

Fr. Celier's Interpretation of Archbishop Lefebvre

True Principles, False Facts, Unsound Conclusions

John Lane

Fr. Celier's recent article entitled *Interpreting the words of Archbishop Lefebvre*, is aimed at what he calls "the sedevacantist movement," which the good father accuses of misinterpreting the Archbishop's words and actions. It is a most interesting article, revealing a penetrating and meditative mind, and a clear apprehension of the character of Archbishop Lefebvre. It is a welcome addition to the literature at a time when the Archbishop's legacy is under pressure from those who dismiss many of the things he said as rhetorical excesses, or more seriously, as Fr. Celier puts it, accuse the Archbishop of falling "into incoherence or self-contradiction." Further, as the Society of St. Pius X displays a willingness to take positions which are diametrically opposed to those held by its founder, it is vital that his true mind and spirit are once again brought forcibly before the public.

Having made an historical and textual study of Archbishop Lefebvre over the past decade, the present writer is particularly interested in what Fr. Celier has to say on the subject. And he makes a very valuable contribution. Every principle of interpretation he lays down seems sound. In his comments on the character of the Archbishop one immediately recognises the great man in his true nature. Pragmatic yet principled, consistent, clear-minded, serene. Fr. Celier does not emphasise the Archbishop's capacity for passionate arousal when the interests of the Church or of the Fraternity were threatened, yet this too was a reality and is alluded to in the article.

One aspect of the Archbishop's approach, in many ways the key to it, is however absent from this analysis. Archbishop Lefebvre habitually and consistently distinguished between what was *necessary* and what was able to be put off or left aside permanently; and he was equally determined to separate those things which are *certain* from those which are *doubtful*. To my mind, this wise and pragmatic approach is in many ways the key to understanding Archbishop Lefebvre's words and actions. Let us examine some examples.

In French Africa the Church was faced with Islam proselytising and spreading geographically, finding numerous converts amongst traditional Animists. These pagan Africans practiced polygamy and for this reason were not open to Christianity. The demands it made of them were too great. Yet they were not anti-Christian in any sense, and even recognised the great good that the Church was doing amongst them, and admired the African converts. Islam on the other hand, offered a religion superior to their chaotic Animism, yet demanded no real sacrifice: hence its success. Archbishop Lefebvre considered the situation and developed what was a radical innovation, a solution which proved highly successful in preventing the spread of Islam. He erected an organisation of friends of

the Church, which African Animists could join without converting. It institutionalised their affection for the Church without asking them to put aside numerous wives, and it brought the children of these men into direct contact with the Church so that they at least could be converted before further obstacles arose.

In this solution of the Archbishop's we recognise his careful avoidance of any unorthodoxy, combined with his masterful pragmatism. What he achieved was real and valuable, without in any way compromising what was both necessary and certain.

In the Archbishop's dealings with the Modernists who controlled Rome after the Council, we witness the same spirit at work. He did not seek to make himself a martyr for orthodoxy, yet he was perfectly prepared to be one if Providence so desired. He saw that loud declarations, a war of words, and all such things would not achieve anything permanent. The war of words had been conducted at Vatican II. What was required was for a bishop to form and ordain Catholic priests who would bring the true faith, the holy sacrifice, and the sacraments, to the remaining faithful who requested them. This was an enormous task, and the Archbishop set about it with his customary modesty and prudence. He saw, correctly, that the ideal situation would be if Rome approved his work, and arranged quietly to bring that about. In this way he ensured that the less clear-minded of the faithful would not be deprived of the goods of the Church through scandal at apparent disobedience to Rome. What was certain and necessary was Tradition; what was less certain was the authority of those in Rome. It was unnecessary to irritate the Modernists without proportionate reason. In the end, the scandalous assertion of Modernism by two "apostolic visitors" from Rome within the very walls of Econe, led Archbishop Lefebvre to announce with indignation his unyielding principles. He declared:

We hold fast, with all our heart and with all our soul, to Catholic Rome, Guardian of the Catholic faith and of the traditions necessary to preserve this faith, to Eternal Rome, Mistress of wisdom and truth.

We refuse, on the other hand, and have always refused to follow the Rome of neo-Modernist and neo-Protestant tendencies which were clearly evident in the Second Vatican Council and, after the Council, in all the reforms which issued from it.

All these reforms, indeed, have contributed and are still contributing to the destruction of the Church, to the ruin of the priesthood, to the abolition of the Sacrifice of the Mass and of the sacraments, to the disappearance of religious life, to a naturalist and Teilhardian teaching in universities, seminaries and catechetics; a teaching derived from Liberalism and Protestantism, many times condemned by the solemn Magisterium of the Church.

No authority, not even the highest in the hierarchy, can force us to abandon or diminish our Catholic faith, so clearly expressed and professed by the Church's Magisterium for nineteen centuries.

“But though we,” says St. Paul, “or an angel from heaven preach a gospel to you besides that which we have preached to you, let him be anathema” (Gal. 1:8).

...

That is why we *hold fast* to all that has been believed and practiced in the faith, morals, liturgy, teaching of the catechism, formation of the priest and institution of the Church, by the Church of all time; to all these things as codified in those books which saw day before the Modernist influence of the Council. This we shall do until such time that the true light of Tradition dissipates the darkness obscuring the sky of Eternal Rome.

*By doing this, with the grace of God and the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and that of St. Joseph and St. Pius X, we are assured of remaining faithful to the Roman Catholic Church and to all the successors of Peter, and of being the fideles dispensatores mysteriorum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi in Spiritu Sancto. Amen.*¹

The Archbishop made clear that he was holding fast to what is *certain*. What is uncertain, he would leave aside for further consideration. This declaration brought about the inevitable collision in the hot summer of '76, when the Society was condemned, the Archbishop suspended *a divinis*, and the useful yet strictly unnecessary approval of Rome was finally lost.

The same distinction was made explicit in his comments following the condemnation by Rome:

*While we are certain that the faith the Church has taught for 20 centuries cannot contain error, we are much further from absolute certitude that the pope is truly pope.*²

In forming and ordaining priests, and in managing the Society generally, Archbishop Lefebvre remained above the inevitable disputes which arose over the various aspects of the crisis. He permitted both liberal and hard-line views, but within the bounds of proper discretion. Sedevacantists remained, as did those who desired a reconciliation with the Modernists. Troublemakers were expelled occasionally, from either camp. The common good, bringing the mass and sacraments to those who requested them, was paramount. What was certain and necessary was maintained with complete discipline; what was lawfully disputable remained free. He was perfectly capable of tolerating ideas and judgements with which he disagreed, for the sake of the greater good, so long as the faith itself was maintained with complete integrity, and that the priests did not make their personal views into causes of disunity.

¹ Archbishop Lefebvre, *Declaration*, November 21, 1974. Some emphasis added.

² *Le Figaro*, August 4, 1976. Emphasis added.

This spirit can be identified in Fr Stephan Maessen, a true son of the Archbishop and one who is reportedly strongly opposed to reconciliation with Modernists. In 2001 an article of his was published in the *Catholic* newspaper on the subject of sedevacantism. Towards the end, by way of summary, Fr. Maessen made the following comments.

“But did not Msgr. Lefebvre himself say, that he could not guarantee that the Pope is Pope?” Yes, he did say that, and he was completely right. How could he, as a simple Catholic bishop with neither the office nor the authority to decide such a question with magisterial certainty, guarantee whether the current occupant of the See of St Peter is Pope or not? “Let us not attribute to ourselves an authority which we do not possess”, he repeated again and again, and it is, I believe, a sign of honesty and sincerity when one thinks and acts so. When we no longer know how to distinguish between the infallibly guaranteed teaching of the Church and our own theological opinions, then we replace the illumination of the Holy Ghost with our own intelligence, and consider ourselves to be cleverer than the Magisterium of the Church, which we no longer need.

...

In speaking of the Church's social doctrine Pope Leo XIII admonished Catholics in words that have a universal validity:

“The defence of Catholicism, indeed, necessarily demands that in the profession of doctrines taught by the Church all shall be of one mind and all steadfast in believing; and care must be taken never to connive, in any way, at false opinions, never to withstand them less strenuously than truth allows. In mere matters of opinion it is permissible to discuss things with moderation, with a desire of searching into the truth, without unjust suspicion or angry recriminations.”(Encyclical *Immortale Dei* 1/11/1885.)

It will only be on this foundation of honesty and sincerity regarding the Church's Magisterium that a deeper investigation and discussion of this problem will take place in the spirit of the Church and bear fruit for souls.

“And they laid up the stones in the mountain of the temple, in a convenient place, till there should come a prophet, and give answer concerning them.”(1 Machabees 4, 46.)³

The situation in which the Society of St. Pius X finds itself today has been caused precisely by the decision of its leadership to settle the question that Fr. Maessen confirms that Archbishop Lefebvre did not think himself competent to settle. By maintaining as absolutely certain that Benedict is pope, something which all serious Catholics must regard as in some sense doubtful, Bishop Fellay and his General Council have made all that is truly certain subject to what is doubtful. This is a

³ Fr. Stephan Maessen, *Sedevacantism*, published in the newspaper, *Catholic*, 2001.

complete inversion of the approach taken by Archbishop Lefebvre, and ultimately if it is maintained, it will destroy the Society.

Returning to Fr. Celier's article, it is clear that whereas his principles of interpretation are indisputable, his facts are not. The good father asserts as factual what is really the whole matter of debate. He avers:

Archbishop Lefebvre "constantly condemned their [i.e. sedevacantists'] false positions as being ruinous to the Church, and he systematically removed and excluded defenders of those positions from the Society of St. Pius X."

This is notoriously contrary to fact, as has been proved elsewhere.⁴ The actual policy of Archbishop Lefebvre with respect to sedevacantism must be understood by reference to his over-all attitude towards the crisis, as outlined above. He regarded it as a legitimately disputed question, a question he himself repeatedly raised without finally answering it, as Fr. Maessen and Bishop Tissier have both testified.

Fr. Celier adds:

In response let us say first that *a priori* the authentic interpreter of Archbishop Lefebvre's course of action is obviously the work that he himself founded and directed...

This is obviously true. But what is taken *a priori* must yield if it finds itself in conflict with plain fact. Three of the four bishops of the Fraternity are now alleging, with what seems an incontrovertible foundation, that the views being expressed by the General Council of the SSPX are not those of Archbishop Lefebvre. They appeal,

[L]isten again to your Founder. He was right 25 years ago. He is still right today. On his behalf, we entreat you: do not engage the Society in a purely practical agreement.

Nor does the disagreement turn solely on the question of a practical agreement. Since the publication of this letter from the three bishops, additional vastly more serious lines of conflict have

⁴ John Lane, articles, *Archbishop Lefebvre and the Sedevacantist Thesis*, and *Archbishop Lefebvre and the Conciliar Popes*.

opened up. Bishop Fellay has now stated, in his interview with CNS, a view which is diametrically opposed to that of Archbishop Lefebvre.

We, I may say in the discussions, *I think we see that many things which we would have condemned as being from the Council are in fact not from the Council.* But the common understanding of it.

...

The Religious liberty is used in so many ways and looking closer I really have the impression that not many know what really the Council said about it. The Council is presenting a religious liberty which is in fact a very, very limited one. Very limited. (Emphasis added.)

Archbishop Lefebvre, on the contrary, said:

The phrase of the schema [on Religious Liberty] quoted in the intervention: "The Catholic Church claims as a right of the human person, etc.," is monstrous, and it is odious to credit the Catholic Church with this claim.⁵

For the Archbishop, the problem was the text itself, not just the interpretation. For Bishop Fellay, *who admits that his view has changed*, the problem is one of misinterpretation, not primarily the text itself.

In light of the serious division now apparent in the Society, even those who looked solely to the Society to interpret the words and actions of the Archbishop are forced to ask, *which Society?*

Fr. Celier is a partisan of the new SSPX which is willing to make an agreement with Modernists. This must be the explanation for the strange phenomenon of such a penetrating and meditative mind, which displays a clear apprehension of the character of Archbishop Lefebvre, maintaining such a disastrously inaccurate view of the historical record. Fr. Celier manages to insert untrue factual data into his sound principles of interpretation, and arrive thereby at complete error. Yet even that does not fully express the complete perversion of the Archbishop's views achieved by Fr. Celier. To grasp this, a little further analysis is required. He writes:

⁵ Archbishop Lefebvre, *I Accuse the Council*, p. 27. When this book was published in its English edition in 1982, the Archbishop wrote a new preface. He did not remove the words quoted above, for he still held the views in 1982 that he held in 1965 and 1976.

Therefore, if some expressions, some statements penned by an author seem out of tune, then one ought *a priori*, unless there is a well-founded reason, to reconcile them with the recurring expressions and constant statements of that author. Ordinarily, indeed, it is methodologically sound to interpret what is variable in terms of what is constant, the obscure by what is clear, novel language in terms of oft-repeated thinking, and not vice versa.

This is true. Yet then Fr. Celier asserts:

If we look now at the short term, Archbishop Lefebvre, like any human being, was obviously affected and impressed by immediate events, and naturally that coloured his momentary judgments. A close analysis of the texts clearly shows, for example, that he hoped in the early 1970's to obtain pontifical right [for the Society], just as he truly thought, at some moments in the year 1987-1988, that an acceptable agreement was possible. Similarly, one senses a certain optimism at the beginning of the pontificate of John Paul II, etc.

Conversely, some events that moved him, like the gathering in Assisi in 1986, could momentarily make him use words that were harsher than usual.

Now each of these sentences is compatible with the historical record, indicating that Fr. Celier is not completely divorced from the realm of fact. As noted above, the desire for canonical approval, if achievable without compromise of principle, was a feature of Archbishop Lefebvre's policy in the early 1970s. Likewise the optimism at the beginning of John Paul II's reign, about whom the Archbishop was completely disillusioned by 1983. It is also factual that in 1987-1988 he held hopes for a practical agreement. Yet none of these things are fleshed out sufficiently in order to make sense of them. This would not require any great effort, or the expenditure of a large amount of ink. Yet Fr. Celier is content with a few delicate and ambiguous sentences. The last factual question is the reaction of the Archbishop to the abomination of Assisi, and here Fr. Celier definitely misrepresents the record, for the founder of the SSPX did not merely "use words that were harsher than usual" – he made a series of calculated public interventions, and published an address on the possibility of *sede vacante* which was in excess of 2500 words.⁶

During the same period, Archbishop Lefebvre indicated the seriousness of his thoughts and actions on this question, in interviews in Canada and Australia.

Q. Last May, in Canada, you spoke of "pertinacity in error." Could you expand upon what you mean?

⁶ The Archbishop Speaks, *Talks given by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre*, March 30 and April 18, 1986, *The Angelus*, vol. IX, no. 7, July 1986. A version of this same address was later published in *Fideliter*.

A. *It is because of this pertinacity that we sent our recent letter to the Pope. If he continues to promote the reforms in the Church, which are becoming more and more grave, then he can certainly be described as pertinacious.* Soon, perhaps, Bishop de Castro Mayer and I will produce another document which will outline the gravity of the situation.⁷

This open suggestion of *sede vacante*, recognised as a dire threat in Rome, resulted in the offer by Cardinal Ratzinger of canonical regularisation for the SSPX and a papal mandate to consecrate a successor bishop. This offer almost led to an agreement in the middle of 1988.

Within the true factual context, Archbishop Lefebvre's relatively brief period of public anti-sedevacantism, circa 1979-82, is seen to be the exception. If "it is methodologically sound to interpret what is variable in terms of what is constant," as indeed it is, then the repeated statements of Archbishop Lefebvre over several decades asserting that the question of *sede vacante* remains open must outrank the few statements that he made which appeared to rule it out.

Ultimately we are left with one question: Why has Fr. Celier, after laying down the principle that the Archbishop's words and actions can only be understood in the light of their historical context, omitted to provide any of that necessary context?

Whatever might be the answer to that question, one conclusion is inescapable. The authentic interpreters of Archbishop Lefebvre's thought are certainly not those who are blinded by their desire to come to terms with Modernist wolves dressed as sheep.

⁷ *Interview with Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre*, Don McLean, Editor of *Catholic*, January 1986. Source: http://www.sspxasia.com/Documents/Archbishop-Lefebvre/Interview_With_Archbishop_Lefebvre_Jan_86.htm