

Shortly after the episcopal consecrations in Ecône on June 30th, 1988, the President of the *International Federation Una Voce*, Dr. Eric M. de Saventhem, together with his wife, had several long conversations with an ecclesiastical friend who is a bishop. When His Excellency asked for a written summary of what they had told him, Dr. de Saventhem sent him the following letter which was subsequently published (in the German original) in *Una Voce Korrespondenz*, September/ October 1988. With their kind permission we now reproduce this *text* in an English translation by Mary Waddelove, revised and approved by the Author. Dr. and Madame de Saventhem's understanding of Vatican complexities at the present time is unrivalled.

An Avoidable Tragedy

ERIC M. De SAVENTHEM

Your Excellency,

The tragic grand finale of June 30th is, to us, particularly distressing because we are certain that it could have been avoided. This thought continues to torment us. We are trying to throw light on some underlying causal relationships. In so doing, we are mindful also of the fact that, particularly when conflict breaks out in the Church, that side carries the heavier responsibility to whom greater spiritual power has been granted, because: the greater the power, the greater also the imperative obligation to exercise healing forbearance.

“If Rome had granted to Mgr. Lefebvre the right to celebrate Mass in Latin in accordance with the Rite of Saint Pius V twelve years ago, today's schism would certainly not have arisen”, as Cardinal Oddi said a few days ago. He is right a thousand times: it was the suppression of the Old Mass, pushed through relentlessly by administrative means, which introduced the seed of division into the *Corpus Ecclesiae*. In so far as Cardinal Oddi's statement implies a reproach, its main target is the pontificate of Paul VI: “twelve years ago”, that is in 1976, it was incumbent on the Montini Pope to accommodate, at least in the area of liturgy, Mgr. Lefebvre's constantly repeated request: “Allow us to make the ‘experiment’ of Tradition”. Paul VI was firmly convinced that he could not do this: “The Church would have lost its credibility” he said just then to Jean Guilton. And at exactly the same time – October 1976 – the late

Archbishop Benelli emphasized to my wife and myself that, even within the post-conciliar liturgical diversity, there could be no place for the Old Mass, because “the Old Mass stands for a different ecclesiology”.

Previous History

What was not done in 1976 could, nay ought to have been made up for later on. Pope John Paul II’s attitude on this issue was different from that of his predecessor. Already at the beginning of his pontificate this became evident. When he received Mgr. Lefebvre in November 1978, the Pope indicated that the problem of the old liturgy was for him “a question of ecclesiastical discipline”, which could be settled without difficulty. He also seemed to understand the need for an early solution: already on Holy Thursday 1980, the encyclical *In Coena Domini* should have announced *urbi et orbi* the rehabilitation of the Old Mass. This first attempt foundered on the resistance of Montini’s “widows”, then still strongly entrenched in the Curia.

Two years later there was a second try: in December 1982, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote to Mgr. Lefebvre that, “independently from his case”, the Pope intended to re-permit in the entire Church the use of the old Order of the Mass, provided that “such use does not imply any contempt of the Missal renewed by Pope Paul VI and that the liturgical decrees of the Holy See currently in force be fully recognized”. But the Archbishop and all other defenders of tradition waited in vain for corresponding legislative action: yielding to protests from various episcopal conferences, this project too was dropped by the Pope.

The Indult

Then, in 1984, the inglorious “Indult” was promulgated, that “gracious favour” crippled by so many odious restrictions. In no way did it bring the hoped-for and necessary restoration *aequo iure et honore* of the Old Mass, but merely catered for a case by case authorisation of its celebration with the faithful who asked for it. And since this limited concession was bound to trigger opposition from the cartel of liturgists, its practical application was, in addition, left to the discretion of the local Ordinaries – with the (fore-seeable) result that in most dioceses it was either not applied at all, or was used only rarely and subject to humiliating additional conditions.

The psychological consequences of papal indecision in this supremely important matter were disastrous: there followed an

* See *Christian Order*, October 1978.

accelerated loss of confidence in the sincerity of all pronouncements by which the Pope assured the faithful attached to tradition of his “paternal solicitude”. Anyone continuing to take these assurances seriously soon had to realise with dismay that the Pope, constrained by the principle of collegiality which he kept reaffirming, was in fact prevented from exercising his office in the manner which he himself considered necessary.

This distressing realization was again confirmed at the beginning of 1987. A commission of cardinals had been instructed to prepare recommendations for amending the useless Indult of 1984. A corresponding draft-law was submitted to the Pope by Cardinal Mayer in February 1987. Alarmed by leaks of the contents of this draft, several powerful episcopal conferences immediately protested violently against the planned new ruling. And, once again, the Pope conceded defeat: to this day, the cardinals’ recommendations lie on his desk, unsigned.

A Lack of Confidence

Why do I expose all this in such detail to Your Excellency? For a correct assessment of the most recent events, knowledge of these various phases of the “quarrel of rites” seems to me to be indispensable. It is this knowledge, above all, which explains the lack of confidence which, from the very beginnings, has marred the conversations between Rome and Ecône. Because, despite any broadening of the area of conflict over the last few years, the solution of the liturgical problem remained the touchstone on which Rome’s credibility as guardian of tradition would be tested. This was so not only for Mgr. Lefebvre and the traditionalist family closely grouped around him, but above all for the millions of believers, loyal to the Pope, who no longer find in the “Conciliar Church”, with its progressively degraded liturgy, a spiritual homeland for a life nourished by unadulterated Catholic Faith, the “Faith of all time”.

In our view, the collapse of the recent negotiations must, in the final analysis, be attributed to the fact that Rome, even under John Paul II, has failed to adduce that “proof” of credibility which was demanded of it in the liturgical field.

Given the radical different power potential existing between the two sides, a satisfactory outcome of the negotiations could be hoped for only if the weaker party could trust the stronger one not to take undue advantage of its superiority. “You must have confidence in the Holy See” wrote Cardinal Ratzinger in his last letter to Mgr. Lefebvre, rejecting the latter’s requests concerning the date and number of episcopal consecrations and the composition of the new Roman Commission. But precisely for such an act of trust the necessary foundation was lacking utterly: “I no longer have any confidence in them”, said the

Archbishop to us a few days later.

My wife and I remain convinced that Rome could have ensured such minimal disposition for trustfulness by timely initiation of “measures for generating trust”. When Cardinal Ratzinger’s letter of July 28th, 1987, made to the Archbishop proposals of an un hoped-for generosity, we immediately informed the Cardinal of Mgr. Lefebvre’s initial, deeply wary reaction: “What do they really want? Is this an attempt at a take-over?” We urged the Cardinal promptly to initiate actions that would engender a climate of trust. Such actions should not, of course, have any direct bearing on the negotiations offered to the Fraternity, or else they could appear as mere tactical moves. Rather should they be signals given to the Church as a whole and indicating beyond doubt Rome’s sincere desire to maintain and promote Tradition – in the sense in which Mgr. Lefebvre understands this concept.

A New Edition of the Indult

One such measure suggested itself peremptorily: the immediate promulgation of the Cardinals’ recommendations for emending the Indult of October, 1984. Drawn up at the end of 1986, they had been worked out months *before* Mgr. Lefebvre’s first public “threat” to consecrate bishops even without Roman permission. Acceptance of these recommendations by the Pope could not, therefore, be interpreted as a mere “ploy” in the game of chess between Rome and Ecône. Rather would they give proof of Rome’s independent efforts to rehabilitate the Old Mass as the ‘core-piece’ of tradition. Thus, there would have been created that minimum of trust which was absolutely indispensable for ensuring the success of the talks between the Cardinal and the Archbishop. But, again, nothing happened – *nothing*.

In the conflict with Mgr. Lefebvre, Paul VI had been guided by ecclesiological considerations (erroneous ones, in our opinion), and by concern for the credibility of the Church “facing outward”. Hence during his pontificate no bridges could be built – despite Paul VI’s growing awareness of the accelerating decadence of all forms of Church life since the Council. By contrast, under John Paul II, renewed attention was given to “credibility facing inwards”. But efforts in this direction were too strongly determined by pragmatic considerations. Rome’s action – and above all her inaction – was primarily governed by considerations of the relative “factors of power” by which at any given moment she saw herself confronted.

Power Politics

Seen in terms of power, the Fraternity stands out among the supporters of tradition for one reason in particular: during Mgr. Lefebvre's life-time it disposes of a factual "autarchy of ordinations". By announcing that he would ensure continuation of this autarchy beyond his death by consecrating bishops "with or without Rome's authorisation", the Archbishop forced Rome to recognize that, as a power factor, he and his movement had to be taken seriously. This is why negotiations were eventually initiated with him. For fear of the "power" of the Episcopal Conferences, Rome most regrettably abstained from concerning herself at the same time, or even as a matter of priority, with the much greater number of unorganized upholders of tradition. Much talk is heard about the necessity of "pastoral care for those estranged from the Church". But, even under the present pontificate, one waits in vain for Rome herself to adopt credible pastoral measures for those hundreds of thousands of her own people who, in less than two decades, have been alienated from the Church by an arbitrary interpretation and application of the Council's decisions.

Moreover – and this was an omission fraught with particularly heavy consequences – no energetic measures were ever taken in favour of candidates for the priesthood whose vocation is centred upon that traditional concept of the Catholic priest which still inspired *all* the relevant texts of Vatican II. The collapse of the Roman Seminary *Mater Ecclesiae* has cast a long shadow because it seemed to prove Rome's utter *helplessness* in this area, which is so crucial for the future of the Church.

The fatal consequences of this Roman pragmatism became evident in the final phase of negotiations with Mgr. Lefebvre. Since there was no basis for trust, for the Archbishop likewise those aspects became predominant on which would depend in future the relative strength or weakness of the Fraternity and of the traditional family for whom it catered. These aspects were the whole issue of "in-house" bishops, and the numerical weight of the Fraternity's representatives on and in the new Roman Secretariat for Tradition. In his last letter to the Pope, dated June 2nd, 1988, Mgr. Lefebvre stressed their fundamental importance: "So as to protect us from all compromise, we ask for several bishops, chosen from Tradition, and for a majority of members in the Roman Commission". With Rome herself thinking mainly in categories of power, the traditional family's overriding "need for security" which here became clearly evident should have been met with ready comprehension. But in the Pope's reply of June 9th, 1988, not the slightest reference to it can be found.

Last Hopes

True, Mgr. Lefebvre's letter of June 2nd "expressly interrupts

the process of reconciliation”, as was subsequently stated in the Informative Note issued by the Vatican Press Office. Yet, we know from Mgr. Lefebvre himself that he was awaiting the Pope’s reply with an ultimate hope. He expected that now, at long last, the Holy Father would summon him for a personal encounter. A most urgent appeal to do just this had been on the Pope’s desk since June 7th. It came from Mgr. Alfredo Mendez, former bishop of Arecibo, and had been sent by telefax direct to Cardinal Ratzinger with the plea that he hand it personally to the addressee:

“Most Holy Father,

Do not delay to intervene personally in this last and crucial phase of the negotiations. In response to Mgr. Lefebvre’s latest letter, do please summon the venerable Archbishop for a private audience. Let him then hear from your own lips how highly you esteem the Society’s particular ‘charism’ and how earnestly you desire the collaboration of its priests for the good of the entire Church, the *Corpus Mysticum*.

It is my firm conviction that only such a personal intervention by Your Holiness can still avert the tragedy of a *rupture definitive* being consummated on June 30th.”

But this impassioned plea remained, again, unheeded. On the contrary, the papal reply dated June 9th brought a further – gratuitous – escalation of the conflict: “... your planned undertaking, if realized, could not appear but as a schismatic act”. Instead of embracing, in a last gesture of healing forbearance, the “traditional family”, rendered deeply insecure through years of contempt and even proscription, Rome now threatened it with ejection from the communion of the Church. Through its own action, the Holy See thus deprived itself of all possibility of subsequently judging the illicit episcopal consecrations with the clemency which Canon Law always lets prevail *post factum*, i.e. after the event.

In retrospect, the road leading to the consecrations of June 30th appears paved more with grave Roman (and, unfortunately, also Papal) omissions than with Lefebvrist “obstinacies”. And from the eyes of an informed public this cannot be hidden by attempting to present the Archbishop’s act of grave disobedience as an offence against the Faith. It is said – today ! – that Mgr. Lefebvre has “an erroneous concept of Tradition”. If this were so, Cardinal Ratzinger could not, on behalf of the Pope, have addressed to the Archbishop the following words in his letter of July 28th, 1987:

“Your ardent desire to safeguard Tradition by procuring for

it ‘the means to live and to prosper’ testifies to your attachment to the Faith of all time ... The Holy Father understands your concern and shares it.”

By writing thus, Rome seemed to identify herself with precisely that “understanding of Tradition” which has, throughout, inspired the Archbishop’s work, i.e. “the faithful transmission of what has been received”. If that grave assertion – “The Holy Father understands your concern *and shares it*” – is now put aside and if, instead, through an appeal to “the living tradition” or, still more daringly, to an alleged “dynamism of tradition”, one is virtually accusing the Archbishop of heterodoxy, then the integrity of Rome’s desire for reconciliation appears indeed to be open to question.

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