

The Society of St. Pius X Rejects Rome – Again

by Father Raymond J De Souza

Numerous accounts of the illicit and gravely sinful episcopal ordinations by the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX) have termed it a “crisis.” Is it? Not for the SSPX, it would seem. Choosing to ordain four new bishops on the precise anniversary that their four previous bishops were excommunicated in 1988 suggests a rather celebratory disposition toward the canonical penalties. For the two ordaining bishops, who were first excommunicated in 1988, it is their second time around on the excommunication carousel. Perhaps they enjoy the ride.

Why would the four new SSPX bishops be fussed about excommunication? They have spent their entire priesthood, like the entirety of the SSPX — each and every priest — not exercising legitimate ministry in the Catholic Church. From the day of their priestly ordination, they have been under the equivalent of suspension from sacramental ministry. Either SSPX priests are serene about living in sin, or they do not believe that they are doing anything wrong.

Thus, when Pope Leo XIV wrote to the SSPX on Monday to plead with them to “turn back” from “a sin of extreme gravity,” it did not have the impact that ordinary Catholics might expect. The SSPX clergy live their entire lives in what would be, for the hundreds of thousands of Catholic priests in the world, a state of grave sin. They are accustomed to it. It is not remarkable that Christians can become accustomed to living habitually in sins of extreme gravity, especially if they convince themselves that they, and not the legitimate bishops of the Church, are correct.

The illicit ordinations are not a crisis for the Catholic Church. The Church does not count as the world counts, but the SSPX is not part of the ecclesial landscape in the vast majority of dioceses. Where it is present, it is usually quite marginal. There are entire countries, including the ones with the fastest-growing Catholic populations, where the SSPX is not at all a concern. And in those few countries where it is present in modest numbers, its impact on diocesan life is usually negligible. The alleged crisis of the SSPX ordinations will likely change nothing for local dioceses or local parishes. How then may it be a crisis?

For those who frequent Masses offered by SSPX priests — estimated to be about 700,000 worldwide — it will be harder to pretend that they are doing a properly Catholic thing. Some of them, told by generations of SSPX clergy that the ordinary means of salvation are not available to 99% of Catholics in the world, may honestly think that being excommunicated by the Catholic Church is the best way for Catholic bishops to serve the Catholic Church.

A genuine spiritual crisis may be at hand for some of them, as was the case in 1988. Likely, most of them will follow the example of their priests and live contentedly in irregular union with the Church, receiving sacraments in illicit celebrations.

There is one genuine crisis. The 2026 repetition of 1988 marks the definitive end of the Ratzinger outreach. For those who have high admiration and affection for the late Holy Father, that is a great sadness. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger felt a special urgency for reconciliation with the SSPX. His approach was simple: Offer the maximum, ask for the minimum. In 1988, on behalf of St. John Paul II, he offered the SSPX a canonical structure with full autonomy, a guarantee of their liturgical tradition, and permission to ordain a bishop chosen by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, founder of the SSPX. All he asked in return was that the SSPX would affirm their adherence to *Lumen Gentium* 25, Vatican II’s teaching on the Petrine office, and take a “positive attitude” toward the study of other teachings of Vatican II.

It was such a good offer that Archbishop Lefebvre agreed. He signed a protocol with Cardinal Ratzinger in May 1988 but then reneged the next day. He proceeded to the episcopal ordinations, and thus incurred excommunication, in which state he died in 1991. John Paul created the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter (FSSP) for those SSPX priests who wished to remain in communion with Rome. Otherwise, he left the SSPX to follow its chosen path after its schismatic act. John Paul accepted “No” for an answer.

When Cardinal Ratzinger was elected pope, having heard “No” he still tried to get a “Yes.” He issued *Summorum Pontificum*, permitting widespread celebration of the “extraordinary form,” or traditional Latin Mass. He lifted the excommunications of the 1988 SSPX bishops as a gesture of goodwill and mercy, even though the SSPX still did not “exercise any legitimate ministry in the Church.” His letter explaining his decision was a deeply moving

manifestation of his great pastoral heart. “It is hoped that this step will be followed by the prompt attainment of full communion with the Church on the part of the whole Society of St. Pius X,” the decree lifting the excommunications stated.

Pope Benedict XVI had been given to understand that the SSPX was at least considering a “Yes.” He was disappointed again. In the negotiations that followed, Pope Benedict XVI offered the maximum — a religious order or even a nonterritorial diocese — and asked the minimum. The answer was “No.” The magnanimity of Benedict was not sufficient to convert the pusillanimity of the SSPX.

Pope Francis was willing to take “No” for an answer, as was John Paul before him. He was even more generous than Benedict, granting SSPX priests faculties to hear confessions — which otherwise had been invalid for decades — and to witness marriages. Expecting that the SSPX would say “No” again if he asked even the minimum of it, Francis did not bother to ask them for anything.

The current superior of the SSPX, Father Davide Pagliarani, has publicly lamented that Pope Leo XIV has not granted him an audience to discuss the status of the SSPX. But Leo knows that the Ratzinger approach has come to an end. He, too, will take “No” for an answer. That is the primary meaning of choosing July 1 for the ordinations — the SSPX answer will always be No, even if it first says Yes, as Archbishop Lefebvre demonstrated. The SSPX wishes to celebrate each year two “blessings” — new bishops and excommunications.

For those who do count as the world does, the SSPX is hardly in crisis. The digital age is very favorable to them, as it is to any entity with strong identity markers, cultivated grievances and a robust sense of persecution. It gains adherents in politics and culture, and is also potent in ecclesial life. Thus, the July 1 ordinations and subsequent excommunications will strengthen the SSPX identity in the minds and hearts of its own clergy and faithful. It will gain them new adherents, as is the case with many more extreme voices online.

A thunderous “No” was given to Pope Leo. It is not the path of ecclesial communion, but it brings the SSPX considerable worldly rewards.

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