

Sacramental Intention and Masonic Bishops

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by Rev. Anthony Cekada

An old canard about Abp. Lefebvre's ordination

"People who are not theologians never seem to understand how little *intention* is wanted for a sacrament... The 'implicit intention of doing what Christ instituted' means so vague and small a thing that one can hardly help having it — unless one deliberately excludes it. At the time when everyone was talking about Anglican orders, numbers of Catholics confused *intention* with *faith*. Faith is not wanted. It is heresy to say that it is. (This was the error of St Cyprian and Firmilian against which Pope Stephen I [254–257] protested.) A man may have utterly wrong, heretical and blasphemous views about a sacrament and yet confer or receive it quite validly."

— **Adrian Fortescue**
The Greek Fathers

IN THE LATE 1970s, as priests of the Society of St. Pius X began to offer Mass in more and more cities, certain controversialists in the U.S. traditionalist movement began to circulate the story that the Society's founder, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (1905–1991) had been ordained to both the priesthood and the episcopacy by a Mason, that the Archbishop's own priestly ordination and episcopal consecration were therefore invalid, and that consequently, all SSPX priests were invalidly ordained as well.

The alleged Mason in question was Achille Cardinal Liénart (1884–1973), Archbishop of Lille (Abp. Lefebvre's native city), and later one of the leading modernists at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965).

The late Hugo Maria Kellner, the now-defunct publication *Veritas*, Hutton Gibson and a few others — the "Liénartists," we could call them — argued that, since Masonry despised the Church, its adepts among the clergy would naturally want to destroy the priesthood by withholding the required sacramental intention when conferring Holy Orders. All ordinations conferred by Masonic prelates, they maintained, had to be treated as either invalid or doubtful, including the priestly ordination and

episcopal consecration that Archbishop Lefebvre received from Cardinal Liénart.

Since the “Masonry” story still occasionally resurfaces even thirty years later, I decided to revisit this question.

How to begin? The best way is by clarifying the component parts of the Liénartist argument.

This can be done by putting it in the form of a formal logical argument called a “syllogism” — a method employed in manuals of dogmatic theology. A syllogism argues from a *general* statement (for example: All men are mortal), to a *particular* statement (Socrates is a man) to a *conclusion* (Therefore, Socrates is mortal).

You need to prove both your *general* statement and your *particular* statement. Otherwise, you don’t prove your conclusion.

When we boil down the argument of the Liénartists and put it into this form, here is what we get:

1. *General Principle*: Whenever a bishop is a Mason, his sacramental intention must be presumed doubtful and all his ordinations therefore presumed doubtful.
2. *Particular Fact*: Achille Liénart was a bishop who was a Mason.
3. *Conclusion*: Achille Liénart’s sacramental intention must be presumed doubtful and all his ordinations therefore presumed doubtful.

The supposed “proof” for point (2) has been more than adequately demolished elsewhere. In his 1982 article entitled “Cracks in the Masonry,” Rama Coomaraswamy demonstrated that all the stories about Cardinal Liénart’s supposed Masonic affiliation can be traced back to just one work, *L’Infaillibilité Pontificale* by the Marquis de la Franquerie, a French sensationalist writer. The only source the Marquis gives for the story is an anonymous one — a former Mason identified as “Mister B...” Coomaraswamy’s witty and erudite article is posted on traditionalmass.org

Here we will turn our attention instead to point (1), the general principle behind the Liénartist argument. I will demonstrate that it is false because it contradicts the fundamental presumptions that canon law, moral theology and dogmatic theology lay down regarding the validity of sacraments in general, and the intention of the minister of Holy Orders in particular. Further, I will demonstrate that it contradicts the practice of the Church in the past, and leads to manifest absurdities.

1. General Presumption of Validity. Sacraments conferred by a Catholic minister, including Holy Orders, must be presumed valid until invalidity is proved. This is:

“the *queen of presumptions*, which holds the act or contract as valid, until invalidity is proved.” (F. Wanenmacher, *Canonical Evidence in Marriage Cases*, [Philadelphia: Dolphin 1935], 408.)

“When the fact of ordination is duly established, the *validity* of the orders conferred is naturally *to be presumed*.” (W. Doheny, *Canonical Procedure in Matrimonial Cases* [Milwaukee: Bruce 1942] 2:72.)

2. Intention and Holy Orders. When a bishop confers Holy Orders using correct matter and form, he must be presumed to have had a sacramental intention sufficient to confect the sacrament — that is, at least “to have intended to do what the Church does.”

This is the teaching of Pope Leo XIII in his pronouncement on Anglican orders:

“Now, if a person has seriously and duly used the proper matter and form for performing or administering a sacrament, he is by that very fact *presumed to have intended to do what the Church does*.” (Bull *Apostolicae Curae*, 13 September 1896.)

The theologian Leeming says this passage recapitulates the teachings of previous theologians who

“all agreed that the outward decorous performance of the rites sets up a *presumption that the right intention exists*.... The minister of a sacrament is *presumed to intend what the rite means*... This principle is affirmed as certain theological doctrine, taught by the Church, to deny which would be at least theologically rash.” (B. Leeming, *Principles of Sacramental Theology* [Westminster MD: Newman 1956], 476, 482.)

3. Heresy or Apostasy and Intention. Heresy, or even total apostasy from the faith on the part of the ordaining bishop, does not harm this sufficient intention, because intention is an act of the *will*.

“Error in faith, or even total disbelief, does not harm this intention; for concepts of the intellect have nothing in common with an act of the *will*.” (S. Many, *Praelectiones de Sacra Ordinatione* [Paris: Letouzey 1905], 586.)

4. When Intention Invalidates. An ordination otherwise correctly performed becomes invalid only if the bishop makes an act of the will *not* “to do what the Church does” or *not* “to ordain this person.”

“An ordination is invalid if the minister... as he confers it on someone, *makes an act of the will not to ordain* that person, because by that very fact he does not have at least the intention of doing what the Church does — indeed, he has a contrary intention.” (P. Gasparri, *Tractatus de Sacra Ordinatione* [Paris: Delhomme 1893], 1:970.)

5. Invalid Intention Never Presumed. A bishop who confers Holy Orders, however, is *never* presumed to have such an intention *not* to ordain, until the contrary is proved.

“In performing an ordination *the minister is never presumed to have such an intention of not ordaining*, as long as the contrary would not be proved. For no one is presumed evil unless he is proven as such, and an act — especially one as solemn as an ordination — must be regarded as valid, as long as invalidity would not be clearly demonstrated.” (Gasparri, 1:970.)

The general principle proposed by the Liénartists, however — “Whenever a bishop is a Mason, his sacramental intention must be presumed doubtful and all his ordinations therefore presumed doubtful” — directly contradicts the foregoing and sets up the *opposite* presumption.

This theory thus treats an accused “Masonic bishop” as guilty until proven innocent. (His sacraments must be treated “as non-sacraments.”) And the burden of proof he must meet to acquit himself is impossible: he must *disprove* a double negative about an internal act of the will (“prove you did *not* withhold your intention”).

This runs contrary to all the principles of equity in civil and canon law.

6. No Support in Theology. For this reason, the Liénartists can cite no pre-Vatican II canonist, moral theologian or dogmatic theologian who proposes or defends their major premise.

Instead, all they offer are the standard quotes about Masonry — it conspires to destroy the Church, is condemned by popes, promotes Naturalism, is a cause for excommunication, etc.

This merely proves what no one disputes: Masonry is evil.

But since evil men and even unbelievers can confer valid sacraments, it gets no closer to proving the principle that is the basis for their arguments: “Masonic membership = doubtful sacraments.”

If such a general principle were true, popes, canonists and theologians would have told us.

7. No Support in History. The excuse sometimes given for not providing such a citation — “it was not widely known what was going on [regarding Masonic clergy] until the fruits were displayed at Vatican II” — is refuted by the history of the Church in France, where many clergymen were Masons. In France before the Revolution:

“One fact is inescapable: the lodges contained a large number of ecclesiastics... At Caudebec fifteen out of eighty members of the lodge were priests; at Sens, twenty-five out of fifty. Canons and parish priests sat in the Venerable Assembly, while the Cistercians of Clairvaux had a Lodge within the very walls of their monastery! Saurine, a future bishop of Strasbourg under Napoleon, was a governing member of the Grand Orient. We cannot be far from the truth in suggesting that towards the year 1789 *a quarter of French freemasons were churchmen...* [In 1789 there were] *seven atheists and three deists out of one hundred and thirty-five French bishops.*” (H. Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Eighteenth Century* [London: Dent 1960] 63, 73. See also J. McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France* [Oxford: University Press 1998] 1:354, 356, 420, 509.)

The Masonic revolutionaries set up their schismatic Constitutional Church in 1791 with clergy such as these, the most prominent among them being Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, the former Bishop of Autun and an advocate of the revolutionary cause.

Unlike the case of Cardinal Liénart, it is an established fact that Talleyrand was a Mason — he belonged to the Francs Chevaliers Lodge in Paris. Moreover, he was probably even an unbeliever. On 25 January 1791 Mgr. Talleyrand consecrated the first bishops for the Constitutional Church, and thus all its bishops subsequently derived their consecrations from him.

Nevertheless, when Pope Pius VII signed his 1801 Concordat with Napoleon, he appointed *thirteen bishops from Talleyrand's hierarchy to head the restored Catholic dioceses.*

Among them was the above-mentioned Mgr. Jean-Baptiste Saurine, schismatically consecrated “constitutional” bishop of Landes in August 1791. Of all the Masonic lodges in the world, the Grand Orient of Paris in which Saurine was a governing member has always been considered the most powerful and the most anti-Catholic. Despite this, *Pope Pius VII appointed Mgr. Saurine Bishop of Strasbourg in 1802*, a post that this Masonic bishop retained until his death in 1813.

So in France we find Masonic bishops consecrating other Masons bishops, whom the pope then appoints to head Catholic dioceses, where they confirm children, bless holy oils used to

anoint the dying, ordain priests and consecrate other bishops. If the Liénartists' principle were indeed correct, the pope would have permitted none of this, and would have insisted that all bishops from the Constitutional hierarchy submit to conditional re-consecration.

Proof that a cleric was affiliated with Masonry, moreover, is not necessarily proof of atheism or hatred of the Church. Of the many French clergy involved with Masonry, historian Henri Daniel-Rops says:

“There is no reason to think all were, or considered themselves to be, bad Catholics. On the contrary, there must have been a great many of them who saw no incompatibility between their faith and their Masonic membership, and who even regarded Freemasonry as a weapon to be employed in the service of religion. One of these, in Savoy, was Joseph de Maistre, orator of his lodge at Chambéry; he dreamed of creating within the bosom of Masonry a secret staff which would have made the movement a papal army at the service of universal theocracy.”
(*Church in the Eighteenth Century*, 63.)

Even though the adherence of many French clergy to Masonry during the revolutionary era was well known, theologians did not treat their sacraments as “doubtful.”

If Masonic bishops had *truly* posed a threat to the validity of the sacraments, one would expect to find theologians, especially among the French, making this argument, or at least debating the issue.

But even French theologians and canonists such as Cardinal Billot (*De Ecclesiae Sacramentis* [Rome: Gregorian 1931] 1:195–204), S. Many (*Prael. de Sac. Ordinatione* 585-91) and R. Naz (“Intention,” *Dictionnaire de Droit Canonique* [Paris: Letouzey 1953] 5:1462), who otherwise discuss at some length sacramental intention, have nothing at all to say about “doubtful” sacraments from Masons.

In his article on Masonry, moreover, Naz’s only comment on *clerics* who are members is to note that they incur the penalties of suspension and loss of office. (“*Françmaçonnerie*,” 1:897-9) He says nothing about their membership rendering their sacraments “doubtful.”

8. Absurd Consequences. The absurdity of the Liénartists’ principle is further demonstrated by applying it to (a) the hierarchy of the United States, where it would render doubtful *forty* episcopal consecrations performed between 1896 and 1944, and to (b) the lower clergy in France, where it would render doubtful *all baptisms* performed since the 18th century.

(a) The episcopal consecrations in the United States are those derived from Mariano Cardinal Rampolla del Tindaro (1843–1913), Pope Leo XII’s Secretary of State. After Rampolla died it is said that among his personal effects was found proof he belonged to a luciferian Masonic sect called the *Ordo Templi Orientalis* (associated with the Satanist Alistair Crowley) and frequented a Masonic lodge in Einsiedeln, Switzerland, where he took his vacations.

Forty American bishops consecrated between 1896 and 1944 derived their consecrations from Rampolla, via either Mgr. Martinelli (the Apostolic Delegate) or Rafael Cardinal Merry del Val, both of whom Rampolla consecrated bishops. (See Jesse W. Lonsway, *The Episcopal Lineage of the Hierarchy in the United States: 1790–1948*, plate E.)

If the Liénartists’ principle were true, all these bishops would have to be considered “doubtful,” because the precise role of assistant bishops at an episcopal consecration as true “co-consecrators” was not clearly defined until 1944.

(b) I have shown that Masonry was widespread among French clergy in the late 18th century. If the principle “Masonic affiliation = doubtful sacraments” were indeed true, it would apply to sacraments conferred by *priests* as well. *This would render “doubtful” all baptisms conferred in France since the 18th century.* After all, who knows which French priests were “secret Masons” and which were not?

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PLEASE NOTE that, despite the foregoing I do *not* concede the factual allegation that Cardinal Liénart was indeed a Mason. My aim here is to demonstrate that, had Cardinal Liénart indeed *been* a Mason, one could not for that reason attack the validity of the sacraments he conferred.

The Liénartist argument, then, runs afoul of the fundamental presumptions that canon law, moral theology and dogmatic theology lay down regarding the validity of sacraments in general, and the intention of the minister of Holy Orders in particular. It is contradicted by the practice of the Church in the past, and finally ends up in manifest absurdities.

In a word, it is an argument rooted in ignorance.

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