
40th Anniversary of the Society of St. Pius X

THE FOUNDATION OF THE SOCIETY OF ST. PIUS X

An account gleaned mostly from the biography of Archbishop Lefebvre by His Lordship Bishop Tissier de Mallerais¹

BIOGRAPHICAL JOURNEY

Archbishop Lefebvre would have earned a distinguished and honoured place in the history of the Church even if he had retired finally from public life in 1968, as he had intended. No one had done more for the Church in Africa in his century; no one had done more to uphold the true faith during the Second Vatican Council. But the most important task for which God has destined him had not even begun.

Marcel Lefebvre was ordained on 21st September 1929 in Lille after studying at the French Seminary in Rome. He returned to the seminary for a year to sit for his doctorate and then was sent back to the diocese of Lille as curate in the parish at Marais-de-Lomme. After one year he was accepted into the novitiate of the Holy Ghost Fathers and made his vows on the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (8th September) in 1932.

From thence he was sent to Gabon where for thirteen years he worked in the bush except for a six year stint first as professor and then rector of the mission seminary. Recalled back to France at the end of the war in 1945, he was appointed rector of the Holy Ghost Fathers' scholasticate at White Abbey in Mortain, Normandy.

Two years later he was named Vicar Apostolic of Dakar and so was consecrated a bishop on 18th September 1947 in his home town of Tourcoing. From 1948 to 1959 he was also given the position of Apostolic Delegate for the whole of French Black Africa acquiring the title of archbishop with its palium and having responsibility for what eventually became sixty four dioceses. But in 1962, he was obliged to retire (as France rushed to dispossess itself of its colonial treasures) and was ignominiously treated by being given the smallest diocese in France at the behest of the French cardinals and bishops.

His time in Tulle was short lived, however, for on 26th July of the same year he was elected Superior General of the Holy Ghost Fathers at the General Chapter.

1962 was a year when the combat for Catholic principles and tradition erupted into open warfare. Not only was his religious order in the throes of an auto-destructive revolution, Archbishop Lefebvre, found himself obliged to take a leading role in a dispiriting rearguard action against liberals at the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965. Following the Council, he fought further within his own religious order for Catholic principles and tradition until he was ousted for his outmoded views at the General

Chapter of 1968. He left his motherhouse after his formal resignation in September 1968 carrying a single bag and contemplating the future with a weary heart.

INTO THE TRENCHES

When the Archbishop retired in 1968 at the age of 63, he could not have imagined that God had reserved for him what was possibly the most important role assigned to any prelate during the 20th century. This is no exaggeration. Archbishop Lefebvre was to be given the task of preserving the Catholic priesthood in the West during what has proved to be a period of universal apostasy. But he did not seek to undertake this task.

Archbishop Lefebvre lived a very retired life in Rome at first, but, as many disciplinary rules of the French Seminary (over which he had had authority as the Superior General of the Holy Ghost Fathers) were being discarded as well as moral teachings being questioned (e.g. contraception), a number of seminarians turned to him for help. He declined to help them initially on the grounds of lacking all the requirements such as money and buildings, but finally, under insistent pressure from these seminarians and from other religious such as Fr. Marie-Dominique Philippe O.P., and other priests and laity he agreed to do something.

He told them that if he undertook their direction their studies would be long and intense and they would lead a life of prayer and sacrifice: the formation necessary to prepare them for the priesthood in these times. They insisted that this was what they wanted. But where could they study? Unfortunately, nowhere suitable could be found in Rome itself; but an old friend, Bishop Charrière, Bishop of Lausanne, Geneva, and Fribourg, suggested that the students might pursue their studies at the University of Fribourg. Archbishop Lefebvre, therefore, rented a house at the Foyer Don Bosco, 106 Route de Marly in Fribourg, Switzerland and established the "Saint Pius X Association for Priestly Training." Nine seminarians presented themselves on 13th October for the 1969-70 academic year.

THE NECESSITY OF A SOCIETY

As early as November of the same year, Archbishop aired an idea to establish a society for secular priests instead of just an association for training priests. The idea was not embraced by his seminarians at first, but soon they saw that it was a pressing necessity. From the 1st Sunday of Advent 1969, the Novus Ordo Missae came into force in the diocese of Fribourg. It would not be compulsory until the end of 1971, and so Archbishop Lefebvre

¹Marcel Lefebvre by Bernard Tissier de Mallerais, Angelus Press ISBN 1-892331-24-1 www.angeluspress.org

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changed nothing in his little community, but as it gradually replaced the traditional Mass everywhere, some of the Fribourg seminarians, worried at the thought of having to go back after their ordination to their Dioceses in the hands of modernist bishops, begged the Archbishop to establish something that would bind them together and protect their priesthood.

On 21st February 1970 the first ordinations of the Association took place in the Chapel of Our Lady of Bourguillon in Fribourg. The seminarian Paul Aulagnier received the tonsure, and Pierre Piqué was made a subdeacon. The Archbishop had had some trouble obtaining the necessary permission from the bishops of their respective dioceses and so it probably came as no surprise that the new subdeacon was called back to his diocese by the Bishop of Dax in April. He was not the only one to leave either. Owing to differences in opinion or failing hope, by June 1970 there were only four out of the nine seminarians left.

THE NECESSITY OF A SEMINARY TOO

It was not only the need for a society of secular priests that occupied Archbishop Lefebvre's mind; it was becoming clear at this time that the University of Fribourg was no longer a safe place for the education of his seminarians and so the foundation of a full seminary was becoming an imperative too.

In Holy Week of the previous year, the Archbishop had been shown a house at Ecône, a hamlet near the small town of Riddes in the Catholic Canton of Valais. The present owners were a group of five laymen, (three of which were members of the Order of the Knights of Our Lady) who wished to see the house put to good use. For over six hundred years the property had belonged to the Canons of St. Bernard, and to prevent it falling into the hands of a communist, the five men had borrowed money from the bank to acquire it. With the reluctant approval of Bishop Nestor Adam, Bishop of Sion on 19th May 1970 to establish a first "year of spirituality" for his seminarians, Archbishop Lefebvre accepted the use of this house until it was finally given to him in 1979.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE SOCIETY (JUST IN TIME)

On 1st July 1970, the Archbishop, gave Bishop Charrière a copy of the draft statutes he had composed for a new society of secular priests. "I see nothing to object to in such a timely initiative," replied Bishop Charrière. Unfortunately, he must have been too busy to read the draft, for the Archbishop was compelled to raise the matter again on a visit to the Bishop on 18th August and then again by letter on 13th October 1970. Finally, on 7th November, still awaiting a reply, he telephoned the Bishop's resi-

dence, and Bishop Charrière, perhaps embarrassed for his procrastination, beckoned the Archbishop to come over straight away to his office. "There's no point in waiting any longer," said Bishop Charrière with the draft in his hands, "You can leave with this straightaway. I'll give the decree to my secretary to type up." There was just enough time to go and pray in the chapel while the document was being prepared. Then Bishop Charrière signed it. He was at the end of his episcopal career. Three months later he retired from office.

The document read:

The International Priestly Society of St. Pius X is erected in our diocese as a "Pio Unio" (pious union)... We approve and confirm the Statutes, here joined, of the Society for a period of six years, ad experimentum, which will be able to be renewed for a similar period by tacit approval; after which, the Society can be erected definitely in our diocese by the competent Roman Congregation.... Done at Fribourg, in our palace, 1st November 1970 on the Feast of All Saints, + François Charrière

The decree was deliberately predated by six days. Returning to the Rue de la Vignettaz (to where the remaining four Fribourg seminarians had moved on 26th June), Archbishop Lefebvre, who was obviously delighted, showed the letter to the seminarians, who passed it from one to another: they could not resist re-reading it, looking at the signature and checking the seal.

PERMISSION FOR THE SEMINARY

Now that the Society of Saint Pius X was firmly founded, it remained for the Archbishop to obtain permission to establish a seminary. He had already received permission for a first year of spirituality at Ecône from Bishop Adam of Sion and so he repaired again to his residence on 26th December 1970. The Bishop had granted permission only for a first year because, he said, there were already three seminaries in his diocese. The situation had changed since then: the diocesan seminary had moved to Fribourg and the Capuchin seminary had closed. Bishop Adam, therefore, found himself painted into a corner and so (even more reluctantly) gave his oral permission for a full seminary. Perhaps the Archbishop felt that he was pushing Bishop Adam too far if he insisted on the permission being given in writing and so he left the Bishop's palace content with his oral permission. At a later date, however, Bishop Adam maintained that "Archbishop Lefebvre had tricked me!"

THE INTERNATIONAL SEMINARY OF ECONE

The 1970-71 academic year commenced at Ecône with a re-

40th Anniversary of the Society of St. Pius X

treat for the remaining Fribourg seminarians (who were to continue at Fribourg) and the new first year seminarians. The Archbishop had welcomed offers of assistance for the year from three priests: Fr. Maurice Gottlieb, a former student of the French Seminary in Rome; Fr. Jacques Masson, a teacher at the minor seminary of Meaux in France and Fr. Claude Michel of Rome, and these formed the professorial corps for the year. In the course of the year, a complete program of seminary studies was put together, building work began for new wing and new volunteers were recruited: Fr. François-Oliver Dubuis, a seminary professor of Sion (and of the scholasticate of the Grand St. Bernard Canons of Martigny) and Canon René Berthod, a distinguished ex-professor of the Grand St. Bernard Canons.

Twenty seven new seminarians entered at the beginning of the 1971-2 academic together with the remaining Fribourg seminari-

ans and more volunteer priests such as a Fr. Spicq O.P. and Fr. Thomas Mehrle, both professors of Fribourg University, Dom Edouard Guillou, a Benedictine liturgist, Fr. Dominique de la Presle, a discalced Carmelite, and of course Père Barrielle who bequeathed to the Society the treasure of the Ignatian Exercises. A new accommodation wing was also added during the year.

Thirty five new entrants arrived for the 1972-3 academic year and a second accommodation wing was added. Thirty six arrived for the following year to bring the total to 104 seminarians in October 1973 hailing from France, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, U.S.A., Great Britain, Australia and Canada. The seminary was truly international and had been solidly founded, which is just as well, for dark storm clouds were gathering in the skies of the Valais from the South.... Ω



The Seminary of Saint Pius X, Ecône, Switzerland. This picture was taken in the month May from the field in which hundreds of priests have been ordained and four bishops consecrated over the last forty years. The original buildings—the barn and the house—are in the centre. To the left are the two accommodation wings built between 1970 and 1973. The Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary was completed in 1998. A few pious seminarians have remarked that two hearts can be discerned in the rock face above the seminary.