

Misunderstandings

True and False Obedience: What a Confusion Among *Écône* Supporters

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If anyone thought that the Holy See's response to the schismatic act of July 1 would put an end to the matter once and for all, they need to think again: not only is the confusion not abating, but it seems to be growing. This confusion is all too evident online and even

reaches our editorial office's inbox. We will try to address the most common objections, striving to provide as much clarity as possible, in the hope of encouraging reflection rather than an emotional reaction—however understandable that may be.

The first of these objections goes something like this: but you tell the FSSPX to obey the Pope, yet then you disobey him by criticizing *Fiducia supplicans*, pointing the finger at *Traditionis Custodes*, and distancing yourselves from the Abu Dhabi declaration. What kind of consistency is this? If one must obey the Pope, then “be silent and keep quiet.”

Let us begin with the teaching of the pre-Vatican II Church (not because of reservations about the last Council, but to find common ground with our interlocutors): submission to the Roman Pontiff is necessary to be true members of the Church and thus to attain eternal salvation. “We declare, affirm, and establish that submission to the Roman Pontiff is, for every human creature, necessary for salvation” (*Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 875); so stated Boniface VIII, succinctly. So here we must make an initial choice: it is not possible for a Catholic not to be subject to the Pope, under the pretext of being unable to adhere to the “conciliar Church” or the “synodal Church.” Anyone who asserts, as the FSSPX does, that Leo XIV is the Pope, must submit to him. But let us examine more closely what this means.

The Pope has received from Christ a power of jurisdiction, which extends immediately to the entire Church and to every single member of the faithful: “We teach and declare [...] that the primacy of jurisdiction over the entire Church of God was promised and conferred immediately and directly upon the blessed Apostle Peter by Christ the Lord” (*Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 3053). What was conferred upon Peter is perpetuated in the Church until the end of time through those who succeed him on the Roman See, so that the *Pastor æternus* anathematizes those who maintain that “it is not by the institution of Christ the Lord himself or by divine right that the blessed Peter always has successors in the primacy over the universal Church; or that the Roman Pontiff is not the successor of the blessed Peter in this primacy” (*Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 3058).

We are at the heart of the dogma of the primacy of the successors of the Apostle Peter—that is, of that full authority to govern the entire Church, thanks to the fullness of supreme legislative and judicial power—to which corresponds the duty of true obedience on the part of all the faithful. The necessity of obedience therefore flows from this dogmatic truth, which cannot be denied if one wishes to remain Catholic:

“Therefore, all pastors of every rank and every rite, as well as the faithful—both individually and collectively—are bound by the duty of hierarchical subordination and true obedience, not only in matters concerning faith and morals, but also in those relating to the discipline and governance of the Church spread throughout the whole earth. Thus, by preserving the unity of communion and the profession of the same faith with the Roman Pontiff, the Church of Christ is one flock under one supreme shepherd. This is the doctrine of Catholic truth, from which no one can depart without endangering their own faith and salvation” (*Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 3060).

From the texts cited, we see that under the umbrella of this same primacy, there are two distinct aspects: that of the magisterium (profession of the faith) and that of governance (unity of communion). The Pope’s infallibility, whether he speaks *ex cathedra* or intends to define a doctrine—even in a non-solemn manner—is part of the primacy, but it does not exhaust it. Nor is obeying the Pope as he governs the same as assenting to the Pope as he teaches. Obedience is given to commands that come from legitimate papal authority, while intellectual assent is given to his teachings.

Let us begin with obedience owed to the Pope. St. Thomas, in the *Summa Theologiæ* (II-II, qq. 104–105), explains what true obedience consists of, emphasizing its fundamental difference from its counterfeit, which we call false obedience. In q. 104, a. 5, he outlines the two reasons why one may not obey a superior in everything. “First, by the command of a greater authority”; a superior authority that may be human or divine (in the case of the Pope, it is solely divine authority). Second, if the superior “commands things to which the subject is not subject to him.” True obedience is ordered obedience and may be limited to what is obligatory, or extended to other optional matters, provided they are lawful. Disordered obedience, on the other hand, is that which pertains to things that are unlawful, evil, or contrary to God’s law, whether natural or divine.

It is this ordered obedience that is owed to the Roman Pontiff. If, for example, he orders the blessing of a same-sex couple, as a couple, his order must not be carried out, because it is contrary to the higher authority of God; a contradiction that, incidentally, was emphasized by the *Responsum* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, dated February 22, 2021. And in fact, several Episcopal Conferences have legitimately expressed their *non possumus*. If, on the other hand, the Pope orders that episcopal consecrations not be performed, there is nothing in this order that contradicts God’s law; rather, it is a matter that falls perfectly within the primacy that Christ conferred upon Peter. It is interesting that Pius XII draws precisely on the texts of *Pastor æternus*

cited above to recall that, as a consequence of this primacy, “no one can legitimately confer episcopal consecration unless the existence of the appropriate apostolic mandate is first certain,” as this would constitute a “most grave attack on the very unity of the Church” (*Ad Apostolorum Principis*).

Thus, obedience in the first case would be merely apparent, because in reality it is disordered, whereas in the second case it is orderly and obligatory. We have written many times that the power to choose, consecrate, and send bishops was conferred upon the Apostolic See by Christ Himself, and is therefore of divine right and not merely ecclesiastical; but we will return to this in a future article.

As for the Magisterium of the Church, and specifically that of the Pope, it is a matter of intellectual assent. But the nature of this adherence must correspond to the degree to which the Church intends to bind the faithful. It is significant that in the various proposals for a doctrinal declaration from the Holy See to the FSSPX, acceptance of the Church’s Magisterium—and in particular of the Second Vatican Council—has never been demanded absolutely, but rather according to the degree of assent required by the teaching of each document. One does not give definitive assent to a teaching that does not require it; nor should one think that the obedience required at the lowest level of the Magisterium means it is impossible to raise doubts or suggest improvements; even less should one assume that what is presented in the documents as illustrative, provisional, or as mere data drawn from the secular sciences properly requires obedience (for further reading, we provide the special feature on the Magisterium that we published in *La Bussola Mensile*, March 2025 issue).

So, it is quite clear that this is not a matter of “La Bussola can criticize the Pope, but the FSSPX cannot.” Rather, on the question of obedience, it is a matter of understanding when an order from the Pope is binding and when it is not, while on the question of teaching, it is a matter of determining what kind of assent is actually required of the faithful.