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ARCHBISHOP LEFEBVRE DEFIES POPE PAUL The Conflict Intensifies

By John Mutig, published in the September 2, 1976 edition of the Catholic Herald

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Following the dramatic traditionalist Mass celebrated August 29 by suspended Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, the next move in the escalating conflict between Rome and the ultra-conservative archbishop belongs to Pope Paul VI.

Many observers and Church officials here guess that the Pope will formally excommunicate the 70 year-old archbishop for celebrating the Mass in Lille, France. Pope Paul himself has called the celebration "a challenge to these keys placed in our hands by Christ."

Church lawyers have said that the process of formal excommunication would take at least a month to complete. A decree of excommunication, should one be issued by Pope Paul, would be the final act in a long series of skirmishes between the Vatican and the archbishop, who rejects most of the decrees of the Second Vatican Council as heresy and still celebrates the pre-conciliar Mass in Latin.



Photo from Archbishop Lefebvre Website

Archbishop Lefebvre, who has thousands of followers in the US, England, France and other western European countries, was suspended from priestly functions July 24. The suspension was the Vatican's reaction to the illegal ordination of 13 priests June 29 by the archbishop at his ultra-conservative Econe Seminary in Switzerland.

The August 29 Mass at

Archbishop Lefebvre Celebrates an Illicit Ordination Mass

the Lille Sports Arena which became a media event in Western Europe, was an open violation of the suspension. Church lawyers point out, however, that when a suspended priest says Mass, excommunication is not automatically incurred.

The archbishop, former superior general of the Holy Ghost Fathers as well as one-time apostolic delegate for French-speaking West Africa, has asked repeatedly to speak directly with Pope Paul VI.

Until August 27, the Pope demanded as a prerequisite for an audience a public retraction of the archbishop's rejection of Vatican Council decrees. But two days before the Lille Mass, the Vatican press office conceded in a declaration that the Pope would receive the rebel archbishop if he would "make known before hand the dispositions with which Archbishop Lefebvre would come" to the Vatican.

The Vatican has stopped short of calling the Mass at Lille, attended by 6,000, an open declaration of schism. But, Pope Paul himself, speaking to about 7,000 pilgrims at his Castelgandolfo summer residence while the Lille Mass was still in progress, termed the Mass a challenge to papal authority.

The archbishop, said Pope Paul before publicly reciting the Sunday noon Angelus, "has voluntarily committed a very revealing infraction of Church law, as obvious as it is serious, by the improper conferral of ordination through which he incurred suspension. "Now we hear the news that this confrere, with an attitude of challenging these keys placed in our hands by Christ, wants to take upon himself the celebration of acts of worship and ministry without obtaining the previous required reconciliation with the Church."

The Pope called for "union and peace within the Church" during the noontime *Angelus*, the latest in a series of papal appeals to Archbishop Lefebvre.

Archivist's 2014 Update: To better understand how this tragic division happened in the church, we will follow the journey of Marcel Lefebvre that led to his excommunication from the Catholic Church. This summary of events is from the internet.

Family Background

Marcel-Francois Marie Joseph Lefebvre was born on November 29, 1905 in Tourcoing, France. He was the second son and third child of eight children of textile factory-owner René Lefebvre and Gabrielle Watine, who died in 1938. Marcel's father René died at age 62 in 1944 in the German concentration camp at Sonnenburg (in East Brandenburg, Germany), where he had been imprisoned by the Gestapo because of his work for the French Resistance and British Intelligence.

Marcel's parents were devout Catholics who brought their children to daily Mass. His father was an outspoken monarchist who ran a spy-ring for British Intelligence when Tourcoing was occupied by the Germans during World War

Studies for the Priesthood and Ordination

In 1923 Lefebvre began studies for the priesthood; at the insistence of his father he went to the French Seminary in Rome. He would later credit his conservative views to the rector, a Breton priest named Father Henri Le Floch. His studies were interrupted in 1926 and 1927 when he did his military service. On May 25, 1929 he was ordained deacon by Cardinal Basilio Pompili in the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome. On September 21, 1929 he was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop (soon to be Cardinal) Achille Liénart in Lille, the diocese in which he was incardinated. After ordination, he continued his studies in Rome, completing a doctorate in theology in July 1930.

In August 1930 Cardinal Liénart assigned Lefebvre to be assistant curate in a parish in Lomme, a suburb of Lille. Even before this, Lefebvre had already asked to be released for missionary duties as a member of the Holy Ghost Fathers. But the cardinal insisted that he consider this for a year while he engaged in parish work in the Diocese of Lille. In July 1931 Liénart released Lefebvre from the diocese. In September Lefebvre entered the novitiate of the Holy Ghost Fathers at Orly. A year later, on September 8, 1932, he took simple vows for a period of three years.

First Assignment with the Holy Ghost Fathers

Lefebvre's first assignment as a Holy Ghost Father was as a professor at Saint John's Seminary in Libreville, Gabon. In 1934 he was made rector of the seminary. On September 28, 1935 he made his perpetual vows. He served as superior of a number of missions of the Holy Ghost Fathers in Gabon. In October 1945 Lefebvre was ordered by the superior general to return to France and take up new duties as rector of the Holy Ghost Fathers seminary in Mortain.

Called to be a Bishop in Africa

Lefebvre's return to France was not to last long. On June 12, 1947, Pope Pius XII appointed him Vicar Apostolic of Dakar in Senegal; he received the titular episcopal see of Anthedon (El Blakiyeh near Gaza in Palestine). On September 18, 1947 he was consecrated a bishop in his family's parish church in Tourcoing by Achille Liénart who had previously ordained him a priest; acting as co-consecrators were Bishop Jean-Baptiste Fauret, C.S.Sp. and Bishop Alfred-Jean-Félix Ancel.

In his new position Lefebvre was responsible for an area with a population of three and a half million people, of whom only 50,000 were Catholics.

On September 22, 1948, Lefebvre, while continuing as Vicar Apostolic of Dakar, received additional responsibilities: Pope Pius XII appointed him Apostolic Delegate to French Africa. In this capacity he was the papal representative to the Church authorities in 46 dioceses "in continental and insular Africa subject to the French Government, with the addition of the Diocese of Reunion, the whole of the island of Madagascar and the other neighboring

islands under French rule, but excluding the dioceses of North Africa, namely those of Carthage, Constantine, Algiers and Oran." With this new responsibility he was appointed Archbishop of the titular see of Arcadiopolis in Europa.

Apostolic Delegate to French Africa

As Apostolic Delegate, Lefebvre's chief duty was the building up of the ecclesiastical structure in French Africa. Pope Pius XII wanted to move quickly towards a proper hierarchy (with bishops instead of vicariates and apostolic prefectures). Lefebvre was responsible for selecting these new bishops, increasing the number of priests and religious sisters, as well as the number of churches in the various dioceses.

On September 14, 1955, the Apostolic Vicariate of Dakar became an archdiocese, and Lefebvre thus became the first Metropolitan Archbishop of Dakar. Archbishop Lefebvre was the first and foremost advisor to Pius XII during the writing of the encyclical *Fidei Donum* (1957), which instructed the clergy and laity on the missions in the Third World countries and called for more missionaries.

In 1958 Pope Pius XII died and was succeeded by Pope John XXIII, who in 1959, after giving Lefebvre the choice between remaining either as Apostolic Delegate or as Archbishop of Dakar, appointed another to the post of Apostolic Delegate for French Africa. Lefebvre continued as Archbishop of Dakar until January 23, 1962 when he was transferred to the diocese of Tulle in France, retaining his personal title of archbishop. In 1960, Pope John XXIII appointed Lefebvre to the Central Preparatory Commission for the Second Vatican Council.

Superior General of the Holy Ghost Fathers

On 26 July 1962, the Chapter General of the Holy Ghost Fathers elected Lefebvre as the Superior General. Lefebvre was widely respected for his experience in the mission field. On the other hand, certain progressive members of his congregation, particularly in France, considered his administrative style authoritarian and desired radical reforms. On August 7, 1962 Lefebvre was given the titular archiepiscopal see of Synnada in Phrygia.

Lefebvre was increasingly criticized by influential members of his large religious congregation who considered him to be out-of-step with modern church leaders and the demand of the bishops' conferences, particularly in France, for modernization and reforms. A general chapter of the Holy Ghost Fathers was convened in Rome in September 1968 to debate the direction of the congregation after the changes of the Second Vatican Council. The first action of the chapter was to name several moderators to lead the chapter's sessions instead of Lefebvre. Lefebvre then handed in his resignation as Superior General to Pope Paul VI. The Archbishop would later say that it had become impossible for him to remain superior of an institute that no longer wanted or listened to him.

Second Vatican Council

Appointed by Pope John XXIII as a member of the Central Preparatory Commission for the Second Vatican Council, Lefebvre took part in the discussions about the draft documents to be submitted to the bishops for consideration at the Council. During the first session of the Council (October to December 1962), he became concerned about the direction the Council's deliberations were taking. Lefebvre took a leading part in a study group of bishops at the Council which became known as the *Coetus Internationalis Patrum* (International Group of Fathers).

A major area of concern at the Council was the debate about the principle of religious liberty. During the Council's third session (September to November 1964), Archbishop Pericle Felici announced that Lefebvre, with two other like-minded bishops, was appointed to a special four-member commission charged with rewriting the draft document on the topic, but it was soon discovered that this measure did not have papal approval, and major responsibility for preparing the draft document was given to the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

Instead of the draft entitled "On Religious Liberty", Lefebvre and Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani had supported instead a text dealing with "Relations between the Church and State, and religious tolerance." The *Coetus Internationalis Patrum* did, however, manage to get the preliminary vote (with suggestions for modifications) on the document put off until the fourth session of the Council, but were unable to prevent the adoption, on December 7, 1965 of the final text of the declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* by the overwhelming majority of the Council. The expressed view of some that this overwhelming majority was only due to intense lobbying by the reformist wing of Council Fathers among those prelates who initially had reservations or even objections, however, is not accepted by all observers.

Lefebvre was one of those who voted against the declaration, but he was one of those who added their signature to the document, after that of the Pope, though not all present did sign. Lefebvre later declared that the sheet of paper that he signed and that was "passed from hand to hand among the Fathers of the Council and upon which everyone placed his signature, had no meaning of a vote for or against, but signified simply our presence at the meeting to vote for four documents." However, the paper on which his signature appears, and which was not "the relatively unimportant attendance sheet which Lefebvre recalled in his interview," bears "the title *Declaratio de Libertate Religiosa* (along with the titles of three other documents) at the top," and "(t)he fathers were informed that if they wished to sign one or more documents, but not all of them, they could make a marginal annotation beside their name, specifying which documents they did or did not wish to sign. No such annotation is found beside the names of either Lefebvre or de Castro Mayer, which proves that they were prepared

to share in the official promulgation of that Declaration on Religious Liberty which they later publicly rejected."

Society of Saint Pius X

After retiring from the post of Superior General of the Holy Ghost Fathers, Lefebvre was approached by traditionalists from the French Seminary in Rome who had been refused tonsure, the rite by which, until 1973, a seminarian became a cleric. They asked for a conservative seminary to complete their studies. After directing them to the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, Lefebvre was urged to teach these seminarians personally. In 1969, he received permission from the local bishop to establish a seminary in Fribourg which opened with nine students, moving to Écône, Switzerland in 1971.

Lefebvre proposed to his seminarians the establishment of a society of priests without vows. In November 1970, Bishop François Charrière of Fribourg established, on a provisional (*ad experimentum*) basis for six years, the International Priestly Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX) as a "pious union".

The French bishops, whose theological outlook was quite different from Lefebvre's, treated the Écône seminary with suspicion and referred to it as "the Wildcat Seminary". They indicated that they would incardinate none of the seminarians.

In November 1974, two Belgian priests carried out a rigorous inspection on the instructions of a commission of cardinals, producing, it was said, a favorable report. However, while at Écône, they expressed a number of theological opinions, such as that ordination of married men will soon be a normal thing, that truth changed with the times, and the traditional conception of the Resurrection of Our Lord were open to discussion, which the seminarians and staff objected to as scandalous. In what he later described as a mood of "doubtlessly excessive indignation," Lefebvre wrote a "Declaration" in which he strongly attacked the modernist and liberal trends that he saw as apparent in the reforms being undertaken within the Church at that time.

Clash with the Vatican

In January 1975 the new Bishop of Fribourg stated his wish to withdraw the SSPX's pious union status. Though Lefebvre then had two meetings with the commission of Cardinals, the Bishop put his intention into effect on May 6, 1975, thereby officially dissolving the Society. This action was subsequently upheld by Pope Paul VI, who wrote to Archbishop Lefebvre in June 1975. Lefebvre continued his work regardless. In the consistory of May 24, 1976, Pope Paul VI criticized Archbishop Lefebvre by name and appealed to him and his followers to change their minds.

On June 29, 1976, Lefebvre went ahead with planned priestly ordinations without the approval of the local Bishop and despite receiving letters from Rome forbidding them. As a result Lefebvre was suspended *a collatione ordinum*, i.e., forbidden to ordain any priests. A week later, the Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops informed him that, to have his situation regularized, he needed to ask the Pope's pardon. Lefebvre responded with a letter claiming that the modernization of the Church was a "compromise with the ideas of modern man" originating in a secret agreement between high dignitaries in the Church and senior Freemasons prior to the Council. Lefebvre was then notified that, since he had not apologized to the Pope, he was suspended *a divinis*, i.e., he could no longer legally administer *any* of the sacraments.

Lefebvre remarked that he had been forbidden from celebrating the new rite of Mass. Pope Paul VI apparently took this seriously and stated that Lefebvre "thought he dodged the penalty by administering the sacraments using the previous formulas." In spite of his suspension, Lefebvre continued to celebrate Mass and to administer the other sacraments, including the conferral of Holy Orders to the students of his seminary.

Pope Paul VI received Lefebvre in audience on September 11, 1976, and one month later wrote to him admonishing him and repeating the appeal he had made at the audience. Pope Paul VI died on August 6, 1978, the Feast of the Transfiguration, at Castel Gandolfo. Sixty days after his election as pope in 1978, Pope John Paul II received Archbishop Lefebvre in audience, again without reaching agreement.

In his biography of Lefebvre, *The Horn of the Unicorn*, David Allen White said that Lefebvre received a small number of votes (variously reported as three or "several") in the August 1978 conclave that elected Pope John Paul I, a matter that, he said, caused some consternation among the cardinals, as Lefebvre was not a cardinal, and casting a vote for a non-cardinal in a papal election is unusual, although permitted by Church law.

Ecône consecrations

In a 1987 sermon, Lefebvre at age 81, announced his intention to consecrate a bishop to carry on his work after his death. This was controversial because, under Catholic canon law, the consecration of a bishop requires the permission of the Pope.

On May 5, 1988, Lefebvre signed an agreement with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) to regularize the situation of the Society of St Pius X. The cardinal agreed that one bishop would be consecrated for the society. However, Lefebvre decided that he was obliged both to reject the arrangement he had agreed to and to ordain a successor—if necessary, without papal approval—because Cardinal Ratzinger did not specify a date for the episcopal consecration. Pope John Paul II appealed to him not to proceed in "a schismatic act", warning of "theological and canonical consequences."

On June 30, 1988, Archbishop Lefebvre, with Bishop Emeritus Antônio de Castro Mayer of Campos, Brazil, as co-consecrator, consecrated four SSPX priests as bishops: Bernard Tissier de Mallerais, Richard Williamson, Alfonso de Galarreta and Bernard Fellay. The next day, July 1, the Congregation for Bishops issued a decree stating that this was a schismatic act and that all six people directly involved had thereby incurred automatic excommunication.

On July 2, Pope John Paul II condemned the consecration in his apostolic letter *Ecclesia Dei*, in which he stated that the consecration constituted a schismatic act and that by virtue of Canon 1382 of the Code of Canon Law, the bishops and priests involved were automatically excommunicated.

Lefebvre declared that he and the other clerics involved had not "separated themselves from Rome" and were therefore not schismatic and that they "found themselves in a case of necessity," not having succeeded, as they said, in making "Rome" understand that "this change which has occurred in the Church" since the Second Vatican Council was "not Catholic." In a letter addressed to the four priests he was about to consecrate as bishops, Lefebvre wrote: "I do not think one can say that Rome has not lost the Faith."

In 2009, at the request of the four surviving bishops, Pope Benedict XVI lifted their excommunications.

Death of Archbishop Lefebvre



Photo from the Lefebvre Website

The Body of Archbishop Lefebvre Lies in State

Archbishop Lefebvre died on March 25, 1991 in Martigny, Switzerland at the age of 85 from cancer, and eight days later was buried in the crypt at the society's International Seminary in Écône, Switzerland. Archbishop Eduardo Roveda, Apostolic Nuncio to Switzerland, and Bishop Henri Schwery of Sion, the local diocese, came and prayed at the body of the dead prelate. Later that year, on September 18, 1991, Cardinal Silvio Oddi, who had been Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy from 1979 to 1986, visited Lefebvre's tomb, knelt down at it, prayed, afterwards saying aloud: "*Merci, Monseigneur*". Thereafter Cardinal Oddi said he held Archbishop Lefebvre to have been "a holy man" and suggested that the Society of St Pius X could be granted a personal prelature by the Holy See like that of Opus Dei.

In January 1992, the then-superior general of the Society, Fr. Franz Schmidberger, rejected this hypothetical offer by an unpublished private letter to the Holy See. The letter's content was described by Bishop Richard Williamson as basically saying that, "as long as Rome remains conciliar, a fruitful and open collaboration between the two [the SSPX and the Holy See] does not seem possible."

This unresolved conflict is a stand-off between the Society of Saint Pius X and the Vatican to this day.



Marcel Lefebvre en su época de seminarista

