

By now, many will have heard of the arbitrary removal, by Pope Francis, of a young (57-year-old) bishop of Puerto Rico — Daniel Fernández Torres of the Diocese of Arecibo — because, apparently, he wasn't "sufficiently in union" with the pope and his fellow bishops on the island. By all accounts and by the bishop's own testimony, no objective canonically-classifiable wrongdoing or even hint or claim of wrongdoing has been pressed against him, as *The Pillar* summarizes in its article, "[Can the pope just fire a bishop?](#)"^[1] Rather, the bishop exercised a certain freedom of judgment by which he took a more conservative line than his fellow bishops: he would not send his seminarians to a new interdiocesan seminary; he would not enforce vaccinations; he would not collaborate in the suppression of the traditional Latin Mass; he would not buckle to the agenda of the lavender mafia.^[2] This was enough to make him hated and feared. He had to be terminated, just like that. One might say his crime was to be a Catholic in the mold of the pope, Benedict XVI, who had appointed him.

Bishop Torres passionately and articulately defended himself in a crystal-clear [statement](#) on March 9, part of which reads (my translation):

"I regret very much that in a Church where mercy is so much preached, in practice some lack a minimal sense of justice. No process has been made against me, nor have I been formally accused of anything and simply one day the Apostolic Delegate verbally communicated to me that Rome was asking me to resign. A successor of the apostles is now being replaced without even undertaking what would be a due canonical process to remove a parish priest. I was informed that I had committed no crime but that I supposedly 'had not been obedient to the pope nor had I been in sufficient communion with my brother bishops of Puerto Rico.' It was suggested to me that if I resigned from the diocese I would remain at the service of the Church in case at some point I was needed in some other position — an offer that in fact proves my innocence. However, I did not resign because I did not want to become an accomplice in a totally unjust action, one that even now I am reluctant to think could happen in our Church."

The Pillar article, which is quite revealing in itself, competently explains that removing a bishop is an extremely grave matter: he is, after all, a successor of the apostles who receives his authority *from Christ*, even if through the pope's appointment; he is not a middle manager appointed by the CEO of Vatican, Inc.^[3] *The Pillar* treats us to fascinating historical details of the considerable pains taken by earlier popes *not* to fire bishops, because it would have been considered unthinkable to act that way toward one of the "high

priests” in the Church of Christ: “*Ecce Sacerdos magnus*,” as the old antiphon for the entrance of a bishop exclaimed.

A telling example of this reverential attitude towards the episcopate comes to us from the reign of Pope Pius XII. As Yves Chiron narrates in his biography of Giovanni Battista Montini (a masterpiece of a book), the government of France at the end of World War II wanted to punish all the bishops who openly supported Marshal Pétain and the Vichy regime. Understandable enough. But when individuals in the new French government like Hubert Guérin, Pierre Bloch, René Massigli, and Georges Bidault made it known to the Vatican that they wished not only to swap out the papal nuncio but to see a slew of hierarchs removed from their offices — three cardinals and thirty bishops, to be exact — Pius XII responded indignantly:

“On the 27th [of November 1944], Pius XII received Msgr. Théas. Concerning the change of the nuncio, the Pope ‘stated his displeasure with the attitude of the French government, which he regards as offensive, discourteous, injurious. He will change the nuncio because he has become *persona ingrata*, but he will not do it without pain or protest.’ As for purging the episcopacy, he declared: ‘There can be no question of changing the bishops. That has never been done. That will not be done. That would be an injustice. That would be without precedent. That is inadmissible.’”[\[4\]](#)

Pius XII, who knew and hated the Nazis like few others, had the instinct of a pope who also knew that even when a successor of the Apostles has behaved dishonorably, one doesn’t just fire him “at will”; he’s not an employee of a corporation or a government official. Pius XII would not remove bishops who bore the real guilt of collaborating with Vichy, while Francis removes Bishop Torres who seems to have done nothing grievously wrong.

Let us return now to *The Pillar*. In glorious hyperpapalist fashion, we are told that *of course* the pope can remove a bishop *ad libitum* because the pope’s the boss, with no limits to his power:

“Notwithstanding the absence of any evidence of a canonical crime, or the reticence of previous popes to remove diocesan bishops by papal fiat, Francis does have, according to canon law, ‘supreme, full, immediate, and universal ordinary power’ in the Church, and specifically the ‘primacy of ordinary power over all particular churches [dioceses].’”

The Pillar sidesteps the million-dollar question of what all these words — “supreme, full, immediate, universal, ordinary, power” — actually *mean*: if their interpretation were self-evident, they would not have been the object of canonical and theological scrutiny for centuries. Scholastics famous and obscure all took the position that there are limits to *any* human authority’s exercise of power, even the pope’s. It is astonishing that anyone could adhere to an interpretation that makes the pope a mortal god on earth, before whom every bishop must quake for fear that he will be arbitrarily removed from his office at the pope’s next whim.

The Pillar’s simplistic ecclesiology (and would that it were limited only to journalists!) makes an utter hash of the episcopacy as part of the inherent constitution of the Church. If bishops have zero rights in the possession of their office — that is, if they can be “fired at will” — they are not actually governing the Church with divine authority in collegial communion with the vicar of Christ. They are, as the 19th-century caricature had it, “vicars of the pope” who govern their dioceses simply because the pope can’t practically be everywhere at all times. According to that ecclesiology, if one may dignify it with such a name, the pope would be the real bishop of each and every diocese, who has delegated some of his authority, *pro tempore* and *ad hoc*, to these various individuals.



On this view of papal authority, no one in the Church has any objective rights except by

papal sufferance. That is, as long as the pope is willing to let you have the appearance of rights, then you can live according to those appearances, and you might even be permitted to conduct a canon law case in reference to them; but the moment he says “Okay, enough of that make-believe; I deprive you of XYZ,” then we must bow our heads and submit. Not only (on this view) does canon law have no say over the pope himself, it possesses force only by his continually willing it to have force, as if he were sustaining it in being. The pope is not the protector and promoter of the Church and her members, but the source and measure of all that belongs to them qua members of the Church. He *makes* and *unmakes* the members of the Church. In short, he is the sole actual possessor of authority and standing in the Church, while everyone else possesses it from his implicit grant, which may at any time be revoked.

Such is the *reductio ad absurdum* of a certain vein of ultramontaniam. Thanks be to God it is not Catholicism, but only a rotten and sickly parody of it.

Let’s explore this matter further. Who, in the Church, *has* absolute and unlimited power? Who is the source of all authority, all rights and duties? The answer is obvious: *Christ Himself*, the Head of the Church. The pope as *vicar* of Christ is one who stands in His place, exercising certain duties (and only those duties) that have been entrusted to him; but the pope is by no means the *equal* of Christ. Perhaps the chafing pain of this inherent limit explains Pope Francis’s curious removal of the title “Vicar of Christ” from the list of titles in the *Annuario Pontificio*, where he had it relegated to the category of “historical titles”: he no longer wants to be or to be seen as just a representative of Christ. Rather, in some sense, he wishes to be His *equal*, to rule and control and remake the Church as if it were his own possession, his own bride. To be “friend of the bridegroom” (cf. Jn. 3:29) is not enough.

In spite of its democratic outward appearance, the synodal process fits snugly into this ultimate grab for power. Inasmuch as the Church could be described as monarchical in her papacy, aristocratic in her episcopacy, and democratic in the common access of all her members to the full treasury of Redemption poured forth in the liturgy and sacraments, the Church is by no means “synodal” in the newspeak sense of the term, where synodality is a process of “consultation” and “decision-making” emanating from the top down, and seeking to elicit and impose a progressivist vision of perpetual doctrinal and moral evolution validated by the will of the pope, who, taking the place of the “God of surprises,” presides over the autodemolition of historic confessional Catholicism. That kind of synodality serves as both a smokescreen for and an engine of modernism.

The pope as *servus servorum Dei* who receives and hands on what he has received, the bishops as successors to the apostles who do the same, and the faithful as recipients of tradition and subjects of the *sensus fidei* have no place in this Rousseauian vision of a

“general will” that emerges as if spontaneously from human meetings and human decisions. We might even say that the Bergoglian ecclesiology combines the worst features of the three social contract philosophers: it has Hobbes’s autocratic Leviathan in the person of the pope, who is not Christ’s vicar but Christ’s replacement; it has Locke’s relativism about truth claims and the subordination of religion to political power; and it has Rousseau’s autocratic regime masquerading as the people’s will and voice.

There are those who celebrate the “reconciliation” of the Catholic Church with Enlightenment philosophy. We who recognize, in keeping with Vatican I, that the divine constitution of the Church is unchanging and unchangeable, should not be among them.

The Pillar concludes its article thus:

“Bishop Torres may not like, or even understand the reasons for his removal. And it may be true that he has committed no canonical offense, and received no kind of due process. Torres might believe the decision to be entirely unjust, and it very well might be unjust. The Church does not hold that the charisms of the Holy Spirit protect popes from bad decisions in governance — and every pope in history has made some. But does the pope have the power to do it? He does.”

Catholic journalism is not meant to be theology, granted, but it should at least try to avoid trumpeting absurdities. Here is a suggested alternative conclusion:

“When a pope wields his power arbitrarily, against the rights of his subjects (for they do retain their rights, which come to them from sources above and beyond the pope), he sins in doing so, harms the common good of the Church, and deserves to be resisted in any way possible, such as non-compliance. Such a pope would be in a state of mortal sin and would have to seek absolution for it.”

After all, Karl Rahner — no traditionalist he — argued the same about a pope who should dare to obliterate an Eastern Rite.[\[5\]](#)

Editor’s Note (July 8, 2023): *New paragraphs on Pius XII have been added to this article by the author.*

[1] Published March 9, 2022.

[2] See Inés San Martín, "[Pope removes Puerto Rican bishop from office after he refused to resign](#)," *Crux*, March 9, 2022.

[3] See Phil Lawler's take: "[The Pope's arbitrary actions belie his call for 'synodal' governance](#)," *CatholicCulture.org*, March 9, 2022.

[4] Yves Chiron (trans. James Walther), [Paul VI: The Divided Pope](#) (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2022), p. 93.

[5] Fr. Zuhlsdorf cites the text in, "[What the mighty Jesuit Karl Rahner would say, said, about suppressing *Summorum Pontificum*](#)," *Fr. Z's Blog*, July 1, 2021.