

ARTUR ROCHE

## Latin Mass, an English cardinal against his people

---

ECCLESIA

04\_03\_2023



**Nico  
Spuntoni**



If it is true that the United Kingdom is the home of the man who will be remembered for having led the liturgical war on the so-called Tridentine Mass, it is also true that the UK is one of the most flourishing communities accustomed to celebrating Mass according to the extraordinary form of the Roman rite. Little more than a week after the publication of the *Rescriptum* by which, for the third time in under two years, restrictions were

placed on the liberalisation desired in 2007 by Benedict XVI, the British faithful are waiting to see if their bishops will follow the measures imposed by Rome.

**Some first responses** - dispiriting for the people of *Summorum Pontificum* - have begun to arrive and precisely from the diocese of Leeds, once led by Cardinal Arthur Roche, the current prefect of the Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments,. Bishop Marcus Stock, in fact, has announced recently that he has revoked the dispensations previously granted to celebrate according to the 1962 Roman Missal in parish churches.

**It is no mystery that this is the intention behind the *Rescriptum*** with which Prefect Roche has expressed the Holy See's displeasure with the way the bishops have applied *Traditionis Custodes* to date. The case of Leeds is emblematic of the outcome of the decision to centralise in Rome the granting of dispensations instead of delegating it to the bishops. The Tridentine Mass, however, will not disappear altogether from the diocese in Yorkshire, since Monsignor Stock has granted permission to celebrate it in a non-parish church, in Bradford. It cannot be excluded - as is rumoured - that this concession made in compliance with the provisions of the *Motu Proprio* of July 2021 is a timid sign of willingness towards the faithful fond of the extraordinary form, made by the current bishop who finds himself unwillingly having to respect the peremptory provision of his predecessor, who heads the Dicastery for Divine Worship.

**In addition to Leeds, the other diocese** pioneering the consequences of the *Rescriptum* is Liverpool, where Archbishop Malcolm McMahon informed the parish priests of the churches of St Catherine Labouré in Farington and St John's in Wigan of the suspension of dispensations hitherto granted for celebrations according to the Missal of St John XXIII.

**How will the Holy See's document be received in the rest of the British dioceses?** Damian Thompson, associate editor of the influential *The Spectator*, for which he edits the popular podcast *Holy Smoke*, has a theory of his own, which he confided to *The Daily Compass*: "Cardinal Roche is not a popular figure with most of the bishops of England and Wales, who remember him as a self-aggrandising secretary general of the Bishops' Conference and a bishop of Leeds who openly ingratiated himself with the late Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor in the hope of succeeding him in London. But the bishops also know that he will constantly harass them until they begin to cancel the Latin Mass in accordance with his *Rescriptum*".

**The British Catholic journalist, who has always been critical of Roche**, noted that

this process has allegedly already begun in Leeds and Liverpool, that is, “two dioceses whose bishops - ironically - have personally celebrated the Tridentine Mass in the past”. Indeed, Monsignor McMahon - whom Daily Compass readers will remember from the Alfie Evans case - in 2017 ordained two priests from the St Peter's Priestly Fraternity in an extraordinary form at St Mary's Church in Warrington. In the same year, Monsignor Stock had also celebrated a Requiem Mass in the extraordinary form for his deceased predecessors at Leeds Cathedral.

**All eyes are now on the Archdiocese of Westminster** because it is in London that there has been a real boom in celebrations of the so-called Tridentine Mass following *Summorum Pontificum*. According to Thompson, “it will be interesting to see how Cardinal Vincent Nichols of Westminster will handle this crisis” since “the most popular church in his diocese, the London Oratory, celebrates the old Mass every Sunday alongside the new”. In the background there is also the question of succession at Westminster: after turning 75, in fact, Nichols resigned, which the Pope accepted while asking him to remain *donec aliter provideatur*. A decision communicated by the archbishop to his priests in a letter, though since then more than two years have now passed. The names circulating for a possible succession are those of Bernard Longley, Richard Moth and John Wilson, bishops of Birmingham, Arundel-Brighton, and Southwark respectively. All three had allowed celebrations in the extraordinary form after the introduction of Traditionis Custodes.

**"Nichols", Thompson observed in an interview with *The Daily Compass*,** "is not a fan of the Tridentine Mass, but neither is he particularly enamoured of Arthur Roche, whose grandiose ways and favouritism are in stark contrast to Nichols' style; my concern is that he will soon be replaced by an Archbishop of Westminster chosen de facto by Roche”.

It is possible to imagine that most of the bishops of England and Wales are waiting for the opinion of the Bishops' Conference before following in the footsteps of Stock and McMahon and deciding how to implement the provisions sought by the Rescript.

**But the view of Thompson,** who has accustomed his readers and listeners to a caustic and unabashed style, is not so pessimistic about the survival of the community of faithful attached to the extraordinary form. For the former columnist of *The Telegraph*, in fact, the British bishops might eventually “meet Roche's demands in the short term, but in the knowledge that this tyrannical campaign is unlikely to last beyond this pontificate even if the new pope were to be a liberal”. On this point, Thompson blames Francis for choosing “to entrust the task of restricting the Latin Mass” to one whom he describes as

“one of the least popular cardinals in the Catholic Church, whose unique ability to stoke resentment will ultimately work to the advantage of traditionalist Catholics”.

**Already in 2009, from the pages of *The Telegraph***, the Catholic journalist repeatedly expressed his perplexity about the figure of Roche and opposed his arrival at Westminster in place of Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor who would have liked him as his successor.

**In spite of his predecessor's favour**, Benedict XVI preferred at the time to reject his candidature and appoint Nichols himself, but then nominated Roche in 2012 as secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. And this in spite of the fact that Roche, when *Summorum Pontificum* came out in 2007, had sent a note to the clergy of Leeds in which a rather limiting interpretation of the Motu Proprio was given and in which some of the elements that later ended up in the *Responso ad dubia* and in the *Rescriptum* on the Traditionis Custodes could be traced, such as a certain eagerness to be informed about each priest who intended to celebrate in an extraordinary form in order to establish his aptitude to do so.

However, in opposition to the spirit of the content of the *Rescriptum* is the fact that the then Bishop of Leeds was laying claim to the right of granting or not granting a priest the possibility of celebrating *sine populo* although Rome, in Article 2 of the *Summorum Pontificum*, had spoken plainly by stating that "for such a celebration (...) the priest does not need any permission, either from the Apostolic See or from his Ordinary".