

Opinionism

(2004, 2006)

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The question of the pope: “Just an opinion”?

THE VACANCY of the Apostolic See, the non-papacy of Benedict XVI, and for that matter of John Paul II, John Paul I, Paul VI, and even of John XXIII, is an issue which has divided traditionalists perhaps more than any other over the past forty years.

Of those who have taken the path of resistance to the reforms of Vatican II, the majority profess to be *sedeplenists*, that is, they hold that Benedict XVI is a true Roman Pontiff. They do so usually under the direction of the Society of Saint Pius X. Others, a minority but not an insignificant one, are *sedevacantists*, that is, they say that Benedict XVI is not a true Roman Pontiff, nor are his Vatican II predecessors.

This difference of theological position has caused a worldwide agony among those who are resisting Vatican II. Each side claims that its view is the right one, and indeed necessary in order to maintain a Catholic position. Each side accuses the other of being schismatic.

In the autumn of 1979, Archbishop Lefebvre issued a declaration in which he stated that he would not tolerate in the Society of Saint Pius X those who refused to place the name of John Paul II in the canon of the Mass. He dismissed a number of priests in Europe for refusal to observe the dictum. In the spring of 1980, he came to America with the same agenda: to dismiss those who would not say the name of John Paul II in the canon.

In the course of the negotiations with the American priests, however, Archbishop Lefebvre came to a compromise, of sorts. He would not throw out the priests from the Society of Saint Pius X, if they would agree to keep their sedevacantism to themselves. They could leave out John Paul’s name from the canon, as long as they did not make a public issue out of it. *Opinionism* was born. The Archbishop himself would formulate the fundamental tenet of opinionism: “*I do not say that the pope is not the pope, but I do not say either that one cannot say that the pope is not the pope.*”

The point of this article is to examine opinionism, and to render judgement whether it is a legitimate position to take. Can the identity of the Roman Pontiff be a matter of opinion?

I. What is an Opinion?

An opinion is an idea or doctrine which you hold to be *probably* true. At the same time, however, you have founded fear that its opposite may be true. The mind is definitely leaning towards one idea, and rejecting its opposite, but not completely. It does not totally accept the one as true, nor totally reject its opposite as false. It happens often in medical diagnoses.

Even highly trained physicians are often only of an opinion of a diagnosis which they make. They are unable to have absolute certitude because of lack of sufficient evidence to produce the certitude. So they *think* or *opine* that their patient may have a

certain disease, but would not be very surprised if they found something different as time went on.

II. What is a Theological Opinion?

A theological opinion is a doctrine which one holds concerning a theological issue, with a fear that its opposite may be true. It is not something which is defined by the Church. It concerns a matter which is “free,” that is, where there is no obligation on the part of declarations of the Church to hold to one side or the other.

Many, however, confuse theological *opinion* with theological *conclusion*.

A theological conclusion, which in Latin is *sententia theologica*, is a firm and certain theological doctrine which flows from principles which are derived from revelation and right reason.

The problem is that *sententia* in Latin is commonly translated into English as *opinion*. But there are many, many theological conclusions which are absolutely certain, which in Latin would be called *sententia*, but which are in no way opinions in the English sense of the term. For example, it is a certain theological conclusion that God gives all men the sufficient grace to save their souls. This fact is not directly revealed, nor is it declared by the Church, but it is held by all theologians as absolutely certain. It could not be termed a “theological opinion.”

Moral theology, however, is full of theological opinions, in the true sense of the term. Moral principles are in themselves certain, and in many cases are *de fide*, but are nonetheless at times difficult to apply. Consequently there arise easily different schools of thought about various issues. Typically these are called *probable opinions*, that is, positions which are probably true, but not absolutely and certainly true.

At times moral theology does not permit us to go further than the probable. Human acts are so complicated with their circumstances that often one cannot arrive at complete certitude; you come to a theological opinion, with a certain fear that the opposite may be true. It is for this reason that opinion might differ from priest to priest about the application of a particular moral principle. There is no dispute about the principle, but there may be dispute about its application.

It is a fallacy, however, to say that because some doctrine is not defined or taught by the Church, it therefore ought to be placed in the category of theological opinion.

Theology is a science, and just like other sciences, and draws conclusions from its highest principles. Theology takes its highest principles from revelation itself, truths told to us by God, as they are contained in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, and proposed for our belief by the Catholic Church. From these truths which we hold by faith, theologians draw conclusions which, although they are not revealed by God, nevertheless flow certainly and reasonably from truths revealed by God.

There are some theological conclusions which are so certain and authoritative that, if you denied them, you would be logically bound to deny the Faith itself. Yet the Church has never defined them, nor even taught them by her ordinary magisterium. They are theological conclusions, but they are intimately bound to revelation.

But many apply the fallacy of the “theological opinion” to the problem of Ratzinger’s papacy. They say, “Because the

Church has not declared him a non-pope, it is a legitimate theological opinion to hold that he is the pope or is not the pope, whichever you prefer. Neither position is offensive to the Faith.”

This statement is *loaded* with error.

The first error is that it places the identity of the Roman Pontiff, i.e., whether Ratzinger is the Vicar of Christ or not, in the category of “theological opinion.” The second error is that it relegates the question of the identity of the Roman Pontiff to a mere theological opinion, as if it were a discussion among theologians as to how many angels can fit on the head of a pin. The third error is that it confuses a theological conclusion and a theological opinion. The fourth error is that someone may be free to hold that Ratzinger is or is not the pope for the *sole* reason that the Church has said nothing about it. The fifth error is that neither position is offensive to the Faith.

I will examine each of these errors in detail.

III. Five Errors of Opinionism

ERROR 1: Opinionism places the identity of the Roman Pontiff, i.e., whether Ratzinger is the Vicar of Christ or not, in the category of “theological opinion.”

The very term *opinion* indicates that it is not certain whether he is or he is not the pope. It is impossible to hold, however, that there is a lack of certitude on this subject.

Those who hold that he *is* the pope point to absolutely certain signs: (1) a legal election which was universally accepted; (2) Ratzinger’s own acceptance of the election; (3) Ratzinger’s functioning as pope; (4) the universal acceptance of Ratzinger as a legitimate pope.

None of these things is uncertain. If one is using these arguments as evidence of his papacy, where is there any room for doubt?

Those who argue *against* his papacy use arguments which are in themselves certain and incontestable: (1) that he has promulgated to the universal Church false doctrines, false moral teaching, and evil disciplines; (2) that he has said heretical things and has acted like a heretic, even an apostate, on many, many occasions; (3) that he has appointed heretics and/or apostates to the Roman Curia and to episcopal sees, maintains them in power, and is in communion with them.

None of these facts is disputable or in doubt. They are sufficient, particularly no. 1, to prevent him from being pope.

So if you hold that he *IS* the pope, for the reasons alleged, how could you hold that it is a legitimate opinion to say that he is not the pope? If you hold that he is *NOT* the pope, for the reasons alleged, how could you say that it is a legitimate opinion to say that he is the pope? Where is the doubt? Where is there, in these arguments, any fear that the opposite side may be true?

The theological underpinning and the moral justification of the traditional movement is that Vatican II and its reforms are false and evil. They are a substantial distortion of Catholicism. Why do we establish an apostolate against that of Ratzinger and the local Novus Ordo bishop, except because the doctrines, rites, and disciplines of Vatican II and its reforms are contrary to faith and morals? If they are not contrary to faith and morals, then why do we have a traditional movement? Why are we doing this? What justification would we have to do it in the eyes of God?

If, however, it is certain that Vatican II and its reforms are contrary to faith and morals, then it is certain that they are not promulgated by the Church. If, in turn, it is certain that they are promulgated by the Church, then it is certain that those who promulgate them do not represent the Catholic Church. Then it is certain that Ratzinger is not the pope.

The conclusion that Ratzinger is pope carries with it *necessary* conclusions: that the doctrines, disciplines, and rites which he has universally promulgated are Catholic and not sinful. If Ratzinger is pope, then by the indefectibility and infallibility of the Church, the religion which he approves and promulgates is the Catholic Faith. One could practice it in all good conscience; indeed one *must*.

The conclusion, on the other hand, that the doctrines, disciplines and rites of Vatican II are false and evil, and contrary to Faith, religion, and good morals, carries with it a *necessary* conclusion: that the person or persons who have promulgated it do not have the authority of Christ. The infallibility and indefectibility of the Church, which come from the solemnly promised assistance of Christ, cannot bear that such a thing happen. One *must* conclude to Ratzinger's non-papacy, if one concludes these things about Vatican II

So it is impossible, logically and theologically to say, "I accept Ratzinger as pope, but I reject Vatican II and its reforms." Likewise it is impossible, logically and theologically to go the other way, saying, "I reject Vatican II and its reforms, but I accept Ratzinger as pope."

In other words, Ratzinger's papacy necessarily means the religion he promulgates is Catholic, and the non-Catholicism of Vatican II and its reforms necessarily means that Ratzinger cannot be pope.

The Society of Saint Pius X is guilty of the first fallacy, of accepting Ratzinger but rejecting his religion. They mount a worldwide defiance of him by the establishment of a parallel apostolate in which they try to lure souls away from him and his hierarchy.

The opinionist is guilty of the second fallacy. He rejects Vatican II and its reforms, but admits the acceptance of Ratzinger is theologically viable. It makes no sense.

If you have undertaken a resistance to Vatican II and its reforms, you cannot say that it is a legitimate opinion to hold that Ratzinger is the pope. To say this is to implicitly admit that you are not certain that Vatican II and its reforms are truly contrary to faith and morals. To be opinionist about Ratzinger is to be opinionist (and therefore doubtful) about the whole basis of the resistance to Vatican II.

If it is possible that Ratzinger is pope, then it is possible that Vatican II, the New Mass, the new sacraments, the new canon law, and ecumenism are Catholic. If it is possible that Ratzinger is pope, then it is possible that we are all wrong about Vatican II.

ERROR 2: Opinionism relegates the question of the identity of the Roman Pontiff to a mere theological opinion, as if it were a discussion among theologians as to how many angels can fit on the head of a pin.

It is as if the question of the identity of the Roman Pontiff had no dogmatic or moral effects.

The identity of the Roman Pontiff has enormous dogmatic and moral effects. In the first place, our faith depends upon his teaching. We are obliged to give assent to the teaching of the Church. But the authority of this teaching comes from a single source, the authority of Saint Peter. Without this authority, there is no binding doctrine. No magisterium can take place, either solemn or ordinary.

Furthermore, our salvation depends on our submission to the Roman Pontiff. We go to hell if we are disobedient to him in a serious matter, or worse, if we are not submitted to him.

So how can anyone be so blasé about the identity of the Roman Pontiff, so as to say that it really does not matter, in the practical order, what you think about him? It is as if the Roman Pontiff were merely a decoration in the Catholic Church, something the Church could even dispense with, a purely accidental accessory, a bagatelle. It is as if you can conduct your own version of Roman Catholicism without the Roman Pontiff.

Opinionists are great for saying that the question of Ratzinger's papacy should not divide us. They think that all traditionalists should get along, no matter what they think about him.

Such an attitude, however, is not Catholic. The very identity and unity of the Roman Catholic Church is intimately and essentially bound up in the Roman Pontiff, and his identity cannot be a mere matter of "opinion." Likewise our salvation — the question of heaven or hell — is bound up in the Roman Pontiff, and to be opinionist about his identity is tantamount to being indifferentist about which church is the right church.

ERROR 3: Opinionism confuses a theological conclusion and a theological opinion.

A theological **conclusion** is, once again, absolutely certain, and at times is even connected to truths of the Faith in such a way that, if denied, you would have to deny the Faith as well.

A theological **opinion**, however, is a position which has faulty and insufficient evidence in its favor, so that you would not be surprised to find out that the opposite is true.

As I said above, the arguments for or against the papacy of Ratzinger rest on **certitudes**. Neither side denies the facts which it proposes in favor of its conclusion.

Hence each side must produce, logically, not an "opinion," but a **certain theological conclusion**. This is true because the conclusion will be as strong as its principles. If there is no doubt in the principles, there is no doubt in the conclusions, provided, of course, that the logical process is without fault.

So if it is merely sufficient for a man to be a true pope that he be duly elected, that he accept, and that he act as pope, and that he be universally accepted as pope by those who are commonly called Catholics in the world, then it is *certain* that Ratzinger is the true Roman Pontiff. For all of these things are true and verified.

On the other hand, if it is sufficient for a man to be a false pope, that he have the intention of promulgating false doctrines and evil disciplines, despite whatever other appearances or material elements of papacy he may have, then it is *certain* that Ratzinger is a false pope, since his intention of promulgating and adhering to modernism is blatant.

ERROR 4: Someone may be free to hold that Ratzinger is or is not the pope for the sole reason that the Church has said nothing about it.

The causes for Ratzinger's papacy or non-papacy are primarily theological, and not merely legal. In other words, if Ratzinger is not the pope, it is not *because* the Church has declared him to be non-pope.

Rather the opposite is true: the Church would declare him to be non-pope **because** he is **really and truly** not the pope. The declaration of the Church, in this case, would only give a *legal* certitude of an existing fact. But the Church could never declare something as *legally* certain, unless it were *really* and *truly* certain.

The Church, for example, declares a marriage to be null. It is not the declaration that causes the nullity; it is the nullity that causes the declaration.

The declaration merely makes a legal fact out of the really existing fact of nullity. The nullity cannot have *legal* effect until it is declared, but the nullity already exists before the declaration. Long before the declaration of nullity, the man and woman are *not* husband and wife. They would be bound to the *moral* effects of their non-marriage as soon as they are aware of the nullity; the legal declaration could come years later.

So we are bound to the certain theological conclusion of the non-papacy of Ratzinger based on the certain existing evidence, and this long before some future declaration of his non-papacy. A couple, certain of the invalidity of their marriage, could not act as husband and wife with the excuse, "Oh well, there is no declaration of nullity, so we can do whatever we want!" So we, who are acting upon the premise that Vatican II and its reforms are contrary to faith and morals cannot recognize the papacy of Ratzinger with the excuse, "Oh well, there is no declaration, so we can think whatever we want!"

Furthermore, I would add that those who argue that he is the pope cannot rightly maintain that the Church has not made a declaration about it, or that it is a matter of theological opinion, as if there were some doubt.

If the motives for recognizing him as pope are the ones which I gave above, i.e., his election and the general acceptance of the people, then how could there be any doubt?

On the other hand, how could you hold that it is legitimate to say that he is not the pope, as opinionists say, unless you give credence to the principles of sedevacantism? But the principles of sedevacantism argue with certitude that he is not the pope, and not merely with probability. In other words, either you have to deny the principles of sedevacantism, or you have to say that its conclusions are true.

ERROR 5: Neither position is offensive to the Faith.

Not true. It is offensive to the Faith to hold that a man is the pope, the Vicar of Christ on earth, and at the same time to conduct a worldwide apostolate in defiance of him. It is offensive to the Faith to say that the doctrines, disciplines and liturgical rites which are promulgated by the Roman Pontiff are erroneous, heretical, false, evil, and/or sinful.

But this is the very position of the sedepalenist traditionalists, of the Society of Saint Pius X. Worse, it is the position of the sedevacantist opinionists who hold that Ratzinger is not pope, but

at the same time say that the sedeplenist position is not offensive to the Faith.

Likewise it is offensive to the Faith to identify with the authority of Christ the promulgation of false doctrine and evil disciplines. It is offensive to the Faith to identify with the Roman Catholic Church the worldwide beliefs and observances of Vatican II and its reforms.

On the other hand, if Ratzinger is truly the pope, then it is offensive to the Faith to hold that he is not the pope, and/or to hold that his doctrines and disciplines are contrary to faith and morals.

So the convinced sedeplenist cannot, in good conscience, regard the sedevacantist position as a tenable theological position without offense to the Faith. Likewise the convinced sedevacantist cannot, in good conscience, hold the sedeplenist position to be a tenable theological position, without offense to the Faith.

To identify the defection of Vatican II and its reforms with the authority of the Church, as the sedeplenists do, is to thoroughly destroy the whole nature of the Church, which is a divine institution which enjoys the perpetual assistance of Christ through the Holy Ghost. If the Church could make such a blunder as Vatican II and its effects, such a blunder that we must mount a dogged resistance against it in order to save our souls, then where is the assistance of Christ? The sedevacantist resolves this problem by saying, "These reforms do not come from the authority of the Church." But the sedeplenist has no answer without resorting to private interpretation and private rejection of Vatican II and its reforms. It is a Protestant attitude.

The sedevacantist cannot hold the sedeplenist position to be a viable theological opinion, as if it had some probable merit. If someone is a true sedevacantist, and is convinced of it, he must regard the sedeplenist as someone who holds an absolutely untenable position.

IV. An Objection

OBJECTION: What if you are in doubt about Ratzinger's papacy?

I respond by saying first that doubt exists only in the mind, and never in the real world. In reality, Ratzinger either is the pope, or he is not.

Can we morally remain in doubt?

No. As I explained above, **the identity of the Roman Pontiff constitutes essentially the identity of the Roman Catholic Church**, and is the basis of its unity. Since we are obliged to profess the true faith, and belong to the true Church, and not remain indifferent, so **we are obliged to resolve our doubt about the identity of the true Roman Pontiff**. To remain in doubt about him is to remain in doubt about the very identity of the Church. Furthermore, **we are bound to obey him under pain of sin**. We therefore cannot be complacent in the doubt about his identity.

Moral theology requires us to **resolve our doubt by diligent inquiry**. In most cases, such inquiry will cure the doubt about Ratzinger in favor of sedevacantism. For if one is in doubt about him, it is because he has already been moved by the horrors of Vatican II to call into question the orthodoxy of those who promote it. Thorough investigation merely reveals that our suspi-

cions are more than confirmed, and doubt quickly yields to certitude.

If, for some legitimate reason, **we cannot conduct an inquiry** into the evidence against Ratzinger, then we are **required to resolve the doubt by reflex principles**, i.e., certain general principles of morality and law which give us certitude when we cannot resolve doubt on our own. Moral theology would turn the doubt **in favor of Ratzinger's papacy**, given the fact that he enjoys, at least apparently, a valid election and the general acceptance of what is commonly known as the Catholic Church.

So **the sedevacantist can only be a sedevacantist if he is CERTAIN of Ratzinger's non-papacy**, since irresolvable doubt would put him in the camp of sedeplenism.

Hence **the sedevacantist cannot consider the sedeplenist's position to be a tenable theological opinion**, as if the whole question were doubtful.

V. The Hypocrisy of SSPX

From what I have been told by many reliable contacts both within and without the Society of Saint Pius X, they offer to their priests who are loath to mention the name of Ratzinger in the canon, the possibility of being a closet sedevacantist but publicly a sedeplenist. So at the altar they skip the modernist's name in the silence of the canon.

Yet at the same time SSPX gives public adherence to his papacy by external signs. In their writings they consider sedevacantists to be schismatics; yet they permit sedevacantist priests to circulate in their ranks and function as priests in good standing.

This solution permitted the Society to dodge the bullet of another major split within their ranks. They do not admit publicly that they have sedevacantists in their priestly ranks. Their public position is that sedevacantism is schismatic. To me this is rank dishonesty.

But let your speech be yea, yea : no, no : and that which is over and above these is of evil. (Mt 5:37)

VI. Summary and Conclusion

Opinionism is rooted, in my opinion, in an indifferentism to the Roman Pontiff.

Opinionists want to live in a world of the traditional Mass and sacraments without any reference to the Roman Pontiff. To them, it does not matter, in the practical order, whether Ratzinger is or is not the pope. They attend the Mass of any priest, provided he say the traditional Mass, with no care about his relationship to the Roman Pontiff.

Such an attitude is extremely dangerous. **It removes the Roman Pontiff from Catholicism**, and reduces our adherence to the traditional Faith to a form of Protestant picking and choosing.

There have been times in the history of the Church when, in order to be Catholic, you had to be a sedevacantist. I am referring to the interregnum every time a pope dies, which at one time went for as long as three years. If a Catholic were to recognize a pope during the vacancy of the Roman See, he would be a schismatic. Likewise a Catholic would be a schismatic if he did not recognize a pope who was truly reigning.

So in this situation, either the sedeplenists are schismatic, or the sedevacantists are schismatic. The one excludes the other.

But these two opposing systems cannot both be considered to be “legitimate theological opinions.”

(Catholic Restoration, May-June 2004; Internet 2006)

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