

EXCLUSIVE: Former FSSP Superior General Speaks in Virginia, Provides History of Fraternity's Founding

FRONT ROYAL, VIRGINIA — During the COVID shutdown of most diocesan churches that began shortly after the two weeks of “flattening the curve” and then stretched from weeks to months beginning in the first quarter of 2020, Catholics living in or near Front Royal, Virginia (home to Christendom College, which formerly offered the Traditional Latin Mass several times per week, including on Sundays) saw that nearby Maryland churches shuttered. The same shutdown of churches and sacraments was coming for Virginia, so Catholics prayed, organized, and offered sacrifices to plan for this abnormal fear that was spreading like a tsunami across the nation.

Erika Zepeda, a Catholic wife and mother in the Arlington diocese near Front Royal, provides an exhilarating perspective: “The Society of St. Pius X (SSPX) mission in Front Royal is so providentially established that only God can take credit for its origin — really.”

“After Bishop Burbidge closed the churches, various petitions from Catholics went to the diocese, but to no avail. According to one diocesan priest we know, priests were even forbidden to say private Masses for families in their homes,” she said. “The only recourse we had left was to pray to God that He would send a priest who would provide us the sacraments,” Zepeda said.

And provide a priest, He did!

Nearby Maryland was already under lockdown, “And to our surprise, a priest of the SSPX arrived in Front Royal to offer Mass for [what he thought was] his Maryland community ‘for one Sunday only’ due to a miscommunication that led him to Front Royal instead of Herndon.” Other Catholics, together with Zepeda, then petitioned the SSPX priest, specifically invoking [Canon 843 §1](#), the right of the Catholic laity to the sacraments, to continue serving Front Royal area Catholics, Zepeda said.

“During the lockdown Masses, the sheriff was notified, and all was done in compliance with the local government guidelines at the Fairgrounds,” she said. “And after the lockdown, we petitioned the SSPX to make their mission permanent so that we could be guaranteed the sacraments in the future.”

Fr. Bisig's Talk in Front Royal

This background, a brand new and burgeoning SSPX chapel located near Front Royal, Virginia, provides background to Sunday night's (April 16) talk at [Chelsea Academy](#), located nearby to Human Life International, Seton Home School, and Christendom College.

Two diocesan priests, with the approval of Chelsea Academy, invited Fr. Josef Bisig, one of

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the founding members of the [Society of St. Pius X](#), and then later in 1988, the [Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter](#) (FSSP), to give a talk to an overflowing crowd of more than 300 laity and about a dozen priests in a gym that is now used for three Sunday Traditional Latin Masses offered by the Diocese of Arlington.

Multiple area Catholics expressed their dismay leading up to the talk as to the rationale of seeming provocation as a tactic to inoculate or use scare tactics against those 200-plus Catholics who have been frequenting the burgeoning SSPX chapel that continues to provide all of the sacraments in the traditional rite. This chapel opened during the lockdown when the diocese closed down for nine weeks, about a half an hour away.

An invitation flyer that was distributed prior to the event included the following message:

“Father Josef Bisig, ordained by [Archbishop] Lefebvre and co-founder and first Superior General of the FSSP, will be in Front Royal, Virginia on Low Sunday, 4/16 for an evening to talk about being faithful to Holy Mother Church and to Tradition. His story has never been written down, and he'll be talking about things he never had before. He will be joined by other FSSP priests, including Fr. Akers, Fr. Heenan, Fr. Killackey (all Christendom grads) and Fr. Smith (FSSP Harrisburg). Rsvp as there will be Eastertide feasting with wine and dessert!”

History of the Founding of the SSPX and FSSP

Fr. Bisig covered a lot of historical ground for the first half of his approximately hour and a half talk which included questions and answers. He went out of his way on multiple occasions to compliment [Archbishop Lefebvre](#) and his wisdom and insight to found the seminary in Écône, Switzerland, in the early 1970s at the request of 35 seminarians, including himself, who had approached the then-retired Archbishop about founding a seminary based on the orthodox Catholic Faith during a time of extreme turbulence and revolution in seminary formation throughout the Church.

Key highlights gleaned from the talk included Fr. Bisig explaining that he stayed with Archbishop Lefebvre and the SSPX even after the Écône seminary was suppressed “by the French episcopal conference” in the mid-1970s. More details can be found on all of this history online (see [here](#) and [here](#)) and in Michael Davies' three-volume series [Apologia Pro Marcel Lefebvre](#).

In fact, for those who have read the Michael Davies' series, much of the information shared

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during Fr. Bisig's talk could be found there. For those who have not, I would highly recommend it.

The primary motivation of Archbishop Lefebvre was not the 1962 Mass and sacraments, according to Fr. Bisig. Instead, it was the loss of Faith in the seminaries and the lack of truly Catholic formation in seminaries in the 1970s.

Such deficient formation led to widespread changes in belief concerning the nature of the priesthood itself. Whereas the Church has always understood and taught that the priest acts *in persona Christi* (something no other man can do) and offers a true sacrifice to God the Father, a false notion of the priest as a mere presider over a communal meal began to supplant the traditional doctrine. This led to many priests becoming more like social workers with an obvious lessening of Faith in the dogma of transubstantiation and the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

Fr. Bisig emphasized that the propitiatory character of the Mass was being erased.

Why Did the Formation of the FSSP Become Necessary?

After the suppression of the Écône seminary, Fr. Bisig said that Archbishop Lefebvre came under severe unjust persecution and that he began to become increasingly hostile to the Vatican authorities and the leadership in the establishment Church. The French Episcopal Conference condemned the Écône seminary as a "wildcat Seminary."

And indeed, after the July 1988 episcopal consecrations against the expressed will of Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict later told Fr. Bisig that people in the Roman Curia (cardinals) were also responsible for the division and that Pope Benedict seemed very sad about that.

Perhaps this sorrow on the part of then-Cardinal Ratzinger, who was the primary point of contact with Archbishop Lefebvre during the pontificate of John Paul II, explains this passage in his [letter to bishops that accompanied *Summorum Pontificum*](#) (July 7, 2007):

"I now come to the positive reason which motivated my decision to issue this Motu Proprio updating that of 1988. It is a matter of coming to an interior reconciliation in the heart of the Church. Looking back over the past, to the divisions which in the course of the centuries have rent the Body of Christ, one continually has the impression that, at critical moments when divisions were coming about, not enough was done by the Church's leaders to maintain or regain reconciliation and unity. One has the impression that omissions on the

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part of the Church have had their share of blame for the fact that these divisions were able to harden. This glance at the past imposes an obligation on us today: to make every effort to enable for all those who truly desire unity to remain in that unity or to attain it anew. I think of a sentence in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, where Paul writes: 'Our mouth is open to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return ... widen your hearts also!' (2 Cor. 6:11-13). Paul was certainly speaking in another context, but his exhortation can and must touch us too, precisely on this subject. Let us generously open our hearts and make room for everything that the faith itself allows."

John Paul II Reportedly Offered to Consecrate the Bishop for the SSPX

Fr. Bisig also revealed for the first time that in a 2015 meeting he had with Pope Benedict XVI, the Pope Emeritus told him that Pope John Paul II was planning on consecrating the bishop for the SSPX that was being negotiated with Archbishop Lefebvre in 1988.

And finally, while Fr. Bisig's talk explained from his perspective why the founding of the FSSP was necessary in order to keep full communion with the Church, there were no real moments of apologetics specifically directed against the SSPX or Archbishop Lefebvre as perhaps the expectations of the many traditional Catholics in the area expected. There was no mention of their local presence or of any delicts or sins committed by Catholics who have been, are, or may frequent their nearby chapel especially for a full traditional life and all of the sacraments.

Father did mention the "schismatic" consecrations more than once and said that he thought that the "SSPX was outside of the visible confines of the Catholic Church" and needed to have their canonical status regularized.

In response to a question from this reporter about how [Traditionis Custodes](#) impacted the FSSP and other traditional orders with the forbidding of opening new personal parishes, Fr. Bisig explained that there were other canonical solutions that the FSSP has already used and is using to provide for the needs of the lay faithful. Oratories, chaplaincies, quasi-parishes and other similar structures are currently in use in Lincoln, Nebraska and in Germany, according to Fr. Bisig.

The FSSP currently has 350 priests with 170 seminarians with about 90 seminarians in Germany and about 80 in Denton, Nebraska.

FSSP Priest Appointed as Chaplain for Chelsea Academy

The following statement has been provided by the Diocese of Arlington regarding Fr. John Killackey, FSSP, a Christendom College graduate, who will be the chaplain for Chelsea Academy in Front Royal apparently effective immediately:

“Diocese of Arlington statement on FSSP priest assigned to Chelsea Academy

The priest who has been assigned as chaplain to Chelsea Academy is Fr. John Killackey, FSSP. His function as chaplain will be to provide for the pastoral needs of the school, similar to priestly ministry carried out in schools throughout the Diocese of Arlington. His ministry will be in accord with diocesan policy and *Traditionis Custodes* as well as the *Responsa ad Dubia*. Weekend Masses are celebrated in the Extraordinary Form at Chelsea Academy as an extension of St. John the Baptist Parish in Front Royal. Marriages, Confirmations, and other Sacraments are celebrated only in parish churches or missions in the Diocese of Arlington, in the *Novus Ordo*, as prescribed by *Traditionis Custodes*, and would not take place at Chelsea Academy.”

A Final Thought on Unity Extending Both Ways by Traditional Catholics

In light of the ongoing angst within traditional Catholics both in Arlington and elsewhere regarding attendance at a diocesan parish where the Traditional Latin Mass and sacraments are offered regularly along with orthodox Catholic doctrine or with a traditional priestly society such as the FSSP, the SSPX or the Institute of Christ the King, Erika Zepeda summarized her thoughts as they apply to Front Royal Catholics attached to Tradition:

“There is no such thing as an SSPX Catholic. We are Catholic, period. Practicing the received and approved immemorial traditions and passing them on to our children is as crucial of a duty now as it has ever been. Traditional Catholics should be united in faith and charity to preserve the sacred and ancient treasures of the Church, especially the TLM, during this time of worldwide persecution.

It's disheartening that the SSPX mission in Front Royal finds itself a target for other traditionalists at this time. There is no quarrel on our side here. God forbid that the diocese discontinues the TLM altogether [as they have with the other

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sacraments], but if it happens, everyone should know that they are welcome here. The TLM is for everyone.”

Catholic Family News requested comment from local parish priests who offer the Traditional Latin Mass regularly in the Diocese of Arlington, including those who invited Fr. Bisig to speak, as well as from several Catholic laity who frequent the Traditional Latin Mass at diocesan church locations (currently eight in the diocese), but was deferred to the diocese for comment by the priests (similarly, none of the laity were willing to go on record).