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Latin Mass Supporters Stymied

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Traditionalists Blame Bishops In Raleigh, Charlotte

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Staff Writer

Charlotte Catholics at the helm of a national effort to bring back weekly Latin masses say they've lost the fight in their home state.

The problem, they say, is not in Rome — it's in Charlotte and Raleigh.

A new clarification from the Vatican has given local bishops the power to authorize optional weekly Latin services, but the bishops in Charlotte and Raleigh won't do so.

Officers of the Society of Traditional Roman Catholics accuse them of "stonewalling" their efforts and ignoring the wishes of Catholics who prefer the old Latin rite. The bishops, however, say weekly Latin masses would be a step backward and call it an exercise in nostalgia.

"Their (the bishops's) attitude is absolutely divi-

sive, totally un-Christian and quite possibly ignores their duty to provide for all the people in their diocese..." said Marty Kupris, president of the Charlotte-based traditionalist group.

"We have been deeply disappointed that once we got one obstacle cleared away, we found another obstacle placed in our path. Since the bishops have said further requests (for weekly masses) will be useless, we have to step back and ask why we're doing this."

The Tridentine Latin Mass was a staple in the Roman Catholic church for more than 400 years. It was officially replaced in 1970 by masses in the native languages of the world's 800 million Catholics.

An indult, or dispensation, issued in 1984 by Pope John Paul II allowed it to be publicly celebrated under strict guidelines.

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The old mass was reinstated on a monthly basis in Charlotte, Winston-Salem and Raleigh in May 1985 after Kupris's group petitioned Bishop John Donoghue of the Diocese of Charlotte and Bishop Joseph Gossman of the Diocese of Raleigh. A national petition drive netted 15,000 signatures, which Kupris delivered to the Vatican in November.

About 25 of nearly 200 U.S. Catholic dioceses began to offer a monthly Latin mass, Kupris said, and the fight for weekly services ensued.

"But around Christmas-time," he said, "things changed."

Attendance started to drop at masses held the first Sunday afternoon of the month. "We were averaging 250 to 300 people in Charlotte," Kupris said. "Then the bishops put up the stone wall. We're down to 60 or 70 now."

Part of the problem, Kupris says, is lack of advertising. As copublisher of the weekly diocesan newspaper North Carolina Catholic, Bishop Gossman has refused to let Kupris's group advertise monthly services.

"Bishop Gossman thinks it's a step backward and a real mistake," explains the Rev.

Joseph Vetter, director of communications for the Raleigh diocese. "He draws a distinction between allowing the monthly mass and promoting it."

Frustrated by the lack of progress, Kupris sought Vatican clarification of the indult last month. By telephone from Rome, Augustin Cardinal Mayer told him the old mass may be said weekly — if the local bishop approves.

Bishop Donoghue doesn't. Neither does Bishop Gossman.

"There is no question that I could grant it weekly if I wanted to," Bishop Donoghue said. "But I won't, because it's an exception. The norm in the church is the new mass."

During the more formal Latin service, the priest faces the altar, not the congregation. Worshipers take communion by kneeling while the communion wafer is placed in their mouths.

"I think it's a nostalgic thing for most of these people," Bishop Donoghue said. "They want to go back to what they remember from their childhood, and it's just not that way anymore."

But Kupris, 32, says most supporters of the Latin mass prefer it for spiritual reasons.

"It is not nostalgia that makes someone who is still young and seems to have the world by a string offer to give up everything he owns so he can become a priest and say this mass," he said. "I've had calls like that.

"It's not nostalgia for the 19-year-old girl who comes every month or the Protestant who attends regularly and now is considering becoming a Catholic."

Kupris predicted thousands of U.S. Catholics will leave the church if local hierarchies don't reconsider their opposition to weekly Latin masses.

Kupris says his group has offered to build a new Charlotte church for the weekly services and deed it to the diocese. Bishop Donoghue refused.

Traditionalists also have discussed their options with priests from the Society of St. Pius X, a group whose Latin masses are not authorized by the Vatican. He said a Pius X priest from Goldsboro conducts weekly services for about 35 people in a rented room in Charlotte.

"We want to be a part of parish life," Kupris said. "We don't want this catacomb mentality that the world is against us. But the parish doesn't meet our needs."

While the traditionalists mull their future, Vetter laments the bitterness that has developed between opposing groups.

"I agree with the bishops on this. We can't lead these people to believe if they just push hard enough the clock will turn back

"But what makes it very difficult is that these are sincere people who are trying to express their faith in a way that's meaningful to them. We respect them for that."



Donoghue