

The Society of Saint Pius X

by Sebastian R Fama

Whenever a new group rejects Rome's authority, its leaders attempt to justify their rebellion with cleverly worded arguments. These arguments usually begin with universally recognized truths. Gradually those truths are twisted until they no longer retain the meaning intended by God. Unfortunately, this can lead to good people being deceived. This of course is a dangerous game for the deceivers. In Matthew 18:6 Jesus said: "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be far better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."

The Society of Saint Pius X is one such group. They reject the Second Vatican Council and anything it produced. This is based on the mistaken notion that the council contradicted established Church teaching. Bishop Bernard Fellay, Superior General of the Society of Saint Pius X attempted to justify their position in a speech he gave in November of 2004. But before we examine his argument, we need to lay out the problem he faces in a little more detail. Scripture teaches us the following:

1. Jesus Christ established a Church with Peter as its head. He guaranteed that the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).
2. He gives Peter the authority to legislate (Matthew 16:19).
3. He promises to be with his Church until his second coming (Matthew 28:20).
4. Jesus says the Holy Spirit will guide the Church into all truth (John 16:13).
5. Decisions of the Church are decisions of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28).
6. Believers are to observe the decisions of the apostles (and their successors) (Acts 16:4).
7. If anyone refuses to listen to the Church he is to be cast out (Matthew 18:17-18).
8. Jesus says anyone who rejects his apostles, and by implication, their successors, rejects him and the Father (Luke 10:16).

In his speech Bishop Fellay said the following about the papacy:

It is true that in the Catholic Church we have in the papacy an absolutely tremendous authority. It is the highest authority among the creatures in the world. The pope has the supreme authority, not as a man, but because he is the Vicar of Christ. He is the visible representative of Christ our Lord. That is what makes this authority so enormous. And we know according to the promise of our Lord, that what he binds on earth shall be bound in heaven, and what he looses on earth, shall be loosed in heaven. It is a tremendous power and we link this to the character of infallibility (*The Angelus*, November 2004, page 7).

So far so good. He appears to have a good understanding of Catholic teaching. But then he contradicts himself by saying:

But here too, many find an easy way out of the crisis: the pope has spoken, so there is no need to reflect anymore just obey. When everything is normal, it is sufficient, and it is fine. But this does not change the reality of obedience.

Obedience is a virtue, a virtue which is exercised by a human being. When we refer to a human being we mean somebody who has reason and will. That means that this act shall be virtuous insofar as a human being makes use of his reason and will when he obeys. If we switch them off when we obey, we are no better than a dog (ibid).

The reality of obedience is to obey! With his little addition, Bishop Fellay changes Christ's words to: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven as long as no one disagrees." That's nonsense of course, obedience is obedience! There is no second guessing involved. As the 1911 version of *The Catholic Encyclopedia* put it: "By Divine law, religious persons are subject to the hierarchy of the Church; first to the pope, then to the bishops" (Volume XI, page 182).

As long as the pope acts in his official capacity we are to obey, period. If our decision to comply is dependent on our own reasoning then it is not obedience but agreement. As the book of Hebrews tells us: "Obey your leaders and defer to them" (13:7). Nowhere in Scripture will you find conditions attached to this command. Nor will you find anything of that nature in Catholic teaching or Sacred Tradition. In fact we find just the opposite. As we noted earlier: "If anyone refuses to listen to the Church he is to be cast out (Matthew 18:17-18).

Man is afflicted with a fallen nature. Thus, his "reason and will" are defective. And that means he is not qualified to be the arbiter of truth. And that is the reason why Jesus established a Church with authority. Authority, by its very nature, is needed most when those subject to it disagree.

Further on he says:

So where is the point at which we must say no? It does happen. The point at which we say no is when this authority which has been granted by God to a human being is used against God (ibid, page 8).

That would be true when for instance; a bishop contradicts official Church teaching. However, when it comes to the pope, we have an entity whose authoritative decisions are guaranteed by God. And if they are guaranteed by God, you can be sure they will never be used against God. As the Scripture says: "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).

Bishop Fellay then claims there is a Scriptural precedent for his disobedience:

It is like Saint Peter in front of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the highest religious authority, and when it said, "we forbid you to preach in the name of Jesus," Saint Peter replied, "We have to obey God rather than man." That is a very basic principle in obedience. Usually, these types of things are rare and the normal behavior really is obedience. But it can happen that things are abnormal, and the situation in which we are now in the Church is such a situation" (ibid).

When it came to religious matters, the Sanhedrin had no religious authority over Peter and the apostles. At this point in time Jesus had already established his Church (Matthew 16:18-19) and given it its commission (Matthew 28:16-20). As Bishop Fellay admitted earlier, Peter and his successors possess "the highest authority among creatures of the world." Hence, no one on earth had more religious authority than him. So this is not a case of religious authority being justly defied. This is a case of religious authority being justly exercised. And it is the same religious authority that Bishop Fellay is bound to obey.

After noting that all the laws in the Church are given to help souls to be saved, he says the following:

Now if you find in that organization a law against the salvation of souls or circumstances in which a law is being used against that purpose, of course you do not obey that law.

So how is that determination made? Well, earlier Bishop Fellay said one must make use of one's own reason. In other words, one must privately interpret Scripture as well as Sacred Tradition. Not only is this idea foreign to authentic Catholicism, it is the basis for, and the most distinguishing characteristic of Protestantism.

This is eerily reminiscent of a similar event in Scripture. In Genesis 2:16-17 God says to Adam and Eve: "You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and bad. From that tree you shall not eat" Satan suggests that, God didn't really mean what He said (Genesis 3:4-5).

In Matthew 16:19 Jesus says to Peter: "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven ..." Bishop Fellay suggests that, Jesus didn't really mean what He said.

But what about a pope who is guilty of bad behavior? Would that have any effect on the status of his authority? In Matthew 23 Jesus condemns the scribes and the Pharisees for their bad behavior. And yet listen to what he says to the crowd: "The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. Therefore, do and observe

all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice” (Matthew 23:2-3).

Even though their personal behavior was bad, the scribes and the Pharisees still retained their positions of authority. In Galatians 2:11-14, Peter behaves badly and Paul calls him on it. As we just saw, the scribes and the Pharisees did not lose their authority because of their bad behavior. Likewise, Peter never loses his authority because of his bad behavior. And that same principle applies to his successors.

In John 8:44 Satan is called the father of lies. His business is deception and he is very good at it. Aside from being very intelligent he has thousands of years of experience. When you isolate yourself from the Church you are like a lamb who wanders away from the shepherd and out into the wilderness. And that’s right where Satan wants you. For he is “like a roaring lion looking for [someone] to devour” (John 5:8).

If Bishop Fellay were correct in his assertion that the pope officially taught error it would mean that the gates of hell prevailed over Christ’s Church. And that, of course, would make Christ a liar. We know that’s not possible. Consequently, we can only conclude that it is Bishop Fellay who teaches error.

Man is sinful by nature. Once stained by sin, the humble repent and seek God’s forgiveness. But the proud only seek to justify their transgressions. A good example of this is found in 1 Samuel 15:1-23. Saul, king of Israel, is given a direct command by God. He does most of what God asked him to do, but not all of it. Unfortunately, when confronted by the prophet Samuel he uses the excuse that he did what he did in order to honor God. And that is the essence of Bishop Fellay’s argument. He disobeys God in order to honor him.

The bottom line here is that Jesus nowhere gives believers the authority to dogmatize their personal preferences. The idea that we can, by our own reasoning, pass judgement on the Church implies, among other things, that we are personally infallible. And that is a quality that no human being possesses, not even the pope. When we speak of Papal Infallibility, we do not mean to say that the pope is infallible. Rather Papal Infallibility is a charism which protects the Church. It does so by preventing a pope from officially teaching error. Unfortunately, there is nothing that prevents Bishop Fellay from officially teaching error.

Copyright © Catholic365 2021

Posted on StayCatholic.com