

Traditionalists add spice to the Catholic stew

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 25, 2011 | All Things Catholic

If ever an object lesson were needed in the complexities of running the universal Catholic Church, a recent interview with Bishop Bernard Fellay, the Swiss head of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, offers it in living color. It may be an especially apposite read for liberals, both inside and outside the church, who sometimes struggle to grasp that there's actually Catholic life to the right of the pope.

Granted, although its bishops are no longer excommunicated, the Society of St. Pius X -- which broke with Rome in 1988, when the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre ordained bishops in defiance of the pope -- has no formal standing in the church. Granted, too, we journalists probably pay more attention to the traditionalists than their real-world following might justify, largely because they often say and do inflammatory things that make great copy.

Even with those stipulations, the climate of opinion represented by the Society of St. Pius X nonetheless remains an important part of the broader Catholic conversation.

In terms of news value, the headline from the Feb. 2 Q&A with Fellay, posted on the society's American web site, is that a round of talks with the Vatican is coming to an end without resolution -- because, in Fellay's view, Rome refuses to concede the "contradictions" between the eternal Catholic faith and the innovations introduced by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Fellay also announces that two new stumbling blocks have emerged along the path to reconciliation: Benedict XVI's plan to host an inter-religious summit in Assisi this October, and the May 1 beatification of Pope John Paul II.

On Assisi there's no surprise, since the Lefebvrites lodged similar protests when John Paul II assembled religious leaders there in 1986, and again in 1993 and 2002, to pray for peace. (Their objection is the risk of syncretism, or the combining of different religious beliefs.)

Facing yet another Assisi summit, Fellay calls on Catholics to pray that the "Good Lord intervenes in one way or another" -- which some in Rome, by the way, took as a not-so-subtle prayer for Benedict to die before the event can take place -- and in case that doesn't happen, to "start making reparation now."

What may be more counter-intuitive, at least for some, is the fiercely negative reaction to the beatification of John Paul II, which Fellay defines as "a serious problem."

Here's why: According to Fellay, John Paul led "a pontificate that caused things to proceed by leaps and bounds in the wrong direction, along "progressive" lines, toward everything that they call "the spirit of Vatican II." This is therefore a public acknowledgment not only of the person of John Paul II, but also of the Council and the whole spirit that accompanied it.

That will likely be a stunning assertion for many left-leaning Catholics, who simply can't fathom seeing John

Paul in those terms. Yet if you put the pieces together the right way -- such as John Paul's ecumenical and inter-religious outreach, his social teaching, even the style of his liturgical celebrations (think World Youth Day) -- one can begin to see how a traditionalist might style him a terribly 'progressive' pope.

Whatever one makes of Fellay's views, it's tempting, from the perspective of *Realpolitik*, to dismiss them as irrelevant. The society's following is fairly miniscule -- even if one takes the high-end estimate of one million faithful, that's less than one tenth of one percent of the global Catholic population.

As of 2009, the society claimed 510 priests in 31 countries, which is less than three percent of the membership of the Jesuits all by themselves -- to say nothing of the Dominicans, Franciscans, and so on, or the 275,000 diocesan clergy around the world.

Yet the number and influence of Catholics who may feel some sympathy for the positions taken by the society should not be under-estimated, and any Vatican regime would feel obligated to try to heal what they regard as the lone formal schism to follow Vatican II.

The traditionalist perspective is thus something church leaders have to consider as they survey the Catholic landscape.

If nothing else, all this illustrates a core insight about the political science of the church: If you think the answers to the questions facing Catholicism are ever obvious, or that making any policy decision ever comes without a cost, you simply don't understand the stew of competing pressures and perspectives that make up ecclesial life. As John XXIII once put it, a pope has to consider the views both of those with their foot on the gas, and those with their foot on the brake.

The full text of the 54 questions and answers with Fellay [can be found here](#) [1].(The interview was conducted at St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary in Winona, Minnesota, which has the largest enrollment of the six seminaries operated by the Society of St. Pius X around the world.)

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The signature issue for the traditionalist camp long has been the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass, sometimes called the 'Tridentine rite.' When Pope Benedict XVI installed the old Mass in 2007 as an 'extraordinary form' of the Roman rite, it was therefore understood as an olive branch for the Lefebvrite movement.

In the interview, Fellay alleges there has been 'practically no effect, or very little,' from Benedict's 2007 *motu proprio*, titled *Summorum Pontificum*, because of what he describes as 'massive opposition by the bishops.' (To be fair, Fellay was probably talking mostly about France and perhaps Switzerland, where the ideological tensions surrounding the older Mass tend to be most acute.)

When speculation about the *motu proprio* began to gather steam in 2007, there were fairly dramatic forecasts of its impact on all sides of the debate. Some devotees of the older liturgy predicted that its inner power and beauty would prove so compelling that in a free market environment, Catholics would 'vote with their feet' against the new Mass. Critics warned that reintroduction of the Tridentine Mass would fracture the unity of the church and herald a broader 'rolling back of the clock?.'

Four years down the line, such predictions now seem a little over-hyped. Whatever one makes of it, the *motu proprio* so far does not seem to have triggered an earthquake.

To get a sense of its impact in the United States, I turned to Fr. Richard Hilgartner, Executive Director of the Secretariat for Divine Worship of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. A priest of the Baltimore archdiocese, Hilgartner studied liturgical theology at the prestigious Benedictine-run Pontifical Athenaeum of

St. Anselm in Rome.

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NCR: What impact has the *motu proprio* had in the United States?

Hilgartner: For many places it's regularized what was previously deemed exceptional. Prior to the *motu proprio*, priests had to have special permission to celebrate the Tridentine form. Now priests don't need special permission, because while the Tridentine form isn't necessarily normative, it has its place in the larger context of the liturgical life of the church.

People usually ask for statistics, how many priests are celebrating the Tridentine form and how many people are attending it. Because of the *motu proprio*, however, there isn't necessarily any reporting. Priests don't need special permission, so we really don't know when they're doing it, especially when it's a private celebration as a form of their own devotion.

What's your anecdotal impression of how strong the demand has been?

I think there was an initial bump after the *motu proprio*, probably fueled by curiosity. Some people had rather limited access before, and suddenly there was the possibility of attending the extraordinary form more regularly. What seems to be happening in many dioceses is that there isn't necessarily a Tridentine Mass in every parish that wants it, because the numbers are often fairly low, but there's some kind of regional approach. In lots of dioceses there are one or two designated locations, and some bishops now celebrate the Tridentine form occasionally to be supportive of those efforts. Part of the reality, too, is that not many priests are well trained in celebrating the Tridentine form.

There's been no popular repudiation of the new Mass?

I think that's very safe to say. The *motu proprio* is serving a niche, a need felt by a small number of the faithful.

There's talk of "opposition" from bishops. What's your sense of how the American bishops have responded?

I can't say that it's been negative in any way. Some bishops have been more attuned to it than others, in part because there are some places where bishops might not see the demand. I've not seen anything, however, that could be perceived as overt or organized opposition. Some may be more passionate about it than others, but that's natural.

Prior to the *motu proprio*, there were dire predictions about its impact. Almost four years into it, can we say that upheaval really hasn't materialized?

I would agree. Initially there was some hesitation and concern, but we've not really seen histrionics in any large way. It's not had a detrimental effect in terms of fracturing the unity of the church, so a lot of the hype has calmed down. Experience has proven that it's not caused upheaval, and in most places it's business as usual.

I've heard stories on both ends. I've talked to people who had never before experienced the older Mass, especially young people, who go out of curiosity and find beauty in it, something uplifting and moving. I've also talked to people who really thought we should go back to this, who then actually attended a Tridentine Mass and felt differently. Over the last forty years, people have grown accustomed to being able to comprehend and participate in what's being celebrated. Participating by devotion, rather than actually engaging in the rites being celebrated, is a very different experience. Sometimes people who were nostalgic for the older Mass, therefore, end up with a different view once they actually take part in it.

Are seminarians today being trained in celebrating the extraordinary form?

It's probably unrealistic to expect seminaries to provide the kind of training and formation that would mean every new priest, upon ordination, emerges ready to celebrate it. There are a lot of technicalities in the older rite. Liturgical formation is already taxed by many other things, and it's hard to squeeze in something else that's incredibly involved and time-consuming. Many seminaries are offering a broad introduction, and then for those who are really interested there are places they can go, such as the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter and the St. John Cantius Society. They'll go for a workshop, and then they have to commit to practicing it.

Benedict XVI seems to hope that the extraordinary form will gradually influence the approach to the ordinary form, nudging it in the direction of greater reverence and appreciation for tradition. Do you see evidence that's happening?

It's limited, because there are plenty of people who never see the extraordinary form. More broadly, though, the whole climate of the church today might be focusing on things that perhaps we weren't paying a whole lot of attention to before, especially the integrity of the rites. In that sense, the extraordinary form can help shape the regular liturgical experience -- not by taking on its trappings or externals, but by calling attention to the importance of celebrating faithfully, with a sense of reverence, understanding that the rite itself has a beauty built into it. The Tridentine form is maybe hyper-sensitive to the rubrics and performing the prescriptions of the rite accurately, but it can help us be more attuned to those things in the ordinary form.

Given projections that forty percent of the U.S. Catholic population will be Hispanic by 2030, what's your sense of the appetite for the old Mass among Latinos?

I've not seen a whole lot of interest in Latino circles, at least in the United States. We're still struggling to offer the Mass in Spanish where it's needed! To suddenly say that we're also going to encourage the extraordinary form is probably asking too much.

[John L. Allen Jr. is NCR senior correspondent. He can be reached at jallen@ncronline.org.]

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