

On Sedevacantism: Questions & Answers

Essential text translated from *Le Sel de la Terre*, Spring 2001, by *Communicantes*, SSPX Canada

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What is sedevacantism?

Sedevacantism is the theory of those who think that the most recent popes, the popes of the Second Vatican Council, have not really been popes. Consequently, the See of Peter is not occupied. This is expressed in Latin by the formula "*sede vacante*," *vacant see*.

Where does this theory come from?

This theory has been conceived in reaction to the very grave crisis which the Church has been undergoing since the Council, a crisis that Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, founder of the SSPX, justly called "the III World War." The main cause of the crisis has been the dereliction of the Roman Pontiffs, who teach or allow to be propagated serious errors on the subjects of ecumenism, religious liberty, collegiality, *etc.* Sedevacantists think that real popes could not be responsible for such a crisis, and consequently they consider them not to be "real" popes. Their "last pope" is Pius XII.



His Holiness Pope Pius XII

Do sedevacantists agree amongst themselves?

No, far from it. There are many different positions. Some think that, since the Chair of Peter is vacant, someone should occupy it, and so they have elected a "pope." Such is the case of the sect of Palmar de Troya in Spain, for example. See below some of the characters claiming the "papacy" today... this is where sedevacantism leads to!



"Pope" Pius XIII, elected in a telephonic conclave



"Pope" Michael I, elected by mom, dad, and friends



Gregory XVII, "Pope and Emperor" by the grace of God



"Pope" Peter II, a mechanic, designated by the Holy Ghost

Among those who do not go so far, there are different schools. Some think that the current pope is an anti-pope, others that he is only partly pope, a pope "*materialiter*" but not "*formaliter*."

Some sedevacantists consider their position as a "likely opinion," and consent to receive the sacraments from non-sedevacantist priests, while others, called "ultrasedevacantists" by the French Abbé Coache,¹ make it a matter of

faith, and refuse to assist at Masses where the priest prays for the pope. But what is common to all the sedevacantists is that they think that the pope should not be prayed for in public.

What is meant by being pope "materialiter"?

The main difficulty of sedevacantism is to explain how the Church can continue to exist in a visible manner (for she has received from the Lord the promise that she will endure until the end of the world) while being deprived of her visible head. The partisans of the so-called "Cassiciacum Thesis"² have come up with a very subtle solution: the current pope was validly designated as pope, but he did not receive the papal authority because there was an interior obstacle (namely heresy). So, according to their theory, the pope is able to act in some ways for the good of the Church, such as, for instance, appointing cardinals (who are cardinals "materialiter"), but he is not really pope.

What do you think of this solution?

For one thing, this solution is not based on Tradition. Theologians (Cajetan, St. Robert Bellarmine, John of St. Thomas, *etc.*) who have examined the possibility of an heretical pope, but no one prior to the Council every devised such a theory. Also, it does not resolve the main difficulty of sedevacantism, namely, how the Church can continue to be visible, for, if the pope, the cardinals, the bishops, *etc.*, are deprived of their "form," then no visible Church hierarchy is left. Moreover, this theory has some serious philosophical defects because it supposes that a head can be head *materialiter*, "that is, without authority."

What arguments do sedevacantists adduce to prove their theories?

They use a theological argument and a canonical one. The theological argument consists of positing that a heretic cannot be head of the Church, but –John Paul II is a heretic, therefore The legal argument consists of pointing out that the laws of the Church invalidate the election of a heretic; they will say that Cardinal Wojtyla was a heretic at the time of his election, therefore he could not have been elected pope validly.

But isn't it true that a pope who becomes a heretic loses the Pontificate?



St. Robert Bellarmine (pictured left) says that a pope who would formally and manifestly become a heretic would lose the pontificate. For that to apply to John Paul II, he would have to be a formal heretic, deliberately and explicitly refusing a truth defined by the Church's magisterium; and this formal heresy would have to be open and manifest.

But if John Paul II often enough makes heretical affirmations or statements that lead to heresy, it cannot easily be shown that he is aware of rejecting any dogma of the Church.

And as long as there is no sure proof, then it is more prudent to refrain from judging. This was Archbishop Lefebvre's line of conduct.

St. Robert Bellarmine

If a Catholic were convinced that John Paul II is a formal, manifest heretic, should he then conclude that he is no longer pope?

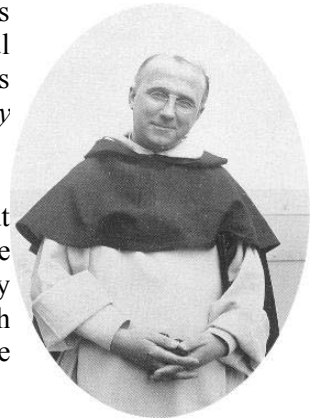
No, he should not, for according to the "common" opinion (Suarez), or even the "more common" opinion (Billuart), theologians think that even an heretical pope can continue to exercise the papacy. For him to lose his jurisdiction, the Catholic bishops (the only judges in matters of faith besides the pope, by Divine will) would have to make a declaration denouncing the pope's heresy.

According to the more common opinion, Our Lord, by a particular providence, for the common good and the tranquillity of the Church, continues to give jurisdiction to an even manifestly heretical pope until such time as he

should be declared a manifest heretic by the Church.³ Now, in so serious a matter, it is not prudent to go against the common opinion.

But how can a heretic, who is no longer a member of the Church, be its leader or head?

The great Dominican theologian **Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange** (photo right), basing his reasoning on Billuart, explains in his treatise *De Verbo Incarnato* (p. 232) that an heretical pope, while no longer a member of the Church, can still be its head. For, what is impossible in the case of a physical head is possible (albeit abnormal) for a *secondary moral* head.



Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P.

The reason is that, whereas a physical head cannot influence the members without receiving the vital influx of the soul, a moral head, as is the Roman Pontiff, can exercise jurisdiction over the Church even if he does not receive from the soul of the Church any influx of interior faith or charity. In short, the pope is constituted a member of the Church by his personal faith, which he can lose, but he is head of the visible Church by the jurisdiction and authority which he received, and these can coexist with his own heresy.

What is their main canonical argument?

Sedevacantists base their position on the Apostolic Constitution *Cum Ex Apostolatus* of Pope Paul IV (1555-1559). But some good studies have shown that this constitution lost its legal force when the 1917 *Code of Canon Law* was promulgated. See, for example, the article of Fr. Albert, O.P., in *Sel de la Terre*, Summer 2000, pp.67-78.

What remains in effect from this constitution is its dogmatic teaching. And, consequently, it cannot be made to say more than the theological argument already examined.

Don't sedevacantists claim to find a confirmation of their theory in the errors of Vatican Council II and the harmful liturgical and canonical laws of the Conciliar Church?

Indeed, sedevacantists think, in general, that the teaching of the Council should have been covered by the infallibility of the ordinary and universal magisterium, and consequently should not contain any errors. But, since there are errors, for example, on religious liberty, they conclude that Paul VI had ceased to be pope at that moment.

Really, if one accepted this argument, then it would be necessary to say that the whole Catholic Church disappeared then, too, and that "the gates of hell had prevailed" against her. For the teaching of the ordinary, universal magisterium is that of the bishops, of the whole Church teaching. It is simpler to think that the teaching of the Council and of the Conciliar Church is not covered by the infallibility of the ordinary, universal magisterium for the reasons explained in the article of Fr. Pierre-Marie, O.P., on the authority of the Council that appeared in *Sel de la terre*, "L'autorité du Concile," pp.32-63.

One of the arguments set forth there consists in showing that the Council does not present its teaching as "necessary for salvation" (which is logical, since those who profess this believe that it is possible to be saved without the Catholic Faith). Since this teaching is not authoritatively imposed, it is not covered by the guarantee of infallibility. The same thing can be said about the liturgical laws (the New Mass) and the canonical laws (the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*) promulgated by the most recent popes: they are not covered by infallibility, although normally they would be.

Aren't sedevacantists right, though, in refusing to name the pope at Mass in order to show that they are not in communion with ("una cum") a heretic (at least materially) and his heresies?

The expression "*una cum*" in the Canon of the Mass does not mean that one affirms that he is "in communion" with the erroneous ideas of the pope, but rather that one wants to pray for the Church "and for" the pope, her visible head.

In order to be sure of this interpretation, in addition to reading the erudite studies that have been made on this point, it is enough to read the rubric of the missal for the occasion of a bishop celebrating Mass. In this case, the bishop must pray for the Church "*una cum ...me indigno famulo tuo,*" which does not mean that he prays "in communion with ...myself, your unworthy servant" (which does not make sense!), but that he prays "and for .. myself, your unworthy servant." Also, in Catholic kingdoms the name of the king is added at the same place in the Canon...

But doesn't St. Thomas Aquinas say that in the Canon one should not pray for heretics?

St. Thomas Aquinas does not say that one should not pray for heretics (*Summa Theologica*, III, Q: 79, A. 7, ad 2), but merely observes that, in the prayers of the Canon of the Mass, one prays for those whose faith and devotion are known to the Lord (*quorum tibi fides cognita est et nota devotio*). For, he says, so that this sacrifice obtain its effect (*effectum habet*) those for whom one prays must be "united to the passion of Christ by faith and charity." He does not say that praying for heretics is forbidden. He only means that this prayer will not have the same efficacy as one for a Catholic, and is not provided for in the Canon.



All that can be concluded from this affirmation of St. Thomas is that, if the pope is a heretic (which remains to be proven), then the prayer for him will not have the foreseen effect, "*non habet effectum.*"

In conclusion, what should we think of sedevacantism?

St. Thomas Aquinas



Sedevacantism is a theory that has not been proven speculatively, and that it is imprudent to hold practically (an imprudence that can have very serious consequences).

That is why Archbishop Lefebvre never adopted this position, and even forbade the priests of the Society of Saint Pius X to profess it. We should have confidence in his prudence and theological sense.

Fr. Pedro Munoz⁴ points out that **no saint in the Church's history was ever a sedevacantist, while several saints openly and forcefully resisted a pope's errors.** Let us do likewise, and let us pray and make daily sacrifices for the Holy Father. Far from our chapels and communities the farfetched ideas of sedevacantism!

NOTES

1. Father Coache (1920-1994), Doctor of Canon Law, was the pastor of the parish of Montjavoult until 1973. He was one of the pioneers of the Catholic resistance against the Conciliar revolution. His parish bulletin evolved into *The Combat for the Faith*, which was widely distributed, and which he edited until his death. He organized with Mgr. Ducaud-Bourget the epic taking of St. Nicholas du Chardonnet in Paris, France, in February 1977.

2. "Cassiciacum" is the name of the place to which St. Augustine withdrew with some friends after his baptism, and where he studied and deepened his faith. In the late 1970's, Father Guerard des Lauriers, O.P., together with a group of like-minded priests, founded a review called *Les Cahiers de Cassiciacum* to defend the sedevacantist position. The "Cassiciacum Thesis" is the name given to the theory that the pope is pope *materialiter* but not *formaliter*.

3. Billuart, *De Fide*, Diss. V, A. III, No. 3, obj. 2.

4. Of the diocese of Barcelona, Spain. He was ordained in 1952, and was vicar of a parish in Barcelona. With women active in the Catholic Action movement, he founded a contemplative religious community called the Oasis, near Barcelona. The special mission of this community is to pray for priests. Becoming acquainted with Archbishop Lefebvre in the early 1970's, he chose to remain faithful to the traditional Mass. Archbishop Lefebvre had a deep affection for the community of the Oasis, whose apostolate he judged to be very necessary for the Church today, and would go there to visit. In October 2000, Fr. Munoz

founded a second Oasis in the South of France. He has manifested his interest in opening an Oasis for English speaking vocations in Ireland, but this project is in God's hands and it depends on the generosity of some major benefactor (who maybe is right now reading this letter!).