

“It is rather strong to claim that the New Mass is contrary to the Council of Trent but, displeasing as it is, it is true.”

Thus spoke Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani. Under three popes, he served as head of the Holy Office, the Vatican tribunal responsible for uprooting heresy and protecting the purity of the Catholic faith. Before him in September 1969 lay the document you are about to read — a study which contends that the New Order of Mass promulgated in April 1969 poses a serious threat to the integrity of the Catholic faith.

Such a charge will strike most Catholics as exceedingly odd. While the Mass they assist at each Sunday may seem a bit boring now and again (or even more like entertainment than prayer on occasion), what would prompt a distinguished cardinal to call it contrary to one of the General Councils of the Catholic Church? A partial answer to the question, at least, is to be found in the story of *The Ottaviani Intervention*.

For centuries the rite of the Mass was fixed, stable, otherworldly, uniform throughout the world and unsurpassed in beauty. The core of the Mass, the Roman Canon, had remained essentially unchanged at least since the days of St. Ambrose (4th century). Other prayers in the Mass were similarly ancient. In response to Protestant attacks on the Mass, the Council of Trent (1545–63) reiterated and defined the Church’s teaching on Christ’s Real Presence in the Eucharist and on the sacrificial character of the Mass. Shortly

thereafter in 1570, Pope St. Pius V promulgated a Missal which codified the Church's already-existing liturgical tradition.

The Mass of St. Pius V (often called the “Tridentine Mass”) continued to be used until the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) opened the door to a whole series of sweeping changes in the Mass. In 1963 Pope Paul VI established an entity known as Consilium (The Committee for Implementing the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) which he entrusted with the duty of carrying out the liturgical reform mandated by Vatican II. Consilium formulated a new Order of Mass — the framework of prayers and ritual gestures employed each time Mass is celebrated — which Paul VI duly promulgated on 3 April 1969.

Conservatives — they would later be referred to as “traditionalists” — viewed the New Order of Mass (*Novus Ordo Missae*) with alarm. They had endured five years of continuous liturgical change, each stage of which appeared to bring the Mass closer to Protestantism and closer to the teaching of the progressive theologians who sought to subvert the Church from within. In the New Order of Mass, Protestantism and the new theology seemed to have triumphed. But what to do?

Origins of the Intervention

In the conservative camp were two members of the Roman aristocracy, Vittoria Cristina Guerrini and Aemilia Pediconi. Both were friends of Cardinal Ottaviani (then

retired from his post as Prefect of the Holy Office), and both had wide connections at the Vatican and in other ecclesiastical circles. The ladies used their contacts to bring together a small group of conservative theologians, liturgists and pastors who would prepare a study of the contents of the New Order of Mass. Cardinal Ottaviani agreed — it is unclear at exactly what point — to revise the study and to present it to Paul VI.¹

The group met a number of times in April and May 1969. The task of preparing a suitable text fell to a Dominican theologian and philosopher, Father M.L. Guérard des Lauriers, then a professor at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome. Working from his notes in French, Father Guérard dictated a text to Madame Guerrini, who simultaneously translated it into Italian.²

The result was the *Short Critical Study of the New Order of Mass* (*Breve Esame Critico del Novus Ordo Missae*), now known in English-speaking countries as *The Ottaviani Intervention*. At the request of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, then recently retired from his position as Superior General of the Holy Ghost Fathers, Father Guérard translated the text into French.³

1. "Avertissement," in Cardinaux Ottaviani et Bacci, *Bref Examen Critique du Nouvel "Ordo Missae,"* new edition with Italian text, edited and translated into French by M.L. Guérard des Lauriers OP, (Vailly-sur-Sauldre, France: Editions Sainte Jeanne d'Arc 1983), 5.

2. "Avertissement," 5–6.

3. "Avertissement," 7. Guérard lost his position at the Lateran as a result of his involvement in the project. He later taught at Lefebvre's seminary in Ecône, Switzerland. (He was one of my professors.)

Cardinal Ottaviani, for his part, composed a covering letter to Paul VI which supported the *Study's* conclusions. The organizers hoped to have a large number of high-ranking ecclesiastics sign it along with the cardinal — Archbishop Lefebvre spoke of six hundred bishops.⁴ Had such been the case, it is conceivable that the *Study* would have moved Paul VI to modify substantially or even rescind the New Order of Mass.

From May through September 1969 the organizers lined up at least a dozen cardinals to sign, among them, Arcadio Cardinal Larraona, former head of the Sacred Congregation of Rites. Cardinal Ottaviani spent several days examining the *Critical Study* and signed the covering letter on 13 September 1969.

The following day, however, a French traditionalist priest compromised the project by publishing the *Critical Study*, even though it was not supposed to have been made public until a month after the group of cardinals presented it to Paul VI. His action appears to have scared off most of the signers.⁵

Antonio Cardinal Bacci, however, remained undeterred. The cardinal was a famous Latinist, and during this time served on the Vatican Congregations for Religious, Causes of Saints and Catholic Education. In 1967 Cardinal Bacci had written a laudatory preface to a book which charged

4. "Avertissement," 7.

5. Based on an account by one of the organizers, Dr. Elizabeth Gerstner, a résumé of which is provided in Michael Davies, *Pope Paul's New Mass* (Dickinson TX: Angelus Press 1980), 483–4.

that the liturgical reform had betrayed the faith of the Council of Trent, and that the head of Consilium, Cardinal Lercaro, was “Luther resurrected.”⁶

Such a prelate did not scare easily. Cardinal Bacci signed the letter on 28 September, and the following day both the letter and the *Critical Study* were presented to Paul VI.

Content of the Intervention

The central contention of *The Ottaviani Intervention* is that the New Order of Mass teems with dangerous errors in doctrine and represents an attack against the Catholic teaching on the Mass defined by the Council of Trent. The authors of the *Intervention* stated that their intention was not to present an exhaustive treatment of all the problems the New Mass posed, but rather to point out those deviations from Catholic doctrine and practice which are most typical of the New Mass. Among these the *Intervention* lists the following:

- A new definition of the Mass as an “assembly” rather than as a sacrifice offered to God.
- Omissions of elements emphasizing the Catholic teaching (utterly repudiated by Protestants) that the Mass makes satisfaction for sins.
- The reduction of the priest’s role to a position approximating that of a Protestant minister.

6. The work was Tito Casini, *La Tunica Stracciata (The Torn Tunic)*, (Rome: 1967).

- Implicit denials of Christ's Real Presence and the doctrine of transubstantiation.
- The change of the Consecration from a sacramental action into a mere narrative re-telling of the story of the Last Supper.
- The fragmenting of the Church's unity of belief through the introduction of countless options.
- Ambiguous language and equivocation throughout the rite which compromise the Church's doctrines.

The *Intervention* levelled these charges against two texts: (1) the New Order of Mass itself, and (2) the 1969 *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, a 341-paragraph document which set forth not only the rubrical directions for performing the new rite, but also the theological principles on which it was based.

The General Instruction would be a particular bone of contention during the controversy which would follow.

Vatican Reaction

Once the conservative Catholic press spread the story of the *Intervention* throughout the world, a major scramble ensued at the Vatican.

Though Paul VI had received a copy of the General Instruction in 1968⁷ and had personally approved every detail of the New Order of Mass, he sent the *Intervention*

7. Annibale Bugnini CM, *La Riforma Liturgica (1948–1975)* (Rome: Edizioni Liturgiche 1983), 184.