

## OPEN LETTER TO CONFUSED CATHOLICS

Reviewed and commented

By Gerard Keiser

*What would the Archbishop do? Answering this question, usually with agitated polemics, has become a real fad in the last two years. But instead of all the angry essays with a couple of quotes thrown in, one would do much better to read a very short book of his own, the Open Letter to Confused Catholics. While his other works, such as They Have Uncrowned Him and I Accuse the Council, tend to focus on a particular topic, this one serves as a more general introduction to the nature of the Church's crisis and what his Society is doing to solve it. The English version is only 133 pages, it is widely available for free online, and the style, should one wish to condemn it, would be faulted for being too quick and casual; it is not at all technical or abstruse. As a result, no summary can be adequate, because he includes so many valuable parenthetical and transitional remarks that must be left aside if one is to show the overall structure of his argument. So take the following as an encouragement to read the original rather than as a substitute for it.*

### A Brief Outline

Before starting, it will be helpful to provide an overview of the work. In the first section, on the problems, he starts with concrete issues, and explains that these are caused by corrupt bishops and priests, this corruption is caused by heresy, especially by false ecumenism, religious freedom, and collegiality, these heresies were strengthened by the Second Vatican Council, and this council was ruined by Modernists. In the second part, on the solution, he reverses the order, beginning with the principles of tradition and obedience, and showing how these justify his actions and those of his Society.

### What is Wrong?

The first six chapters are primarily a catalog of practical problems on the level of ritual, custom, and teaching. This is where he explains, for example, why the New Mass is wrong no matter how it is celebrated, and why priests should wear the cassock. He also quotes various prelates as they explain the reasons for the changes, who practically admit that the abuses in the liturgy and our worship are not simply mistakes, but part of a program to change the Church's nature.

Having grounded himself in particular facts, he climbs up a chain of effects to show the ultimate reason for the crisis: a resurgence of the Modernist heresy con-

demned by St. Pius X. First, these ground-level abuses would not be occurring if we had good priests. So he demonstrates that, in addition to many individual priests, even the whole idea of priesthood itself has been debased, and so much that we must suspect many invalid ordinations. After all, the intention is often not *ad Missam*, the man chosen from among the people “to offer gifts and sacrifices in expiation of their sins” (Hebrews 5:1), but *ad justitiam socialem*, the man chosen to offer plans and programs in expiation of capitalism. Moreover, these “bastard priests” (p.92) could not exist without bad theology, and that is what we find, both in the new, officially-recognized catechisms, and among the new theologians who write and inspire them.

These theologians' most important novelties are explored in the next three chapters, particularly with regards to Catholicism's place among other religions. For besides adopting many Protestant errors and promoting impurity, they minimize Catholicism's importance. This leads to false ecumenism, which is essentially indifferentism, or even worse, the belief that religious diversity is actually preferable. False religious liberty comes next, which, placing man higher than his own end, demands, in the name of freedom and dignity, that the truth have no place of honor in society—no error, no matter how iniquitous, may be suppressed, and no special funding may be given to Catholic schools and organizations. Such thinkers finally come to

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see religion itself as unimportant, and foster a sort of ecumenism with the explicit enemies of Christ, including Communists and Freemasons.

These heresies may seem quite distant from the immediate problems that lay people have in their parishes, but they are in fact their cause; once you deny that our beliefs hide a unique treasure, you will start removing anything distinctively Catholic from all of our ceremonies, and destroy education to show children alternative views.

### Why are Things So Bad?

Finally, in the last four chapters of the first section, he exposes the fundamental cause of the crisis: Satan's *non serviam*, as manifested in Revolution, or “the hatred of all order not established by man and in which he himself is not both king and god” (p.76)<sup>1</sup>. Besides its innate evil, Revolution inevitably ruins Church authority and her ability to combat error—without God, authority must come from democracy, which means collegiality, endless commissions, and bishops' conferences which pressure even the pope. So the Revolution's triumph has been achieved using the strategy of the most effective viruses: it attacked the Church's immune system, which is the authority of individuals to condemn errors and abuses. Also like a virus, it has led to secondary infections: the sickening scandals and the infiltration of Protestant and Rationalist ideas.

The following chapter is of course about Vatican II, or how the Revolution was administered. The story is well known: how an organized clique of liberals, with the ear of the pope, managed to have the preparatory documents rejected, and then conveniently had replacements ready, as well as lists of suitably progressive candidates for the commissions; how everything was vague and ill-defined to slip past criticism and prevent too much resistance from the more conservative; how most bishops acquiesced to the demands for a cooler, slicker, more worldly Church. This was what allowed numerous documents to be endowed with an authority much greater in perception than in reality, full of statements that, while usually susceptible, with enough pressure, to orthodox interpretations, are more readily used to support evil. At the same time, the general atmosphere, contaminated as it was by the liberals, and scented with an air of history-making, led a great number



*Archbishop Lefebvre at home in Tourcoing in 1965 after the close of the Second Vatican Council.*

of bishops to breathe in heresy.

The destruction of authority is, however, only a corollary symptom of the Revolution, and the Council only the wound through which it entered the heart of the Church—we must now speak of its more immediate effects.

Because it rejects God's order, we are left only with man's order, and that, without a constant reference point, becomes unstable. The Church, if seen as a purely human institution, must then keep up by putting on trendier rituals, reshaping theology to fit current fashions, and trimming off the supernatural until left with “a salvation reduced to economic and social well-being” (p.91). This will obviously strip her of anything meaningfully Catholic. But we are told that her ridiculous new style will not make her despised and abandoned, because the Holy Ghost “assists believers in the turning points of history” (p.94)<sup>2</sup>—which brings us to the next chapter, on Modernism.

Modernism is first of all the intellectual attempt to reconcile Church and Revolution by redefining Faith. The Enlightenment—Revolution's intellectual component—taught that our reason cannot reach God. Quoting from Pascendi, St. Pius X's encyclical on the subject, the

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Archbishop explains how the Modernist response to this problem is the attitude of much of the hierarchy. For the Modernist, Faith springs from “the need he feels for the divine” (p.98). This mysteriously joins him to God, Who may or may not exist apart from the Modernist's notions about Him. To make sense of these notions and this attachment, he makes up doctrines, which will cease to properly reflect truth—that is, his feelings—if they are not regularly updated to accord with his evolving sensibilities. Over time a church may form out of communal beliefs, especially if one of the believers has particularly well-developed feelings, like Our Lord had.

Besides the impossibility of real, enduring doctrine—giving us false ecumenism and religious liberty—the Archbishop mentions three other consequences of this error. First, the Church is made by her believers, so she must be democratic—giving us collegiality. Second, the sacraments are no more permanent than the doctrines, because, although efficacious, they are efficacious only insofar as they allow believers to express themselves—giving us liturgical reform. Similar statements may, of course, be made about the liturgy and Catholic devotions in general. Finally, the Bible is inspired, not by an external Holy Ghost, but by the Holy Ghost Who consists in our religious feelings—giving us room to doubt anything in Scripture. He also directly compares all this with quotes from prelates and a particularly evil catechism, in case the reader will not believe that the Church has really been so infected.

### What To Do About It

Following this introduction to the nature of the crisis, he outlines a solution. He first lays out the two principles which must be properly understood if there is to be a return to Tradition: Tradition itself, to know what we are about, and obedience, to know how to treat our normal authorities.

Tradition, he explains, is not any old tradition, is not just smells and bells: it is “the Deposit of Faith transmitted by the Magisterium down through the centuries” (p.103). In itself it is unchangeable, though our understanding of it increases with observation, yielding more distinct expressions of it as time passes. With this definition we are armed against the two extreme errors: Mod-

ernism, which, seeing Tradition as purely human, preaches that dogma can change; and bitter stubbornness, which, seeing Tradition as what grandpa did, denies that anything can change.

But what must we do in today's dilemma, when Tradition tells us to accept the hierarchy, and the hierarchy tells us not to accept Tradition? We must take Tradition. In the Arian and Anglican crises, geographically local hierarchies departed from the Faith, and it is clear that the duty of the faithful was to disobey their priests and bishops in order to obey Tradition. Likewise, the hierarchy that commands heresy is this time geographically universal, but temporally local, and so we must disobey, if necessary, even the Pope, in order to obey Tradition, which exists in all times and places, and without which we cannot know even his authority.

It is quite the fashion in conservative circles to claim that, since the hierarchy is the proper interpreter of Tradition, we must assent when it claims that this or that practice or teaching agrees with it. He does not answer this objection—perhaps it was not yet so popular—and ordinarily it would be true. But when we have an encyclical with tremendous authority behind it<sup>3</sup> denying in the strongest terms that “it has been wisely decided by law, in some Catholic countries, that persons coming to reside therein shall enjoy the public exercise of their own peculiar worship,”<sup>4</sup> and then the hierarchy declares that “religious communities also have the right not to be hindered in their public teaching,” while declining to explain exactly how we can clear up this apparent contradiction, but rather asserting baldly that this contradiction does not actually exist, we cannot just blindly accept, just as a Catholic could not blindly accept his bishop's assurances that the novelties of Arius agreed perfectly with Apostolic teaching.<sup>5</sup> Submission to authority does not imply a total renunciation of the intellect.

### The Society

Having laid down the principles, the Archbishop spends the next three chapters explaining how he applied them in the SSPX, and how he was justified despite official opposition in Rome. Leaving the historical details aside, the main point of his argument is that the suppression of

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the SSPX and all the subsequent sanctions were legally invalid on several counts, such as by being declared without a trial by people lacking proper authority. Even had the procedures been spotless, they were clearly unjust anyway, and went against the highest law, the very purpose, of the Church: the salvation of souls.

Besides that, the most noteworthy contents of these chapters is a very brief explanation of how the Society began—as a house for seminarians who could find no decent places of formation, which quickly became a full seminary, and finally began taking its current structure when the Archbishop realized his new priests would not be accepted by any diocese. He also repeatedly tried to gain official recognition, and could have had a regular canonical status, but only if he would say the New Mass, just as the Society could have been recognized by Benedict XVI, but only if it accepted every statement of the Council.

But the Archbishop remembers that it is not only religious who are in this crisis, and so he devotes a chapter to what others can do to help. It is not primarily through politics, he says—and we have learned this well since his death, since no one has successfully bent his government from perdition, but only slowed it. The main thing is simply for families to accept all the children God gives them and to make sure they grow up good Catholics: the same as what families have always been called to do, only today it is both more difficult and more necessary.

### A Few Notes on the Progress of Tradition

Finally, to give some consolation to the disheartened reader, the Archbishop points to signs of hope that this crisis will end, and it is here that one rejoices to see the progress made since that time. The Church continues to suffer, and millions of members have rotted off, but the healthy remnants are strengthening. He was unable to offer much in the way of encouraging statistics at the time, and in one way, the picture is still tragic: out of over 410,000 priests in the world, only around 560 were SSPX members in 2012. On the other hand, that is excluding the many priests who work with the Society but are not technically members, as well as the affiliated orders, such as the traditional Benedictines and Dominicans. If one then adds the *Ecclesia Dei* communities, including close to 300

priests in the FSSP, the number of priests will easily rise to over a thousand. They are, of course, compromised to some extent, but are still traditionalists after a fashion. Yet that is still only 0.25%. But now consider the huge new interest in responsible liturgy since *Summorum Pontificum*, and that it is especially found among young priests. At this point, one can no longer easily quantify, not just because it would be difficult to estimate their numbers, but also because they exist along a gradient, between those who refuse to ever say the New Mass, and those who simply like to do the old stuff now and then. We can hope that the proportion of those who have said the Tridentine Mass since 1969 is at least 10%, which is reportedly the proportion among the Cardinal Electors of this last conclave<sup>6</sup>, but there is really no telling. As it is, the *Economist* reported recently that there are 420 Latin Masses each week in the US, and 157 in England and Wales.<sup>7</sup>

It is true that this book proves that the fundamental issue is doctrine, not liturgy; the bad liturgy came from the bad doctrine. Nevertheless, he also discusses how the Latin Mass is fundamentally opposed to modern errors, so the priests who say it will tend to be turned towards truth. I am sure many of you have at least a couple anecdotes of meeting young priests who at least privately are on the traditionalist spectrum.

Pope Francis is worrying, of course, but remember that for all the signs he has made of being a horrifying disaster, we know that the Church cannot fail, Christ will conquer, and Mary will reign. All our good efforts can **only hasten that victory.** Ω

### Notes

1. Quoting Jean-Joseph Gaume, *Révolution*, vol. 1, 18.
2. Quoting *The Faith Word by Word*.
3. See Michael Davies' discussion in *Religious Liberty and the Second Vatican Council*, appendix 2.
4. *Syllabus of Errors* no. 78.
5. *Dignitatis Humanae*, sec. 4.
6. Rorate Caeli. <http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2013/02/the-next-pope-and-latin-mass.html>. Retrieved 29/3/2013.
7. *Catholic Conservatives: A Traditionalist Avant-garde*. Dec. 15, 2012.

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