



Bishop Fellay's Interview with The Latin Mass

Résumé : Someone in the Vatican has referred to Bishop Fellay and his brothers within the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX) as “fossils.” Yet, to meet this young bishop, there is nothing about him that seems fossilized. He sits before a small computer reading through research reports, studying data and statistics, and receiving and sending e-mail. Not bad for a fossil! Bishop Bernard Fellay, the Superior General of the SSPX, was born April 12, 1958 in Switzerland. He was ordained a priest in 1982. He was consecrated a bishop by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre on June 30, 1988, and has been the Superior General of the SSPX since 1994. He speaks French, English, German, Italian and Spanish. In this interview, The Latin Mass spoke with him chiefly about the crisis in the Church and the present situation regarding the relations of the SSPX with Rome.

***The Latin Mass:** Your Excellency, you and your fellow bishops of the Society of St. Pius X have asked that the Vatican officially acknowledge that every priest of the Roman Rite is entitled to offer the traditional Latin Mass. An ordinary observer might wonder why Church authorities would hesitate at such a request. After all, what does the Church stand to lose by liberating the old Mass?*

Bishop Bernard Fellay: If we remember that the old rite has never been abrogated, a statement that was confirmed in 1986 by a commission of nine cardinals, a statement that has been restated to us by Cardinal Castrillón Hoyos (“Basically the Pope does agree that the old rite has never been abrogated”), a statement repeated by Cardinal Medina who, assures his readers that he has nowhere found that this Mass has been prohibited, we must conclude that the main thing the Church would lose by giving the freedom of the Mass would be the injustice that has been imposed by a silent tyranny for 35 years over the whole Latin Rite. The odious way of pressuring the faithful and especially priests who want to make use of their strict right to celebrate the Mass according to the old rite would be partly lost also. The tranquility of a false peace, this pretended peace of a unity of rite (the new Mass) which is supposedly reigning today, could also be partly lost. But for my part, I have absolutely no doubt that the freedom of the Mass would be a welcome challenge to the “creativity” in which the progressivists find themselves needing to engage so often in order to keep their faithful coming to Mass every Sunday.

The Church has nothing to lose but so much to win by reintroducing the Tridentine Mass on a grand scale, and whoever really loves the Church and souls should not hesitate one minute before granting it. We even find voices in the Vatican who understand that the Church will not get out of the present crisis before going back to the Tridentine Mass. So many priests would find their priestly identity when at last put in contact with the Mass.

***TLM:** Is it true, as some allege, that the widespread return of the old Mass could put pastoral unity in danger?*

BBF: Before speaking of pastoral unity, we should speak of unity in itself. The Tridentine Mass had so many components that were secure guardians of unity; all these elements have been put aside in the new Mass, thereby leaving open the possibility of a huge mess. The openings towards freedom in the new Mass are so numerous: look, for example, at inculturation, at the innovations left to the various bishops' conferences, and so on, not to mention the enormous blow to unity caused by the introduction of the vernacular. Doubtless the liberation of the Tridentine Mass would change things

and cause problems for the new Mass, a poor Mass that would be totally outweighed by its ancestor. But frankly speaking, where is the true danger against unity?

TLM: What is your assessment of the current Vatican attitude toward Tradition?

BBF: Regarding the efforts of Cardinal Castrillón Hoyos, I have no doubt that His Eminence has put his whole heart into trying to provide a measure of relief and some breathing room for the faithful and priests desiring to keep or to turn back to the traditional liturgy. We certainly have to be thankful for this engagement on his part. It is highly probable that Cardinal Castrillón Hoyos has taken some hits from the other side, especially in the Vatican. I have never considered the problem the Society is facing as a personal problem. Nevertheless we see a constant will to give the upper hand to the Vatican reforms and to the new Mass in particular, sometimes just in statements to the effect that the celebration of the old Mass is only a concession from the Holy Father, that Rome cannot force the bishops on these liturgical matters, that there should be peace between the rites (liturgical rites).

All this leads to the conclusion that Tradition remains an exception in the Church, and that the general and universal law that shall remain the norm is that of the new Mass and the post-conciliar reforms. Tradition thus occupies a very precarious status. The present state of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter (FSSP) is one of the best illustrations of the fruits of the *Ecclesia Dei* Commission given under Cardinal Castrillón Hoyos. They were beheaded by the dismissal of Father Bisig, who tried to keep his society's exclusive commitment to the old Mass. The FSSP is now led by a minority ready to engage in almost any liturgical compromise, and is losing more credibility every day. As the FSSP has articulated no clear stance regarding the current crisis in the Church, and seems not to possess the possibility of having one, there is an enormous potential for a split amongst the members themselves.

TLM: What do you think is the present Vatican assessment of the Society of St. Pius X?

BBF: "Disobedient, rebellious, arrogant, narrow-minded, extreme, if not extremist": most probably the Vatican hierarchy considers that this type of behavior, attributed to us, is the cause of our problems with Rome. We are certainly considered a source of disturbance, despite the fact that certain good aspects or some good fruits of our work have now been recognized by these same authorities.

Indeed it is very difficult to know what Rome really thinks of us, because Rome is itself divided. You may even find official contradictory statements about us.

This confusing situation is another reason for us to avoid a rush to any kind of diplomatic or ambiguous agreement in which any or all of the participants possess uncertainties regarding positions.

TLM: Does Rome consider the Society to be in schism?

BBF: I can confirm that despite the fact that certain official declarations issued by the Vatican may lead by their wording to the conclusion that we are schismatic, nevertheless, in our conversations Cardinal Castrillón Hoyos has actually stated that we are neither schismatics nor heretics, and that the whole matter is one of regularizing a canonical situation. There are several arguments of great importance that sustain this position. In practice, Rome has never dealt with us as if we were real schismatics. For example, when a Catholic who has left the Church and received ordination outside the Church returns to her fold, Church authorities do not allow such a priest to exercise in the Catholic Church the orders he received outside the Church. This is a general practice of the Catholic Church. But when some of our priests leave us and go to Rome, Rome receives them and allows them to exercise their priesthood fully.

When Campos was regularized, there was no word of schism in any of the official documents, and for

years Campos was in the same situation as we ourselves are still in now. We have never been approached by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity; ecumenical dialogue has never been proposed to us. Recently, a Catholic prelate visited us. He was so surprised when he heard our congregation pray for the Pope during benediction that he told us "in fact it seems you pray more for the Pope than the Romans do."

TLM: *After four years of dialogue, you have not yet reached an agreement with the Holy See. We know that the position of the SSPX is that, before any talk of an "agreement," it is necessary that the traditional Mass be "freed": specifically, that every priest who desires it must be given the freedom to offer the Mass of Pius V. At the moment, this idea does not seem feasible. So, will the SSPX close the door to any further conversation with the Holy See or will they suggest another proposal?*

BBF: First of all, I would like to state that the freedom for the Mass is not an impossible hypothesis. What would be impossible would be to require all priests of the Catholic Church to celebrate the Tridentine Mass tomorrow. But to leave it open, simply to recognize a rite that has never been lost, is not impossible; it is a simple requirement of justice. We could ask more; we do not. We certainly expect such a freedom to generate a growing movement toward return to the Tridentine Mass and Tradition.

Later on, we even will request from Rome that they stand in favor of the old against the new. Perhaps we should do so even now, but then we might be accused of requesting something impossible. So if Rome tells us they cannot, shall we continue the dialogue or just stop it? Should we look for other solutions?

What should be understood here is that the whole situation we are facing is not just a question of the Mass; much more is at stake. And all other proposals we might bring forth will always have as a purpose to help get out of this terrible, devastating crisis. We are not introducing a false dialectic; the reality of the Church today is one of a fight for life or death. One day, we will have to say to Rome: "You have to make a choice - either you keep your Tradition alive or you die." But I think history will demonstrate this by itself; indeed it already does.

I like to say that we are not the problem; we might instead be the sign that there is a problem. Just for one second, forget about the Society of St. Pius X; let us suppose it does not exist. Tell me whether things go better for the whole Church. We are in the middle of an enormous fight, and this fight is about whether or not we shall keep the Catholic faith, and all that it entails. So the purpose of our discussions, of our efforts will always be to try to find a way to strengthen the good and to weaken the bad forces that paralyze the supernatural life of the Church. By saying so, we do not pretend to take the place of another; but while we do want to stay at our place, it is not forbidden at times to remind the boss of his duties.

That said, I do not believe that we shall see significant progress towards a reconciliation as long as we do not see a clear and determined will on the part of the head of the Church to terminate this state of crisis. Finally, what we ask for are simply clear expressions of this will.

TLM: *Do we see a clear will to suppress liturgical abuses in the recent document from the Vatican about the Holy Eucharist?*

BBF: To apply half of the necessary remedy to a sick person will never heal him completely. Half measures are not sufficient. Once again, we are in battle for life or death. This document is fearful - fearful to offend progressive sensibilities, and it is not accompanied by a determined will to see the measures it promulgates respected. The result is a new loss of the authority of the Roman Curia. Nobody cares. It is the sorrowful reality. Nobody cares, and who shall be punished? The Americans say that this instruction is only for Europe. In Europe, the French say: everything is fine here; the Belgians: nothing new; the Swiss: these laws are universal and we are concerned only by the particular, so we shall continue to do as we have been. So please, I do not say that the Vatican does

nothing. I just try to look for the real fruits, and I do not see them.

TLM: *How do you respond to those who say that all you do is criticize, and that you recognize no good in Rome?*

BBF: Many of our statements may lead to that conclusion that we are never happy, that we do not want to recognize anything good in Rome. But this is not true. We do understand that the situation in which Rome finds herself is a very touchy, delicate and difficult one. The danger of a split within the Church is enormous and terribly real - and we speak not about ourselves here but about the progressive forces. In fact, it is more than a danger. It is already a reality. Fifteen years ago, Cardinal Gagnon was already speaking of the material schism of North America and the will of Rome to avoid provoking a formal schism. The cracks are all over the place, and what remains of the unity of the Church more and more involves only superficial elements. What should be the strength of unity has become completely slackened.

Look at the unity of faith, the unity of teaching. Go from one church to the other, from one diocese to the other, from one country to the other and listen to the sermons, to the homilies, look at the catechism that is taught, and tell me where is unity. We are wondering how such a situation can be resolved without the blood of the martyrs. And if the Church recovers without it, it will be one of the greatest miracles in all its history. I am certain that several among the Roman authorities are aware of that situation and they try to do their best. We would expect, though, that the principles of action and the means used would be more rooted in the supernatural; precisely the reintroduction of the Tridentine Mass would involve this supernatural dimension. There are, of course, many other actions that are requested.

TLM: *If you were able to offer advice to the hierarchy in the Vatican, what would you counsel as the most critical issues that need to be addressed in order to ease the crisis in the Church?*

BBF: First of all, the Catholic Church is essentially supernatural and not human - though the human plays an important part - and so this supernatural vision on things needs to be restored. It is a matter of faith applied to concrete situations; it is counting on God's help to solve huge problems. At such a level, the consecration required by Our Lady at Fatima would be of great importance. The care for the Holy Liturgy, especially the Mass, is to be placed also at that level. The Sacrifice of the Mass is the heart of our religion, the source of all supernatural life in the Church and in souls. The conservation and transmission of the Catholic Faith are of capital importance. This point is of the highest urgency in the practical order. It implies also the renovation and care for the formation of future priests hence, attention must be paid to the seminaries, the universities, and also catechetical and homiletic instruction. Obviously, on the practical level, the choice of the right persons - at all levels - to implement these reforms will be of capital importance.

TLM: *Are you really persuaded that there exist figures in the Vatican, despite the fierce hostility of the progressives, who are making genuine efforts to address the grave crisis in the Church?*

BBF: Yes, I believe it with all my heart, and I really do think that there is a certain group of people who are fighting and certainly suffering as they try to save something in the great debacle. My impression, though, is that there is too much fear of the progressivists and not enough courage on behalf of Tradition.

But to go deeper, I am not convinced that our conviction that the crisis is first of all to be attributed to the Council and the post-conciliar reforms is yet shared in the Vatican. What is for us a simple matter of evidence is still considered outrageous and insulting. To give you an example: there is no doubt that those who deal with us in the Vatican and would like us to enter into an agreement are people who have good will towards us. But what they request from us is a statement according to which the new Mass is valid, the Council is a true council of the Catholic Church, etc. These

statements are not wrong in themselves; they are just terribly misleading. Imagine a soup that contains a drop of poison. We refuse to drink it. Rome insists and tells us: let us make peace, but you must at least recognize that it is a soup. And we answer, we know that it is a soup, but we do not care, because it is poisoned.

And if we recognize that it is a soup, you may draw the conclusion tomorrow that we nevertheless have to eat it; and that is precisely what we do not want to do. We do not want any misleading compromise. We do not care about what the progressivists think about us. We want to please God and be faithful to the faith of our baptism. We do want to obey the Church, but of course with a true obedience that is going to lead us to heaven and not to hell.

***TLM:** Your Excellency, because you travel much throughout the world, you have the benefit of a privileged perspective on the situation in the Church. Do you find any movement toward Tradition and, if so, in which countries?*

BBF: These last years have witnessed an increasing movement towards Tradition. Even we are surprised by the importance of this movement, which especially involves young priests and seminarians. Over the past few years, many priests in many countries have grown closer to us, and even expressed their desire to learn and to celebrate the old Mass with or without the permission of their Ordinaries. More recently we see now several bishops prudently inclining and taking steps towards the same attitude in favor of the Tradition of the Catholic Church. I do see this movement of return everywhere in the world. Certainly some countries have a stronger leaning than others, but we cannot see a special rule in it. A special mention may be given to the United States, but Italy could give us a great surprise in the near future, as could African countries, where the expectation for Tradition is great.

***TLM:** What are your views concerning next year's Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist?*

BBF: Provided the right means are taken, provided the hearts of the faithful and the clergy are directed again towards what is the heart of the Church and should be the heart of the life of any Catholic, this Synod could be the start of a true renovation in the Catholic Church. But once again, I do not think that that is possible without a tremendous, dramatic spiritual fight. Deadly forces are present. I do not hesitate to say that we are in an apocalyptic battle. So let us pray, and pray a great deal.

***TLM:** What are your thoughts about Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* and its potential to reach souls?*

BBF: We may never have seen so visible a contradiction within the Catholic Church, especially among bishops, as in the comments in favor of or against Mel Gibson's film. This deep opposition on a matter of opinion reveals much about topics of much deeper importance. The question of a film is in itself an indifferent matter. And as Catholics we should judge it first by looking at its fruits. There is no doubt that in the present situation of the world and of the Church this film has to be placed amongst the most powerful means of apostolate. But, as a film, its effects will remain temporary and transitory. It will be the work of the priest to take advantage of the situation created and to lead souls to deeper and more stable condition by means of catechism, sacraments, and all the usual means of the Church to preserve the state of grace in souls. A great supernatural means of conversion, a tremendous mercy of God by the intensity of the truth it recalls to the memory of this poor world: the existence of God, of sin, of the punishment of sin which is death and hell, of a Redeemer, of the sacrifice of the Redeemer to save us, of the cooperation of creatures and especially of the Blessed Virgin Mary in this work of Redemption. The violence in the film in certain scenes may be striking. But is not such a shock needed in order to let these truths penetrate in the heart of modern man? My great congratulations to Mel Gibson for his master-piece and his courage.

TLM: *What is the situation in your seminaries, particularly with regard to priestly ordinations?*

BBF: This question could yield a whole interview or conference in it-self. Among our six seminaries, Australia should bring forth its first priestly fruits next year, which is a happy sign for the mission countries of the Society. This year and the next will be rather low in number of new priests; we will add just below 20 new priests. But this is a temporary situation and the number of newcomers is rather stable; each year we get between 50 and 60 new vocations. We certainly need many more, and we can hardly cover the needs of all the faithful crying for help in the whole world. If we had one hundred and fifty more priests right now, we could provide them with “work and roof” immediately.