

The Cosplaying Traditionalism of the SSPX

Why the SSPX's appeal to emergency, conscience and tradition fails the Church's own ecclesiology.

by Larry Chapp

It is being reported that the radical traditionalist community known as the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX) is planning on going ahead this summer with new episcopal ordinations, even if it is without approval from Rome. This is, of course, in explicit violation of canon law, which forbids such unilateral actions. Furthermore, it is specified in canon law (CIC 1382) that such renegade moves incur the penalty of an automatic excommunication, officially known as a *latae sententiae* excommunication.

But should this happen, it will not be the first excommunication rodeo for the SSPX leadership. This penalty was incurred once before in 1988 when the founder of the SSPX, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, and four bishops he consecrated without a papal mandate, were announced by Pope John Paul II to have incurred the penalty of an automatic excommunication.

At that time the SSPX claimed that the automatic excommunication did not “really” happen since canon law does allow for such consecrations in emergency circumstances where there is a grave need and souls are at stake. But of course, this is risible nonsense since the allowance for such consecrations had in mind circumstances where getting a papal mandate was impossible due to oppressive political regimes or the geographically remote and inaccessible nature of the mission land in question. But it was always understood that such a papal mandate would be sought out at the first possible opportunity, even if it is done secretly in order to avoid political reprisals.

In no way was the allowance for episcopal consecration without a papal mandate envisioned as somehow legitimate based on the grounds that Rome itself had fallen into heresy. In other words, the putative “crisis” to which the SSPX is responding is a manufactured one of its own making. There is a crisis in the Church today and that cannot be denied. There is widespread dissent from official magisterial teaching on all manner of topics, ranging from moral theology to ecclesiology to Christology. But far from fighting this lamentable trend, the SSPX is in fact a part of it, as they engage in their own version of theological dissent which entails the assertion that they get to make up their own ecclesial rules as they see fit.

And now here we are in 2026 facing another round of illicit SSPX episcopal consecrations without a papal mandate. People have asked me for my views. Well, here is my view: Should they do this then excommunicate them once and for all and let's be done with them. The Catholic defenders of the SSPX point to the fact that Rome has allowed the “German Synodal Way” with all of its theological lunacy to continue and therefore, in order to avoid a double standard, it needs to give the SSPX a break here. And as much as I dislike on a theological level the German Synodal Way, the fact is that at least they have not announced a schismatic act whereby they have decided to consecrate bishops on their own, without a papal mandate, or to begin ordaining women, or to perform same-sex marriages, all without papal approval. Yes, they are being sneaky and deceptive. And yes, they may yet do such things. But so far, they have played within the rules established by canon law. And what becomes of them will be up to Rome eventually. They are at this point Rome's headache and not ours, at least in terms of concrete ecclesial action.

If one goes to SSPX sites, what you see is an entrenched and widespread belief that Vatican II was a “Modernist Council” that contains many teachings that are heretical. One finds expressed the view that all post-conciliar popes are also Modernist and continue to spread the heresies of “the Vatican II Church.” One finds the assertion that the *Novus Ordo* Mass destroys the soul and should never be attended even if it is the only Mass available; better no Mass at all than this “Freemason Mass.”

It is commonplace in such circles to read references to “the *Novus Ordo* Church” and, as mentioned above, “the Vatican II Church,” and to see them contrasted with the “true Church of Tradition.” It is hard not to see a latent *sedevacantism* in all of this. It is hard not to see this dissection of the Church into a “before apostasy” and “after apostasy” dichotomy as a blatant *sedevacantist* position, even if they would never say this quiet part out loud.

They may deny the charge, but the internal logic of their self-defeating position says otherwise. For once one pits the “modern magisterium” against the “true magisterium of true tradition,” and one uses the latter to reject the teachings of the former, one is left with a deep ecclesiological incoherence and contradiction. And the incoherence is compounded by the fact that this entire ecclesiological typology of “before magisterial heresy and after magisterial heresy” is not the result of any magisterial decision as such wherein the magisterium itself “self-corrects” (as it has done in the past), but is instead the pure fictional concoction of a theological interpretation from a small handful of radical traditionalists.

The fact that they seem undisturbed by the threat of excommunication is a big “tell” in this regard. The insouciance with which the SSPX treated the 1988 excommunications on the grounds that they never happened owing to “emergency circumstances” is absurd on its face. And one cannot seriously entertain the view that the alleged heresy of an entire ecumenical council and several popes constitutes such an emergency, when such declarations come not from the Magisterium – which is alone empowered in a proper Catholic ecclesiology to make such depositions – but from the schismatics themselves.

This kind of self-justifying theologizing has a creepy crypto-cult-like feel to it. Some have accused the SSPX of engaging in a kind of “Protestant” picking and choosing. But that is an insult to Protestants who are serious Christians. Rather, the whole SSPX “thing” smacks of an insular and cultish devotion to a false, romanticized version of a Catholicism that never was.

And now I am also going to just say it. I do not think that many of the leaders of the SSPX are really very “traditional” at all and are merely cosplaying at this point at Catholicism. Because a true traditionalist would loathe schism. And a true traditionalist would fear the full meaning of excommunication. The movement adheres to a very, very narrow interpretation of the doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. For them, the “Vatican II Church” abandoned a proper understanding of this doctrine when it championed interreligious and ecumenical dialogue and outreach. For them, most non-Catholics are indeed probably on their way to Hell. And, they assert, unless we hold to such narrow interpretations, we lose all reason for being Catholic and morally good, and we lose all reason for evangelizing.

But if they are excommunicated then that means they are now part of the *extra ecclesiam* that they see as outside of salvation. And the fact that this does not seem to bother them tells me that they are not serious. It tells me that they are not true traditionalists. It tells me that they are cosplaying at Catholicism for largely psychological and cultural and political reasons having nothing to do with salvation.

At this point some might rush in and explain that this is “merely” a “canonical excommunication” and not a “real excommunication,” which is why they do not take it seriously. In other words, this is a “mere technicality” of the law and not a legitimate theological reality. But I disagree. This is a schismatic act and that is a serious business. And the actual act of consecrating illicit bishops is merely the cherry on top of the ice cream of their now 55-year-old dissent from the entirety of the Church from 1962 onward.

The Church has bent over backward to accommodate them. Pope Benedict even lifted the excommunications of the four bishops consecrated in 1988 and he did so, as he said, for purely pastoral reasons of mercy and reconciliation. And this cost Benedict dearly since one of the bishops turned out to be an antisemitic Holocaust minimizer, which made the German Ratzinger look very bad. Pope Francis, the bogeyman of so many ultra-right Catholics, sent out his own olive branches to the SSPX. I was no fan of Francis either, but for different reasons, and his kindnesses to the SSPX cannot be denied.

But nothing the Church does is good enough for the SSPX. They are completely wedded to their scorched earth rejection of *Nostra Aetate*, *Dignitatis Humanae* and the *Novus Ordo*. I support the ongoing efforts by Rome to try and forestall any more illicit episcopal consecrations. But if the talks fail, and they go forward with their schismatic act, then in my view they will have incurred automatic excommunication.

And I say this as someone who is deeply sympathetic with some of the grievances from my traditionalist friends. I oppose *Traditionis Custodes* and I support the freedom for the wide use of the TLM if that is what many Catholics want. I think the *Novus Ordo* could use some deep reforming and I myself attend an Anglican Ordinarate liturgy since I do love a more traditional Mass with *ad orientem* worship, altar rails, chant and so forth. I am opposed to theological progressivism and its endless accommodationism with secular modernity.

But none of that justifies schism. And none of it implies a rejection of the theology of Vatican II and of the modern post-conciliar papacies. Vatican II was not heretical. It was a legitimate ecumenical council of the Catholic Church. Was it perfect? No. Can it be criticized here and there? Yes. But heretical and modernist? No. And the same goes for all post-conciliar popes and the modern magisterium of the Church.

But if the SSPX wants to engage in schismatic acts then they will be, and should be, excommunicated. So be it. Because at that point the Church would be better off without them. And I will say the same thing about the Germans if, one day, they do decide upon schism from Rome.

There have been good popes and bad popes. And no pope is immune from any and all criticism. But the Catholic Church is, and always will be, sub Petro et cum Petro.

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