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THE CRISIS OF THE CHURCH/1

Frustrated by Rome, following the Lefebvrians is not the solution

ECCLESIA 18_08_2023

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The serious and prolonged crisis being experienced in the Catholic Church, and which clearly emerged during the years of the current pontificate, has led many faithful to seek shores they consider safer. The pandemic years further exasperated the situation,

especially from a liturgical point of view: mandatory masks, the faithful seated at “safe” distances from each other, Communion only in the hand, gels, gloves plus all the other imaginative gimmicks priests devised in what seemed like a competition to create the most aseptic parish on the planet, left many in a state of exasperation.

Like castaways in search of dry land, many of the faithful understandably began to frequent chapels in which there was not only at least the semblance of normality, but also a liturgy celebrated in a dignified and solemn manner. The chapels of the St Pius X Priestly Fraternity (SSPX) undoubtedly provided this oasis for many. And credit must be given to their priests for this.

However, many are unaware of the actual situation of the SSPX either because they did not address the problem at all, or because, although they had heard of some 'irregularities', they had been reassured by the long-standing faithful of these chapels and their priests that they were in every respect Catholic. Furthermore, the confusion was also fuelled by some statements by respected bishops and prelates who tried to downplay the seriousness of the Fraternity's situation, describing it as a simple canonical irregularity. The situation that has arisen, together with the requests of a number of readers, calls for a series of articles to be dedicated to the regretful matter of the SSPX.

Above all, because the truth is unfortunately very different from how it is presented. The Fraternity, founded by Monseigneur Marcel Lefebvre (1905-1991), Archbishop Emeritus of Tulle, was canonically erected as a Pious Union, i.e. a public association of the faithful, in Fribourg on 1 November 1970, by Msgr François Charrière (1893-1976), Bishop of Lausanne-Geneva-Fribourg for a probationary period of six years. This canonical configuration meant that the Fraternity could not incardinate priests and depended on the authority of Msgr Charrière. On 21 November 1974, after an apostolic visitation ordered by Paul VI, during which the two visitors allegedly made repeated erroneous or heretical statements, Msgr Lefebvre published the famous Declaration in which he rejected "the neo-modernist and neo-Protestant tendency Rome clearly manifested in the Second Vatican Council and after the Council, in all the reforms that followed" and affirmed his "categorical refusal to accept the reform" of the liturgy.

On 6 May 1975, Msgr Charrière's successor, Bishop Pierre Mamie (1920-2008) suppressed the SSPX, with the approval of Paul VI. On 23 July 1976, Msgr Lefebvre was suspended *a divinis* for ordaining priests without the legitimate dimissorial letters; for the remaining years of his life, Lefebvre continued to exercise his ministry, including priestly ordinations, regardless of the suspension that prohibited him from exercising

any act deriving from the power of his ordination.

On 30 June 1988 he made the most serious decision: the ordination of four bishops against the express prohibition of Pope John Paul II, which cost them and the consecrating bishop the excommunication *latæ sententiæ* reserved for the Apostolic See, according to canon 1387. It is important to emphasise a few details here. First of all, the Holy See, through the mediation of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, had proposed to Msgr Lefebvre the possibility of having a bishop for the SSPX, chosen from among its priests, who would be ordained in mid-August 1988; Lefebvre at first accepted, but the next day revoked his consent to the agreement. Secondly, the episcopal ordinations were not carried out simply without a papal mandate, but *against* the will of the Pope, who had formally forbidden Msgr Lefebvre to proceed with the ordinations by means of a *monitum* sent by the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops on 17 June 1988. Finally, the excommunication foreseen "was triggered" per se: it is therefore not properly a sanction inflicted by the Pope, but a sanction that Msgr Lefebvre and the four bishops ordained by him have in some way inflicted upon themselves.

In the Motu Proprio *Ecclesia Dei Adflicta*, John Paul II explained that this act had been "one of disobedience to the Roman Pontiff in a very grave matter and of supreme importance for the unity of the Church"; a disobedience "which implies in practice the rejection of the Roman Primacy" and therefore "constitutes a *schismatic* act". The Pope then made an appeal to "remain united to the Vicar of Christ in the unity of the Catholic Church", and to "cease their support in any way for that movement. Everyone should be aware that formal adherence to the schism is a grave offence against God and carries the penalty of excommunication decreed by the law of the Church", according to canon 1364.

The SSPX, for its part, has always defended itself against the accusation of schism, resorting to a distinction: Msgr Lefebvre had not committed a schismatic act, as he did not wish to pass on any power of jurisdiction, but only the power of episcopal order. In this way, he had not usurped the power that belongs only to the Pope (jurisdiction), but had communicated the power that belongs to every bishop and not only to the Pope. The latter is transmitted through the rite of sacred ordinations, while jurisdiction through the Supreme Pontiff's injunction. On the basis of this distinction, the episcopal consecrations conferred by Msgr Lefebvre would not have been a schismatic act - since schism would occur where the intention is to transmit what only the Pope can give - but if anything an act of disobedience, though made necessary by the state of necessity caused by the crisis in the Church.

The argument however does not hold water. The prerogative of the primacy of Peter is not simply to hand down jurisdiction, but to decide who can be admitted to the College of Bishops and who cannot; in essence, the primacy of Peter also includes the exclusive right to appoint a bishop (which can concretely be realised in different ways). In his exhortation *Ad Apostolorum principis* (29 June 1958), Pius XII recalled “For it has been clearly and expressly laid down in the canons that it pertains to the one Apostolic See to judge whether a person is fit for the dignity and burden of the episcopacy, and that complete freedom in the nomination of bishops is the right of the Roman Pontiff (...) it follows that bishops who are neither appointed nor confirmed by the Holy See, and indeed chosen and consecrated against its explicit provisions, cannot enjoy any power either of magisterium or of jurisdiction (...) Acts requiring the power of Holy Orders which are performed by ecclesiastics of this kind, though they are valid as long as the consecration conferred on them was valid, are yet gravely illicit, that is, criminal and sacrilegious”.

Pius XII confirmed that “no person or assembly, whether of priests or of the laity, can arrogate to themselves the right to appoint bishops; no one can legitimately confer episcopal consecration if first the existence of the appropriate apostolic mandate is not certain”; and he emphasised a fundamental principle, of great importance for the issue at hand: “The spiritual needs of the faithful are not provided for by violating the laws of the Church”.

These “laws of the Church” must not be understood as mere ecclesiastical law, but as the expression of a divine right conferred on Peter and his legitimate successors. Pius IX clearly explained this in his condemnation of the Armenian Church: "We have held that Our right to make some elections outside of the proposed triad should not be

kept silent, (...) since the rights and privileges conferred on it by Christ God Himself can indeed be contested, but they cannot be abolished; and it is not in the power of any person to renounce a divine right, when sometimes, by the will of God, he is compelled to exercise it" (Encyclical *Quartus supra*, § 32).

Thus, the appointment of bishops is to all intents and purposes a divine right conferred on the Pope “by Christ God Himself”. Now, the consecrations performed by Lefebvre were a schismatic act to all intents and purposes, as they usurped a power that belongs only to the Pope by divine right, namely that of appointing bishops, and not simply that of conferring jurisdiction on them. The distinction brought forward by the SSPX is factually irrelevant. And, as we shall see, erroneous.

1- To be continued