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Vetus Ordo Missae: Italian Catholic priests facing the revival of Latin and traditional liturgy

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ABSTRACT
The liturgical reform promoted by the Second Vatican Council led to a renewed way of celebrating the Mass entailing new ritual features and the drastic reduction of the use of Latin in favor of vernacular languages. Liturgical changes are still in act and present several problematic aspects fueling debates among Catholics. A significant category of interlocutors in these debates is constituted by the ordinary priests, who have both to apply the directives established by the Holy See and to engage with local communities. While the positions endorsed by ecclesiastic authorities are well known, scarce attention has been devoted to the priests' opinions and experience. This paper presents therefore the results of an ethnographic study investigating how Italian priests interpret the liturgical use of Latin in the contemporary socio-cultural context, what meanings and values they attribute to the ancient ritual, especially in comparison with the new one, and how they deal with the issue of the translation of sacred and liturgical texts.

KEYWORDS
Second Vatican Council; translation; Latin; liturgy; priests; ritual; semiotic ideology

1. Introduction

In Italy, Catholic priests constitute a minority of speakers with a passive knowledge of an ancient language, Latin, many of whom also use it actively as a liturgical language. Such a use has, however, been the subject of lively debate, especially following the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which promoted a reform entailing an increased use of vernacular languages in liturgy. This paper aims to study some facets of this recent debate by adopting an ethnographic perspective focusing on the opinions of ordinary priests collected through interviews. Indeed, priests are directly involved in the application of the directives of the Holy See, and they act in close contact with the community of secular believers. They thus have articulated and well-founded opinions about the use of Latin and the liturgical reforms, tested in their own daily practice and in the framework of their community, which often represents a critical interlocutor.

I interviewed a sample of ten Catholic priests who use, or have used, Latin in the celebration of the Mass, albeit to differing degrees.[1] They were born between 1933 and 1978 and their area of activity is north-western Italy (Piedmont and western Lombardy).

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Six of them celebrate or used to celebrate the Mass in Latin according to the *vetus ordo* (namely according to the 1962 edition of the Tridentine Missal), following Benedict XVI's *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* (2007b). The frequency of the celebration of the ancient Mass is daily for two priests, monthly for three priests, and weekly for one priest. Three of the priests interviewed, in contrast, celebrate the Mass according to the *novus ordo* but insert parts in Latin, especially chants (such as the *Salve Regina* or the *Gloria*). One of them, who was born in 1933 and became a priest in 1958, used to celebrate the Tridentine Mass before the liturgical reform, but then began to celebrate the Mass in Italian and never returned to the *vetus ordo*.[2]

Of course, I do not claim that this small sample is exhaustive; it rather serves as a base for a preliminary inquiry into an issue crossing several research lines in semiotics. Indeed, the liturgical shift is a relevant matter for the discipline, as proved for instance by the semiotic study of the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* recently authored by Robert Yelle (2018). The research presented herein, however, is not centered on the analysis of institutional documents, but rather aims to outline some characteristic features of the semiotic ideology[3] – i.e. the set of ideas and beliefs about language (in this case liturgical Latin) – of a minority of speakers whose opinions are not as well-known as those of the prominent personalities officially representing the Church. Besides being a novel field for analyzing a semiotic ideology, this case study also provides the cross section of a moment of oscillation between ritual "ossification" and "revivalism" (Tambiah 1985):[4] the interviews with the priests are a good touchstone for understanding how a community responds to the opposite thrusts towards conservation and innovation. Moreover, if ritual can be defined as "a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication" (Tambiah 1985, 128), this study also displays a case – albeit quite narrowly circumscribed – of cultural construction and interpretation of ritual meaning.

2. The liturgical reform: an ongoing process

The liturgical reform was triggered by the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), the first official document issued by the Second Vatican Council.[5] The goal of the reform was to adapt liturgy to the new needs of modern times and to render the meaning expressed in liturgical texts and rites clearer for people belonging to different cultures and traditions, who "should be enabled […] to take part in them fully, actively, and as befits a community" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1963, n. 21). The renewal proposed by the Council was, however, gradual and moderate, and included the preservation of Latin:

> Particular law remaining in force, the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites. But since the use of the mother tongue, whether in the Mass, the administration of the sacraments, or other parts of the liturgy, frequently may be of great advantage to the people, the limits of its employment may be extended. This will apply in the first place to the readings and directives, and to some of the prayers and chants … . (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1963, n. 36)

With the *motu proprio Sacram Liturgiam*, Paul VI (1964) appointed a board (*Consilium ad exsequendam Constitutionem de Sacra Liturgia*) to apply the general criteria listed in the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and prepare new liturgical books. A renewed Missal was published in 1969, and in 1975 two Eucharistic prayers were added. Some of the main changes introduced in the Mass are the drastic reduction of Latin (which actually involved

its almost complete elimination) and the priest's orientation toward the people, which was not mentioned in the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

As Yelle (2018) observes, both the use of vernacular languages and the orientation *versus populum* should be related to similar practices introduced by the Reformation, which heavily criticized Catholic rituals because of their incomprehensibility and excessive codification.[6] The striking similarities between the new Catholic Mass and the Mass introduced by Luther and celebrated by Protestant denominations were one of the reasons for the Catholic traditionalists' opposition to the liturgical reform. Marcel Lefebvre (1975), for instance, claimed:

> For Luther, the Mass is firstly the Liturgy of the Word, and secondly a Communion. For us the fact that the current liturgical Reforms have adopted precisely these same modifications is nothing short of astounding. Indeed, as we well know, the texts in use by the faithful today no longer make reference to the Sacrifice, but rather to the Liturgy of the Word, to the Lord's Supper and to the breaking of bread, or to the Eucharist. […] It goes without saying that, added to these substantial alterations, the large number of lesser liturgical modifications have contributed further to the inculcation of Protestant attitudes which seriously threaten Catholic doctrine: the suppression of the altar stone, the use of a single altar cloth, the priest facing the people, the Host remaining on the paten rather than on the corporal …

A certain number of priests and churchgoers regretted the radical rejection of the Tridentine Mass and continued to ask for its reintegration. In order to deal with their request, John Paul II granted "diocesan bishops the possibility to use an indulgence whereby both the priests and the faithful […] may be able to celebrate Mass by using the Roman Missal according to the 1962 edition" (*Quattuor Abhinc Annos* 1984). Permission to celebrate the Mass in Latin was given by bishops under certain conditions, among which:

> That it be made publicly clear beyond all ambiguity that such priests and their respective congregations in no way share the positions of those who call in question the legitimacy and doctrinal exactitude of the Roman Missal promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1970

and that

> Such celebration must be made only for the benefit of those groups that request it; in churches and oratories indicated by the bishop (not, however, in parish churches, unless the bishop permits it in extraordinary cases); and on the days and under the conditions fixed by the bishop either habitually or in individual cases.

A major impulse for a partial reintegration of Latin came from Benedict XVI. During the Council, as a cardinal and prominent theologian, Jospeph Ratzinger (1965) took a stance in favor of the reduction of the use of Latin, which he connected to an "archaeologization" of liturgical forms started with the Council of Trent. In the 1960s, Ratzinger saw the marginalization of Latin as one of the main measures for eliminating superfluous elements and re-establishing the authentic function of liturgy, which consisted of fostering effective communication between the faithful and the deity. When he became a pontiff, Ratzinger did not reject the reforming principles of the Second Vatican Council, but continued the work of John Paul II for the preservation of Latin and the Tridentine liturgy. In 2007, in the post-synodal exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, he underlined the traditional function of Latin as the common language of the Church and encouraged its use especially during international gatherings:

> In order to express more clearly the unity and universality of the Church, I wish to endorse the proposal made by the Synod of Bishops, in harmony with the directives of the Second Vatican Council, that, with the exception of the readings, the homily and the prayer of the faithful, it is fitting that such liturgies be celebrated in Latin. Similarly, the better-known prayers of the Church's tradition should be recited in Latin and, if possible, selections of Gregorian chant should be sung. […] I ask that future priests, from their time in the seminary, receive the preparation needed to understand and to celebrate Mass in Latin […]; nor should we forget that the faithful can be taught to recite the more common prayers in Latin … (Benedict XVI 2007a)

In the same year, the pope issued the *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum,* which

> lifted previous restrictions that applied to the *Missale Romanum* of 1962 and the other liturgical books in use before 1970. They now constitute the 'Extraordinary Form,' or *usus antiquior* (older use), which, together with the 'Ordinary Form,' is an expression of the one Roman rite. (Lang 2012, 13)

The priests interviewed all used the terms *novus ordo* and *vetus ordo* to distinguish between the two.[7] Although the intention of the *motu proprio* was to promote unity,[8] the effect of the partial restoration of the old liturgy was, instead, to rekindle the old debate between supporters and critics of Latin and traditional rites.[9]

The interviews with the priests uncovered two different yet related semiotic issues concerning liturgy: the first regards the specific ways of conveying religious meanings attributed to the *vetus ordo*, especially in comparison to the *novus ordo*. It is connected to ritual features mostly independent from verbal language and thus involves the use of Latin only secondarily. The second issue, in contrast, specifically concerns the way Latin conveys religious meaning, especially in comparison with Italian.

This issue is associated to the problem of translation. Being a religion based on sacred texts originally written in different languages, translation has been an important practice in Catholicism throughout its history. In this matter as well, the twentieth-century conciliar innovative thrust played an influential role. For instance, in the apostolic constitution *Veterum Sapientia*, John XXIII (1962) claimed the particular suitability of Latin to be the universal Christian language due to its natural solemnity and elegance, immutable character, and Roman roots, coinciding with the earthly location of the Holy See. In 1964, the progressive theologian Karl Rahner, who was directly involved in the Council, published a booklet in response to the pope's constitution, underlining that the superiority of Latin is established neither by divine revelation nor by an intrinsic sacredness, but only by human tradition and historical circumstances, and that the only value of Latin lies in its acting as an international language that can be functional within the Church (Rahner 1964).

As mentioned above, after the Second Vatican Council, in accordance with the principle of enculturation, the Mass was translated into a number of vernaculars, including Italian. The first Italian translation of the Roman Missal was published in 1973 and a second edition was published in 1983. In November 2018, the CEI (*Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, Episcopal Conference of Italy) approved a third edition, which still needs to be ratified by the Holy See before being officially adopted in the celebration of the Mass.

Another important recent issue connected to translation is the publication of the Italian Bible edited by the CEI in 2008. This version proposed several innovations, and especially a new translation of one verse of the Our Father: the traditional "non indurci in tentazione" (lead us not into temptation) is changed into "non abbandonarci alla tentazione" (abandon

us not to temptation). The revised translation is less literal, but its supporters believe that it conveys a meaning which is more consistent with Catholic doctrine.[10] The verse was also changed in the 2018 version of the Roman Missal.[11] Pope Francis himself encouraged this translation: in a booklet devoted to the Our Father (Bergoglio 2017), he argues that the fact of inducing into temptation is a prerogative of Satan, not of God.

A further relevant event is Pope Francis's promulgation of the *motu proprio Magnum Principium* (2017), which delegates the translation of liturgical texts to the dioceses and reserves to the Holy See only the approval of the texts already ratified by diocesan bishops. This disposition is meant to clarify can. 838 of the Code of Canon Law in light of the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Pope Francis's new dispositions specify the relationship between central and diocesan ecclesiastical authority, and allow the latter greater freedom.

All these issues show that the enormous task of translation and adaptation of liturgical texts which began with the Council needs to be regulated and arranged gradually, just like the conciliar fathers had forecast, and that more than fifty years after the Council this effort has not yet been concluded.

3. The priests' position: the *vetus ordo* as a ritual focusing on transcendence

According to the priests interviewed who celebrate the Mass in Latin in the 2010s, the *vetus ordo* particularly emphasizes the substantial meaning of the Eucharist, which consists of the renewal of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. It also emphasizes the sense of mystery and sacredness through several ritual features that are repeatedly mentioned, in particular moments of silence and meditation. In comparison, the *novus ordo* is perceived by the celebrants as a more "spoken" and less meditated Mass. Most of the priests interviewed connect this feature to the liturgical orientation: the fact of being turned toward the people gives them the impression of being "showmen," "entertainers" who are excessively focused on the audience. In the *vetus ordo*, in contrast, the priests feel much less distracted and can reach an increased level of concentration. The *vetus ordo* consequently allows priests a better appreciation of the content of prayers, especially the Canon (or Eucharistic prayer), which they pronounce individually, not heard by the people.

The orientation is also connected to another issue frequently mentioned in the interviews: the *vetus ordo* clarifies the role of mediation of the priests between God (the crucifix) and the faithful. This mediation is expressed for example through the prayers that the celebrant pronounces individually, also on behalf of the congregation. One priest states:

> The ancient rite is much more centered on the real presence of God and not on the people: you look to the East and the people are behind you. You are the shepherd of someone that you lead. You look at the cross, the tabernacle. You are not an entertainer but a shepherd.

Another priest claims that the *vetus ordo* focuses on transcendence:

> The *vetus ordo* privileges transcendence over communication, because it stresses silence and adoration. In the *novus ordo* there is an evident effort to communicate: the priest communicates with the congregation. Unfortunately, today these different nuances are seen as antithetic, but actually they are complementary. […] The best teaching comes from Ratzinger,

> who recognizes the ancient rite and appreciates the new one, and who intended to present the richness of both by integrating them, not by opposing them. But Ratzinger was not understood.

As a consequence, the *vetus ordo* stresses in particular the aspect of adoration, which is described as another seminal goal of the Mass. Adoration is not only emphasized through silence, but also through specific gestures, such as the sign of the cross, and most of all a number of genuflections which were removed from the *novus ordo*.

The sense of transcendence is also increased by the use of Latin, which differs from everyday language, thus giving a sense of sacredness and detachment from ordinary life.[12] In particular, one priest described Latin as one of the sensuous components of liturgy aiming at "taking us from the visible to the invisible."

4. The Mass of the great saints

All the priests interviewed, whether or not they celebrate the Mass according to the *vetus ordo*, recognize its historical and cultural value, as well as its importance in the construction of their identity. They are all aware that the *novus ordo* is not a simple translation but a new liturgy shaped on the ancient. For instance, one priest celebrating and one not celebrating according to the *vetus ordo* declared, respectively:

(1) The *novus ordo* was shaped on the *vetus ordo*, they have the same framework. Therefore, studying the *vetus ordo* is like studying the parent of the current rite. The fact of Latin in itself is not that fundamental to me. What really impressed me in the [ancient] rite was a greater richness, which maybe was too often labeled as formalism, but is actually a richness of gestures, attentions, even of devotions, which reflect the love for what one is doing.
(2) I had a professor who used to say: "you can celebrate the Mass in Italian, but remember that the true Mass is in Latin, not because the Italian one is not good, but because the root lies in the ancient Mass." The underlying way of thinking is always the ancient one.

Moreover, it is significant that all the priests constituting our sample associate the *vetus ordo* with saints. The fact that the great Catholic saints celebrated this Mass is considered as a sign of the sanctifying property of this particular ritual. In three cases the matter of saints was the first answer given in response to the question "What does celebrating the Mass in Latin mean for you?":

(1) It means celebrating […] that Mass which sanctified thousands and thousands of faithful, beginning with our saints. All of our great saints, thus, took part in and then celebrated – at least those who were priests – this holy Mass.
(2) [It means] joining the tradition of the Church which generated so many saints: think of all the saints that we know, except for the most recent ones, who celebrated that Mass (Padre Pio, Don Bosco), and you can see that they gained a particular strength, a particular grace from that Mass.
(3) More than for Latin itself, [I celebrate this Mass] for the ritual. I mean, it is a ritual […] which accompanied the liturgy of the Church for more than 500 years. So, there is also, so to speak, a historical value, but also, I think, spiritual. It accompanied the faith of great saints, of so many faithful, of our ancestors.

One priest mentioned Latin as the language of the first martyrs, underlining the value of this language in the construction and maintenance of the historical identity of the Church: "[Latin] is the language of the martyrs of Rome. [Celebrating according to the *vetus ordo*] means remembering the ancient way. This memory should be revived, moderately and in relation to the culture in which we live."

The priests interviewed, therefore, all attribute an historical value to the *vetus ordo*, even though they hold different views concerning its restoration. Despite these divergences, however, they generally recognize the subjective right to choose between the old and the new ritual, given the theological equivalence between the two. This concept is well expressed by a priest who has celebrated according to the *vetus ordo* since the 1984 indulgence of John Paul II, with permission from his bishop. When asked what celebrating the Mass in Latin means for him, he answered:

> I will give you an obvious answer: it means celebrating the Mass. That is, I think that the Mass is a sacrament. The ritual is functional to the sacrament, but it is not essential. From the theological point of view, the sacrament, not the ritual, is what matters. […] Many people confuse the ritual with the sacrament. Therefore, each Sunday I celebrate a Mass in the ancient rite, and then, in the evening, I celebrate a Mass in the *novus ordo*. And one is Mass as much as the other, per se; then the rite has an influence on the participation of the congregation, but this is on the human, subjective plane, not on the objective plane. And the tendency to forget this theological dimension gives rise to those disagreements and ecclesial and clerical exaltations that have neither dignity nor foundation.

Only one young priest expressed a different point of view, in stating that "It is not a question of subjectivity but of objectivity, a question of truth. Truth does not change. Celebrating in Italian means diminishing the truth." According to this priest, the Mass, signifying the sacrifice of Christ, represents the very heart of the Church, so that

> touching the Mass is like touching the heart of the Church itself. […] It is therefore very important to come back to the old Mass, first of all for the priests and the monks […]. If I do not find the heart, the center, I am fully disoriented.

This position is similar to that held by Marcel Lefebvre (see above), and actually this priest is close to the traditionalist Society of Saint Pius X, which was founded by the French archbishop.

5. Private and public practice

All the priests celebrating only according to the *novus ordo* underline a distinction between private and public religious practice. Even though they recognize the cultural and historical value of the old ritual and of the Latin texts, they tend to restrain their study and practice to the private sphere, as a prerogative of the clergy, while they claim that liturgy performed in public should be in vernacular languages. One priest, for example, states: "The introduction of the *novus ordo* was necessary for the enculturation, for the announcement of faith in our time." However, the prayer in Latin must be practiced by priests: "If a priest never prays in Latin, can he have sufficient consciousness of being a Latin priest? Can he be aware of being connected to a previous path?" From this perspective, the use of Latin in private prayer by the clergy means maintaining a collective memory: "to cultivate memory in a moderate and equilibrate manner is something

necessary, I would say mandatory, in particular for priests, even though the announcement of the faith must follow changed modalities in a changed time."

An elder priest says:

> I became a priest when the Mass was still celebrated in Latin, and I liked Latin very much, as it is the mother of the Italian language. Then, I gladly accepted Italian, because it was more comprehensible for the Christians who came to the Mass. But I was aware that, even though the language of the Mass was Italian, the mentality was still based on Latin. Even though after the reform I have no longer celebrated in Latin, I always tried to keep the Latin root. It seems to me that now many have adopted Latin more for an aesthetic fashion, more for the framework than for the content. I was interested in the content. But even though I have celebrated in Italian, I have kept a great mental reference to Latin, the Latin of the Church, of the Vulgata, of the true tradition, that is. Just like priests celebrating in Latin nowadays, I like Latin too, but not for an aesthetic sense, rather for a sense of depth.

The public use of Latin is problematic because of the limited understanding on the part of the faithful, but also of a number of priests.[13] The priests interviewed studied Latin for one to eight years, and all of them lament the scarce linguistic competence of both the clergy and the Catholic community at large, which they perceive not only in their parishes but also on other occasions, such as the celebrations in famous sanctuaries like Fatima. This scarce competence has two serious consequences. Firstly, it contradicts the principle of clarity fostered by the Second Vatican Council and consequently the possibility for the faithful to take an active part in the ritual. Secondly, it also invalidates the value of Latin as the common language of the Church. This loss of a common language is greatly regretted by the majority of the priests interviewed. Many of them pointed out the inherent contradiction in the fact that Catholics are no longer able to pray together in a growingly globalized world, and see this inner separation as one of the great weaknesses of the contemporary Church.

With the exception of one priest celebrating the Mass according to the *vetus ordo* daily with only one respondent, in the other cases the celebration of the ancient Mass was triggered by the participation of a group of churchgoers. The priests celebrating in the *novus ordo* did not receive this request from their communities. One in particular, active in quite a small village, noticed a certain hostility toward Latin, which is also detectable in bigger cities of the geographical area under consideration, such as Novara.[14] In general, priests celebrating in Italian tend to see the choice of the Latin Mass as a form of elitism. The clearest statement in this sense is the following:

> Priests celebrating the Latin Mass should be very careful to avoid restricting their celebration to the elite, just to show off their Latin. Celebrating the Mass in Latin is not prohibited, but it entails creating a class, an elite, something that separates the Church instead of unifying it.

6. Issues of translation from Latin

In general, the priests interviewed assert that the vernacularized version preserves the substantial meaning of the ancient Mass, recognizing however the problematic nature common to all kinds of translation: they are all aware that the perfectly equal rendition of meaning is impossible, and that "'Omnis traductor traditor.' It is a general principle: no translation fully reproduces all the nuances of meaning of the original language."

All the priests are, moreover, well informed about recent debate concerning the translation of several passages of the text of the Mass. In the interviews, two translation problems emerged frequently. The first is a famous issue concerning the expression "pro vobis et pro multis effundetur" in the consecration formula: the blood of Jesus is poured out for "many" in the Latin formula, but in Italian it was translated as "per tutti" (for everybody). Of course, a literal interpretation would question the theological principle of the universality of the salvific message of Jesus, but some literalist fringes question the correctness of the translation. A solution mentioned by two of the priests interviewed could be to translate "multis" with "moltitudini" (crowds). In general, however, all the priests interviewed perceive the debate surrounding this expression as excessive, and in two cases they openly label the issue as "ideological," that is, a pretext for a broader "political" contrast between progressives and traditionalists.

The second recurring issue is the above-mentioned translation of the Our Father. Even though the Church still has to approve the new edition of the Missal adopting the 2008 CEI version (see above), a number of Italian priests already use the new translation. Two of the priests interviewed relate this innovation to the loss of unity inside the Church: "in the past, in the whole world the faithful could pray together in the same way, now neighboring parishes have different ritual practices and formulas." Another priest, moreover, directly connects this issue to the loss of a central authority responsible for the translation of sacred and liturgical texts, caused in particular by the 2017 *motu proprio Magnum Principium*, perceived as a dangerous step towards chaos, heresy, and incommunicability inside the Church.

None of the priests recognizes an intrinsic superiority to the Latin language, but many underline a general strategic and "political" problem in the practice of liturgical translation. For instance:

(1) Maybe in some cases the translations in Italian are questionable, but I think that this depends on the choices made by translators rather than on the poverty of the language.
(2) There should be a strategic decision: do we want fidelity or communication in the translations? This is a big problem that I cannot solve. In many cases it has been well solved, in other cases it has not. And there is also a fanatic extremism on the part of some liturgists, in that their errors become dogmas and cannot be touched. Translations are just translations, and can be revised and explored.

Two of the priests interviewed believe that the fact that Latin is a dead language makes it more suited to liturgy because "Being a dead language, there is no evolution of the concepts and the truth always remains unchanged, codified by this fixed, dead language." This position can be interpreted as a defensive reaction against the confusion and conflicts brought about by the translation of liturgy. Another advantage attributed to Latin as a dead and immutable language is its suitability to be the universal language inside the Church, a value that the majority of the priests interviewed see, however, as seriously compromised: "Now we don't have a grammar for praying together anymore. So, the aspect of the *una lingua*, a language that is no longer spoken, and that therefore is fixed and has no more evolution, granted this."

Some of the priests also express regret for parts of the Mass which were elided in the *novus ordo*, in particular the initial and conclusive parts, with the psalms and the ascent to the altar, and the final prayers. One priest (who only celebrates the Mass according to the *novus ordo*) particularly misses the prayer to Saint Michael, an exorcism by Leo XIII asking the intercession of the Archangel against the devil, suppressed in the course of the liturgical reformation and excluded from the *novus ordo*.[15] This priest thus recites this prayer privately at the end of the Italian Mass.

This suppression can be connected to another important semiotic issue, that is, the perceived smoothening of the terminology referring to evil and damnation in the *novus ordo*. In particular, one priest asserts that one of the reasons why the *vetus ordo* increases the sense of sacredness is that "the formulations in Italian are more generic and do not give a sense of eternity. The use of words such as Satan, sin, and damnation was profoundly attenuated and they were substituted by more neutral words." This semantic attenuation is seen as part of a general negation of evil that does not correspond to the truth and confounds both Catholic doctrine and the general morals of modernity.

7. Conclusion

After more than fifty years, the adaptation of the Mass to vernacular languages and to modern culture proposed by the Second Vatican Council is still in progress and poses interpretative problems.[16] In general, the priests interviewed do not express a negative opinion about the Council's directives and principles, but they do criticize the way in which they were applied, considered sometimes as an ineffective and dangerous radicalization of the spirit of the Council, which was both innovative and moderate. Moreover, some priests believe that the application was too fast and hasty, in contrast to the prescription of the conciliar fathers, who recommended a gradual reform, thus leading to a loss of authority and efficacy, and consequently to confusion and division inside the Church.

Some of the most significant semiotic issues emerging from the interviews are, firstly, the fact that the priests tend to see the celebration of the Mass according to the *vetus ordo* and the knowledge of Latin as bringing them special spiritual benefits thanks to their specific role in the traditional liturgy. These spiritual benefits consist specifically of an increased concentration and consciousness of the sacred meanings of liturgical words and gestures. Secondly, the priests perceive the *novus ordo* as a ritual privileging the horizontal communication between the priest and the people, while the *vetus ordo* privileges the vertical communication of human beings with the deity, with the priest placed both physically (on the altar, higher than the assembly space, and turned toward the cross) and spiritually (as a mediator) between the two. Thirdly, the priests believe that Latin constitutes an important linguistic and cultural root. The knowledge of this ancient language is essential especially for the clergy, both because it provides an interpretative key which is indispensable for the comprehension of sacred and liturgical texts and because it is an important component of the Catholic identity. Consequently, all the priests consider the study of Latin and private prayer in Latin as beneficial spiritual practices that should be encouraged, also following the example of the great saints of the Church.

This private practice is not to be confused with a form of elitism, because priests see it as a way of personal edification that can also benefit their pastoral action. It is worth mentioning here that a number of priests evoked the issue of clericalism (i.e. an attitude of

superiority), in relation to the numerous calls by Pope Francis to avoid it.[17] Even though some priests said that the celebration according to the *vetus ordo* sometimes has an elitist character because of the use of Latin, which only the educated class masters, a number of priests, even those celebrating only according to the *novus ordo*, assert that the structure of the *vetus ordo* is less "clericalist" than that of the *novus ordo*, both because it does not place the person of the priest at the center of the scene, and because of some specific formulas, especially the double *Confiteor*, which means that the priest too asks for the pardon of his sins, so there is a reciprocal absolution between the priest and the people.

The priests celebrating only according to the *novus ordo* tend to see the celebration of the *vetus ordo* as a passing trend. Indeed, of the six priests who celebrated the Mass according to the *vetus ordo* after Benedict XVI's 2007 *motu proprio*, three ceased after some years. In one case, the group of churchgoers that had requested the celebration of the Latin Mass, which was a choir devoted to Gregorian chants, broke up, so the celebration was no longer motivated by an interested audience. In the second case, the motivation was identical (the requesting group, another Gregorian choir, broke up), but in addition this priest lost the collaboration of a colleague who helped him in the celebrations, so he had to reduce the number of Masses celebrated in his parish and suppress the one with the smallest audience, namely the Latin Mass. The same happened to the third priest, who had to stop celebrating the *vetus ordo* because of the retirement of an elder priest who helped him with the celebrations. Indeed, according to the rules of the Church, each priest cannot celebrate more than two Masses per day, or a maximum of three if they obtain permission from their bishop. As a consequence, the celebration of the *vetus ordo* as an alternative to the ordinary form is also becoming increasingly uncommon due to the widespread and serious issue of the fall in the number of newly-ordained priests and the ensuing difficulty in replacing the elder priests after their retirement.[18]

Our sample included two generations of priests, and the interviews showed that there is a significant difference in the meaning attributed to the prayer in Latin and to the celebration of the Mass by the exponents of each generation. For a number of priests who were young before the Council, the Italian Mass was a positive emancipation (a "liberation," as one priest said) from an obsolescent and rigid tradition. In contrast, a new generation of priests, who constitute a minority inside the Church, are trying to face the problem of the Church's fragmentation and of the threats coming from a growingly secularized society by recuperating the ancient tradition. In this framework, the use of Latin liturgy is perceived as a free choice, helping priests to reconnect their role to a precise historical and cultural root and to be fully conscious of their religious identity.

The semiotician Massimo Leone (2011) points out that one of the universal features characterizing ritual is its association to the idea of an identical repetition of the same combination of elements through time, which does not allow actors a choice or the possibility of introducing changes. As a consequence, Leone argues, the meaning of ritual cannot be explained in structuralist terms, because the idea of meaning endorsed by structuralism is based on difference: the meaning of signs emerges from the differences between them, from the opposition of alternative elements.[19] In contrast, ritual actors recognize an intrinsic semiotic value to the ritual, so that its meaning seems to stem from its very predetermined, immutable, and unique – or transcendent – nature. Leone ascribes this characteristic to a kind of mentality which was predominant in the pre-modern era.

Based on these considerations, we can argue that the liturgical reform and the subsequent creation of the viable alternative between the *vetus* and the *novus ordo* introduced a significant turning point in Catholic culture.

If formerly there was only one, immutable and meaningful ritual of the Mass, celebrated in exactly the same way in the whole Catholic world, the introduction of the vernacular Mass – which, as mentioned above, is not a simple translation, but a renewed ritual – opens a brand-new comparative perspective for both the faithful and the priests. The ritual thus partly loses its routinized character: the unprecedented free choice between two equally valid rituals triggers a need for semiotic reflection and awareness in the involved actors. This alternative thus leads to the integration of the pre-modern conception of the intrinsic meaning of ritual with a modern notion of meaning deriving from difference. The introduction of this mentality allows the actors to gain an increased understanding of ritual itself and elicits the debate concerning the specific values and meanings connected to each of the alternative ritual forms. In this sense, the duplication of ritual constitutes an interesting variable in the historical dynamics of oscillation between ossification and revivalism identified by Tambiah (1985).

This "differential" approach to ritual involves not only the re-elaboration of meanings directly connected to liturgy and doctrine: as the interviews clearly show, the comparison between the two ritual forms also leads to the attribution of specific social and political connotations to each *ordo*. While the revival of the practice of the *vetus ordo* is often connected to an educated upper middle class with a good knowledge of Latin in search of a renewed religious identity, the *novus ordo* tends to appear as a more "popular" and inclusive ritual. The way in which the two ritual forms are compared is also the touchstone of an ongoing contrast between different factions inside the Church: it is evident that progressive and traditionalist Catholics tend to interpret ritual practices and formulas in different ways according to a broader ideology concerning the general organization and doctrine of the Church. The debate about of the use of Latin in the Mass, moreover, has highlighted the problem of the cohesion of the Catholic community at large: while on one hand the use of Latin raises concerns about the involvement of all the social classes in the ritual, on the other hand its abandonment in favor of vernaculars is generally seen as the loss of a common language that risks undermining the inner unity and identity of the Catholic global community and encouraging a dangerous fragmentation.

The point of view of ordinary priests, whose role is both that of mediators between the ecclesiastic hierarchy and the local communities, and of representatives of the different orientations inside the Church, has thus proven to be a privileged subject of study for an increased understanding of the socio-cultural and semiotic aspects of the liturgical reform following the Second Vatican Council.

Notes

1. The interview was carried out orally and individually in Italian and consisted of several questions. In this paper I mainly consider the answers to the following questions: why did you begin to celebrate the Mass in Latin? According to you, does the Italian translation of the Mass express all the meanings or are there concepts or parts that can be expressed only (or better) in Latin? What does celebrating the Mass in Latin mean for you?
2. The two main criteria in the choice of the sample were: (1) priests that use or used Latin in their celebration of the Mass (i.e. priests with direct experience of liturgy in Latin) and (2) a

geographic criterion (priests active in north-western Italy). Many of the priests interviewed, especially those who chose not to celebrate the whole Mass in Latin, cannot be labeled as "traditionalists." From this perspective, the sample is representative of different positions inside the Church, from traditionalism to moderate progressivism.

3. A semiotic ideology is "a set of basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world," Keane (2003, 419). This concept derives from the notion of "linguistic ideology" (i.e. "any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use," Silverstein (1979, 193). See also Keane (2007); Lambek (2013); Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity (1998).
4. In periods of "ossification," rituals "may increasingly lose whatever semantic meaning they previously had," while in periods of "revivalism" there is an attempt to "mold new rituals bursting with meaning attached to the contents of the acts per se. In such times of promise and hope the semantic meanings of words uttered and objects-symbols and icons manipulated matter terribly" (Tambiah 1985, 165).
5. On the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* see Faggioli (2012); Sorci (2013).
6. On the Protestant critique of "vain repetitions" and obscure meaning in Catholic ritual see Yelle (2013, 103–135). For theological reflections about the *versus populum* orientation, see Lang (2009).
7. Technically, the "ordo Missae" does not indicate the whole Mass, but only one part (the so-called "order of the Mass"). However, outside the specialist community of liturgists, the expression is often used to indicate by extension the whole Mass. The priests interviewed used it in this sense, and consequently I also adopt this terminology herein.
8. See the letter attached to the *motu proprio*.
9. See e.g. Congar (1977); Chalet (1976); Miccoli (2011).
10. See e.g. Muolo (2017).
11. See the report of the press conference of the CEI announcing the approval (Dicasterium pro Communicatione 2018).
12. Anthropologists have widely demonstrated that mystery and stability are two distinctive features of sacred language, and that ritual belongs to a sphere separated from everyday life, see e.g. Mohrmann (1957); Malinowski (1935, part 6), Turner (1967).
13. On the problem of the scarce knowledge of Latin within the Church (with a particular focus on French clergy), see Waquet (1998, chapter 2).
14. In Novara, three priests who celebrated according to the *vetus ordo* had to face the hostility of both their bishop and the local community (Di Maio 2007).
15. Even though it is no longer part of the Mass, in September 2018 Pope Francis invited the faithful to integrate this prayer in the recitation of the rosary, see the Holy See's public notice "Comunicato della Sala Stampa della Santa Sede" (2018).
16. The liturgical reform had a significant impact not only inside the Church, but also on the broader and secular Italian culture. Traces of such an impact can be found, for example, in Italian literature: on this topic, see Ponzo (2019, chapter 2).
17. E.g. Valle (2018).
18. E.g. Rodari (2017).
19. On this subject, see Leone (2011), but also Bloch (1974), who claims that formalization of ritual varies inversely with informative content.

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