

Tridentine Community News

July 13, 2008

Recent Moves Toward Unification With Rome

The past several weeks have been encouraging for those of us who have been praying for various groups to be reconciled with the Holy See. The Catholic press has been detailing correspondence between Society of St. Pius X Superior Bishop Bernard Fellay and Cardinal Castrillón Hoyos of the Pontifical Commission Ecclesia Dei, in which steps are being made toward regularization.

On June 26, the Transalpine Redemptorists, an independent traditionalist group of priests affiliated with the SSPX, announced its formal reconciliation with Rome.

This past week, British Anglican Bishop Andrew Burnham has asked Pope Benedict XVI for assistance in helping Anglican congregations become Catholic. He is likely seeking a method similar to the "Pastoral Provision" that Anglicans in the U.S. have employed for the same purpose (see our column of two weeks ago, available on-line at the address at the bottom of this page).

In the midst of these developments, some terminology is being thrown around that must be properly understood. In order for a priest to celebrate Mass and the sacraments in full communion with the Holy See, he must celebrate them *validly* and *licitly*.

Validity

In order for a priest to celebrate the sacraments *validly*:

- 1) He must have the *proper intention*. For example, he must intend to consecrate the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of our Lord.
- 2) There must be *proper matter and form*. For example, the matter of the Holy Mass according to the Latin Rite is unleavened bread and wine. The proper form is contained in the words of consecration specified in the Roman Missal, either in the original Latin or, in the case of the Ordinary Form, in the vernacular translations approved by national Bishops' Councils and ratified by the Holy See.
- 3) The priest must have been validly ordained by a bishop in apostolic succession. This means that the bishop, and all his predecessor bishops, must be able to trace their ordinations back to the original twelve Apostles, using valid rites of the Church.
- 4) In the case of the Sacraments of Penance and Matrimony, validity also requires the priest to have the approval of the local diocesan bishop to perform the ceremonies.

It is generally agreed that the priests of the SSPX do meet criteria 1-3, but fail criterion 4. For this reason, Confessions heard by an SSPX priest are invalid. Marriages witnessed by an SSPX priest are also invalid, but may be regularized by the competent local diocesan authority.

Anglican priests fail criterion 3. They do not enjoy valid Holy Orders, thus all of their sacraments are invalid.

Licitness

Apart from validity, to be in full communion with Holy Mother Church, a priest must celebrate the sacraments *licitly*. This means

they must done in accord with the structure and rules of the Church. Because SSPX priests establish chapels and offer the sacraments without the permission of the local diocesan bishop, their sacraments are illicit.

The situation is akin to a doctor who is practicing without a medical license. He or she might be exceptionally talented, and may even maintain contact with other "independent" physicians, but ultimately, he and his peers cannot work within the hospital and insurance networks that create order for our medical system.

Irregularity vs. Excommunication

It is sometimes said that the SSPX and its members are excommunicated. In fact, this is not the case. Only the four bishops of the SSPX are clearly excommunicated because of the gravity of their acceptance of illicit – though valid – Episcopal consecration. The priests and congregations of the SSPX are not automatically excommunicated. Rather, as Cardinal Castrillón has clarified on more than one occasion, they are in an irregular status. Therefore, it is appropriate to speak of the reconciliation of the SSPX with Rome as a regularization process.

At the same time, the Ecclesia Dei Commission has made it clear that attendance at an SSPX chapel is not acceptable when an Extraordinary Form Mass in full communion with Rome is available. One must not actively or passively support schism.

In contrast, Anglicans did not claim to be in communion with Rome to begin with, thus they have not been excommunicated per se. They would be entering into communion with the Church from a starting position clearly outside.

Grey Areas

Some discussions of the topics of validity and licitness can become rather contentious. Rather than foster argument, let's consider a more practical, real-world situation that can and does arise in Tridentine Mass communities.

A certain Extraordinary Form Community has a friendly relationship with its diocesan administration. The diocese has explained that all visiting priests must apply to the chancery for temporary faculties in the diocese, and the community's leaders faithfully obey this directive.

Late one Friday, the regular celebrant for the Sunday Mass cancels. The community scrambles to find a replacement, cannot find one from its own diocese, but does find one willing to travel from another diocese. The community asks the chancery for faculties for the visiting priest, but the chancery does not respond. The community invites the priest regardless out of necessity.

The visiting priest would offer Mass validly (and arguably licitly, presuming that the chancery trusted the community's judgment in seeking celebrants). But he would not be able to hear Confessions. The question is, would a chancery's "Oh sure, no problem" response to a request for faculties for Confession suffice? Or must the community insist on receiving a letter? If a letter is required, does the community risk becoming annoying to the chancery simply because it is trying to follow Church law? In addition to validity and licitness, we must also value prudence.