



# Letter to Brother Priests

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N° 1 – April 2018

## The Society of St. Pius X: Well known and yet so little known

The Society of St Pius X (SSPX) has been in existence for nearly 50 years and its founder, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, has been much spoken of during this time, both within the Catholic Church and by the secular media. Particular events concerning the SSPX have received a lot of publicity, such as the 1976 suspense *a divinis* and the 1988 Consecrations of four Bishops by the Archbishop. Currently there is much discussion surrounding a possible ‘agreement’ or ‘regularisation’ of the SSPX. This traditional Catholic society of priests has a presence in many countries throughout the world, with priestly priories, schools, chapels and Mass centres and affiliated traditional religious communities working in tandem (Benedictines, Dominicans, Capuchins, etc). Yet at the same time there can be many confused notions and misunderstandings about the work of the Society of St Pius X, even misinformation!

This publication is intended to communicate *to* and inform diocesan priests *of* the work of the SSPX. It has as its principal goal to communicate the doctrinal position of the SSPX in relation to the liturgy of the Church, the Second Vatican Council and its effects, the Priesthood and any other significant Church events and to show that this position is keeping with the bi-millennial tradition of Church.

What the SSPX is, its work and its ordinary activities, is not always well known. These occasional letters will try to remedy any confusion which may exist.

## Archbishop Lefebvre, founder of the Society of St. Pius X

Marcel Lefebvre was born in Tourcoing, near Lille in northern France, in 1905. His father, René Lefebvre, passed away in 1944 as a result of ill treatment which he had received during his internment in the prison camp at Sonnenburg, Germany, where he had been imprisoned for his resistance work during the Second World War. He had twice been condemned to death in Berlin on the 28<sup>th</sup> May 1942 for ‘*consorting with the enemy and recruiting the young to bear arms against the Third Reich*’. On the 6<sup>th</sup> July 1953, Mr. René Lefebvre was posthumously awarded the French Military Medal.

In 1923, after studying at Sacred Heart college, Marcel Lefebvre entered the French Seminary in Rome, studying at the Gregorian Pontifical University. He was ordained priest in the French city of Lille by Cardinal Liénart on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1929. After having been appointed as curate to a suburban parish in Lille, he was persuaded to join his eldest brother, Fr. René Lefebvre, in the missions of Gabon. His brother was a missionary in Gabon for 55 years. The football stadium in Libreville, Gabon, had already been named ‘Reverend Fr. Lefebvre Football Stadium’ because of Fr. René’s encouragement of football and his part in the founding of the ‘Gabon football team’.

### The Missionary

Marcel Lefebvre entered the noviciate of the Holy Ghost Fathers at Orly, near Paris. After his religious profession on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1932, he left France to become a missionary in Gabon. In 1945 he was appointed as prefect of studies at Mortain and then, two years later, was recommended to become Vicar Apostolic for Dakar. He was consecrated Bishop by Cardinal Liénart on the 18<sup>th</sup> September 1947, and appointed as Apostolic Delegate for French-speaking Africa and Madagascar. In 1955 he became

Archbishop of Dakar. In 1960 he was appointed as Assistant to the Pontifical throne and member of the central preparatory commission for the Second Vatican Council. He was transferred to the diocese of Tulle in 1962 and appointed as a consultant for the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. On the 26<sup>th</sup> May of the same year he was elected Superior General of the congregation of the Holy Ghost (at that time, consisting of 5000 members). In 1968 when the congregation met for an extraordinary meeting of *aggiornamento* (renewal in the spirit of the post Second Vatican Council era), he felt compelled to resign from the post of superior and retire.

### Founder of the Society of St Pius X

In 1970 he founded the Society of St Pius X, with the approval of the bishop of Fribourg. But on 6<sup>th</sup> May 1975, this society was suppressed, a decision which Archbishop Lefebvre would always contest. On the 1<sup>st</sup> July 1976, he received a *suspense a divinis* because of the priestly ordinations which he continued to perform, despite being forbidden to do so by the Vatican. This period and the years to follow would be peppered with controversies, protracted contacts with the congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and papal audiences (Paul VI in 1976 and John Paul II in 1978).

On 5<sup>th</sup> May 1988, following an apostolic visit by Cardinal Gagnon to the SSPX's seminary at Ecône, Archbishop Lefebvre signed a 'protocol of agreement' with the Vatican but the next day retracted his signature from the protocol, citing as his reason that, in fact, the protocol did not contain the right conditions for a sound agreement. Subsequently, on the 30<sup>th</sup> June 1988, he, along with his co-consecrating Bishop de Castro Mayer, consecrated four bishops. All six bishops would be declared *ipso facto* excommunicated.

Archbishop Lefebvre passed away three years later on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1991, in Martigny, Switzerland.

### The public man

Archbishop Lefebvre was a doctor of philosophy and theology, received an honorary doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh, was an Officer of the Legion of honour, commander of the Order of Christ (Portugal), grand officer of the National Order of Senegal and officer of the Equatorial Star (Gabon).

## Statutes and Spirit of the Society of St Pius X

### A Society of Apostolic life and the Priesthood

The Society of St Pius X is defined by the first article of its Statutes, namely: 'a priestly Society of common life without vows, similar to the example of the Missionary orders', (according to the terminology used by the 1917 Code of Canon Law no. 673 and the 1983 Code no. 731).

It should be noted that the Statutes of the SSPX make no special reference to the current doctrinal or liturgical problems in the Catholic Church and make no particular criticism of any contemporary or practical problems. Each sentence of the Statutes is weighted towards the sanctification of its members and, consequently, towards a blossoming of their apostolate. As stated the Statutes 'The final end of the Society is the priesthood and everything which concerns the priesthood'. The different apostolic works of the SSPX are then enumerated in a descending order in relation to their proximity to the ultimate end. It is first and foremost 'any apostolic work towards the formation of the priesthood'. After this, in order of importance, is anything which can help priestly sanctification: retreats, recollections, priestly associations and reviews produced with priestly holiness in mind, etc. Added to this is the formation of souls devoted to helping the priests in their work, concerning the preparation of the liturgy, the teaching of catechism and any material help for the priests in their daily work. Equally, Catholic schools orientated towards forming vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Moreover 'parish work and the peaching of parish missions which should be organised with the local Ordinary so that the SSPX can perform its apostolate

according to its own particular charism'. Finally, the SSPX can also willingly assist elderly and infirm priests and even support and encourage priests who have fallen away from their calling'.

The administrative rules of the SSPX and the organisation of its common life of apostolic work are very standard and do not greatly differ from the work of any other society of apostolic life.

A priesthood and spiritual life orientated towards the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass  
The most notable quality of the Statutes of the Society of St. Pius X is the intimate link which is established between the Sacred Liturgy, the spiritual life of the priest and the apostolate. If one could say that there is a particular spirituality of the SSPX, it is undoubtedly a spirituality of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Its purpose is 'to steer the whole life of the priest towards that which is the reason for his priesthood: the Holy Sacrifice, everything which it encompasses, everything which flows from it and everything which accompanies it'. Also, the members of the SSPX 'will have a true and continual devotion towards their Holy Mass, towards the liturgy which enshrines it and towards everything which contributes to make the liturgy more expressive of the Mystery accomplished in it... a profound theological knowledge of the Sacrifice of the Mass will convince them ever more firmly that the whole Revelation, the Mystery of Faith, the completion of the Mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption and the whole efficacy of the apostolate are accomplished in this sublime reality'. 'Nothing should be neglected to make sure that devotion and piety should be orientated towards and flow from the liturgy of the Holy Mass, which is at the centre of the Church's theology and pastoral approach'.

Another important element of the spirituality of the SSPX is set out in two short but significant sentences: 'They will have a boundless devotion to the Kingship of Our Lord Jesus Christ, in keeping with the infinity of His Kingship over persons, families and societies. If they must express a political preference, it will always be in accordance with the social Kingship of Our Lord Jesus Christ'.

## History and expansion of the Society of St. Pius X

In a few years (2020) the Society of St Pius X will be celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> year of its foundation and already its short history and development is worthy of note.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Superior General: Archbishop Lefebvre 1970 – 1982

On the 1<sup>st</sup> November 1970, Archbishop Lefebvre received the official approval of the Bishop of Fribourg to found the 'Society of St Pius X', the statutes of which had been written by the Archbishop. In those early years, given that the seminary at Ecône was the only place of studies for the SSPX, the seminarians were individually incardinated into different dioceses. The first houses of the SSPX were opened with the necessary authorisations of local ordinaries. In 1971, the SSPX received a letter of praise from the Congregation for the Clergy.

In 1974, an Apostolic visit to the Ecône Seminary took place. The two visitors expressed theological positions, notably concerning the theology of the Resurrection, which considerably clashed with the faith of the seminarians: as a consequence Archbishop Lefebvre, who was in Rome at that period, drew up a text declaration, which he sent to the seminary; a text dated 21<sup>st</sup> November, 1974, which would begin with these words: '[We adhere, with our whole heart and our whole soul to Catholic Rome...](#)'. This text would be published some time later and would unleash a series of events which would end by the decision being taken (by Rome or by the Bishop of Fribourg, which was never made very clear) to 'suppress' the Society of St Pius X.

Archbishop Lefebvre always questioned both the legality of this suppression (of which the judgment broke various principles of canon law) and its morality (given that the sole motivation for this suppression was the attachment to the traditional liturgy and teachings of the Church). Therefore, he decided to

disregard this suppression and continue his work. On the 29<sup>th</sup> June 1976, he ordained thirteen new priests, despite being forbidden to do so by Rome. This action, in its turn, incurred upon the Archbishop and the thirteen newly ordained priests the penalty: *suspense a divinis*.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Superior General: Fr Franz Schmidberger (1982 – 1994)

In accordance with the statutes of the SSPX, at the end of his twelve-year period of being Superior General of the SSPX, the Archbishop stepped down. At that time, there were about 100 priests in the SSPX, located in about 50 houses around the world. Father Franz Schmidberger, a German priest of the SSPX was elected Superior General. During his mandate as superior, the Archbishop consecrated four new bishops. As a result, a number of priests who could not accept these consecrations, decided to leave the SSPX in order to found the Society of St Peter. In 1994, at the end of Fr. Schmidberger's mandate as superior, there were about 300 priests in the SSPX in around 120 houses worldwide.

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Superior General: Bishop Bernard Fellay (1994 - present)

Bishop Fellay, of Swiss origin, was elected Superior General in 1994. He directs the SSPX, not because he is a bishop, but simply because he was elected by the General Chapter of the SSPX; he could and probably will be replaced by a priest as Superior General when the election of a new superior will take place in July 2018. At the end of his first period of mandate, in 2006 he was re-elected for a further term of office (twelve years).

Today, the Society of St Pius X comprises 635 priests in 175 houses spread throughout 33 countries to minister to souls in a total of 60 countries. As well as the priests, there are 115 Religious Brothers and 80 Oblate Sisters. An associate group of Religious 'Sisters of the Society of St Pius X', who work in and around the main houses of the SSPX, also count 195 members. If we add the number of seminarians (about 200), we can say that the SSPX totals around 1,200 active members.

## A day in the life of a priest of the Society of St. Pius X

The daily regime of a priest (or religious brother or sister) follows the same timetable throughout all SSPX houses, give or take the variations made necessary due to local conditions. The community chants the office of Prime together in the chapel at 6:30am; this is followed by a period of mental prayer (meditation) until 7:10am when the Angelus is recited followed by the Public Mass. Sometimes the priest may have to celebrate Mass in a chapel located away from the priory, perhaps late morning or early evening.

After breakfast, the priest will attend to his priestly activities. Some are spiritual (daily Bible reading, Spiritual reading, recitation of the Breviary); others will be somewhat mundane (sacristy work, administration and accounts, overseeing maintenance of buildings, etc.) and some of which may be more in the domain of practical and pastoral (confessions, marriages, conferences, catechism, etc).

At 12:15pm the community comes together to chant the office of Sext together, followed by the communal midday meal at 12:30pm. The day continues with similar priestly activities until 6pm or 7pm (according to the different communities) when the Rosary is recited in common, followed by the evening meal. Compline is sung together at 8.30pm or 8.45pm.

This timetable is the framework of the life of a priest in the Society of St. Pius X. However, a SSPX priest is also subject to a number of factors which can make his life quite different to that of a diocesan priest. An emergency call for the sacrament of extreme unction could come from somebody located a few hours' drive away. Regular sick calls are also made for the good faithful who have supported us in the past and can no longer make the journey to one of our chapels. The burial of one of the faithful who request the Latin Requiem Mass from us may also take up time as it can sometimes be far from our usual centres.

The Sunday apostolate can begin with a journey on the Saturday, or even on the Friday if the priest is responsible for a chapel or groups of faithful at a great distance. Add to this the maintenance of distant chapels etc., there can be a lot of travelling involved, particularly in larger countries or continents such as the United States. or Australia, or Africa, or India.

It is not always an easy life, but then anyone who would imitate the High Priest, Jesus Christ, could not really expect any other.

*(translated from [Lettres à nos frères prêtres](#) of the SSPX District of France)*