

INTERVIEW

Only fidelity to the hierarchy of the Church is Catholic, even in trials

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The crisis within the Church is evident and appears to attack even what is good and holy. Making the situation worse, there are those whose overreactions seriously endanger the salvation of souls, but to many increasingly appear to provide the only lifeboat to

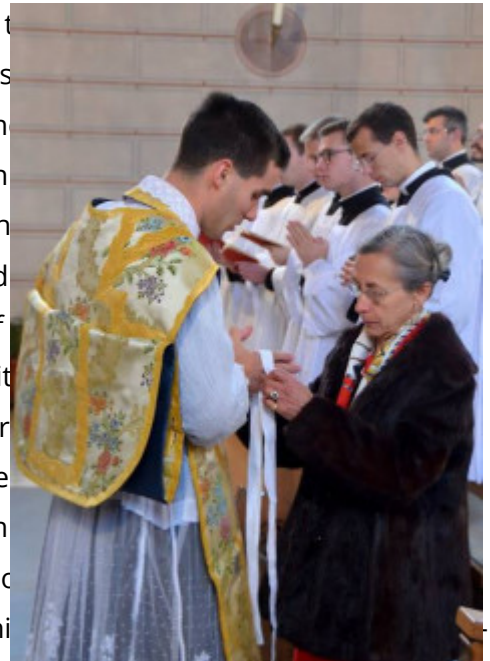
avoid sinking with the ship.

The *Daily Compass* asked Abbé Hilaire Vernier, who was ordained to the priesthood in 2017, and is a member of the Priestly Fraternity of St Peter, to help us understand the pitfalls, hidden in those supposed solutions to the crisis for the truth to be proclaimed in its entirety. For more than fifteen years, Abbé Vernier has dealt with apologetics and issues related to traditionalism, providing several contributions to the Claves.org website.

You have spoken about two forms of sedevacantism which are increasingly spreading in the 'traditionalist' world: one explicit and declared, the other implicit and practical. Can you briefly describe them?

Declared sede vacantism consists of affirming that the Apostolic See is vacant (unoccupied) for some since 1965 (closure of the Second Vatican Council), for others since the election of Paul VI, or even John XXIII. This position is based on various reasons, which vary between sedevacantist communities, and sometimes combine with each other: invalidity of the new ordination rites, heresies professed by the magisterium of Vatican II or subsequent popes, formal heresy of the

Practical sedevacantism, on the other hand, consists of recognizing the validity of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which is manifested, among other things, by the recognition (the official integration of their community) that does not fall within the sphere of faith in the Church discipline; a discipline that is not an end in itself and is applied in cases of necessity. Their members, such as those of the Priestly Fraternity of St Peter (FSSPX), therefore affirm that, in order to remain faithful to the discipline, it is necessary in practice to evade the submission to the hierarchy in order to be able to publicly exercise the ministry. In fact, while proponents of practical sedevacantism continue to recognize the Pope and praying for him, or accepting his jurisdiction, in practice they act as sedevacantists or sedeprivazionisti.



despite being 'apparently' (materially) Pope - is not really invested with the authority he deserves, due to a tacit rejection of his office, for lack of the intention to govern the Church or to teach in a Catholic manner (on the grounds that he would not seek the common good of the Church).

Let us come to avowed sedevacantism. Some think that for various reasons (lack of consensus, invalidity of Benedict XVI's resignation, violation of conclave rules, etc.), the election of Pope Francis would be invalid.

Apart from the fact that Benedict XVI has never publicly questioned the legitimacy of his successor, it should be noted that no cardinal, before or after Benedict XVI's death, has questioned the validity of Pope Francis' election.

To assert that Francis is not really Pope under the pretext of some irregularity concerning his election would be tantamount to adopting a covert sedevacantism, that is, to declare not only the vacancy of the Roman See, but also to assume that this absence of a true Pope remains hidden from view to the world and almost all Catholics. Theologians and ecclesiastical practice agree that the vacancy of the Apostolic See cannot be ignored by almost all the faithful, all the cardinals and all the bishops in office, as would be the case if, contrary to appearances, Francis were not pope.

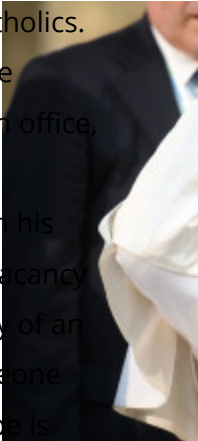
Cardinal Billot, considering the case of the illegitimate election of a pope, states in his famous treatise on the Church: 'Without a doubt, God can sometimes allow the vacancy of the See to be prolonged. He can also allow doubts to arise about the legitimacy of an elected person. But He cannot allow the whole Church to recognise as Pope someone who is neither truly nor legitimately so. Therefore, from the moment that the Pope is recognised as such and is bound to the Church like a head to his body, the question of a possible flaw in the election or of a defect in the conditions required for legitimacy no longer needs to be raised, because the Church's accession operates as a *sanatio in radice* to cancel any flaw in the election, and infallibly demonstrates that all the conditions required are fulfilled' (De Ecclesia Christi, tome II, Publication du Courrier de Rome, 2010, p. 457, n°950).

Others argue that even if Francis' election were valid, the Pope would be deposed ipso facto for manifest heresy. What is your opinion?

The opinion that a pope would lose ipso facto his pontificate for heresy spread among theologians of great authority (St. Robert Bellarmine, St. Francis de Sales,...) only at the end of the Middle Ages. However, this theological opinion, although not condemned by the Church, has never been taken up by the magisterium of an ecumenical council or a pope. However, it is illuminating to note that, in the past, the Church condemned a heretical pope, Honorius I, for monothelism, but only posthumously and not during his pontificate.

Among the supporters of this view, some believe that formal heresy alone is sufficient for the pope to be deposed. For others, it would be necessary for this heresy to be public and declared as such by the Church hierarchy. Even today, Canon Law (Canon 1404) reiterates that the Pope cannot be judged by anyone.

Those who advocate the immediate deposition of a Pope for formal heresy, allowing themselves to judge him like any cleric who has committed a canonical crime, forget



that to declare heresy 'formal' (i.e. guilty) and resolve any controversy about the heresy of the one occupying the Roman See and his guilt, it is necessary to have the authority to do so. Now, should a dispute arise, it could be that the occupant of the See of Peter is not really guilty of heresy, therefore still truly pope and therefore exempt from any higher judicial power.

Finally, it is very interesting to note that the one who has power of ordinary or delegated jurisdiction and who has been excommunicated laicized and who can use this power in a lawful and binding manner. This is equivalent to saying that a person can continue to govern it, by virtue of his office. Some canonists liken this situation to a pope who is still alive.



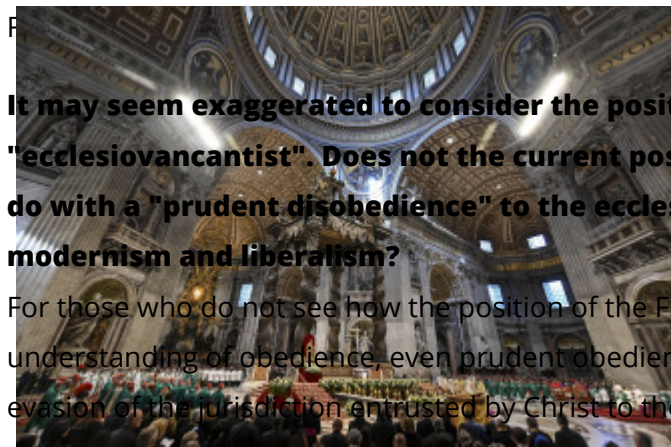
Regardless of these opinions and all the reasons that could be adduced to question the legitimacy of a pope, there is no doubt that a Roman pontiff peacefully accepted by almost all Catholics cannot be a usurper; this is an infallible dogmatic fact, because of the indefectibility of the Church and its nature as a visible society.

Let us now turn to practical sedevacantism, to which you link the FSSPX. You have described the FSSPX as "ecclesiovacantist" in several articles, in particular those published last May on Claves.org (see [here](#) and [here](#)) in response to Abbé Jean-Michel Gleize, one of the theologians of the FSSPX. What is the crucial problem with the position of the FSSPX?

The self-justification and position of the FSSPX, at least since the consecration of four bishops on 30 June 1988 by Archbishop Lefebvre against the formal will of the Pope, necessarily implies that the ordinary power of jurisdiction of the Church is a mere disciplinary component, which could be dispensed with as a prudential principle in times of crisis. And it is precisely this that has inevitably led to the autocephaly of the FSSPX, which can only be justified by an 'ecclesiovacantism', whatever its representatives may say.

The facts, which defeat all arguments, easily prove this. For example, the FSSPX holds as a matter of principle that all members of traditional communities officially recognised by the church hierarchy have aligned themselves with the errors of the Council and the post-conciliar magisterium. This explains why most of its priests admonish their faithful not to attend Sunday Mass rather than Mass celebrated by members of these communities, pejoratively referred to as 'ralliées' [an expression referring to Leo XIII's 'ralliement', i.e. the rapprochement with the French Third Republic, ed.] In addition, the

FSSPX does not recognise a priori any magisterial authority proper to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent popes; it habitually rejects any communicatio in sacris between its members and clergy who do not belong to its ranks, even when Mass is celebrated in the traditional rite; it insinuates a general doubt in principle about the validity of sacraments celebrated in the Latin Church by Latin clergy (not sedevacantists) other than its own, after the liturgical reform. This doubt is based on the modernist and ecumenist intention that is believed to have presided not only over the reform of the rite of Mass, but also over that of Holy Orders and the other sacraments that require the priesthood to be validly celebrated. This explains why its bishops conditionally confer Confirmation on the faithful who have been confirmed according to the new rite, and why external bishops who have joined the FSSPX, such as Bishop Lazo or Bishop Huonder, have never conferred the sacrament of Holy Orders on



It may seem exaggerated to consider the position of the FSSPX as "ecclesiovacantist". Does not the current position of the FSSPX have more to do with a "prudent disobedience" to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, corrupted by modernism and liberalism?

For those who do not see how the position of the FSSPX is not only a questionable understanding of obedience, even prudent obedience, in times of crisis, but a habitual evasion of the jurisdiction entrusted by Christ to the hierarchy of his Church, it is worth recalling a few facts, more eloquent than any argument: the FSSPX does not habitually submit in any way to the authority of the Pope and the bishops united with him; it invokes a generalised state of necessity in the Church to institute its apostolic works and administer the sacraments without any prior request to the bishops of the places concerned, claiming an almost universal substitution jurisdiction without precedent and without any serious ecclesiological or canonical basis. The FSSPX rejects a priori the binding authority of the Code of Canon Law in force since 1983, while fortuitously accepting this or that canon (such as that of the Eucharistic fast reduced to one hour); just as it usurps the Pope's exclusive power to re-judge, in particular, cases of matrimonial nullity as a last resort, through its Saint-Charles-Borromée commission, which is in reality a veritable ecclesiastical tribunal whose existence seems to be disguised.

In practice, apart from the mention of the Pope in the Canon of the Mass, the prayer for the Supreme Pontiff's intentions and the fortuitous acceptance of the powers of confession granted to its priests by Pope Francis since 2015, on the occasion of the Year of Mercy, nothing distinguishes the Saint Pius X Priestly Fraternity from sedepriatism.

Finally, by denying the necessity of an ordinary jurisdiction in the Church and believing that Christ directly supplants all that is necessary, without going through the intermediary of the Pope, the FSSPX seems to admit, in spite of everything, that the ecclesiastical hierarchy is not concretely and truly always necessary for the Church.

Recently, Abbé de Jorna, Superior of the French District of the FSSPX, has started to spread the idea that new episcopal consecrations are on the horizon. The key idea that the Fraternity has always defended is the possibility of consecrating bishops without jurisdiction, due to the state of necessity in which the Church finds itself after the last Council. What is the response to this argument in favour of consecrations without papal mandate?

Even if one accepts a state of necessity in the Church resulting from a generalised deficiency in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, this state can never exempt natural or revealed divine law.

Now, the designation of a candidate for the episcopate is the competence of the Sovereign Pontiff, as Pius XII reminded in the Apostolorum principis of 29 June 1958, which teaches that consecrations without a pontifical mandate are "grave attacks against the Church", and it is "Our precise duty to remind everyone of the doctrine and principles that govern the constitution of the Church of Jesus Christ". And he adds: "The sacred canons in fact do not leave for the Apostolic See alone to judge the suitability of a candidate for the episcopate and mission and that it is for the Roman Pontiff to free himself further on, he recalls that "no one can legitimately confer an episcopal consecration if the existence of the appropriate apostolic mandate is not fulfilled. An abusive consecration, which is a most serious attack on the Church, is excommunication reserved in a very special way to the Apostolic See is established, in which not only the one who receives the arbitrary consecration automatically incurs, but also the one who confers it". Pius XII merely echoes the constant magisterium to which no other pope or theologian of recognised authority is able to oppose.



Therefore, the necessity in which the Church finds itself cannot justify episcopal consecrations against the will of the Pope or without at least his tacit consent, just as a shortage of bread would not authorise the substitution of the sacrament of the Eucharist for something else.

But what if bishops are consecrated without any jurisdiction being conferring on them?

In reality, it is already the mere fact of designating a candidate to the apostolic

succession against the will of the Pope or without his consent that constitutes a violation of divine law. Indeed, the designation of such a candidate to receive the fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders ultimately belongs to the Pope alone, in accordance with the Church's immemorial practice and its constant Magisterium, which has always condemned the appointment or consecration of a bishop against the express will of the Pope. It is interesting to note in this regard that between two pontificates, while the See is vacant, no new bishops are appointed, not even auxiliaries.

If there were new consecrations within the FSSPX against the will of the Pope, this would only confirm once again its practical ecclesiovacantism. It should be noted that three of its bishops had already consecrated Bishop Rangel in 1991, without any papal mandate.

Many of the faithful feel cornered at a time when it is objectively becoming increasingly difficult to find Eucharistic celebrations worthy of the name and priests who really help in the life of faith. It seems that the only chance of survival is to follow these drifts. What can one say to them in this regard?

The Church established by Christ and by virtue of the divine will is perpetual, that is, it will last until the end of the world. This perpetuity applies in particular to the primacy of the Pope, the hierarchy, revealed doctrine and the sacraments. This affirmation of the Church's indefectibility, which is part of the Catholic faith, was defined by the First



cantist traditionalism, being contrary to the unity of the Church, ultimately lead to a schism. Traditionalism is contrary to the unity of the Church and unity, which implies the necessity of the Pope. From this it follows that they are in a state of schism at their whim an almost latent schism. As for the unity of the Church, the unity of the faith is necessarily required,

so for the unity of the Church, insofar as she is a divinely constituted society, the 'unity of government' is required by divine right, which produces and in itself encloses the 'unity of communion'" (Leo XIII, *Satis cognitum*, 29 June 1896).

The indefectibility of the Church implies the permanence of its hierarchy and its power of jurisdiction, which are truths of faith, and we cannot set them aside to protect ourselves from other errors, such as the practical denial of the dogma 'outside the Church there is no salvation', the denial of the uniqueness of the supreme power of jurisdiction in the Church, or the proclamation of an inalienable human right not to be prevented from acting according to an erroneous conscience in private or in public, even in religious matters. The dogmatic errors, stemming from modernism and liberalism, to

which are added those concerning morality (stemming in particular from personalism and naturalism) and which are corrupting preaching in the Church, are no less serious than those concerning its indefectibility and necessary implications.

The duty to glorify God by sanctifying oneself and testifying to the wholeness of the Catholic Faith in these troubled times inseparably requires fidelity to the Church's hierarchy (i.e. obedience to its legitimate precepts and effective recognition of its ordinary jurisdiction), irrevocable assent to all its infallible teachings and constant magisterium, and participation, as far as possible, in the liturgy most consistent with the propitiatory and essentially sacrificial nature of the Mass.

This threefold fidelity, put to the test by this crisis that affects in different ways the powers of governance, teaching and sanctification entrusted by Christ to the hierarchy of his one Church, is the only authentically Catholic one, because it is the only one consistent with the whole of Revelation, without which there is no salvation, and of which the Church is the sole repository.