

# New Bishops, Empty Tabernacle

(2007)

*by Rev. Anthony Cekada*

## **SSPX's French District publishes an editorial defending the 1968 Rite of Episcopal Consecration.**

THE DEBATE over the validity of the 1968 Rite of Episcopal Consecration continues in Catholic traditionalist circles, particularly in France.

Because most of the clergy operating under the 1984 “Tridentine Mass” Indult and the aegis of various Vatican-approved “traditional” priestly organizations (FSSP, ICK, etc.) were ordained by bishops consecrated with the new rite, the outcome of this debate will eventually affect the number of traditionalists willing to receive sacraments from these priests, as well as from any priests who will function under the anticipated *Motu Proprio* “liberating” the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass. If these priests were ordained by invalidly consecrated bishops, then the sacraments they confer that depend upon the priestly character (Penance, the Eucharist, and Extreme Unction) are invalid as well.

The issue has also heated up in chapels of the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX). In the U.S., for instance, SSPX installed one such priest as a pastor in Richmond, Virginia. The SSPX District Superior, moreover, allows priests ordained by new rite bishops to offer Sunday Mass at St. Vincent’s in Kansas City after they have “graduated” from an SSPX course on how to say the traditional Mass. Conditional ordination beforehand in the traditional rite is not a requirement — an injustice not only to the laity, but to the priest as well, who probably is unaware of any problem and acting in good faith.<sup>1</sup> It appears that some laymen have protested or left the Kansas City chapel over this issue.

In France, the Rev. Grégoire Celier SSPX recently published an article defending the validity of the new rite of episcopal consecration, and attacking those traditionalists who had called it into question — notably the Rore Sanctifica committee (a European research group) and myself. Because it appeared both in the Society’s flagship publication<sup>2</sup> and as an editorial on the web site for the SSPX French District,<sup>3</sup> one can be sure that Fr. Celier’s article was approved by the SSPX Superior General, the Most

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1. SSPX officials claim that they conduct an “investigation” about validity in each case. This, I submit, is public-relations hogwash that is unconnected to any objective principles of sacramental theology, and boils down to nothing more than the question of whether the priest himself is willing to submit to conditional ordination. If he’s not willing, nothing will be done. This was the case in the early 1980s with Fr. Philip Stark SJ, an episode that eventually led to the expulsion of “The Nine” in 1983.

2. “De la Validité du Sacre,” *Fideliter* 177 (May-June 2007).

3. La Porte Latine, editorial, May 2007.

Rev. Bernard Fellay, and that it therefore expresses what is now the official SSPX party line on the new rite.

I presented my own case against the validity of the new rite in two articles, “Absolutely Null and Utterly Void” (March 2006) and “Still Null and Still Void” (January 2007), a reply to objections subsequently made to the first article. Both are available on [www.traditionalmass.org](http://www.traditionalmass.org).

The dispute hinges on the **essential sacramental form** for the episcopacy — the one sentence in the rite that contains what is necessary and sufficient to consecrate a true bishop. Put very simply, my argument was this:

- In his Apostolic Constitution *Sacramentum Ordinis*, Pius XII taught that a form for conferring Holy Orders must univocally (unambiguously) signify the sacramental effects: the **power of the Order** received (deacon, priest or bishop) and the **grace of the Holy Ghost**.

- In 1968 the post-Vatican II reformers completely changed the essential sacramental form for episcopal consecration. In the process, they removed one of these essential ideas: the power of Holy Orders (*potestas Ordinis*) that a bishop receives.

- According to the general principles of Catholic sacramental theology, if a sacramental form is changed in such a way as to remove an essential idea, the form becomes invalid.

- The new form, I therefore concluded, is invalid. Consequently, those consecrated with this rite are not true bishops.

A key point of dispute in the debate concerned the meaning in the new form of the Latin phrase *Spiritus principalis* — rendered into English as “governing Spirit” and into French as “l’Esprit qui fait les chefs.”

Those who defended the validity of the new rite maintained that this expression unambiguously signified the episcopacy. I demonstrated that it did not — I unearthed at least a *dozen* different meanings for it — and that in the new form itself, the expression means nothing more than the Holy Ghost, merely *one* of the required elements for a valid sacramental form for Holy Orders.

In my articles I had presented all this in a systematic fashion and cited various treatises to support each point of my argument.

In his editorial, however, Fr. Celier did not respond with a systematic theological argument of his own. Rather, he launched a personal attack against the members of Rore Sanctifica and myself<sup>4</sup> — and then recycled the objections of a modernist Benedictine that I had already answered.

Since Fr. Celier’s editorial will be translated and widely circulated, I will answer these objections once again. I will conclude by pointing out how the use of these arguments by Fr. Celier and others indicates a larger problem within SSPX.

**1. Eastern Rite?** Fr. Celier states that the essential sacramental form prescribed by Paul VI “is nothing more than a re-use of a formula used for consecrating bishops in the Coptic and Syrian

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4. Fr. Cekada left SSPX “in a manner that was morally questionable.”

Eastern Rite Catholic Churches... The new rite contains the substance of the two Coptic and Syrian rites.”

Did Fr. Celier even bother to read my two articles? By comparing the texts mentioned, I have demonstrated *twice* that this is false.

The essential form promulgated by Paul VI: (a) is *not* a “re-use” of the form for episcopal consecration prescribed by the Coptic synod and approved by Leo XIII, and (b) appears in the Syrian rite as a *non-sacramental* prayer for the enthronement of a Patriarch, who has *already* been consecrated a bishop.

**2. “Ambiguous” Formulas in the Old Rite?** Fr. Celier argues by analogy as follows: If we apply to the pre-Vatican II form for priestly ordination the understanding of “univocal” that Fr. Cekada applies to the Paul VI form for episcopal consecration, we would have to conclude that the old form for priestly ordination was invalid, because it uses the term *presbyter*, which is derived from the Greek word for “elder” rather than “priest.”

Again, did Fr. Celier read what I wrote? In my second article, I pointed out that this analogy fails for two reasons:

(a) The Greek etymology of the term *presebyter* in the old form is irrelevant. The old form is written in Christian ecclesiastical Latin, where the term *presbyter* signifies the second rank of the Christian priesthood.

(b) Fr. Hürth, one of the theologians who wrote *Sacramentum Ordinis* for Pius XII, pointed out that the form further specifies this by also explicitly mentioning “the office of the *second* rank,’ (as opposed to the office of the *first* rank, which is the episcopacy).” (*Periodica* 37 [1948], 26)

**3. Meaning Derived from Context?** Fr. Celier enunciates the following principle: “In reality, the words of the sacramental formula should be referred to a three-fold field of meaning. For it is erroneous to require that a text express a sense in a comprehensible way outside of any other context.”

Here Fr. Celier takes up the nebulous double-talk of modernist sacramental theology, which dismisses pre-Vatican II teaching on essential sacramental forms as a theology of “magic words.”

Like Fr. Celier, the modernists propose instead a “broader context” that effects a sacrament. In my days in a modernist seminary, many was the time I heard priests and fellow seminarians say that pronouncing the Words of Consecration at Mass was not important because “the whole Eucharistic Prayer was consecratory.”

This is also the same theology that allowed Ratzinger and John Paul II to declare in 2001 that when the Nestorian schismatics use the Anaphora (Canon) of Addai and Marai for their Mass, it is valid, even though it does not contain the Words of Consecration — or even mention the Body and Blood of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

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5. See the Most Rev. Donald J. Sanborn, “O Sacrament Unholy,” at [www.traditionalmass.org](http://www.traditionalmass.org)

But according to traditional Catholic sacramental theology, “context” cannot supply validity when an essential element is omitted from the sacramental form.

Thus for example, although the “context” of the traditional baptismal rite contains prayers that explicitly mention baptism, cleansing and the life of grace, this context cannot render the sacrament valid if the priest substantially changes or omits an essential word (e.g., “baptize,” “I,” “you,” “Father,” etc.) in the essential sacramental formula. The rite is invalid, period.

Nor would the “implicit” signification that Fr. Celier proposes for an essential sacramental form produce a valid baptism. If a priest says “I baptize you in the name of **God**,” the baptism will *still* be invalid, even though the surrounding context “implies” the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

**4. Associated with the Episcopal Office?** As regards the disputed phrase “governing Spirit,” Fr. Celier maintains “The dictionaries for Patristic Greek and Latin thus associate *hegemonikon* and *principalis* with the episcopal office.”

This is not even a half-truth. I demonstrated that in Greek and Latin the term has at least a *dozen* different meanings. Among them, we find one that connotes a bishop’s *jurisdictional* power (power to rule) but none that connotes a bishop’s *sacramental* power (*potestas Ordinis*). It is the latter that a valid sacramental form for conferring Holy Orders must unambiguously signify.

**5. Establish the Church = Sacramental Power?** On this point, Fr. Celier recycles an argument made by Fr. Pierre-Marie: “With reference as much to reality — to the tradition of Christian vocabulary — as to the context of the rite as a whole, this petition for an outpouring of the *Spiritus principalis* upon the ordinand — the Spirit of Jesus Christ which He Himself transmitted to the Apostles to establish the Church in all places — perfectly signifies the meaning of the grace of the episcopacy.”<sup>6</sup>

More gobbledygook.

And again, did Fr. Celier read my article? I pointed out in “Still Null and Still Void” that such a claim is false for at least two reasons:

(a) The Apostles founded churches only because they enjoyed an extraordinary *jurisdiction* to do so. The theologian Dorsch says specifically that this power is *not* communicated to bishops: “not all those functions proper to the apostles are also proper to bishops — for example, to establish new churches.”<sup>7</sup>

(b) To establish “churches” (dioceses, in modern terminology) is an exercise of the power of *jurisdiction*, not one of *orders*,

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6. “En référence, tant à la réalité, à la tradition du vocabulaire chrétien qu’au contexte de l’ensemble du rite, cette demande d’une effusion du *Spiritus principalis* sur l’ordinand, Esprit de Jésus-Christ qu’il a lui-même transmis aux Apôtres pour établir l’Église en tous les lieux, est parfaitement significative de la grâce épiscopale.”

7. *De Ecclesia Christi* (Innsbrück: Rauch 1928), 290.

such as ordaining priests. This jurisdictional power is proper to the Roman Pontiff alone.<sup>8</sup>

**6. An “Interesting Insight”?** Fr. Celier uses this phrase to describe Fr. Alvaro Calderon’s argument for the validity of the new form, which he sums up as follows: “Thus it follows that the imposition of hands is a sufficient matter for Holy Orders because they are the hands of a bishop, and that a formula even a bit vague suffices because it is a *mouth* of a bishop, a will of a bishop who expresses his determination to transmit the power that he possesses in its fullness, to beget from his own full priesthood a priest or a bishop.”<sup>9</sup>

A layman who reads such a passage may think it contains something truly “profound” or some inspired but ineffable flash of theological insight.

In fact, it’s just more mumbo-jumbo. Fr. Calderon, if you judge from his article in the November 2006 *Angelus*, seems incapable of fashioning a clear argument or, for that matter, even writing a clear sentence. The essence of good theological writing is *clarity*. Fr. Calderon writes like a modernist.

But the problem is not just style. Fr. Calderon’s “insight,” quoted above and taken up by Fr. Celier, entirely overthrows what Catholic theology teaches about the essential sacramental forms — a form must univocally signify the sacramental effect — and substitutes a modernist, near-Gnostic “sacramental contextualism.”

His statement, once again, could have come straight from one of my modernist professors in the late 1960s — or, for that matter, even from some bizarre Theosophist tract, just before it describes how a Catholic bishop’s words produce “purple bubbles” on the “astral plane.”

Taken to its logical conclusion, moreover, this principle overthrows Pope Leo XIII’s condemnation of Anglican orders in the Bull *Apostolicae Curae*. Are the Anglican formulas that were “a bit vague” now to be considered retroactively revalidated due to Bishop Barlow’s “mouth” in 1559?

Do Fr. Celier and Fr. Calderon *really* believe that as regards a sacrament, “that a formula even a bit vague suffices because it is a *mouth* of a bishop”? Or are they channeling Tyrell, Teilhard de Chardin and Madame Blavatsky?

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THIS LAST point brings us to a larger problem that exists in the Society of St. Pius X. For SSPX priests involved in controversies like this, it seems that research in the library and St. Paul’s dictum “I handed down to you first what I also received” (1 Cor

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8. See Canon 215.1.

9. “De là vient que l’imposition des mains est une matière suffisante pour l’ordre, parce que ce sont des mains d’évêque; qu’une formule même un peu vague suffit, parce que c’est une bouche d’évêque, une volonté d’évêque qui exprime sa détermination de transmettre le pouvoir qu’il possède en plénitude, d’engendrer de son propre sacerdoce plénier un prêtre ou un évêque.”

15:3) never suffice. One must always play the great “intellectual” who dreams up an “original” theological idea.<sup>10</sup>

So, Fr. Celier does not — as you would expect — draw his arguments for the validity of the new rite from pre-Vatican II manuals of sacramental theology. Rather, he bases them on the novel theories of Br. Ansgar Santogrossi, who (though “conservative”) adheres to the *Novus Ordo* and the errors of Vatican II, and is a fully paid-up member of the new religion.

Fr. Calderon, similarly, does not rely on the clear principles enunciated by the older authors. Rather, he feels compelled to invent an “insight” which he attributes to St. Thomas, but which in fact overthrows the standard Catholic doctrine on sacramental form.

For priests who hold themselves and their organization out as defenders of tradition, this is deeply, deeply weird. Why not just argue from principles of traditional Catholic theology?

Apart from the desire for “originality,” the answer, I think, is that the general praxis and “positions” that the Society has developed since its foundation *cannot* be reconciled with standard, pre-Vatican II theology.

Thus the superiors of the Society and the would-be “intellectuals” in its ranks were obliged to invent an array of tenuous theories that would allow the organization to refuse submission to the Roman pontiff (the pope is like a bad dad!), spurn his universal laws as evil (the New Mass is poison, but invalidly promulgated!), “sift” teachings of the universal ordinary magisterium (we can judge and reject what conflicts with “tradition!”), pronounce excommunications invalid (Fr. Murray’s canon law thesis trumps a papal declaration!), advocate resistance to the Successor of St. Peter (justified by “Bellarmine,” and “Vitoria!”), operate an apostolate parallel to Ordinaries appointed by the Pope (state of necessity!), and consecrate bishops in 1988 against the Pope’s express will (Operation Survival, and — my personal favorite — “The tents are rented.”).

If you can invent new theological principles for all these, why not for sacramental theology too? Thus “three-fold fields of signification,” “implicit but unequivocal” forms, new “insights” for the *Summa* and vague formulas transfigured by episcopal lips can be adduced to defend a sacramental form that, according to all the principles of the old theology, does *not* univocally signify the *potestas Ordinis*, and is therefore invalid.

I am sure that there are priests in the Society — and indeed, laity in the Society’s chapels — who reject or are highly skeptical of the “original” arguments that Fr. Celier and Fr. Calderon have made for the validity of the 1968 Rite of Episcopal Consecration.

They should not think this is a “sedevacantist” affair. Those who still consider Paul VI and his successors to be true popes should remember that even a *true* pope lacks the power to change the substance of a sacrament.

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10. The quote from St. Paul, ironically, is inscribed on Archbishop Lefebvre’s tombstone at the Ecône seminary: “Tradidi enim vobis in primis quod et accepi.” Apparently the sentiment never filtered through to the theology classrooms nearby...

In 1975, moreover, Mgr. Lefebvre personally told me that the new rite was invalid. My research and articles more than three decades later confirm that conclusion, and I cite documentation which readers can verify for themselves.

If the new bishops are indeed not true bishops, then the most pressing problem that such traditionalists face — despite the urgings of Fr. Celier and other purveyors of “original” theology — is not the vacant see. It is the empty tabernacle.

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