

Letter of “The Nine” to Archbishop Lefebvre (March 25, 1983)

by Nine American Priests of SSPX

The grave problems in the Society of St. Pius X

NOTE: *This letter was sent to Archbishop Lefebvre and the General Council of SSPX. The priests who wrote it were expelled the following month.*

Your Grace and Rev. Fathers:

It is our understanding that the reason for which the Society of St. Pius X was founded was to promote fidelity to Tradition, by which is meant loyalty to the Church, her doctrine, moral teaching, worship, sacraments and discipline. That such an organization was necessary was due to the fact that the reforms introduced by Pope John XXIII set in motion a process that has resulted in radical change, which constitutes a substantial rejection of traditional Catholic doctrine, morality and worship.

History records that Your Grace was one of the voices of courage and sanity at the Council, and in the years following the Council you refused to cooperate in the destruction of the Church. It was natural that others who loved the Church and her traditions would turn to you. It is no exaggeration to say that you became a symbol to millions of loyalty to tradition, and many souls who might otherwise have been lost will spend eternity in heaven because of what you have done.

Thus in the light of these facts it is necessarily with great sadness that we write to Your Grace and the General Council of the Society about certain matters which we believe are so serious as to constitute a substantial departure from the purpose for which the Society was established and could bring about its ultimate ruination — if they are not corrected. This we must do out of loyalty to that purpose, but more importantly out of loyalty to the Church.

Therefore, we respectfully manifest our grave concern over certain serious developments which have arisen in the Society in the hope that these matters will be resolved. We ask you to give serious consideration to these points which are presented to you by priests who have given you years of faithful service.

1. The Seminary

At the beginning of the school year Your Grace imposed reforms in the Mass at the seminary in Ridgefield, i.e., liturgical reforms imposed by John XXIII. As you know, these reforms are a phase in the process begun in the 1950's, authored by Annibale Bugnini, the creator of the New Mass, and brought to completion by Paul VI. Since these reforms led eventually to the New Mass in the Church, this caused great scandal at the seminary among professors and students.

You said these reforms were necessary for "unity." But these first reforms did not bring unity — which already existed at the seminary. Instead, these changes in the Mass were a prelude to the destruction of peace and unity. Up to that time the seminary in Ridgefield was virtually free of problems. The conflicts and controversy that were so characteristic of Ecône were unknown in the American seminary. Here the seminarians were trained in peace and serenity.

The quest for unity by John XXIII resulted in disunity. How could his reform imposed on a traditional seminary of the Society set the stage for anything but trouble? The imposition of these reforms was subversive of the principle on which the Society was to build: loyalty to tradition.

Furthermore, it is contrary to right reason to attempt to counter the disorder of the liturgical revolution by imposing in the Society an important phase of that revolution as the liturgical norm we should follow. Why impose reforms which contributed to an attack on tradition? Unity cannot be based on disorder and novelty.

And so, as happened in the Church on the heels of the changes of John XXIII, there followed a spirit of contention and division in the seminary — a spirit which has led to the unhappy state in which we find the seminary today, a place not at peace, but in controversy and unrest. As a devil entered in when John XXIII began with his reforms, so too has one entered the seminary in Ridgefield since those same reforms were imposed. The devil's name is legion.

2. Doubtful Priests

Over the past few years, the Society has accepted the service of priests ordained by vernacular versions of the New Rite of Ordination of 1968. On November 30, 1947, Pope Pius XII issued his Apostolic Constitution *Sacramentum Ordinis*, dealing with the matter of the Sacrament of Orders. It was his intention "to put an end to all controversy," as he said. He did this by, among other things, decreeing and determining which words in the form for the ordination of a priest "are essential and therefore requisite for validity."

The English words of the form in the New Rite of ordination so differ from the ones Pius XII said were essential for validity that they introduce a positive doubt as to its validity. In fact the doubt is not negative, but positive enough even in your own mind, Your Grace, so as to justify the conditional ordination of priests ordained in the New Rite.

And so you have in fact conditionally ordained at least two priests in America: Father Sullivan and Father [. . .]. Indeed, you even asked Rev. Philip Stark to accept conditional ordination and he, as you yourself told us, adamantly refused. And yet, after his refusal, you nevertheless allowed and continue to allow him to work with the Society; and he is not the only doubtfully ordained priest that you permit to do so — he is one of many.

Thus under the aegis of the Society, doubtful Masses are being offered, doubtful absolutions are being given and dying people are being anointed with an "Extreme Unction" that may be invalid and of no more value than the anointing with oil done by a Protestant minister.

How, one must ask before God, can the Society reject the doubtful sacraments of the new Church only to replace them

with doubtful priests? How grave a sin this is! How false a pretense! Furthermore the Society in the Southwest District has begun to import to the United States priests whose theological training and manner of ordination are under a similar cloud. As Your Grace knows, this has been a source of scandal.

The employment of such priests strikes at the heart of one of the reasons for the Society's existence: to provide unquestionably valid sacraments for the faithful — for if a positive doubt exists as to the validity of a priest's ordination, not only are the sacraments he administers doubtful, but the faithful are put into a position by the Society of choosing between the doubtful sacraments of the new Church and the doubtful priests of the Society. From the standpoint of Catholic morality this is inadmissible.

3. Liturgical Changes

The First General Chapter of the Society, held at Ecône in 1976, adopted the principle that the Districts and the Houses of Formation should follow the Missal, Breviary, Calendar and Rubrics which were customary at that time. This decision was never rescinded or even discussed at the Second General Chapter held last year at which your successor was selected.

In the case of the United States, we have always followed the Missal, Breviary, Calendar and Rubrics of our holy patron, Pope St. Pius X, which practice was sanctioned by the First General Chapter. Of late, however, an attempt has been made to force all the priests and seminarians in the United States to accept the liturgical reforms of Pope John XXIII on the grounds of uniformity and loyalty to the Society, thereby implying that adherence to the non-reformed traditional Rites of St. Pius X constitutes disloyalty.

Can it be that the Society has come to look upon loyalty to tradition as disloyalty to the Society?

Most recently, to our shock and dismay, a newly-ordained priest was given an ultimatum — either to accept the reforms of John XXIII and to begin saying Mass according to the John XXIII missal or to leave the Society.

Is it possible that the Society which has been persecuted because of its loyalty to tradition now persecutes priests for their loyalty to tradition? What has happened? Can it be that the Society now uses the same tactic which the reforming hierarchy used to impose the reform that has destroyed our people and our churches? Is not this, in the light of recent history, beyond belief? Would we not be far more guilty in accepting this first step than the priests of twenty years ago who did not have the historical precedent that we have before our eyes?

As you well know, John XXIII made his original changes as merely temporary steps in preparation for Vatican II. Father Kelly wrote to you of this matter last year when it was announced that you would strive to introduce the reforms of John XXIII in the United States. To quote from Father Kelly's letter of March 23, 1982:

It seems to me that the very nature of *Rubricarum Instructum* is a temporary one, and, of course, it only remained in vigor for four years. Thus in its text, John XXIII said that his reform of July 25, 1960 was made with the understanding "that the more important principles governing a general liturgical reform should be laid before the members of the hierarchy at the forthcoming ecumenical council," which he said he decided to

convene "under the inspiration of God." It is not difficult, then, for it to be seen as the type of gradualism which eventually embraced the reform.

Our people would be shocked by any liturgical change. To introduce a change in the direction of the Council would be seen as one step toward the changes of the 1960's. We simply could not stand up in front of our congregations and tell them that we were abandoning the Missal, Calendar and Breviary of our Holy Patron, St. Pius X, for that of John XXIII — one, the greatest pope of the century, the other, the originator of the *aggiornamento* whose effects remain with us today.

In our opinion, for us to accept the Missal, Breviary, Calendar and Rubrics of John XXIII would be to accept the first steps toward the "liturgical reform" of Vatican II, which steps lead gradually to the New Mass, and such would be the way the laity in America would interpret it.

Furthermore, and with all due respect, religious superiors do not, under the canons and traditions of the Church, have any power to legislate in liturgical matters. Such power belongs to the Roman Pontiffs who are themselves limited. For though the power of a pope is very great, it is neither arbitrary nor unrestricted. "The pope," as Cardinal Hergenroether once said, "is circumscribed by the consciousness of the necessity of making a righteous and beneficial use of the duties attached to his privileges.... He is also circumscribed by the spirit and practice of the Church, by the respect due to General Councils and to ancient statutes and customs, by the rights of bishops, by his relation with civil powers, by the traditional mild tone of government indicated by the aim of the institution of the papacy—to 'feed'—..." (Quoted in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913), vol. XII, "Pope," pp. 269-270)

Thus obedience in matters liturgical belongs to a religious superior only insofar as what he demands is demanded by the Church and the legitimate demands of a Roman Pontiff.

4. Dismissal of Priests

Over the past few years, a considerable number of priests have been threatened with expulsion from the Society. Some have actually been expelled. No provision was made for the support of such priests. They were simply expelled and the Society washed its hands of them.

It is indeed a flagrant violation of tradition, of the spirit of the Council of Trent and of the Code of Canon Law, and has always led to untold abuses and scandal to souls. While it may be true that we live in difficult times and the letter of the law cannot always be followed, nevertheless this is no excuse to disregard the spirit of the law in the creation of "untitled" priests.

As you know, "The canonical title is a surety for the decent maintenance of the cleric in perpetuity." (Ramstein, *Manual of Canon Law*, [Terminal Pub., 1948], p. 432.)

Canon 979 §2 of the Code of Canon Law states that "This title must be both securely guaranteed for the entire life of the candidate and fully adequate for a becoming livelihood..." And canon 980 §2 says: "If, without an Apostolic indult, anyone shall deliberately promote or permit the promotion to sacred orders of a subject who lacks a canonical title, he and his successors are bound to provide the latter...." "Alexander III, in the Third Lateran Council, condemned bishops who should ordain deacons and

priests without a title, to support such priests from the episcopal table... The Council of Trent maintained the necessity of the "Title of Ordination" (Session XXI, Chapter 2), and "The Congregation of Propaganda in a response to the Bishop of Natchez, 4 February, 1873, shows clearly that the priest cannot be deprived of his means of support.... Grave offenses committed by him such as may even justify his deposition from office, will not warrant the bishop in refusing him means of support." (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, "Alimentation", p. 313.)

So ancient is this tradition of "Title" that some trace it to the Council of Chalcedon in 451. All admit that since the 11th century it has had exactly the same meaning as it has in our day. Is it the Society that will abandon the spirit of this tradition?

This is a most lamentable practice which contradicts ancient traditions and laws of the Church. Furthermore, this mode of action by the Society implies that conformity to the statutes is replaced by conformity to the whims of superiors as the norm of right behavior.

A dramatic example of this is Your Grace's recent ultimatum to a newly-ordained priest in which you threaten him with expulsion because he would not incorporate into his Masses the reforms of John XXIII. One might well wonder: "Where in the statutes of the Society does it say that the liturgical norm for the Society is the reform of John XXIII?"

5. Magisterial Authority

The present situation in the Church has generated many unprecedented problems of a theological and practical nature — for example the question of the *in se* validity or invalidity of the New Mass, as opposed to the question of the attendance at the New Mass. On the one hand, the definitive resolution of speculative theological questions must await the restoration of normalcy in the Church. On the other hand, we must apply Catholic moral and dogmatic principles to practical problems.

The Society must not presume to settle such speculative questions in an authoritative and definitive fashion, since it has absolutely no authority to do so. Any attempt by the Society to teach and impose its conclusions on matters of speculative theology as the only positions suitable for a Catholic to embrace is dangerous and opens the door to great evils —for it assumes a magisterial authority which belongs not to it but to the Church alone.

Now while in theory the Society may deny any claim to such teaching authority, in practice it has acted as though it did have such an authority. For it has proposed solutions to speculative theological questions and has threatened with expulsion or has actually expelled priests and seminarians who disagree with its teaching.

For example on Nov. 8, 1982 a young priest received the following ultimatum on the resolution of a matter of speculative theology:

If you remain with our Society, you have to gradually clarify your inner viewpoint and have to return to the attitude of the Priestly Society, which seems to us to be the only right one, under the given circumstances, as a talk with theologians this past weekend has shown me again. Think about it seriously, because with this decision your temporal and so much more your eternal welfare is at stake to the highest degree. I will con-

tinue to pray for you for divine enlightenment and humble submission.

Is this a threat of excommunication by a pope to a subject embracing heresy? Does not the prediction and threat of temporal and eternal ruination for a refusal to assent internally indicate the highest teaching and ruling authority?

But alas this is not a pope speaking. These are the words instead of Father Franz Schmidberger, himself a young priest ordained in 1975 by Your Grace who will succeed you as head of the Society, and who presumes to teach and threaten with such authority. This is inadmissible!

To act in such a way puts the Society in the dangerous position of assuming for itself rights and authority which belong to the Magisterium alone. It creates the potential for schism and worse. It is unacceptable from a Catholic point of view. The Catholic thing to do would be for the Society to refrain from attempting to bind the consciences of its members on speculative theological questions which are, in fact, open to discussion, and which can only be settled definitively by legitimate authority when the traditions have been restored.

6. Loyalty

The fundamental reason for the Society's existence is to promote loyalty to the Church and her teachings. Unfortunately, it seems that the distinction between the primary loyalty which we owe to the Church and the subordinate loyalty we give to the Society has become somewhat blurred in the practical order.

Priests, seminarians, and the faithful associate themselves with the Society to the extent that the Society is loyal to Tradition; they associate with it because they want the traditional Mass, the traditional sacraments and the traditional teachings and practices of the Church. The trust we have received from them is based on this. It is the trust under which we have labored in the United States these past ten years. We have received this trust from them in a true contractual sense. The support we have asked from them and received was a conditional support. The condition was that we be loyal to Tradition and the people would be loyal to us. It is not loyalty to persons or organizations, but loyalty to the Church and her traditions that counts in their eyes.

We believe it should be the practice of the Society to avoid giving the impression that loyalty to the Society is on the same level as loyalty to the traditions of the Church and the Church itself. We priests cannot propose loyalty to the Society as equal in value to loyalty to the traditional rites and doctrines. Therefore, the primary motive of everything we do is loyalty to the Church.

To the extent that any organization, including the Society, would do things which conflict with the traditions and immemorial practices of the Church, to that extent we reject these things without hesitation or reservation.

7. Annulments.

The Society has recently enunciated a general policy whereby it would presume the validity of the new Church annulments without investigation. The only outcome of following such a policy will be serious public scandal, grave damage to family life

and complicity with the new Church in its attack on the holy sacrament of Matrimony.

In answer to an inquiry from a layman concerning the status of his second marriage (which we know to be invalid), the Secretary General of the Society responded as follows:

On behalf of His Grace Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre I thank you for your letter of July 23, to which he has given due attention.

His Grace thinks that in spite of all, one should adhere to the decision taken by the Church. Although one may deplore that the Church declares marriages invalid too easily nowadays, we cannot affirm in a special case, without any serious reason, that a declaration of invalidity is not valid. Thus you may go on receiving the sacraments and have a Christian family life.

Since no investigation was made by Your Grace or by the Secretary General, and since no grounds for the conciliar annulment were mentioned in the original letter of inquiry, the meaning is clear both from the words and the context. And that meaning is that presumption is to be given in favor of the Conciliar Church's annulments until the contrary is proved.

This is a tragic error, for the Conciliar Church has proved its contempt for the sacrament of Matrimony by its actions. Before the world the Church is held up to ridicule because of the annulment practices of the Conciliar Church, which are more contemptible than the actions taken against marriage by secular tribunals. The policy of the Society must be to presume the invalidity of all the Conciliar Church's annulments until it is proved by traditional Catholic standards that the marriage annulled was clearly invalid from the beginning.

To deal with such serious and sacred things in any other manner attacks the sacrament, makes light of one of the most serious and involved processes of the Church, poses a danger to present marriages, is a scandal to people who suffer much because of their respect for the sacrament and most especially is a mockery of those who have lived out their lives in perfect chastity in loyalty to the doctrine of the indissolubility of Christian marriage.

In the light of the foregoing, we respectfully petition Your Grace and the General Council of the Society to adopt the following resolutions for the good of souls and the Society.

Resolutions

1. Priests doubtfully ordained, i.e., according to the New Rite of Ordination, as well as schismatic priests or bishops, and priests of questionable moral character, will be excluded from working with the Society anywhere in the world.

2. The liturgy of Saint Pius X will be restored at Saint Thomas Aquinas Seminary in Ridgefield, and a perpetual guarantee shall be given for its exclusive use there and in the chapels associated with the Society throughout the United States, which guarantee shall be enforced by legal covenants.

3. Concerning the discipline governing the priests of the Society: insofar as it is possible, the letter, and in all cases the spirit, of the traditions of the Church, the decrees

of the Council of Trent and the 1917 Code of Canon Law will be followed. The practice of the Society of creating, in effect, untitled and unattached priests shall come to an end. And should it be impossible to follow the letter of the law in these matters, the spirit of the law shall be rigorously adhered to.

4. Respect for the magisterial authority of the Church as the sole arbiter of theological questions shall be enforced. Therefore, the Society shall faithfully adhere to the teachings of the Church but shall never usurp that teaching authority by attempting to settle definitively questions of speculative theology. Neither shall it attempt to elicit, by threats of expulsion or any other threats, internal assent to the opinions of its superiors.

5. The Society recognizes and accepts the principle that our loyalty to it is subordinate to loyalty to the Church and its traditions.

6. Because of the reckless disregard of the Conciliar Church for the sanctity of matrimony and its sinful and scandalous policy of granting annulments, the Society presumes the invalidity of all annulments granted by the Conciliar Church until it can be demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that the marriage bond of the annulled marriage did not exist in the first place. For according to canon 1014 of the Code of Canon Law, "Marriage enjoys the favor of the law; consequently in doubt the validity of the marriage must be maintained until the contrary is proved...."

Conclusion

In the Apostolic Constitution by which he convoked the Council, John XXIII spoke of his expectation of "a return of unity and of peace." Instead, his reform brought ruination upon the Church.

Would that John XXIII had been mindful of the words of Gregory XVI: "that every novelty attempts to undermine the Universal Church." Instead, he instituted a reform that was, to use words of Gregory XVI, "the height of absurdity and outrage" towards the Church. For it was "to pretend that a restoration and regeneration have become necessary to secure its existence and its progress; as if it could be believed that it was thus subject to faintness, darkness, or other alterations of this kind." (*Mirari vos*)

The reform of John XXIII could do nothing but bring ruin because it departed from tradition. With this before our eyes, there can be no excuse if we repeat the mistake of Catholics of the 'sixties. For them one can at least understand how they were led away from tradition into the new religion by a process of gradualism and servile submission. They were assured that they were being obedient children heeding the voice of their shepherds and the chief shepherd himself, the Pope. It was inconceivable that the Vicar of Christ would set the Church on a path that would result in the betrayal of tradition and the ruination of millions. And so Catholics submitted to the process.

We write out of concern for the salvation of souls and the glory of God. There can be no question as to our motives. Witness the growth of the apostolate in the United States over the past ten years with a mere handful of priests — from saying Mass in a garage in Wantagh, N.Y., to the churches and chapels,

Mass centers, and increased numbers of the faithful, schools, retreats, missions, summer camps, educational endeavors, the seminary, etc.

This demonstrates in a concrete way our loyalty and fidelity to the reason for which the Society was founded in the beginning. And we hope and pray that these problems will be resolved, in order to insure that the flourishing growth of the Society in the United States may continue in peace and true unity.

For us, over twenty years later, with history before our eyes, there can be no excuse for accepting the first steps of the process of reform. Neither can we sanction practices which amount to a rejection of sacred traditions. We are fearful both for the future of the Society and the good of souls. And so we take this opportunity to present to Your Grace and the General Council our concerns and the above resolutions.

We are resolved to continue the work for which we were ordained and for which we have received the trust of the faithful. This we intend to do in all tranquility even if the Society should abandon us or that trust.

In Jesu et Maria,

Rev. Clarence Kelly

Superior, N.E. District

Rev. Donald J. Sanborn

Rector, St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary

Rev. Daniel L. Dolan

Rev. Anthony Cekada

Rev. William W. Jenkins

Rev. Eugene Berry

Rev. Martin P. Skierka

Rev. Joseph Collins

Rev. Thomas P. Zapp

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