

Sedevacantism: How to Tell Aunt Helen (1995)

by Rev. Anthony Cekada

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Early in 1995 I carried on a cordial correspondence over the issue of sedevacantism with a Catholic priest who operates an independent traditional chapel. In one letter he allowed that while many of the sedevacantist arguments seemed reasonable, the "pastoral" side of the issue bothered him. He worried that such a position would shock parishioners, both current and potential, and possibly drive them into the arms of compromise groups such as the Fraternity of St. Peter. How would simpler people react, he wondered. And what would my Aunt Helen think? Herewith my reply.

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Dear Father:

Thanks for your kind letter of March 28th. A lot has been going on here (Holy Week, travels, etc.) so I haven't been able to reply promptly. *Mea culpa!*

I thought I'd offer you some thoughts not so much apropos the *sede vacante* question and the Tridentine Rite Conference, but rather on the pastoral treatment of the *sede vacante* issue in general. I certainly understand your concern. Yofur question, "What would Aunt Helen think?" is a good one, in the sense that we certainly don't want to scare people off. How should we handle it so that we don't give laymen a wrong impression? Herewith, my reflections:

While I've been a sedevacantist since even before my ordination, I've handled the issue pastorally in a variety of ways over the years. I like to think that I finally learned something from my many blunders. The following approaches did **not** work:

- *Pulpit pounding, inflammatory rhetoric, repeated emotional denunciations from pulpit.* This drove newcomers and old-timers away. It was invariably misinterpreted as "attacking the pope."
- *Only rare, subtle allusions to issue from pulpit.* Pointless. People don't pick up on subtleties.
- *Discuss pope issue only when asked privately.* It seems deceptive to new people. They feel you've been hiding something from them.
- *Present the *sede vacante* and I-can-disobey-him-but-he's-still-my-father approaches as equally acceptable options.* Illogical if one believes the *sede vacante* thesis. Many new people, moreover, find the "right-to-disobey" option profoundly unsettling, since "good Catholics obey the pope."

- *Silence on the issue.* People will never have a coherent explanation for their course of action. Or they'll be easily lured back to the *Novus Ordo* or some St. Peter Fraternity/Indult operation.

What I've found, moreover, is that newcomers to the traditional Mass are usually worried about the "disobedience/pope/authority" issue, even if they don't come out and mention it right away.

The consequences of *not* addressing the issue are grave. For years, people in an independent traditionalist chapel may hear either nothing about the pope/authority issue — or they hear sentimental and/or theologically suspect notions like the following: we support the pope, the bishop we can reject, the pope's really on our side, he's deceived by evil men around him, the Mass is all that really counts, we can disobey bad orders from the pope and bishop, he's still the pope, he's all we've got, etc. A congregation that gets this sort of thing all the time will be pushovers when some day an Indult/St. Peter Fraternity type comes along to offer them the devil's bargain of both "the pope" and a "legit" traditional Mass. Why not take the offer? Shouldn't Catholics want to be "united to the pope"? It's perfectly logical if someone recognizes him as one of Peter's true successors.

Dollars to doughnuts, this is exactly why the modernists were able to take over the Pequannock [New Jersey] chapel the way they did. It could never happen in one of our churches. Most of our people understand that JP2 and company are enemies of the Catholic Faith; they'd rather burn down the buildings than let the modernists take over.

The approach to the pope issue I now take with new people is rather direct. I find that if you explain things clearly and in a matter-of-fact fashion right away, people will actually be relieved, and there will be far less of a chance of losing them to the *Novus Ordo* or to the Indult/St. Peter Fraternity crowd. I make a point of inviting them over for a chat so they have plenty of opportunity to ask questions.

I deal with the obedience/pope/authority issue roughly as follows:

1. I discuss why a new person abandoned his parish and came to traditional Mass. (Inevitably, the reply is that the New Mass is irreverent, sacrilegious, full of errors, otherwise bad, etc., while the traditional Mass is reverent, respectful, orthodox, etc.)
2. I point out how most of the objectionable features of the New Mass (communion in the hand, "cultural adaptation," etc.) are officially permitted or even recommended by liturgical legislation approved by Paul VI and his successors.
3. As Catholics, though, we know that the Church's infallibility is not limited merely to *ex cathedra* pronouncements, but also extends to universal laws, specifically, to her rites. It is impossible for the Church to give a law or approve a rite which promotes error or harms souls.

4. Problem: On one hand, it is self-evident to us that the New Mass *does* promote error and harm souls. On the other, because of infallibility, a law or rite approved by the authority of Church *cannot* promote error or harm souls.
5. We're faced with a choice. Either: (1) Church authority no longer enjoys infallibility — impossible, due to Christ's promise; or (2) The men who promulgated the laws or rites which promote error and harm souls, *did not truly possess authority of the Church*.
6. How is this possible? Heresy or public defection from faith means automatic loss of office, because heresy puts you outside the Church. Example: Archbishop Cranmer during the Protestant revolt in England. When at some point his personal heresy became manifest, he put himself outside the Church and lost authority over Catholics. He still *appeared* to be Abp. of Canterbury (retaining his miter, crozier, throne, cathedral, and cope), but because of his defection from faith, in the eyes of God he objectively lost his authority and office. (Arius and other examples are sometimes helpful.)
7. This principle applies to anyone who holds authority or an office in church — a diocesan bishop, archbishop, pastor of parish, even a pope.
8. A Pope too? When elected to the papacy, you don't lose your free will. You can choose to do evil things. You can also lose the Faith, and embrace error as a private person. When your defection from faith becomes publicly manifest, you automatically lose your office. This is not just something invented by traditionalists. It is the teaching of major theologians and canonists. Even a pope (Paul IV) said such a situation was possible.
9. Faced with choice of believing that either: (1) The authority of the Church promotes error/harms souls (an impossibility, given the Church's infallibility) or (2) A pope as an individual has defected from the Faith and consequently lost his office (a possibility admitted by theologians and even popes), the logic of the faith compels us to believe the latter proposition.
10. A Catholic, therefore, would owe no obedience to someone who does not truly possess the Church's authority. Condemnations from the modernist V-2 hierarchy shouldn't worry us, anymore than we would worry about being condemned by a local Anglican or Lutheran bishop.
11. At the same time, *I'm* not the pope, and I don't require that you sign on the dotted line to all this before coming to Mass here. It's just that, having heard many explanations for the post-Vatican II mess, this seems to be the

only one which makes sense in terms of the Church's infallibility.

12. But don't just take my word for it. Study the issue, think about it, discuss it with others, come back with any questions, worries.

You probably remember the saying: "Real men don't eat quiche." The principle behind the above boils down to something like "Real popes don't issue *Novus Ordo*" — if the New Mass is evil, Protestant, and sacrilegious, in other words, then it could not have come from a real pope (someone who truly possessed authority in the eyes of God).

I have gone over these points like this with about ten new families over the past year here. No one seemed shocked, everyone asked intelligent questions, all said it sounded reasonable, and everyone (to my knowledge) now faithfully attends Mass here.

My purpose in bringing all this up, I suppose, is to demonstrate that a reasonable and pastoral approach is possible when discussing the pope issue with the laity.

Enclosed is a reprint of my article on the pope issue. It started out as a lecture which was very well received. I give a copy to newcomers, along with the usual packet of info.

Also in the works: a new and improved version of *Welcome to the Traditional Latin Mass*, a Tridentine Mass/*Novus Ordo*-compared pamphlet I wrote a couple of years ago. I'll send you a copy as soon as it's printed.

Be assured, Father, of my prayers for you.

(*Sacerdotium* 15, Autumn 1995).

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* The principle, by the way, does not merely fall under the heading of human (canon) law. That a heresy renders someone incapable of *becoming* pope or *remaining* pope is a principle of **divine** law. (See the quote from Coronata in the enclosed pamphlet.)