

Sedevacantism, Safety and Peace

The topic of sedevacantism produces deep curiosity in some, violent antipathy in others, and a great deal of confusion in many, even amongst those who say that they maintain this view themselves.

Much of the reason for these reactions and the confusion that surrounds the subject arises from a lack of knowledge of what is really the *status* of the view that the See of Rome is vacant. By status is meant the epistemological, moral, and legal implications of the notion. The purpose of this article is to delineate some of these points to assist traditional Catholics to take a more informed, dispassionate, view of the matter. In brief, this article aims to undermine the causes of disunity and to foster peace.

There are several questions which feed into the question of the status of the *sede vacante* opinion.

1. Have these men been true popes?
2. What degree of certitude can be achieved in relation to this question?
3. What obligations are incumbent on Catholics in relation to this question?

On the hypothesis that the See of Rome is actually vacant, and that this can be known with certitude, a further question arises: Does this objectively certain truth oblige all Catholics equally, as for example any promulgated doctrine or law of the Church obliges all of her members without exception?

It is the conviction of the writer that the post-conciliar popes have not been true popes. And it is his further belief that this truth can be held with moral certitude, which is the kind of certitude proper to such questions. Moral certitude is true certitude. That is, the firm and unwavering assent of the mind to known truth. These points are proved elsewhere. For present purposes they will be taken as true.

To answer properly the question, are all obliged to judge that the Holy See is vacant, some preliminary concepts need to be grasped.

There is a simple distinction between what obliges all without exception, and what obliges those who recognise a reality even before any universally obligatory declaration of fact is made. An insight

into this distinction can be gained by reviewing the nature of what is called positive revelation, and how it relates to truths which can be known by the unaided light of reason (i.e. natural revelation).

The dogmatic theologians Wilhelm and Scannell explain:

i. Positive Revelation is not absolutely, categorically, and physically necessary for the knowledge of truths of the natural order bearing upon religion and morals, but it is relatively, hypothetically, and morally necessary. If Positive Revelation were absolutely necessary for the acquisition of natural, moral, and religious truths, then none of these truths could be known by any man in any other way. But this is plainly opposed to the doctrine that God and the moral law may be known by man's unaided reason. Many difficulties, however, impede the acquisition of this knowledge. Very few men have the talent and opportunity to study such a subject, and even under the most favourable circumstances there will be doubt and error, owing to man's moral degradation and the influences to which he is exposed. Positive Revelation is needed to remedy these defects, but the necessity is only relative, because it exists merely in relation to a portion of mankind, a part of the moral law, and in different degrees under different circumstances; the necessity is moral, because there is no physical impossibility but only great difficulty; and hypothetical, because it exists only in the hypothesis that God has provided no other means of surmounting the difficulties.

In the present circumstances, there is objectively a great deal of confusion over the status of the post-conciliar popes. Difficulties abound, especially those connected with the truths of ecclesiology. For example, it is impossible for the Church to offer false worship to God or to make laws which conduce to the harm of the faithful; it is equally necessary that the Church hierarchical continues to exist, that is, the bishops with ordinary jurisdiction, and it is a fact that all of the bishops with jurisdiction have continued to recognise the Conciliar claimants as popes. The fact of these difficulties, the fact that there exists an objectively confusing situation, is analogous to the situation with respect to natural revelation prior to the intervention of positive revelation.

The difference between the status of divine revelation and the means by which it is brought to men, and the current situation with respect to the status of the conciliar popes, is precisely in that last phrase of Wilhelm and Scannell, viz. “[the necessity of positive revelation] exists only in the hypothesis that God has provided no other means of surmounting the difficulties.” God has provided a sure way for all men to achieve certitude regarding natural revelation; they can sit at the feet of the Church and learn it, in simple language, from an infallible teacher. In the case of the post-conciliar popes, the infallible teacher has not promulgated the answer. Catholics must reason their way to the truth from general principles, but not all Catholics are equipped to do so in a way which assures certitude. The necessity of a public judgement is not, in this case, hypothetical; it is

actual. The necessity of a public judgement is *relative* and *moral*, but it is not hypothetical. It is real.

God has permitted this situation, and we are obliged to bow humbly before His divine wisdom. We know that He permits it for a greater good, as He permits all evil.

The fact that there is an unmet (relative and moral) need for a judgement by the Church on the question of the post-conciliar popes, has implications in law, both divine and ecclesiastical.

All are aware of the principle that ignorance of the law is no defence. But what is the natural law basis for this principle? Why is it just? The answer is because a law is not a law until it is promulgated, which means “published” to all of those whom it obliges. The obligation arises from the law; it is a correlative of the law; it is the other side of the same coin, so to speak. Once promulgated, all are presumed to know the law, and all are obliged to obey it.

This principle applies both to divine law and to human law. But some law is general, and some specific. For example, all men without exception are obliged by divine law to worship God, especially by praying to Him. Positive revelation specifies this further, and lays upon all men the obligation of worshipping Him particularly on Sunday. Ecclesiastical law specifies this even further, by mandating assistance at Holy Mass every Sunday and Holy Day, and by establishing various other additional commandments, such as that which commands the Easter duty.

Divine law lays down the general obligation to avoid heretics. St. Paul teaches, "A heretic, after the first and second admonition, avoid."¹ This is incumbent upon all Christians without exception. But it is not specified concerning individuals. Each Christian is required to apply it as necessary, and that is why we are told to admonish the heretic.

The Church occasionally condemns particular heretics and adds her own mandate to the divine law, or more properly, applies divine law to specific cases. She will condemn a heretic, excommunicate him, and declare him *vitandus* (i.e. “to be avoided”). From this arises an obligation in ecclesiastical law, incumbent upon all Christians, to avoid that particular culprit. The law in such a case is no longer merely general, to be applied by each Christian; it is specific, and no room remains for individual judgement. We can properly think of this as the promulgation of a particular law concerning an individual person. Once such a law is promulgated, it obliges all without exception.

¹ Tit. 3, 10-11.

But it should be clear that the absence of such a particular law doesn't mean that there is no law at all in relation to a specific heretic, because the general divine law still applies. The theologian Ballerini, addressing the pope-heretic thesis, explains the principles involved with simplicity and clarity.

A peril for the faith so imminent and among all the most grave, as this of a Pontiff who, even only privately, defended heresy, would not be able to be supported for long. Why, then, expect the remedy to come from a General Council, whose convocation is not easy? Is it not true that, confronted with such a danger for the faith, any subjects can by fraternal correction warn their superior, resist him to his face, refute him and, if necessary, summon him and press him to repent? The Cardinals, who are his counsellors, can do this; or the Roman Clergy, or the Roman Synod, if, being met, they judge this opportune. For any person, even a private person, the words of Saint Paul to Titus hold: "Avoid the heretic, after a first and second correction, knowing that such a man is perverted and sins, since he is condemned by his own judgment" (Tit. 3, 10-11). "That is to say, he who has been corrected once or twice and does not change his mind, but is pertinacious in an opinion opposed to a manifest or defined dogma: by this public pertinacity of his, he not only cannot by any means be excused from heresy properly so called, which requires pertinacity; but also openly declares himself a heretic, that is, he declares that he has departed from the Catholic Faith, and from the Church, by his own will, so that no declaration or sentence of anyone is necessary to cut him off from the body of the Church. In this matter the argument given by Saint Jerome in connection with the cited words of Saint Paul is very clear: "Therefore it is said that the heretic has condemned himself: for the fornicator, the adulterer, the homicide and the other sinners are expelled from the Church by the priests; but the heretics pronounce sentence against themselves, excluding themselves from the Church spontaneously: this exclusion which is their condemnation by their own conscience."²

As Ballerini points out, all are under the general obligation to avoid heretics, by divine law. But this obligation arises only in relation to heretics known as such. In very simple terms, if I realise that a given individual is a heretic, then I am strictly obliged to avoid him. But if my neighbour does not realise that the man is a heretic, he is not obliged to avoid the culprit.

In the case of a putative Roman Pontiff, especially one recognised as such, at least verbally, by all of the ordinaries and most of the clergy, the application of the law by individuals is as delicate as it is urgent and necessary. Catholics cannot be indifferent to the pope.

² Ballerini, Pietro. *De potestate ecclesiastica Summorum Pontificum et conciliorum generalium liber. Una cum vindiciis auctoritatis pontificiae contra opus Justini Febronii.* Augustae Vindelicorum [Augsburg]: Veith, 1770. (translation of title: *Book of the ecclesiastical power of the Supreme Pontiffs and of the general councils. Together with vindications of the pontifical authority against the work of Justinus Febronius*). Chapter 9, sec. 2, p. 128. Translated by James Larrabee.

If Benedict XVI is a public heretic, he isn't pope.³ The obligation exists to avoid all heretics, but it is only applicable to that individual in each case in which the recognition of him as a heretic occurs. In the absence of a public judgement, each Catholic is obliged to form his own judgement and act upon it.

When members of the hierarchy have done their duty and formed a judgement on this question, they can proceed to call an imperfect general council and declare the fact. Such a declaration would not be a formal judgement of the pope, but merely the recognition and authoritative promulgation of the fact already existing, which is that the main claiming to be pope is not so. Indeed, there could be no possibility of such a declaration unless members of the sacred college, or the episcopate, were already convinced that the claimant was a heretic and no pope. This is because if he were pope, then nobody would be his superior, and therefore there could be no lawful trial or formal judgement.⁴ But once such a declaration was made, it would constitute a safe norm for all Catholics, and would create a universal obligation incumbent upon all to avoid such a false pope. Any Catholic who persisted in recognising such a heretic as pope could only do so lawfully by way of exception; anybody who refused to assent to such a declaration would sin by rashness, absent some extraordinary knowledge which might justify such a singular view.

It might, at this juncture, be objected that pending such a public declaration it would be rash to conclude that the current claimant is not pope. In other circumstances, this would be so, but not in these. And the reason is that for anybody who is familiar with the doctrine of the Church regarding her own prerogatives and perfections, it is impossible to accept that the Conciliar sect is actually the true Church. Likewise it is not possible to believe, without prejudice to the faith, that the documents and reforms of Vatican II came from the Church. Nor is it possible to believe that the body of men who express recognition of Benedict XVI constitute the true Church, for such a body, including as it does traditional Catholics and Modernists, is essentially disunited in faith, worship, and discipline. For these and other reasons there is no possibility of a peaceful acceptance of Benedict's claim. His claim can only be accepted provisionally and in a sense violently, by putting aside the intrinsic difficulties which militate against such a judgement.

Now, in the turmoil of the immediate post-conciliar era the question of Paul VI's status as pope arose naturally amongst faithful and informed Catholics. Some formed the judgement that he could not be pope, and others that such a question was intrinsically unlawful. Others again acknowledged that the question was lawful, but did not see how it could be answered without the intervention of at least some members of the hierarchy. Compounding the essential difficulty of the question, some

³ This is the doctrine of St. Robert Bellarmine, which for the purposes of this article is taken as true.

⁴ It is illogical to argue that for this reason only a successor could judge such a case. This is because one pope is not another's superior, but rather his equal. If a successor can judge, then so can inferiors, for neither is the superior of a true pope, but both categories of men are superiors to a heretic who is not and cannot be pope.

of those who formed the view that the See of Rome was vacant proceeded to elevate their judgement into the equivalent of a judgement of the Church herself. They treated their view as though it were obligatory upon all, or at least, upon those who were better informed.

The existence of these varying viewpoints explains a great deal of the history of the traditional Catholic reaction to the crisis. And it is only by delineating each view, and keeping them rigorously distinguished in relation to each of the prominent actors, that an accurate understanding of this history can be gained.

For example, Archbishop Lefebvre generally maintained that sedevacantism was a lawful opinion, and was happy to cooperate with sedevacantists, even maintaining many within the Society of St. Pius X, but on condition that they did not regard their opinion as obligatory for all. In other words, as long as they knew it was their own opinion, the Archbishop had no problem with sedevacantists. At least one priest he ordained in the 1980s was given specific permission to omit the name of John Paul II from the *Te igitur* in the Canon of the Mass. Many others had done so, with the Archbishop's implicit sanction, for years beforehand.

Likewise, many laymen who held that the See is vacant have peacefully assisted at Holy Mass offered by priests who recognise, verbally at least, the Conciliar claimants as true popes.

The issue upon which traditionalists divided from others was almost exclusively the faith, with the Mass as the great shibboleth. Priests who maintained the true Mass were accepted, so long as they didn't display other clear signs of heterodoxy. The faithful who maintained the true faith were accepted peacefully, no matter what their theory might be about the status of the Conciliar popes.

In the minority amongst sedevacantists, at least up until the turn of the century, had been those who take a dogmatic stance on the issue, insisting that it is not the faith and the Mass which matters primarily, but rather the fact that Paul VI, John Paul II or Benedict XVI is not truly the pope. For such dogmatic sedevacantists, everything turns upon the pope question. If he is truly pope, he must be obeyed as true popes are obeyed by Catholics at all times. If he is not pope, he must be rejected, under pain of sin or even loss of membership in the Church.

The effect of this view, often held by very outspoken individuals, has been to obscure the true status of the *sede vacante* thesis in the minds of many traditional Catholics. "Sedevacantism" to many means a kind of home-baked dogma, the effect of which is to wreck peace, cause anguish to souls, and distract from the real fight for the faith and the Mass. This is tragic, especially since the *raison*

d'être of the *sede vacante* thesis is precisely to resolve contradictions, restore peace of soul, and render men safe from the depredations of wolves dressed as sheep.

Within the Society of St. Pius X the dogmatic sedevacantist factor, existing as did for a time amongst some of the priests and seminarians, produced a reaction against the thesis on the part of the leadership. Compounding this reaction was the advent of John Paul II in 1978, posing as a conservative who would reverse at least some of the evils of Paul VI. This led Archbishop Lefebvre to decide on a new policy, for public consumption only, yet not without profound effects on the thinking of traditional Catholics, that sedevacantism was intolerable within the Society. Adding further to this factor was the appointment of the ex-sedevacantist Fr. Franz Schmidberger as Superior General in 1982. Fr. Schmidberger appears to have a digital mind – either something is true and obligatory for all without exception, or it is untrue and must be ruthlessly suppressed. Archbishop Lefebvre was soon disabused of any illusions regarding John Paul II, which meant that from around 1983 one could observe the curious phenomenon of anti-sedevacantist rhetoric and texts being published by SSPX organs, along with pro-sedevacantist sermons, articles, interviews and public statements by Archbishop Lefebvre himself.⁵

One of the many lamentable effects of anti-sedevacantist propaganda has been to create the impression that sedevacantism is *essentially* dogmatic. Another has been to harden some sedevacantists into a dogmatic sedevacantist mentality, on the principle that if non-sedevacantists are determined to misrepresent our view, then they are in bad faith; further, their bad faith towards us is evidence that non-sedevacantism is evil.

Those traditionalists who understand the true status of the *sede vacante* thesis are in a very strong position. Those who know that the See is vacant are entirely safe from potentially invalid sacraments and from any danger of believing errors preached by Modernists dressed as Catholic bishops. Those who have not formed the judgement that the See is vacant yet recognise that is a lawful opinion with a degree of theological probability, are at least largely safe from the depredations of the Modernists, for their recognition of Benedict XVI and his entourage is essentially provisional, not absolute.

Bishops Tissier, de Galarreta, and Williamson, are each perfectly relaxed with the notion that Benedict XVI might not be truly pope. None of the three is dogmatically anti-sedevacantist, even though none of them shows any sign of forming that view himself. Yet they feel no inordinate desire to enter into dangerous relations with the Vatican.

⁵ The Archbishop's views on this subject are explored in the articles, *Archbishop Lefebvre and the Sedevacantist Thesis*, and *Archbishop Lefebvre and the Conciliar Popes*, both by the present writer.

In contrast with both of these categories of traditional Catholics are the anti-sedevacantists, those who refuse to acknowledge what Archbishop Lefebvre himself so clearly stated, and therefore make of the status of Benedict XVI a kind of newly minted dogma. These men endanger themselves and those who follow them. This is most clear in the various *Ecclesia Dei* communities, which rashly accept the validity of the new sacramental rites and which desire to make their verbal subjection to the Modernists as real as possible without abandoning the faith. Such an outlook is obviously dangerous, and many deplorable results have already followed from it, including disunity with other traditional Catholics, and the compromise by priests offering the New Mass at least occasionally.

The same factor, but less mature and therefore yet to produce the worst of its fruits, is seen in Bishop Fellay and the majority of the leadership of the Society of St. Pius X. Convinced as they are that there is no possibility that the See of Rome is vacant, such men are at the mercy of the subtle stratagems of experienced Modernists.

John Lane

Feast of St. Rita, 2012