



Theology Corner

Vol. 102 – February 23rd, 2020

Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“What is the SSPX?”

For those of you who haven't heard of St. Therese Chapel in Keno which offers a Latin Mass once a month, it is run by the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX). This is not to be confused with St. Pius X Catholic Church on Bristol Avenue! Since many people have not known what to make of the SSPX, I thought it would be a good idea to give a brief explanation of what they are, what they are not, and whether you can attend their masses.

In 1970, the SSPX was founded by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre in response to Pope Paul VI's new order of the Mass in 1969. Lefebvre was a retired Bishop at the time, but he came out of retirement to help preserve the traditions of the liturgy that he felt were going to disappear as a result of this new Mass among other concerns. This part wasn't the problem since the society (SSPX) was actually approved by Bishop François Charrière as a pious union. The real problem came about when the society began causing disunity in the Church by openly criticizing the Second Vatican Council and Pope Paul VI. This eventually led to a removal of their canonical status, which basically means that they were no longer in communion with Rome. To make matters worse, Archbishop Lefebvre began ordaining priests despite a direct order from the pope against doing so. The icing on the cake was that he went on to ordain four bishops, which was an excommunicable offense. Per Canon Law, a bishop cannot ordain another bishop unless he was given express permission by the pope. Doing this caused what is called a *latae sententiae* excommunication, which just means that the excommunication was automatic.

The society continued to be an invalid one until 2009 when Pope Benedict XVI basically reversed the excommunication of the four bishops hoping that it would resolve much of the suffering in the Church over this issue, and that it would be a good start toward full communion with the Church. This was not the first time the Vatican had attempted to reunite the SSPX with Rome. Pope John Paul II wrote his 1988 apostolic letter *Ecclesia Dei* in response to the excommunication of the four bishops and called for a reunification. Pope Benedict XVI also wrote an apostolic letter called *Summorum Pontificum*, which allowed for the 1962 missal to be used without the need for permission from the Holy See. He only asked that those who celebrate in the traditional rite, acknowledge the legitimacy of the Mass revision of 1969 to preserve the unity in the Church. In order to maintain what Pope Benedict referred to as the “hermeneutic of continuity” (interpreting Vatican II's teachings as in line with what the Church has taught traditionally) and he said that should move forward referring to the traditional form of the Mass as “extraordinary” and the new form of the Mass as “ordinary.” The SSPX still refuses to call this new Mass of 1969 an “ordinary” one (the one which we all attend here at Sacred Heart) because they believe the new Mass to be theologically deficient and thus not “ordinary” at all – at times, they liken it to a Protestant service!

Despite these facts, it should be noted that the SSPX is not formally in schism. The definition of schism is understood as a total withdrawal of submission to the Roman Pontiff. They have not done as they continue to acknowledge that the Pope is, in fact, the supreme pontiff. The SSPX do not believe that the chair of St. Peter is empty – they are not sedevacantists. Yet, they still choose to remain “disobedient” to the pope and continue to fully reject the new Mass of 1969. For this reason, their canonical status is considered “irregular.” While this does not excommunicate them from the Church, it does cause their faculties (or priestly jurisdiction) to be suspended “*a divinis*” which just means that their priests are not allowed to use the privileged powers received by their ordination. This is still in effect now, although Pope Francis has allowed SSPX priests to hear confessions.

Does this mean that SSPX sacraments are invalid? No. There is a difference between validity and liceity (lawfulness). Validity concerns whether the sacrament is actually a true sacrament, while liceity concerns whether it was lawfully given. For this reason, we know that an SSPX Mass is still valid (transubstantiation does occur), but the Mass itself and the sacraments given are being offered in illegally. Does this mean that you shouldn't attend an SSPX mass? Well, making a habit of attending these masses has been openly discouraged since it generates a mentality that separates ourselves from continuity with the Church. If the intention is to attend in disobedience to the Church, then it would be considered a mortal sin. Why risk it though? Instead, we should place more of an emphasis on unity in the Church and use our time and energy for the preservation of reverence and sacredness in the new order of the Mass!