

Some thoughts on the Present situation

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Every community or group, be it the Church Herself, a Religious Order or a school, has dissenters. In itself of course dissent is neutral, neither right nor wrong. We ourselves as traditional Catholics dissent and disagree with much that has been imposed for the last 50 years by the mainstream hierarchy, and claim to be morally right in doing so. We are called to constantly dissent from sin.

There has recently arisen a dissident group of priests and faithful within the Society of St Pius X, who claim the Society is taking a position contrary to the will of its founder, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, and is therefore on the verge of making an unacceptable compromise with Rome with its modernist tendencies. As noted above, the fact that they dissent is not in itself an argument against them.

The particular circumstances surrounding the above-mentioned dissent within the SSPX have highlighted the importance of certain principles, some of which are outlined below. I leave the specific details and vindication of Bishop Fellay and the SSPX to others (see the conference given by Fr Daniel Themann at St Mary's, Kansas, on 16th April 2013 for a crystal clear and succinct summary). Of course there are other principles and factors which are relevant, and the following list is by no means exhaustive.

1) A dissenting voice is not necessarily proof of the dissenter having suffered unjust oppression, and neither is it necessarily a sign of courage on their part. As every father, employer or manager knows, is not dissent usually rather a sign of selfishness and pride? Far from being a sign of courage, dissent is often a sign of *cowardice*, since the dissenters often lack the fortitude to continue the faithful and obedient doing of their duty despite obstacles.

We all like to be conspicuous and noticed. A dissenting voice or group has the advantage that *going against the grain makes them visible*, giving them a sort of 'celebrity status'. This is not to say this is necessarily their intention in any specific instance, but it cannot be ruled out as inconsequential (By the way, this is often why adolescents rebel, since going in the opposite direction to the 'flow of traffic' by strange dress, language and gestures gets them noticed, a craving of their newly-discovered adolescent ego).

We have an unfortunate tendency to unthinkingly attach positive value to what is conspicuous, whereby 'visible=valuable'. We are children of the modern world, and the modern mind is obsessed with externals, attaching greater intrinsic value to what is seen and heard. But who were the most vocal and passionate during Our Lord's crucifixion? His helpers or His haters? Rebels and the disobedient make more noise than the quiet and obedient doers of their humble duty. We must resist the temptation to react like this: 'That priest is visibly and passionately standing up for himself against a tide of unjust opposition. Good on him!' Uum, maybe, but not necessarily.

Another factor not to be ignored regarding the motivations of dissenters is that *even the most saintly superior has subjects with past grievances against them*. Exhibit A is of course God Himself, the most perfect and yet most persistently resented Superior Who is accused of every crime imaginable, as was His incarnate Son.

Even the best superior is a sinful son of Adam, and we are very unforgiving with other's faults. Moreover, it is literally impossible for a superior to please all of his subjects, since they must act for the good of the whole community rather than for any specific part thereof. There is thus always copious fuel at hand for disgruntled dissenters to use against community leaders. And since their own grievances against the superior are usually petty and personal (rather than principled), they must hide behind high-sounding accusations.

2) No human being can be entirely consistent in their words and actions (the only earthly exception to this being the Pope when using his charism of infallibility, which even then operates within four very narrowly defined limits!). It is therefore unjust to take the words uttered by a public person (even in their official capacity), comb them for the slightest contradiction, and then declare the inevitably found inconsistencies clear signs of deceit and compromise.

Only the official authorized pronouncements of a community are to be taken seriously. Even more so are the individual subjects within the group liable to utter silliness and stupidities, *but remember that they are subjects and not superiors, and so the official position must be sought not from them but from official leadership pronouncements.* These official pronouncements represent the thought-out, clarified and distilled position taken by the group. This is *especially* the case when the questions are not about unchanging principles but application of those principles, what we call acts of prudence. These latter are almost infinitely variable (since concrete circumstances are infinitely variable), and need a 'birds-eye view' which only the superior has.

3) Never obtain through a 3rd party intermediary what can be obtained directly. If we have access to an official pronouncement, let us not read a report or commentary *on* that official pronouncement instead, especially if we know that this commentator has an axe to grind with the authority for some other reason.

The more powerful and worldly is the intermediary between us and the authority, the more cautious we must be. Most modern Media, even some Catholic Media, and sadly even some Media claiming to be 'traditional' Catholic, is a miasma of lies and deceit. Let us not be so naïf as to think that just because something is printed then 'it must have at least some truth in it!' There are many people and groups out there whose sole object is to distort and deceive.

4) We may not read letters addressed specifically to others, even if 'everybody is reading it'. Just as we may not open and read 'snail mail' addressed to another without their express permission, the same principles apply to private communications illegally posted on the internet. Sinning against justice in this manner is guaranteed to block out the grace of God needed to interpret it in any meaningful way. Besides, private communication (especially between those in high positions dealing with delicate issues) assume details and past events about which we have almost no understanding (it is for a similar reason that we should be careful about passing onto others the advice given to us by our confessor in the sacrament of Penance, since it may have been tailored specifically to our circumstances).

5) A thing can only be accurately evaluated and judged in its proper context and environment, especially words, which are the most powerful conveyors of meaning. Everything has a usual environment or context which, if taken away, affects our understanding of the thing. Taking a thing out of context may not merely give a distorted view of it, but give it entirely the opposite meaning! The lament of the Psalmist that 'The fool said in his heart, there is no God' is a classic example of how

wrenching words out from their original context can result in the inspired Psalmists ridiculous claim that ‘...there is no God’!

Regarding material things, the normal context of an eyeball is a human face. But to pluck out the eyeball from its normal context and put it on a dinner plate leads to a far different evaluation thereof. From being an object of great beauty it becomes an object of horror.

Regarding words, Our Lord’s advice to pluck out our right eye if it causes us to sin, if taken out of context, would have Him encouraging self-mutilation against the very 5th Commandment which He inspired!

The vast majority of misunderstandings in any community derive from taking things out of their proper context. Broadly, we must look to both the immediate context (e.g. the whole interview from which a sentence was taken) and the remote context (e.g. the whole history of that particular society).

It takes time, effort and humility to find the original context in which something was uttered, and our obligation to do so increases proportionately with the seriousness of the matter at hand.

6) To begin or reform a great work, God chooses Saints conspicuous for obedience.

Obedience is God’s favorite virtue, since it gives over to Him our most prized possession, our own will. When we examine the lives of great Old Testament figures such as Noah, Abraham and Moses, their great works did not begin until they had proven themselves by a long and grueling probation of perfect obedience to God’s mysterious will. Noah spent 100 years obediently building an ark whose purpose surely brought universal mockery from his neighbors. Abraham was 100 years old before God finally gave him a son, Isaac, whom he was obediently ready to slay at God’s command. Moses was 80 years old when God finally sent him to liberate his fellow Hebrews from Egyptian slavery. In the New Testament era, all the founders and reformers of the great Religious Orders were obedient saints: Benedict, Dominic, Francis, etc. Archbishop Lefebvre, after many decades of perfect and proven obedience, did not begin his greatest work until his sixties.

“By their fruits you will know them”, said Our Lord. A history of disobedience and arrogance in apparent founders or reformers is our guarantee from God that He will *not* be using them to build or reform anything.

7) Beware allowing a permanently unfavorable view of a superior, who represents God in a special way, to solidify in our souls. Whether due to a clash of temperament or some past disagreement, it is all too easy to fall into a settled and crystallized dislike of a superior. As a result, we start to view all their words, actions and intentions through an unloving lens, whereby *everything* they do is wrong and blameworthy. And the better objectively are their actions, the deeper we must dig in attributing evil. ‘He casts out demons by the *prince* of demons!’ was how hellishly deep the Pharisees had to dig in negating the great goodness of Christ’s delivering men from the power of demons.

Before our definitive and immovable Judgment by God at the end of our life, the intentions of each one of us are settled only in their unsettledness, and are consistently inconsistent. Imposing a permanently negative spin on another’s actions may be flattering and easy for us, but it harms our soul enormously, attributing evil (and not just once) to a member of the very Body of Christ which we know He takes as done to Himself.

May Christ Himself be our model in this regard. Despite His clear perception of the intentions of each man, He usually attributed the best possible intentions to others. And even when He made exceptions to this rule (Matt 23), *only His certain divine knowledge of their hearts made it licit for Him to do so*. We should be ashamed of our easy attribution of evil to others considering Christ's having called a 'friend' His demon-possessed betrayer in the very act of betrayal, and his forgiveness of His own murderers and mockers as He hung bleeding to death on Calvary. Whereas we may judge the nature of external actions as actions (e.g. 'He did not respond to my letter'), we are forbidden by Christ Himself to judge the intentions behind these actions (e.g. 'He did not answer my letter because he is lazy, etc), no matter how certain we may feel.

8) It is exceedingly rare for someone to become wicked, deceitful or compromising all of a sudden.

This is expressed in the Latin moral maxim that 'Nemo repente fit pessimus'. Spiritual descent is usually a long-term process (virtues and vices are slow-growing plants, and the Devil often evades quick detection by enticing us down by degrees). For superiors who have a history of goodness, trustworthiness and fidelity to suddenly become wicked and compromising goes against all the laws of human psychology and the spiritual life. This, by the way, is a strong (although secondary) argument for the apparent 'disobedience' of Archbishop Lefebvre by consecrating bishops in 1988.

Conversely, those who were in the past notoriously disobedient and arrogant do not suddenly become obedient and humble.

It is said that 'actions speak louder than words'. Someone's past known behavior should be the best commentary on their present words, no matter how high-sounding they may be.

9) Beware of bitter zeal. St Thomas Aquinas describes zeal as a particularly intense or fervent love which aims specifically at preventing the beloved object being shared illegitimately by another. Thus a loving husband should be zealous for the unique and unadulterated affections of his wife. Zeal is thus a flower and fruit of genuine charity. A healthy zeal would be shown, for example, in the love of truth, whereby one would earnestly seek to prevent its being adulterated by error.

But *bitter* zeal is a weed growing not upon love of God and neighbor but love of self. It strives, under cover of genuine love, to tear down rather than build up, to attack those in error rather than error itself, and sinners more than sin itself.

This shifting of the attack from principles to persons often reveals both a) the attackers' lack of rational arguments, and b) their probable private guilt projected out vicariously upon the attacked person as a scapegoat.

Archbishop Lefebvre warned his priests constantly of this danger, an occupational hazard for those forced to constantly attack error in the Church.

10) Beware of being overly allergic to ‘ambiguity’. Due to the obvious and deliberate ambiguities in the documents of Vatican II (and in much that has issued from the Church hierarchy ever since), it would be easy to be too hard on the presence of legitimate ambiguity in other areas.

Certainly the encyclicals of the popes prior to 1958 were models of doctrinal accuracy, and in thus teaching the truths of the Faith the Church fulfilled her duty to teach it in the most crystal clear manner possible. That is, we should not tolerate ambiguity in doctrinal presentation by the Church hierarchy on matters where significant precision is possible.

However, it might be said that ambiguity is the very grammar of practical agreements and diplomacy, the air it breathes. When dealing with persons who *hold* truths rather than directly with *truth itself*, we must meet them on the level on which they are now operating. Most of our attempts at bringing others to the Catholic Faith are only possible with the use of ambiguous language (Unless you are of the ‘If you don’t convert to Catholicism you’ll go to hell’ type).

If practical concrete agreements could only be signed when both agree to every single important matter, nothing would ever get done.

Besides, it is a simple fact that even much of our Faith is ambiguous, in the sense that very few aspects of it have been precisely defined. There are precious few solemnly defined Dogmas, which act like anchors deep on the sea floor while the barque of Peter tosses and turns amidst tempestuous weather above. For example, there is great ambiguity about what exactly the fires of hell are like, especially before the Last Judgment, as well as the nature of Limbo, etc.

The Bible itself is highly ambiguous, with many things ‘hard to be understood’ (II Pet 3:16), as is the case with most of God’s dealings with men. It was ambiguous of Christ to say to Judas ‘What you are about to do, do it quickly’, as was His incredible claim not to know the day and the hour of His very own 2nd Coming!

11) Silence on the part of superiors is not an automatic sign of deceitful concealment. Each of us has indeed the right to be taught the truths of the Catholic Faith in the most unambiguous manner possible. But, we do *not* have the strict right to be privy to documentation passed between our superiors and others. We may be accustomed to viewing such documentation due to the past openness of superiors in this regard. However, we may not accuse them of deceit if there is a delay in providing us with private documentation or the circumstances thereof.

We moderns are so accustomed to knowing the smallest details of our leader’s behavior (due both to the power of the media and greater public expectation of transparency) that we feel the victims of injustice if information is withheld. There is such a thing as ‘confidentiality’ and ‘professional secrets’.

There may be innumerable perfectly good reasons by a superior may not deem it prudent to reveal certain information. Maybe they were commanded thus by a 3rd party under grievous threat, or maybe circumstances are unfavorable for the proper public appreciation thereof.

Our Lord Jesus Christ only revealed His divinity explicitly toward the end of His ministry, and thought it prudent to say very little in response to many of the questions posed to Him during His Passion. It is the prerogative of superiors to decide if or when to reveal certain information, and they must be given the benefit of the doubt when it is withheld.