

Interview with Michael Davies

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For those who unfamiliar with the traditionalist movement and the crisis in the Fraternity of St. Peter, could you summarize the controversy and explain how things stands now?

Michael Davies: It started last summer when 16 French priests of the Fraternity expressed the desire to concelebrate on Holy Thursday with their bishop according to the 1970 Paul VI Missal. This is contrary to the original ethos of the Fraternity. When the Fraternity was established, it was clearly understood that its members would celebrate exclusively according to the 1962 Missal. The Ecclesia Dei Commission has stated rightly that the Fraternity's priests are given the privilege of using the 1962 books, but that this does not preclude them from also using the 1970 Missal. But the vast majority of the Fraternity of St. Peter, which has 92 priests and deacons incardinated in it, still wishes to use the 1962 books exclusively. Then something happened, which, especially those of us who are British, considered to be very wrong. Without telling the Fraternity superior, Father Josef Bisig, the 16 went behind his back and made an appeal to the Ecclesia Dei Commission to take some action because they claimed there was now a schismatic spirit within the Fraternity of St. Peter. What the 16 really meant by “schismatic spirit” was that most of the priests of the Fraternity did not agree with them! Within a few days of receiving the complaint from the 16 priests, the Commission wrote a very strong letter to Father Bisig and ordered him to cancel a meeting of the Fraternity which was to have taken place in August, and ordered him instead to have a general assembly, which has just taken place.

What is the situation at the moment?

Davies: Things seem quite calm. There was some tension going in to the February meeting, but things seem to have been smoothed over. Father Bisig is still the head of the Fraternity. So we hope for the best. The Ecclesia Dei commission itself, sadly, will soon have new leadership, since Cardinal Angelo Felici, its president since December 16, 1995, who turned 80 six months ago, recently broke his thigh and underwent prolonged surgery.

Cardinal Alfons Stickler, who was a member of the select committee on liturgy at the Second Vatican Council, gave an interesting speech during the Una Voce meeting on November 13.

Can you comment on what he said?

Davies: Cardinal Stickler pointed out the contradiction between what the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council voted for in their liturgy constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and what has actually been given to us as a result of the liturgical reform. Quoting from the liturgical constitution specifically stated that Latin was to remain the norm within the Roman Rite. He mentioned the cardinal from Sicily who said “Fathers, Fathers, we have to be careful or we’ll end up with the whole of the Mass in the vernacular” and all the bishops roared with laughter because they thought such a suggestion was ridiculous. He also pointed out, I think it was in Article 23 of the Constitution on the liturgy, stated that no changes must be made unless the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires them, and he pointed out that most of the changes that have happened in the mass since the Council were not genuinely and certainly required by the Church and he stated very emphatically that what we had was not *Novus Ordo*, but *Novus Disorder*. I was deeply moved by the beautiful (Tridentine) Mass we had before our conference sung in Gregorian Chant by a Choir and with a congregation from some 20 countries. At the end of the Mass I happened to think of the passage by Cardinal Stickler quoted, and I asked several of our delegates; can you think of one thing, one aspect of this morning's Mass that the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires to be changed? And nobody could think of one example. I would maintain that every change made in the Ordinary of the Mass since the Council could be seen as disobedience to the Liturgy Constitution. The psalm “Judica me” at the beginning of Mass was removed from the 1970 Missal, as were the last Gospel and the offertory prayers. I could go through the Mass from the beginning to end and I would defy anyone to prove to me that any of the prayers removed were genuinely and certainly required to be removed for the good of the Church. Our 26 associations are determined at whatever the cost to insist that we are given access to Mass celebrated according to the Missal of 1962, which was guaranteed by the Pope in the *Motu Proprio Ecclesia Dei Adflicta* of July 1988.

Do you have reasons for optimism?

Davies: Certainly. For the *Una Voce* movement, the overall picture has improved tremendously since 1984, when the first indult permitting the use of the Tridentine Mass was promulgated. I'd like to give you a little quotation from a document issued by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments dated October 18, 1999, in which they call upon bishops to be “extremely tolerant to those of Christ's faithful who wish to participate in the sacred liturgy in accordance with the previous liturgical books and to keep their sensibilities constantly before their eyes.” The bishops are urged to show benevolence in dealing with these faithful

“either by appointing times suitable for liturgical celebration in some churches, or by designating a particular church which may be convenient for these faithful under the charge of a rector or chaplain, or sometimes even by the creation of a personal parish.” In this text, if compared with the text of the indult in 1984, which said that only in exceptional circumstances could a Mass be celebrated in a parish Church, they are advocating that the traditionalists be given personal parishes. This is a tremendous difference and is precisely what is happening in the USA, where the Fraternity of St. Peter and the Institute Christ the King actually are being given churches by bishops, which very rapidly attract a big congregation.

I would also like to stress that these congregations are composed by a majority of young people. During the recent synod of European bishops, it was accepted that in most of the churches in Europe now, the congregations are made of young children and old people, with no teenagers or young married couples in between. But in the traditional parishes, teenagers and young married couples make up a major part of the congregations. So that is a very, very important sign for the future. I am quite sure that in the new millennium the celebration of the traditional mass is going to expand rapidly. By comparison, in England now 50,000 fewer Catholics assist at Mass each year and a recent report in the London Catholic Times pointed out that if the current trends continue within the Catholic Church in England and Wales, it will have ceased to exist within 30 years. All the statistics prove this. Another very, very alarming figure: if you compare the figures with children being confirmed, 12 years after looking at the figure of baptisms, you find 80% of the children who are baptized are not even confirmed. And these figures are similar in almost every European country. Our delegate from Belgium told us that only 3% or 4% of Catholics there now attend Mass, and the situation in Holland and Germany is no better. The Ecclesia Dei commission stated in a letter to Father Bisig it wants traditionalists to be integrated into the reality of the Church of today', but the reality of the Church of today is that it is disintegrating and traditional Catholics have no intention of being integrated into a disintegrating Church. We are happy to remain within the very rapidly expanding traditionalist movement, which we think is the most vital and orthodox and most loyal section of the Catholic Church.