

Refutation of Sedevacantism

The general circular No. 04.0181 of 7 April 2016 gave some clarifications to our brothers who are faced with some *Sedevacantists*, whether self-professed or not. After being consulted by the Master in Council, Rev. Fr Jean, OFM Cap., chaplain and censor of the Order, gives us below an answer to the main arguments used by the adherents of *Sedevacantism*.

OUR *DUBIA* ON THE SUBJECT OF SEDEVACANTISM

Introduction

Since the Council of Vatican II, the doctrinal, moral and liturgical deviations presided by the last few popes have led some traditional priests and faithful to no longer consider them as true popes and heads of the Church, and to no longer pray for them at the Canon of the Mass.

Even if they reject being addressed by this pejorative term, they should still be classified in a group and they have commonly been called “sedevacantists.” This term encompasses a spectrum of more or less different attitudes and theories, the divergences of which render the proposed hypothesis even less credible.

However, the scandalous views of Francis, which shocked even some non-traditionalists (on homosexuality, the remarried, cohabitation, etc.), could not but induce some traditional Catholics to become Sedevacantists; a temptation which became even more appealing due to the fact that some traditional priests have labelled as “sedevacantists” those who refuse a canonical arrangement with the Vatican...

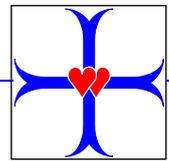
Under these circumstances in which many minds are troubled by this question, which has too much divided traditional Catholics, the Master and his Council have deemed it necessary to reiterate both the constant position of the Order on this subject, and the reasons behind it.

The following exposé does not purport to answer all the objections, or to bring closure to the debate, since experience has shown that such controversies know no end. It would suffice for us to summarily answer the most common arguments, and to refer to the recent booklet published by the *Éditions du Sel* on Sedevacantism, for a more robust argument. The quotes or references from the *Sel de la terre* (abbreviation: SDT) which follow can be found on the site: dominicains.avrille.fr.

Preliminaries

To categorically affirm that he who presently occupies the See of Peter at Rome is not the pope, based on doubtful and questionable premises, would greatly risk what moral theology calls rash judgement. That which can become a grave fault when the matter is a grave one and when the targeted person is clothed with the highest dignity. Besides the other consequences, such as the “risk of schism” mentioned by Abp Lefebvre, there is the injustice of no longer praying publicly for him whose right it is to be prayed for, and the scandalising of one’s neighbour.

We rightly say that there is a *risk* of a grave rash judgement, without personally judging each of those who hold this opinion. Each will have to give an account for his conscience before God. But it is reasonable to presume a more lenient particular judgement for those who would rather suspend their judgement on this question (“For with what judgement you judge, you shall be judged” Matt 7:2), or



for those deceived into believing with nearly the entirety of Catholics that the present pope is truly pope, rather than those who would reject a pope, scandalous he may be, but still pope, and would lead other faithful into this grave error.

These simple considerations, that one should conscientiously weigh and ponder on if one is truly concerned about one's eternity, should be enough to make us adopt a prudential position that Abp Lefebvre always held, who was a bishop and so a *judge of the Faith*, which even the strictest logicians, the keenest theologians, or the most learned people are not: "As long as I do not have evidence that the pope is not the pope, I presume that he is the pope. I am not saying that there cannot be any arguments that might cast doubt in certain cases. But there must be evidence that this is not merely a doubt, a valid doubt. If the argument was doubtful, we do not have the right to draw such serious consequences from it!" (COSPEC, 16-1-79)

This prudential attitude fully conforms to sound moral theology: when there is uncertainty about a person, we give him the benefit of the doubt. Therein lies our principle in answering the arduous question about the pope. Let it suffice for us to note that the various arguments put forth by those who deny the current pontificate remain riddled with doubts, and that those who hold to these arguments do not even agree among themselves (pope *materially* or not, conclavists or not, date of the start of the vacancy, etc.), and that some of their great theorists have suddenly switched to the conciliar camp (Fr Lucien, Fr de Blignières), all the more proving that their arguments cannot pretend to have the certainty required for so grave a matter. Having said these in general, let us examine some of the particular points that are commonly presented:

1) A heretical pope is deposed from his pontificate by the very fact of his heresy

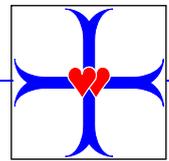
To start with, it must be noted that this doctrine is not recognised as *certain* or even *common* among the great theologians who dealt with this question: some think that this cannot happen, some others think that such a pope should be deposed, or forced to resign, and yet others who think that he would lose his pontificate *ipso facto*. Hence, it is only a probable opinion shrouded with doubts.

Next, the word "heretic" must be understood in the moral sense. For it is in this sense that there is unanimity among theologians and canonists, that one cannot condemn someone of heresy unless it be *formal* (an obstinate sin, wilfully denying an article defined by the Magisterium of the Church). However, it is not possible for us to affirm with certainty, that of a conciliar pope, neo-modernism being just a heresy that does not directly deny defined articles of the previous Magisterium, but empties them of their substance.

It is thus difficult to know if a conciliar pope is truly aware of being in formal opposition with the traditional Magisterium, especially when he preaches the "hermeneutic of continuity"... Even if that is the case objectively, it is not evident subjectively and before God that he has contracted the sin of heresy, a sin that the law of the Church requires to be declared, before being able to impute to him a crime punishable by canonical sanctions. Herein lies a new doubt. Yet, a decree of the Holy Office (20-07-1898) states that in case of doubt, there is presumption of material heresy.

With the *Dictionary of Catholic Theology* (v. 6, col. 2221), let us add that "even feigned ignorance excuses one from the sin of formal heresy, though it does not mean that it excuses from the sin itself". That these conciliar popes are heretics *at least materially*, this is commonly agreed among us, and this is what the Superior General of the SSPX declared publicly in *Fideliter* (No. 92, p. 44) in 1993. But that they are such *formally*, that is doubtful.

Finally, the most common opinion of theologians is that heresy destroys one's membership to the Church from the moment it is *notorious* by law (by the public sentence of a superior authority) or by fact (when it is acknowledged by the greater number, and that one does not even hide it). However, on the one hand, the Apostolic See cannot be judged here by anyone (CIC 1917, c. 1556), and on the other hand, the overwhelming majority of the conciliar clergy and faithful share the same grave errors, being convinced that this is part of the doctrine of the Catholic Church.



These three considerations, distinct from each other, and each having its share of doubt, suffice to demand prudence on our part when it comes to the canonical consequences of the heresy of the pope, at the risk of being rash.

2) The bull *Cum Apostolatus* of Paul IV strips ipso facto a heretical prelate of all ecclesiastical office

In the first place, this bull, like all of canon law, must be interpreted according to the analogy of law, with the other parallel canon laws. However, we just saw that the term “heretic” must be taken in its strict canonical sense, meaning formal and notorious, that which is doubtful in the case of the recent popes.

Next, this very point of the bull is not to be found in the Code of canon law of the Church, and it was even revoked by two later documents of popes St Pius X (*Vacante sede apostolica*, 1904) and Pius XII (*Vacantis apostolicae sedis*, 1945), which expressly declared that no cardinal can be prevented from electing or being elected at the conclave, under any pretext or ecclesiastical impediment. See an article on this subject in SDT No. 33, pp. 67-68.

Finally, let us take note that some important figures of Sedevacantism (such as Fr Ricossa) admit themselves that this bull of Paul IV is insufficient to prove that the See of Peter is vacant. So it is not only that we can doubt its application to the recent popes, but also that it should be considered as revoked and obsolete where their election is concerned.

3) To be pope, one has to be bishop of Rome. However, the last few popes were consecrated bishops in the new rite, which is invalid

A special study on this subject was made – of more than 50 pages - in *Sel de la terre* in 2005. It concludes that “the reasons for doubting the validity of the new rite of episcopal ordination, such as was promulgated by Rome in 1968, cannot be taken seriously.” (No. 54, p. 119). This study has come under heavy attack by sedevacantists, at the level of sacramental theology. Without a higher authority to resolve the debate, let us agree that a probable doubt remains in this argument.

In any case, the new consecratory prayer, which goes back to a text attributed to St Hippolyte, cannot be simply dismissed as invalid, for it has been in use for many centuries in two Oriental (Catholic) rites with some minor variations: the Coptic rite (Egypt) and the Maronite rite, rites that Rome has always recognised to be valid.

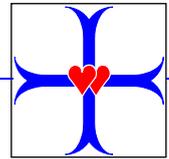
The intention of the consecrator bishops can be called into question, for the validity of the new rite in itself, does not prevent one from legitimately doubting the effected consecrations, such as in the case for the new Mass. But this would require an enquiry on a case-by-case basis, and would inevitably be incomplete. This argument must therefore be left aside since it is generally not worth the while, and leaves too much doubt in the particular cases of the last few popes. In this area, we also lack the required certitude for a categorical judgement.

Finally, whether or not episcopal consecrations are valid in the new rite, the Papacy is above all a power of jurisdiction. A cleric elected pope already has the pontifical power even before receiving episcopal consecration.

4) Canonisations involves infallibility, and those of Balaguer (in 2002) and of John-Paul II (in 2014) are clearly erroneous

The infallibility of canonisations is a doctrine that Vatican I did not want to define, but it is the common doctrine of classical theologians, and it results from the formula used by the pope, obliging the Universal Church. It can and must be held that all canonisations up till Pius XII are guaranteed by infallibility.

If we specify: “up till Pius XII”, this is because of the fact that, like for the sacraments, the intention of the person who canonises is a decisive factor, and, if the intention of engaging infallibility



is absent, the formula does not suffice to guarantee it. However, since John XXIII, it is clear that the popes full of Neo-modernism refuse to be dogmatic or condemnatory.

A blatant example proved this in 1994, when John-Paul II officially declared that women were not able to be ordained as priests. Some affirmed that this pontifical act comes under the definitive extraordinary Magisterium of the pope (cf. *Fideliter* No. 101, p. 40). And we might indeed have believed it, according to the formula used, and the criteria of traditional theology. But Cardinal Ratzinger thereupon published an official refutation: “It is a question of an act of the ordinary authentic Magisterium of the Sovereign Pontiff, and so an act which does not involve defining anything, or any solemn ‘*ex cathedra*’ text ” (*Doc. cath.* No. 2097, p. 613).

Since the Council, modernist prelates and theologians themselves have denied the infallibility of canonisations, either on the basis of principles (truth changes with time), or through prejudice (“decanonisation” of saints deemed legendary, or interfering with ecumenism). Thus, the French Bishops’ Conference declared in 2005 that canonisations “do not come under the domain of infallibility”. An expert of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints said the same at Rome in 2002 (see SDT No. 72, p. 53). Hence, the dominant theology in the conciliar Church has led them to say that the current popes cannot have the intention required for engaging their infallibility during a canonisation. Therefore, one cannot depend on this argument to claim that the See of Peter is occupied by a false pope.

It is the same for the objection by sedevacantists, arguing that it is impossible that the Magisterium of the Church could teach heresy with the fullness of its authority. The answer is quite the same, knowing that we are in the presence of a new magisterium that, after Vatican II, “avoided pronouncing in an extraordinary manner, any doctrine bearing the mark of infallibility” (Paul VI, 12-01-1966).

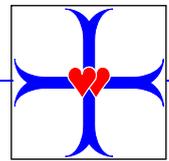
As for the Ordinary Magisterium, the question is too complex to be dealt with here. It was the subject of a special conference at the last General Chapter of the Order at Salérans. Simply put, the modernists have reformed it under some new principles (cf. *Donum veritatis*, of 24-05-1990) which leaves of the “Magisterium” only its name, or rather reduces it to a power which can no longer go into action. There are of course much more to explain and to prove; one can refer to the acts of the Congress of *Si-Si No-No* (2005), and one should also know that this question about the Magisterium was the main stumbling block to the doctrinal discussions of 2010-2011 with the theologians of the Vatican.

5) From 1986, Abp Lefebvre publicly considered that “this pope may not be the pope”, and writes that the Chair of Peter was occupied by “antichrists”. What would he say about Francis today!

These were indeed the words of Abp Lefebvre (30-03-86 and 29-08-87), but they are not to be taken that he holds to a sedevacantist position, since he was once again having negotiations with the Vatican after that. In fact, Abp Lefebvre never wanted to “decide on these theories” (5-10-78), and after the consecrations, he constantly declared at Flavigny, concerning Sedevacantism: “Personally, I have always considered that it is based on too simple a reasoning”. (*Fideliter* No. 68, p. 12)

If there was a change in the attitude of Abp Lefebvre towards Sedevacantism, it was more of a departure than an approach. In the same conference in Flavigny, in December 1988, he recommended the same attitude toward the sedevacantists as toward the compromisers: “We can no longer have relations with them. This is not possible (...); we should stay clear of compromise with the sedevacantists as with those who want to absolutely submit to the ecclesiastical authority.” (*ibidem*, p. 16)

Three months before his death, he declared again in *Fideliter* (No. 79, p. 7-8): “I have *always* warned the faithful by example concerning the sedevacantists. They say: the Mass is good, let’s go there. Yes, there is the Mass. It is good, but there is also the sermon, there is the ambiance, the



conversations, the contacts before and after, which will slowly lead to a change of ideas. That is the danger...”

Let us finally note that Abp Lefebvre, if he considered Sedevacantism as a “probable” opinion, did not however qualified it as a “free” opinion, but on the contrary as an “error”. In his conference to seminarians at Écône on 18 March 1977, he said to them: “That is an opinion. I am not saying that it cannot have any arguments in its favour, any probabilities. But I do not think that this is the solution that we should take (...) for the moment, personally, I believe that it is an error to follow this hypothesis.” (COSPEC 42-A)

Six months before his death, on September 2nd, 1990, he encouraged the Dominicans of Avrillé to publish a doctrinal periodical –which will become *Le Sel de la terre* in 1992– writing to them: “Our faithful are in need of some serious studies, on the error of the compromise of Dom Gérard, on the error of Sedevacantism...” (see SDT No. 36, p. 33)

Every kingdom divided in itself will fall. The founder of the SSPX undertook to write an official position in *Cor unum* and *Fideliter* (No. 13, p. 70) on the question of “the current existence of a pope”, publicly declaring that the Society “cannot tolerate within its ranks, members who refuse to pray for the pope”. He never retracted this public and firm decision, and those who align themselves with the thinking of Abp Lefebvre, both priests and faithful, cannot put it away.

6) But how can we say that we are in communion (*una cum*) with Francis in the Canon of the Holy Mass?

This translation of *una cum* into “in communion with”, even if it was used in some missals for the faithful, is not exact, and in any case is not the one to be retained by our priests and faithful in this sad period of the crisis of the Church. Already in 1982, *Itinéraires* refuted it in a special article: “the true meaning of *una cum*”. (No. 265, p. 8-9) The meaning is “and together with”: “... we offer them for Thy Church, *and together with her*, for our Pope...”

This translation is not arbitrary on our part, it is imposed by the very rubrics of the Missal, which prescribes that the pope recites the canon thus: “*offerimus pro Ecclesia [...] una cum me famulo tuo indigno*” and that the diocesan bishop recites: “*una cum me [...] indigno servo tuo*”. It is clear that the Church cannot be asking them to pray in union or in communion with themselves.

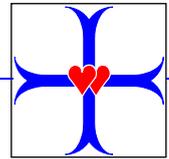
As some sedevacantists were still against this argument, *Le Sel de la terre* (No. 37, pp. 240-249) had to explain it in about ten pages, to which we refer those who are knowledgeable in Latin. Let us at least retain this proof that liturgical Latin equates *una cum* with *cum*: in the Roman Martyrology, 16th March, the martyr saint Julian was thrown into the sea in a sack with serpents (*in sacco una cum serpentibus*) and surely not “in communion” with them...!

We should not feel guilty for praying at the Canon of the Mass “in communion” with the pope (and his heresies and scandals): let us remember that we sincerely pray *for* him, since he is in need of it today more than ever.

In 1970, Fr Calmel wrote in *Itinéraires* (No. 148, p. 18): “The pope puts his soul in great danger by not recoiling from these unbelievable innovations, outside of Catholic norms”. And he concludes that this sad situation “requires us to pray even more for the pope”. In that same year when Paul VI implacably imposed the New Mass, Luce Quenette also declared *Itinéraires* (No. 145, suppl. No. 2): “Never has the prayer *pro pontifice nostro*, been said each day more fervently...” And this, for keeping the pope from heresy. So let us keep on fighting, without veering to the right or the left, the good combat of the faith of our fathers.

7) It is incoherent and hypocritical to recognise the Pope, to pray for him, and still disobey him by freely judging his decisions

Note that this accusation has been made against us by the sedevacantists as well as the compromisers, which can only be explained by a wrong notion of the duty of obedience. Along with



Holy Scripture (e.g. 2 Sam 18:12; Act 4:19) and the Tradition of the Doctors of the Church, and with ethicists and the popes themselves, we affirm that obedience has its limits so as to remain a virtue pleasing to God, even towards the highest authorities here below. With St Thomas (2^a-2^e, q. 3, a. 4, *ad* 2), we reckon in good conscience that one can (and even that one has to) oppose the supreme authority if there is a clear danger for the faith. This is clearly the case now.

As for the charge “free judgement”, which is related to that of obedience, it is not ~~any more~~ valid either, for we do not practice it in the manner of the Protestants, but we as good Catholics use our liberty and our duty to examine if that which is prescribed to us, conforms or not to that which we have always been taught and commanded. In this, we follow the recommendation of St Paul (meaning that which God wanted to reveal to us through His Apostle) in Gal 1:6-8: If an angel from heaven or a successor of the Apostles preaches a doctrine other than that which we have received, we must first of all examine it, so as to be able to condemn it.

Abp Lefebvre often quoted this passage of the Epistle to the Galatians, and also that of “the incident at Antioch” where St Paul believed it necessary to “withstand him [St Peter] to the face, because he was to be blamed”. (Gal 2:11) Note that the Prince of the Apostles had been confirmed in grace after having received the Holy Ghost at Pentecost... Of course, we are not St Paul, but we have his example in guiding ourselves through higher principles in this crisis, unprecedented since the founding of the Church.

In conclusion

It is fully understandable that some traditional Catholics, and among them, some members of the Order of the Knights of Our Lady, be deeply troubled by the scandals of Pope Francis, who seems to have surpassed his predecessors'. The sedevacantist solution may appear to them as the simplest, most logical, and best.

In fact, the fundamental problem remains the same since the 70s, and the prudent attitude of Abp Lefebvre, in considering the risk of excessive and rash judgement, with the attendant danger of schism, should not be abandoned. In 2001, the “Small Catechism on Sedevacantism” published by *Le Sel de la terre* concluded: “This is a position that has not been proven at the speculative level, and it is imprudent to hold it at a practical level, an imprudence that can bear very serious consequences.” (No. 36, p. 117) This conclusion holds as much for pope Francis as for pope John-Paul II who had kissed the Quran.

If one may use an analogy, it would be that of a wife forced to resort to a separation from her husband who has become adulterous, vicious and violent. She still remains united to him through the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. There would be great danger to her life and soul if she continues to live together with him. The Church allows her to be separated, but not divorced. She must be ready to return to her head and submit herself again to him when he would regain his normal state. He still remains as her husband, she is still united to him by the grace of the sacrament, she has a duty to pray more than ever for him and for his conversion.

This is only an analogy, a parable that some will perhaps be unable to understand or accept. I submit this and all before this to the judgement of my superiors, and also to the censure of a Father of Avrillé and of a chaplain of the Order, member of the SSPX, hoping to have answered the Master and his Council...

May the Good Lord and readers more competent than I am, pardon me if I have not appropriately dealt with so serious a subject, and may they not hold it against me. May Our Lady keep us all in peace!

Fr. Jean, Chaplain of the Order