, Pope Benedict still had not publicly celebrated a Mass using the extraordinary form.

The changes he has made in papal liturgies reflect things he said or wrote about the liturgy before becoming pope, particularly about the importance of having the priest and the congregation focused on Jesus during the Mass, not on each other.

In his book, “The Spirit of the Liturgy,” published in 2000, the future pope suggested that to avoid creating disruption and confusion by changing the direction the priest faces, a crucifix placed on the altar or suspended above it could be an appropriate alternative. In fact, wherever the pope celebrates Mass today, a large crucifix and several large candlesticks are on the papal altar.

Another change was put into effect in 2008; since then the faithful who receive Communion from Pope Benedict receive on the tongue while kneeling. The rest of the congregation, however, continues to receive while standing and, usually, in their outstretched hands.

While Pope John Paul II often responded to the international mix of faithful at his Masses by using readings and prayers in a variety of languages, Pope Benedict increasingly draws the congregation together by using Latin, the language of the universal church.

For English speakers, the greatest liturgical change under Pope Benedict is just about to appear. A new English translation of the Mass is being finalized at the Vatican and could be in use in parishes at the beginning of Advent 2011.

The translation closely follows the word order and syntax of the Latin text of the Mass and uses what has been described as more formal and theological language.

In “The Sacrament of Charity,” his 2007 document reflecting on the Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist in 2005, Pope Benedict emphasized the importance of dignity and beauty in the celebration of the Eucharist because receiving Christ’s body and blood is, “in a certain sense, a glimpse of heaven on earth.”

“Beauty, then, is not mere decoration, but rather an essential element of the liturgical action, since it is an attribute of God himself and his revelation. These considerations should make us realize the care which is needed if the liturgical

action is to reflect its innate splendor," he wrote.