

Revisiting Sedevacantism

Father James F. Wathen (1932-2006)

May 1, 2005

Now that we have a new Pope, there are those who have done their research and concluded and pronounced that “We have no Pope.” We call these people “sedevacantists,” because they hereby say that the Chair of St. Peter is still vacant. Presumably, they will do us the unsolicited service of informing us of the arrival of a pope whom they have validated.



This great division among “Traditionalists” is truly lamentable and unhealthy, but, evidently, there is no helping it. Argument is useless. For this reason, here, I am not speaking to sedevacantists, but to those who feel some urgency - some need or obligation - to arrive at a conclusion as to whether the new Pope, Benedict XVI, is a legitimate successor to St. Peter. The theology of the matter is so clear and simple that it is rather surprising that this division exists at all. I have made an effort in the book “*Who Shall Ascend?*” to lay this theology out in an orderly fashion, but evidently my effort was unsuccessful. This is not altogether inexplicable, because, after all, it is a theological matter, a matter of both moral theology and Canon Law, which most people are not schooled in and have no need to be schooled in, because, in the present instance, they really do not need to know the arguments for and against the legitimacy of the present Pope. The matter really does not concern them practically, even if they wish to concern themselves with it theoretically, a truth I cannot state emphatically enough.

Here I wish to abbreviate what is said in the pages of the aforesaid book.

Prima sedes a nemine judicatur. This is Canon 1556, which I failed to quote in my book, though I did state the fact of the law and the ecclesiastical admonition. These words mean: “The First Chair is judged by no one,” which means that none of the pope’s subjects are allowed to judge the status of him who sits on the throne of St. Peter. We may judge his theology and his public acts, as we are bound to judge the beliefs and ideas of everyone which whom we come into serious contact; but we may not judge whether he is a legitimate pope. Sedevacantists claim to be very expert about Canon 181, but Canon 1556 has somehow eluded them.

I should be able to stop right here, because a good Catholic should be satisfied with this directive. Holy Mother Church tells her children, “The legitimacy of the pope is not your concern; it is the concern of Christ only, because He alone has authority over the pope, and He has the power to solve any problems that may arise from his being illegitimate, should the case ever occur.” A sensible Catholic should be able to deduce from this directive that the legitimacy (or lack of it) of the pope does not bear on his religious obligations, that his religious obligations are no different whether the pope is legal or illegal, and that concern about the matter is a distraction from his relationship to Christ and the Church, a

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source of spiritual disquiet. Therefore, to the extent that is possible, for the sake of his peace of mind and attention to his own spiritual welfare, the sensible Catholic should resolve to stay as far away from sedevacantists and their writings as possible. Furthermore, any Catholic who feels bound and determined to pursue this matter, no matter what the Church says, is neither sensible, nor pious, nor humble, no matter how well-intentioned he credits himself with being. Neither is he seriously desirous of growing in virtue and loving union with Christ; instead, he wants something to distract him from his prayers and pursuit of spiritual intimacy.

The main argument of the sedevacantists is that an heretical pope has incurred the censure of excommunication. By excommunication, he has been expelled from the Church. As a non-Catholic, it is impossible for him to be the head of the Catholic Church. He may, therefore, occupy the Chair of St. Peter, but he most certainly does not have his authority. He can rightly be called a “usurper.”

I do not know why it is so difficult to impart the idea that the word “excommunication” does not mean expulsion. It is impossible for anyone for any reason to be expelled from the Church; the indelible mark of Baptism makes it so. Excommunication means that an individual who has received this censure is, by reason of some specific sin, rendered incapable of participating in the communal life of the Church, and forbidden to try and do so. He may not, therefore, act as usher, sing in the choir, be a witness at a marriage, etc. Due to this censure, if he is a cleric, he is forbidden to exercise whatever office he may hold, whether he be pope, a bishop, a pastor, or whatever. Whether the individual actually loses his office, depends upon what kind of sin he committed and what the law says about this censurable infraction.

What is important in this context is that it is not the business of the ordinary Catholic priest or lay person, or anyone who has no authority over such an individual to concern himself with the legal status. No matter what is the said individual’s status, the religious obligations of his subjects are in no way altered thereby.

The next is a key point: sedevacantists say that it is necessary to know whether the pope and the bishops are “in office” or “out of office” that we may know whether we are bound to obey them. If the pope is not a pope, we do not have to obey him; we do not, therefore, have to accept the New Mass, and all the other changes in the Church, which have been introduced since the Second Vatican Council. If they hold their office legitimately, then we must obey them. Since they do not, we are in no way bound. We can therefore ignore them and their commands and procedures and do things which legitimate popes and bishops of the past imposed upon us.

This position is altogether wrong. The reason we do not have to accept the changes wrought by the Conciliar popes (of whom Pope Benedict XVI most certainly will prove to be one) is not that the lawgivers are illegitimate, but that *there are no legal laws* which bind us to do so, and, those individuals, legitimate or illegitimate, have neither the authority nor the power to require us by law to abandon the traditional beliefs and practices of our holy religion.

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Moreover, just because we claim that these men do not have the authority to command us to violate the established laws and customs of the Church, we are not thereby removing ourselves from their authority; we are not disobedient to them; and we are not in a state of schism. Should they govern according to the laws of the Church, we should obey them and their new laws, should they make any.

We do not have to accept the New Mass, not because the Conciliar popes have all been illegitimate, but because the Old Mass was established by inviolable law to be the only legal and acceptable Mass of the Roman Rite for all time to come. Just as it is totally impossible for a pope to exempt all Catholics from ever having to go to Mass on Sunday again; just as it is impossible for any pope to exempt all men from entering the Church for salvation; just as it is impossible for any pope to make a woman a priest; it is impossible for any pope to create a "new mass" and bind his subjects to attend it.

What I say of the Mass, I can say of many other things. A legitimate pope cannot nullify valid marriages; he cannot appoint his own successor; he cannot disqualify certain cardinals from their right to participate in the election of his successor; he cannot reduce the number of sacraments; he cannot change the forms of the sacraments so as to render them invalid; and so on.

How do we know what things the pope can and cannot legitimately do? We do not know. The only thing we have to know is our obligation to Christ as Catholics, all of which have been laid down for us for many centuries, all of which make up the traditional catholic religion, practically all of which can be found in the catechism.

"**Revisiting Sedevacantism**" taken from the book "**I Know Mine and Mine Know Me**", Volume I of the compiled works of Fr. James F. Wathen:

<https://www.amazon.com/Know-Mine-Me/dp/0983356157>