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Interview with the Superior General of the Priestly Society of Saint Pius X

Guardians of Tradition

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which is served unconditionally, with the means of living by it with integrity,
for the salvation of souls and the service of the whole Church.”*

‘The Angelus’: 1. Reverend Father, how would you explain the role of the Society of Saint Pius X in 2024? Rather than a parallel church, as some claim, is it primarily a witness to Tradition? A missionary effort around the world like the Holy Ghost Fathers before? Or something else?

Don Davide Pagliarani: The role of the Society in 2024 is fundamentally no different from the one that it has played since its foundation, which its Statutes define when they say: “The purpose of the Society is the priesthood and all that pertains to it and nothing but what concerns it.” The Society is first of all a priestly society dedicated to the sanctity of priests, and therefore to the sanctity of souls and of the entire Church through the sanctity of the priesthood. As our Statutes also explain: “The Society is essentially apostolic, because the Sacrifice of the Mass is, too.”

The Society has performed this role since its foundation in the particular context of an unprecedented crisis that specifically affects the priesthood, the Mass, the faith, and all the treasures of the Church. In this sense it is a reminder that these treasures are real and quite necessary for the restoration of all things. Without having sought out the role, the Society exists as a privileged witness to Tradition in a situation in which this Tradition has been eclipsed. It is a fact that the Society, in this regard, happens to be a sign of contradiction in favor of the Church’s Tradition. It has a unique strength to defend this Tradition, inasmuch as its rejection of all the liberal reforms is non-negotiable and uncompromising. And so its position proves to be a direct and complete response to what the Church needs in the current situation.



What is perhaps new in recent years is the way in which perplexed Catholics view the Society. As many see it, the Society has been de-demonized. People no longer view it as a parallel church that is or is becoming schismatic, or as a tiny group reacting against modernity, fixed in its backward-looking ways, and incapable of living with the times. Nowadays its situation is often envied, and the treasures on which it lives are coveted. In short, it is a reference point for many people. Catholics who discover it are attracted by its preaching, its liturgy, the charity of its priests, the quality of its schools, and the atmosphere of its chapels. And more and more the Society enables Catholics and priests to rediscover the treasures of the Church. This is very encouraging.

2. What does the Society of Saint Pius X have to offer to Catholics today that is not provided by the Ecclesia Dei communities?

The communities formerly attached to the *Ecclesia Dei* Commission, which no longer exists today, offer at their level the traditional liturgy, and as a whole provide traditional catechesis. Judging superficially, you might think that there is little difference between them and the Society. However, they themselves insist on how they differ from it, particularly in regard to obedience. They describe the Society as being animated by a spirit tinged with sedevacantism, living as though it were accountable to no one, and thus constituting a danger for ecclesial unity and the faith of its faithful. According to them, to simplify a bit, they claim to do “within the Church” what the Society would seek to do “outside the Church.”

What they don't say is that in reality they only have a restricted liberty. They have only the space that is granted to them by a more or less benevolent hierarchy, inspired to a greater or lesser degree by personalist and liberal principles, and regardless incapable of acknowledging the necessary and primordial place of the Church's Tradition. Consequently, their apostolate and their influence are bridled, hobbled, compromised, so that the question about their concrete survival becomes increasingly worrisome. But there is more: the very meaning of their attachment to Tradition becomes incoherent. Indeed, this restricted liberty is conceded to them in the name of a special charism, a liturgical preference, a particular sensibility. This has several extremely serious consequences.

First of all, Tradition is no longer defended as indispensable, the one thing necessary, having inalienable rights in the Church. It is requested as a preferred good. They claim a right to the traditional liturgy without stating clearly that the modern liturgy is unacceptable because it corrupts the faith. They claim a right to traditional doctrine without stating clearly that this Tradition is the only guarantee of the integrity of the faith, to the exclusion of all orientations that depart from it. Now, Tradition cannot be defended as a particular good of this or that community which only asks for its own right to live by it, in preference to another good. Tradition must be defended as the common good of the whole Church, and demanded for every Catholic as their exclusive good. On the other hand, besides the precariousness of their situation, these communities find that conditions are made on their public expression of the faith. In particular, opposition to all forms of liberalism is impossible for them. Now, Tradition cannot be defended effectively without at the same time condemning the errors that are opposed to it. And by persistently remaining silent about these errors, one ends up no longer perceiving how harmful they are, and little by little one assimilates them without noticing it.

Of course, we are not judging here the good that this or that priest may be doing in this or that situation, nor the zeal that may animate him personally in his pastoral ministry. But we do note that the precariousness of these communities, and the conditioning to which they have been



subjected concretely since their foundation, objectively deprives them of full liberty to serve the Universal Church unconditionally.

For his part, Archbishop Lefebvre did not allow himself to be intimidated either by threats or by blows; in giving to the Society the means by which to perpetuate its fight on behalf of the Church, he resolutely provided the Society with supreme liberty: not the false liberty of wanting to be independent with regard to all human authority, but rather the true liberty of working entirely and unconditionally for the restoration of the faith, the priesthood, and the Mass. To Catholics today, the Society offers uncompromising truth, which is served unconditionally, with the means of living by it with integrity, for the salvation of souls and the service of the whole Church.

3. What, in your opinion, is the biggest obstacle for those who hesitate to attend the Masses of the Society?

The main reason that holds back the faithful who are attracted by the Traditional liturgy is no doubt the apparent illegality of our canonical situation, the fact that we are not officially recognized by the ecclesiastical authorities. And this brings us to the question of obedience, which was touched on earlier. It has to be understood correctly that, although concrete recognition and approval by the authorities is always desirable for a work of the Church, in fact there are exceptional situations in which this is not absolutely necessary.

The situation of the Society is itself dependent on the situation of the Church in general, which for several decades now has been going through an unprecedented crisis. Pope Paul VI himself already spoke about the self-destruction of the Church. This is unfortunately caused by the encouragement given by the highest authorities of the Church to the modern errors which, during the Second Vatican Council and in the reforms that resulted from it, have deeply penetrated the whole Church and have led countless multitudes of the faithful to abandon their faith. So that, instead of preserving the deposit of faith for the salvation of souls and the common good of the whole Church, the pope placed his authority at the service of the destruction of the Church.

To his everlasting credit, Archbishop Lefebvre rejected this self-destruction and courageously preserved the Tradition of the Church by rejecting the destructive novelties and by continuing to offer to souls the supernatural goods of doctrine, the Mass, and the sacraments. Now this was precisely the reason why the ecclesiastical authorities chose to sanction him, to suppress his work, and thus to deprive him of canonical recognition. What was at stake at that moment was nothing less than the safeguarding of the Catholic faith, and of the liturgy that expresses this faith. Confronted with this abuse of authority, Abp. Lefebvre could not agree to stop his work. That would have been to abandon the faithful, who would have found themselves deprived of sound doctrine and the Traditional liturgy, and left without a compass to deal with the modern errors. Abp. Lefebvre understood that the suppression of the Society was an abuse of authority, seriously compromising the good of the Church. Now authority is given to the pope to preserve the good of the Church, not to compromise it. And obedience is due to him when it is a matter of collaborating for the good of the Church, not when it is a matter of collaborating to ruin it. Consequently, and indeed in spite of himself, Abp. Lefebvre had the courage not to obey ... in order to obey. Remembering that, by the will of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the salvation of souls is the first law of the Church, on which all the other canonical laws depend, he preferred to obey this first law and to risk being rejected by the Church's hierarchy, rather than to disobey this law by submitting to the prohibitions that were raining down on him. "We must obey God rather than men."



Unfortunately, the situation is still the same today, and the Society continues to put the good of souls and the good of the Church first, without worrying about intimidations or criticisms. It would be very happy if it could be approved by the supreme authority: this would be the sign that the authority has rediscovered the meaning of its mission and understands what the true good of the Church is. And it would be happy to be able to continue to serve the Church with a legal status. But as long as the price of this legality is accepting the unacceptable—the errors that are destroying the Church and the liturgy that is corrupting the faith—it prefers to continue to work under the unjust disapproval placed upon it, rather than to betray the Church and the souls that find refuge in its chapels.

4. What is the best way for families to profit by what the Society of Saint Pius X offers to them?

Families are the very special object of the Society's concerns, because that is where vocations are born and grow, as well as the young people who will found tomorrow's families. By coming to settle near our priories, families benefit from a rich parish life that is nourished by the sacraments, follows the rhythms of prayer, and is enlivened by many other families, which make up a network of mutual help and very comforting Christian charity. The more a family gets involved in the life of a chapel or priory, the stronger and more capable of setting a good example it becomes. The altar naturally becomes a landmark for such a family and the source of its spiritual life; the devotion that it shows enables it to grow in generosity, and little by little the liturgical and sacramental life detaches it from the spirit of the world and promotes the nurturing of the Christian virtues.

We must of course mention the schools run by the Society or by the communities that are affiliated with it, in which the staff strives to form complete men and women, both on the intellectual and physical level and also on the moral and supernatural level. These schools, although imperfect like any human work, are nevertheless true blessings for families.

Finally, I would like to mention the Third Order of our Society, which offers to families in particular a very solid spiritual framework to guide parents in their various duties, and especially in their mission as educators. By this more direct affiliation, the faithful benefit from all the graces of the Society acquired by the prayers and merits of its members, and they spiritually support it in its combat for the Church. This, along with their personal fidelity to the very simple commitments of their rule, is a great aid for their personal sanctification and for that of their whole family.

5. What is the greatest danger that traditional Catholics face today? In what are they most vulnerable?

The first thing that I think of is the menace of the worldly spirit, made up of comfort, materialism, sensuality, and lethargy. Our lay faithful, and the members of the Society themselves, are human beings like everyone else, wounded by original sin, and it is important not to underestimate naively the possible corruption of the Christian life in the soul of any Catholic, whether by way of human respect, indifference, selfishness, or impurity. We must do all that we can to preserve ourselves from it, and to preserve young people in particular. This requires study of the concrete problems that arise today, particularly because of the almost universal access to the internet, which is too often both a moral and an ideological sewer. The invasion of screens and unsupervised usage of them should be the topic of serious studies, so that there is a greater



awareness of the problems that it poses, and so that sound responses can be implemented to limit the damage being done and to take more and more preventative measures.

Another point to underscore, perhaps, among Catholics who have always been traditionalists, is the risk of falling asleep in a comfortable situation that was acquired by the efforts of their elders. This is the danger of relaxation. It seems to me that, on the contrary, the efforts of our elders place obligations on us. The larger facilities that we have today which provide access to the treasures of the Mass and Tradition are given to us to enable us to live more and more by them. Not so that we can relax and rest on what has been done. There are still many, many souls to be saved and the combat to be undertaken on their behalf is harder and more necessary than ever. The time and the facilities that we have at our disposal ought to urge us to work even more industriously for our own sanctification and for the development of apostolic works. Great generosity is needed along these lines, and above all an apostolic way of life that is absolutely and resolutely supernatural.

Finally, one last danger may be to live in the intellectual comfort of someone who knows that he is right and ends up disdainfully judging “those who are wrong.” On the one hand, the need for formation is universal, and people are often wrong to think that they no longer have anything to learn. On the contrary, it is indispensable to continue one’s formation on important subjects, on which every Catholic has the duty to be a source of light to enlighten others. On the other hand, it is always counterproductive to judge others as inferior on the pretext that they have received less. A Catholic worthy of the name and animated by authentic charity should rather set his heart on welcoming benevolently those who are in ignorance, so as to be able to help them along in their discovery of the true faith. A living, benevolent, patient charity does more to spread the faith than learned discourses that are cluttered with unfriendly, condescending criticisms.

6. We are now at the midway point of your term as Superior General. What reflections do you have on the past six years?

One of the things that has left the deepest impression on me during the last six years has been the generosity that our priests show in their apostolate; they managed to demonstrate it very particularly during the COVID crisis. They were able to take certain appropriate risks prudently, sometimes very creatively, to respond as well as possible to the needs of souls. This period showed the Society’s ability to find fitting responses to an exceptional situation, while putting the spiritual good of the faithful first. It was a beautiful illustration of the principle recalled earlier: “The salvation of souls is the first law of the Church.”

Another remarkable lesson from recent years was given to us by the Motu proprio *Traditionis custodes*. This document, which is logically part of the perspective of the current pontificate, proved once again, and definitively, the great prudence and profound wisdom of the decision made by Archbishop Lefebvre in 1988: by proceeding to consecrate bishops in spite of the absence of a papal mandate, he really gave to the Society the means to pursue its mission as “guardian of Tradition.” The pertinence of this choice seems indisputable today. Where would we be without our bishops? Where would Tradition be in the Church? And who else today has the liberty that we have to live fully by the treasures of the Church? No doubt the growth of our apostolate can be explained by the new evidence [for the wisdom of the consecrations].



7. *You speak of our bishops, and I think that we all have on our minds the sad death of Bishop Tissier de Mallerai. What does his passing represent for the Society? Could you speak about the consequences that it will have for the means available to the Society for undertaking its mission? In other words, returning to the midpoint of your term, what is your perspective on the six years to come?*

The death of Bishop Tissier de Mallerai is one of the most significant events in the history of the Society. A page of our history has truly been turned, a page which enters into eternity. But what a magnificent page! Bishop Tissier was present from the beginning, from the first hours of the saga of Archbishop Lefebvre. He lived close to our founder, sharing with him the joys and the pains that accompanied the growth of the Society, until he was ultimately chosen to be one of the four bishops who succeeded him. And his entire life was a life of ardent and courageous fidelity in the battle for the faith and for the mission of the Society. For the Church, for souls, all the way to the end. He even went beyond his strength. His generosity and his zeal carried him farther than his steps were able to take him. He also had a unique passion for speaking to us about Archbishop Lefebvre and the history of the Society. We miss him. But we are proud of Bishop Tissier de Mallerai. Proud of our bishop and the example that he left us.

But obviously, Providence is speaking to us through this event. It is very clear that his death raises the question of the continuance of the work of the Society, which now has only two bishops, and whose mission for souls appears ever more necessary, in the time of terrible confusion that the Church is living through today. But this question can only be addressed in calm and prayer. Following the example of Archbishop Lefebvre, the Society lets itself be guided by Providence, which has always clearly indicated the paths to follow and the decisions to take. Today, as yesterday, this Providence directs us. The future is in its hands, and we follow it with confidence. When the time comes, we will know how to take up our responsibilities, in conscience. Before souls and before the members of the Society. Before God. Let us remain in peace and simply entrust this matter to Our Lady.

As for the future, speaking more generally, I would strongly hope that the next few years will see priests and lay faithful giving a new importance to a vital question: the need for vocations. Not only regarding ways to attract more and more new recruits to the service of Christ, whether in the priestly or religious life, but also regarding ways to ensure the perseverance of those who have vocations.

And I think that we must understand in particular that we must pray more. Yes, pray. Pray that God may send laborers into His harvest, for it is abundant and they are not very numerous. And pray to thank Him for vocations already received, for these last few years have been very encouraging in this regard. But the ideal of sanctity must attract consecrated souls more and more, and become more and more attractive among our young people. Souls are waiting. They are thirsty. They need legions of apostles. And God alone raises up these apostles, pastors, or contemplative souls. Therefore we must pray to God that He will call, and that generous souls will be able to be open to His voice and to respond to it faithfully. For this grace let us ask especially the Immaculate Virgin, to Our Lady of Compassion, Mother of priests and model of religious souls.

God bless you.

Don Davide Pagliarani
Superior General

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