

Ought Priests of the Conciliar Church to Be “Re-Ordained” When They Come to Tradition?

More and more priests ordained in the new rite are turning to the traditional Mass. However, since it is now nearly 40 years since the new rite of ordination was introduced, some traditional Catholics question the validity of their ordination and hesitate to receive the sacraments from them. Each case is different in practice, it is true, and is to be decided by the superiors.

However, the following explanation of the principles that form the basis of these decisions can be of help in understanding them.

1) The three sacraments that confer a character cannot be repeated.

This principle was already established with respect to the sacrament of baptism in the letter of Pope St. Stephen I to St. Cyprian condemning the latter's practice of re-baptizing heretics when receiving them into the Church. This was also defined by the Council of Trent, which declared an anathema against those who maintained that the three sacraments that imprint an indelible mark, namely, Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders, can be repeated (Session VII, Canon 9, Dz. 852).

2) When it concerns the validity of the sacraments, we are obliged to follow a “tutorist” position, or safest possible course of action.

We cannot choose a less certain option, called by the moral theologians a simply probable manner of acting, that could place in doubt the validity of the sacraments, as we are sometimes obliged to do in other moral questions. If we were able to follow a less certain way of acting, we would run the risk of grave sacrilege and uncertainty concerning the sacraments, which would place the eternal salvation of souls in great jeopardy. Even the lax “probabilist” theologians admitted this principle with respect to baptism and holy orders, since the contrary opinion was condemned by Pope Innocent XI in 1679. Innocent XI condemned the position that it is permissible

in conferring sacraments to follow a probable opinion regarding the value of the sacrament, the safer opinion being abandoned.... Therefore, one should not make use of probable opinions only in conferring baptism, sacerdotal or episcopal orders. (Proposition 1 condemned and prohibited by Innocent XI, Dz. 1151)

Consequently, it is forbidden to accept a likely or probably valid ordination for the subsequent conferring of sacraments. One must have the greatest possible moral certitude, as in other things necessary for eternal salvation.

The faithful themselves understand this principle, and it really is a part of the “*sensus Ecclesiae*,” the spirit of the Church. They do not want to share modernist, liberal rites, and have an aversion to receiving the sacraments from priests ordained in such rites, for they cannot tolerate a doubt in such matters. It is for this reason that they turn to the superiors to guarantee validity.

3) A negative doubt is to be despised.

This axiom is accepted by all moral theologians. A negative doubt is a doubt that is not based upon any reason. It is the question “what if” that we frequently ask for no reason at all. Such a doubt cannot weaken moral certitude and is not reasonable. (Cf. Prummer, *Manuale Theologiae Moralis*, I, §328.) Consequently we cannot question the validity of a sacrament such as Holy Orders without having a positive reason for doing so, namely, a reason to believe that there might be some defect of one of the three elements necessary for validity: matter, form, and intention.

4) When a doubt arises in the administration of a sacrament that cannot be repeated, it is possible and even obligatory to reiterate the sacrament “*sub conditione*,” that is under the condition that it was invalid the first time.

Thus it is that both moral certitude as to the administration of the sacrament is **acquired** and the sacrilege of simulating a sacrament that has already been administered is avoided. This is frequently spoken of in the rubrics of the Roman *Rituale*, for example in the case of adult converts from heresy in whom there is a positive doubt as to the validity of baptism, or even foundlings who “should be baptized conditionally, unless there is a certainty from due investigation that they have already been baptized.” The condition is thus expressed: “if you are not baptized....” In fact, the custom before Vatican II was to baptize all adult converts from Protestantism, it being impossible to guarantee with moral certitude the form, or intention, or simultaneity of matter and form necessary for certain validity. Likewise, it is the custom to administer conditionally the sacrament of Confirmation to those confirmed in the new rite, in the frequent case that a valid form and intention cannot be established with certitude.

Under similar circumstances, there is no sacrilege in reiterating conditionally a priestly ordination, as Archbishop Lefebvre himself did many times.

5) The matter and the form of the Latin rite of priestly ordination introduced by Pope Paul VI in 1968 are not subject to positive doubt.

They are, in effect, practically identical to those defined by Pope Pius XII in 1947 in *Sacramentum Ordinis*. (In this, priestly ordination differs from the sacrament of Confirmation, which in the new rite uses an entirely different and variable form, and one whose validity has been questioned.)

However, this moral certitude may not necessarily exist with vernacular translations of the form, which would have to be reviewed to exclude all positive doubt. One such change was the provisional ICEL translation of the form itself, substituting “Give the dignity of the presbyterate” for the traditional expression “Confer the dignity of the priesthood.” Michael Davies comments: “In English speaking countries the priesthood has never been referred to as the presbyterate” (*The Order of Melchisedech*, 1st ed., p.88). It is not always easy to determine what English translation was used, and whether or not it induces a positive doubt.

Not infrequently, Archbishop Lefebvre is quoted as stating that the New Mass is a bastard Mass, and that the same can be said of the new rites for the sacraments, such as Holy Orders. How could such a Mass and sacraments be valid? In fact, the expression is a poor translation of the French “*messe bâtarde*,” which is correctly translated as “illegitimate Mass,” or “illegitimate rites” being the fruit of an adulterous union between the Church and the Revolution, the French expression not having the pejorative force of the English counterpart. Such an expression points out the illicit nature of such a compromise, but does not have a direct bearing on the validity of the rites. He explained this during the sermon he gave in Lille in 1976:

The New Mass is a sort of hybrid Mass, which is no longer hierarchical; it is democratic, where the assembly takes the place of the priest, and so it is no longer a veritable Mass that affirms the royalty of Our Lord. (*A Bishop Speaks*, p.271. Available from Angelus Press; price: \$20.00.)

It is for this reason that he called the traditional Mass the “true” Mass, not meaning thereby to question the validity of Masses celebrated in the new rite.

The new rites of ordination are similarly illegitimate, for they do not adequately express the Catholic Faith in the priesthood. By writing very strongly against them, Archbishop Lefebvre did not intend to declare their invalidity. He stated very clearly, in *Open Letter to Confused Catholics*, quoting parts of the ceremony that are certainly not a part of the form of the sacrament and consequently not necessary for validity, that such a ceremony destroys the priesthood:

Everything is bound up together. By attacking the base of the building it is destroyed entirely. No more Mass, no more priests. The ritual, before it was altered, had the bishop say “Receive the power to offer to God the Holy Sacrifice and to celebrate Holy Mass both for the living and for the dead, in the name of the Lord.” He had previously blessed the hands of the ordinand by pronouncing these words: “So that all

that they bless may be blessed and all that they consecrate may be consecrated and sanctified.” The power conferred is expressed without ambiguity: “That for the salvation of Thy people and by their holy blessing, they may effect the Transubstantiation of the bread and the wine into the Body and Blood of Thy Divine Son.” Nowadays the bishop says: “Receive the offering of the holy people to present it to God.” He makes the new priest an intermediary rather than the holder of the ministerial priesthood and the offerer of a sacrifice. The conception is wholly different. (p.54)

Despite such firm words, the Archbishop has this to say: “The ‘matter’ of the sacrament has been preserved in the laying on of hands which takes place next, and likewise the ‘form,’ namely, the words of ordination” (*ibid.*, p.51). The destruction he is speaking about is of the Mass as it ought to be and of the priesthood as it ought to be. His intention is, consequently, to point out that it is the Catholic notion of the priesthood that is destroyed, not necessarily the validity of the sacrament of holy orders.

6) There can be reasons to doubt the intention of the ordaining bishop in the conciliar Church.

The minister of the sacrament does not have to intend what the Church intends, which is why a heretic can administer a valid sacrament. He must, however, intend to do what the Church does. The positive doubt that can exist in this regard is well described by Michael Davies:

Every prayer in the traditional rite which stated specifically the essential role of a priest as a man ordained to offer propitiatory sacrifice for the living and dead has been removed. In most cases these were the precise prayers removed by the Protestant Reformers, [*e.g.*, “Receive the power to offer sacrifice to God and to celebrate Mass, both for the living and the dead, in the name of the Lord”] or if not precisely the same there are clear parallels....Their omission by the Protestant Reformers was taken by Pope Leo XIII as an indication of an intention not to consecrate sacrificing priests. (*Ibid.*, pp.82, 86)

This is the text of *Apostolicae Curae* (Leo XIII, 1896), §33:

With this inherent defect of form is joined the defect of intention which is equally essential to the sacrament....If the rite be changed, with the manifest intention of introducing another rite not approved by the Church and of rejecting what the Church does, and what, by the institution of Christ, belongs to the nature of the Sacrament, then it is clear that not only is the necessary intention wanting to the Sacrament, but that the intention is adverse to and destructive of the Sacrament.

If it cannot be said, as with Anglican orders, that the *Novus Ordo* rite was changed with the manifest intention of rejecting a sacrificing priesthood, nevertheless the deliberate exclusion of the notion of propitiation, in order to please Protestants, could easily be considered as casting a doubt on the intention of doing what the Church does, namely of offering a true and propitiatory sacrifice. Of course, this doubt would not exist if the ordaining bishop had indicated

otherwise his truly Catholic intention of doing what the Church does.

However, the difficulty lies in the fact that the accompanying ceremonies in the new rite of ordination do not adequately express either the Catholic conception of the priesthood or the intention, as do the ceremonies in the old rite. The following texts from the Archbishop, taken from spiritual conferences to seminarians, refer to the intention of the priest celebrating Mass. However, the same principles can be applied to the bishop ordaining a priest:

In the old rite, the intention was clearly determined by all the prayers that were said before and after the consecration. There was a collection of ceremonies all along the sacrifice of the Mass that determined clearly the priest’s intention. It is by the Offertory that the priest expresses clearly his intention. However, this does not exist in the new *Ordo*. The new Mass can be either valid or invalid depending upon the intention of the celebrant, whereas in the traditional Mass, it is impossible for anyone who has the Faith to not have the precise intention of offering a sacrifice and accomplishing it according to the ends foreseen by Holy Church.... These young priests will not have the intention of doing that which the Church does, for they will not have been taught that the Mass is a true sacrifice. They will not have the intention of offering a sacrifice. They will have the intention of celebrating a Eucharist, a sharing, a communion, a memorial, all of which has nothing to do with faith in the sacrifice of the Mass. Hence from this moment, inasmuch as these deformed priests no longer have the intention of doing what the Church does, their Masses will obviously be more and more invalid. (Quoted in Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, *La messe de toujours*, pp.373-374, available in English translation, *The Mass of All Time* in October 2007 from Angelus Press—Ed.)

There can be no doubt that Archbishop Lefebvre entertained serious doubts as to the intention of some conciliar bishops when they ordain priests. In *Open Letter to Confused Catholics* (p.50), he points out that the doubt that overhangs the other sacraments also applies to the ordination of priests and gives examples, asking the question: “Are they true priests at all? Put it another way, are their ordinations valid?” He goes on to explain the reason why he considers that a doubt exists over the ordaining bishop’s intention, for it is frequently no longer the intention of ordaining a priest to offer sacrifice:

We are obliged to point out that the intention is far from clear. Has the priest been ordained...to establish justice, fellowship and peace at a level which appears to be limited to the natural order only?...The definition of the priesthood given by St. Paul and by the Council of Trent has been radically altered. The priest is no longer one who goes up to the altar and offers up to God a sacrifice of praise, for the remission of sins.” (*Ibid.*, pp.51-52)

Hence the Archbishop’s affirmation that the whole conception of the priesthood has changed and that the priest is no longer regarded as one having the power to do things that the faithful cannot do (*ibid.*, p.54), but rather as one who presides over the assembly. This modernist conception certainly casts a grave shadow of doubt over the intention of the ordaining bishop.

7) The question of episcopal consecration in the 1968 rite promulgated by Paul VI is even more delicate.

The difficulty lies in the complete change of the wording of the form of episcopal consecration. The very erudite article of Fr. Pierre-Marie, O.P., published in *The Angelus* (December 2005 & January 2006), establishes that the form is in itself valid. Although radically different from the traditional Latin form, and although only similar, but not identical, to the forms used in the Eastern rites, it is in itself valid, the meaning designating sufficiently clearly the Catholic episcopacy. For the form of Holy Orders is variable and changeable, this being one of the sacraments established only in general terms. The substance is consequently retained for as long as the words have essentially the same meaning.

However, this does not mean that this new rite of episcopal ordination is valid in every concrete case, for this could depend upon the translation, modifications (now that the principle of change has been accepted), and eventual defect of intention. For the danger of the creeping in of a defective intention, as with the rite of priestly ordination, cannot be excluded. This is what Fr. Nicolas Portail of the Society of Saint Pius X wrote in the January 2007 issue of *Le Chardonnet*:

The authors correctly observe that this rite is the vehicle of a conception of the episcopacy according to Vatican II. It also shows that the functions that are special to the episcopal order (ordaining priests, consecrating churches, administering confirmation...) are not mentioned in the consecratory preface, in opposition to other prefaces in the Eastern rites.

In addition, the specific error of collegiality is explicitly mentioned in the consecrator's allocution. It cannot be denied that this rite is, from a traditional perspective, weak, ambiguous, imperfect, defective, and manifestly illicit.

Yet, even the bishops who ordain priests in the traditional rite were all consecrated bishops according to this new rite. It can easily be imagined how a defect of intention could creep into the episcopal succession, even in the case of "traditional" priests who depend upon conciliar bishops for their ordinations. Fr. Portail quotes a remark by some young priests of the Fraternity of St. Peter who had just been ordained by Archbishop Decourtray to some priests of the Society of St. Pius X: "You are more certain of your ordination than we are of ours" (*ibid.*). It would, indeed, be tragic if all traditional priests did not have moral certitude as to their ordination, and if there existed two different grades of priests, a higher grade ordained in Tradition, and a lower grade. It is for this reason that the superiors have the right to insist on conditional re-ordination for any priest turning towards Tradition, and will only accept ordinations in the conciliar Church after having investigated both priestly and episcopal ordinations and established moral certitude.


Archbishop Lefebvre clearly recognized his obligation of providing priests concerning whose ordination there was no doubt. It was one of the reasons for the episcopal consecrations of 1988, as he declared in the sermon for the occasion:

You well know, my dear brethren, that there can be no priests without bishops. When God calls me—this will certainly not be long—from whom would these seminarians receive the Sacrament of Orders? From conciliar bishops, who, due to their doubtful intentions, confer doubtful sacraments? This is not possible.

He continued, explaining that he could not leave the faithful orphans, nor abandon the seminarians who entrusted themselves to him, for "they came to our seminaries, despite all the difficulties that they have encountered, in order to receive a true ordination to the Priesthood..." (Fr. François Laisney, *Archbishop Lefebvre and the Vatican*, p.120. Available from Angelus Press; price: \$15.00). He considered it his duty to guarantee the certitude of the sacrament of Holy Orders by the consecration of bishops in the traditional rite, who would then ordain only in the traditional rite.

We must observe the same balance as Archbishop Lefebvre. On the one hand, it is our duty to avoid the excess of sedevacantism, which unreasonably denies the very validity and existence of the post-conciliar Church and its priesthood. On the other hand, however, we must likewise reject the laxist and liberal approach that does not take seriously the real doubts that can arise concerning the validity of priestly ordinations in the post-conciliar Church, failing to consider the enormous importance and necessity of a certainly valid priesthood for the good of the Church, for the eternal salvation of souls, and for the tranquillity of the consciences of the faithful. Given the gravity of these issues, it is not even a slight doubt that is acceptable. Hence the duty of examining in each particular case the vernacular form of priestly ordination, the intention of the ordaining bishop, the rite of consecration of the ordaining bishop, and the intention of the consecrators.

Just as the superiors take seriously their duty of guaranteeing the moral certitude of the Holy Orders of their priests, whether by means of conditional ordination or careful investigation (when possible), so also must priests who join the Society accept conditional ordination in case of even slight positive doubt, and so also must the faithful recognize that each case is different and accept the decision of those who alone are in a position to perform the necessary investigations. For regardless of the technical question of the validity of a priest's Holy Orders, we all recognize the Catholic sense that tells us that there can be no mixing of the illegitimate new rites with the traditional Catholic rites, a principle so simply elucidated by Archbishop Lefebvre on June 29, 1976:

We are not of this religion. We do not accept this new religion. We are of the religion of all time, of the Catholic religion. We are not of that universal religion, as they call it today. It is no longer the Catholic religion. We are not of that liberal, modernist religion that has its worship, its priests, its faith, its catechisms, its Bible.... 

Fr. Peter Scott was ordained by Archbishop Lefebvre in 1988. After assignments as seminary professor and the US District Superior, he is currently the rector of Holy Cross Seminary in Goulburn, Australia.