Consecration of the New Immaculata

On the plains of northeastern Kansas, roughly 30 miles west of Topeka, a truly magnificent monument to the Catholic Faith was consecrated on May 3. Located in the small town of St. Marys, towards the western side of the Archdiocese of Kansas City, the stunning Immaculata Church stands 12 stories high and can seat over 1,500 people. And what is more, this resplendent house of God is devoted exclusively to the celebration of the Traditional Latin Mass and sacraments, making it a great sign of contradiction for those bent on restricting (if not abolishing) the traditional Roman Rite (see below for CFN's coverage of the event).

As many readers are no doubt aware, this $42 million edifice was not built under the auspices of the Archdiocese of Kansas City. Rather, it was a long-standing project of the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX), the priestly society founded in 1970 by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, which acquired St. Mary's College along with several hundred acres of land in 1978 after the Archbishop visited the town the previous year and gave his blessing to the endeavor.

The deciding factor, as Lefebvre recalled in a 1989 letter, was the presence of a "magnificent church dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary," referring to the original Immaculata (consecrated in 1909) which stood on the grounds of the formerly Jesuit-run college (established in 1869) and which tragically caught fire due to an electrical short and was badly damaged soon after the 1978 purchase. The beautiful church struck the Archbishop as "a symbol, raised up in the heart of America, and destined to favor the Catholic Renaissance of that great country."

He further declared in his letter:

> "I would never have accepted the purchase of St. Mary's without this magnificent sanctuary. The fire was a true catastrophe, a stroke of the devil …
>
> May God help you to rebuild this religious edifice, for the honor of St. Mary's, for the good of the Society, and for the salvation of America. It is a national basilica.
>
> I propose that the Society of St. Pius X participate universally in this: that a collection be made everywhere for the restoration of this sanctuary, which must be like a beacon guiding souls towards their eternity. Mary is the '*stella matutina*,' the star that guides the mariners. May She be the guide of all

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> Americans."[1]

True to Archbishop Lefebvre's vision, worldwide fundraising efforts began and plans for a new and much larger Immaculata were developed, one large enough to accommodate the growing community of traditional Catholics in St. Marys (the remains of the old Immaculata were demolished in 2009).

Seeking Comment from the Archdiocese

The day before the consecration of the new Immaculata by Bishop Bernard Fellay (full recording available here), a local news station from Topeka featured a story on the church, which the reporter emphasized "can be seen from miles away."

After seeing the secular media pick up the story, I was curious to know if the Archdiocese of Kansas City had issued a statement on the new Immaculata and the SSPX more generally, given the Society's canonically irregular status in the Church.[2] After searching the archdiocesan website and finding nothing, I decided to send the following inquiry to the Archdiocese's Office of Media Relations:

> "I am writing to ask if the Archdiocese of Kansas City has an official position on the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX) and, specifically, if the Archdiocese has any comment about the consecration ceremony which took place yesterday [May 3, 2023] in St. Marys (the story was covered by the local secular news).
>
> Regarding an official position, here are a few specific questions:
>
> • Does Archbishop Naumann consider the members of the SSPX to be 'schismatic'? If yes, on what grounds?
>
> • Does Archbishop Naumann hold that Catholics may fulfill their Sunday and holy day obligation by attending a Mass offered by an SSPX priest? If no, on what grounds?
>
> • Does Archbishop Naumann ever grant faculties to SSPX priests to witness Catholic marriages, in accord with the Pontifical Commission Ecclesia

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> Dei's 2017 letter?
>
> Thank you for your time and attention to my questions. I look forward to hearing back soon."

After a bit of cordial correspondence with a Media Relations staff member, I received the following responses to my questions, which I was assured came from "an authorized representative" of His Excellency Joseph F. Naumann, Archbishop of Kansas City:

> "While regrettably the Church and the SSPX are not currently in full communion, the Archdiocese does not consider the SSPX to be schismatic.
>
> While canonically one may fulfill one's obligation to participate at Holy Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of obligation by attending an SSPX Mass, the Masses are not licitly offered by priests possessing the grant of priestly faculties from the Archdiocese. Therefore, participation at SSPX Masses to satisfy one's Sunday obligation is discouraged.
>
> The Archdiocese does, in support of Pope Francis' pastoral outlook as expressed in the 2017 letter, grant SSPX priests the faculty to witness marriages when the priests request it. The Archdiocese understands that at this time the SSPX priests in St. Marys request faculties to witness all marriages at The Immaculata."

Thus, it is now a matter of public record that the Archdiocese of Kansas City **(1)** "does not consider the SSPX to be schismatic," **(2)** affirms that Catholics do "canonically … fulfill" their Sunday and holy day obligation by attending an SSPX Mass (while still discouraging such attendance), and **(3)** "does … grant SSPX priests the faculty to witness marriages when the priests request it," which is apparently the norm at present.

Needless to say, these are very encouraging responses for all traditional Catholics, and especially for those who reside in the Archdiocese of Kansas City.

Lingering Issue of "Full Communion"

Nevertheless, what are Catholics to make of the familiar claim, repeated by the Archdiocese of Kansas City, that "the SSPX are not currently in full communion" with the Catholic Church?

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Over the years, the phrase has become standard on the part of popes and other prelates when addressing the SSPX. Benedict XVI, for example, recalling his remission of the 1988 excommunications, wrote that he hoped his gesture would help the SSPX "rediscover the path to full communion with the Church" (*Ecclesiae Unitatem*, n. 4). And Francis, when he granted all SSPX priests habitual faculties to absolve sins, explained that he did so "trusting in the good will of their priests to strive with God's help for the recovery of full communion in the Catholic Church" (*Misericordia et Misera*, n. 12).

But what does "full communion" mean?

According to the current (1983) Code of Canon Law, "Those baptized are fully in the communion of the Catholic Church on this earth who are joined with Christ in its visible structure by the bonds of the profession of faith, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical governance" (can. 205). The members of the SSPX clearly profess the same faith and share in the same sacraments as the Catholic Church. They also have habitual faculties to absolve sins from the current Roman Pontiff, who likewise "authorize[s] Local Ordinaries the possibility to grant faculties for the celebration of marriages of faithful who follow the pastoral activity of the Society," taking for granted that those same Nuptial Masses (which, by their very nature, are *public* Masses) will be celebrated by an SSPX priest (see 2017 PCED letter). How, then, does the SSPX not meet the canonical criteria for "full communion"? Is it because they lack what Benedict XVI called "a canonical status in the Church"? If so, on what grounds are they denied a canonical status?

Let us pray for a hastening of the day when a pope will recognize, as does Bishop Athanasius Schneider (who served as an Apostolic Visitator to the SSPX in 2015), that the SSPX "are already in communion with the Church, since they recognize the current pope, mention him in the Canon [of the Mass], pray for him publicly, and pray for the local diocesan bishop."

"In my opinion," says Bishop Schneider, "the SSPX should be recognized [i.e., given canonical status] and, if they were, it would be a true spiritual and pastoral help to the entire Church, to strengthen doctrine and tradition in the Church."[3]

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[1] Letter of Archbishop Lefebvre (Sept. 8, 1989). Text provided on the home page of anewimmaculata.org. For more on the history of St. Mary's, see "Fertile Ground: Saint Marys and the Immaculata" by Dr. Daniel T. Gresham, published in the booklet *The Consecration of the Immaculata* (pp. 131-136).

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[2] A full treatment of the Society's canonical status is well beyond the scope of this article, but a few brief explanatory notes are in order. In 2009, after lifting the putative excommunications of the four bishops consecrated by Archbishop Lefebvre against the will of Pope John Paul II in 1988, Pope Benedict XVI wrote in a letter to the bishops of the world, "As long as the Society does not have a canonical status in the Church, its ministers do not exercise legitimate ministries in the Church." More recently, Pope Francis changed the landscape by **(1)** granting all SSPX priests habitual faculties to absolve sins in Confession (see 2016 Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et Misera*, n. 12) and **(2)** authorizing local bishops to grant SSPX priests faculties to witness marriages (see 2017 PCED letter). Despite these positive changes, the SSPX as a whole continues to lack a "canonical status" in the Church. In order to possess such a status, the SSPX would need to be erected as either a Society of Apostolic Life (most likely of Pontifical Right — see can. 589) or a Personal Prelature.

[3] Bishop Athanasius Schneider in conversation with Diane Montagna, *Christus Vincit: Christ's Triumph Over the Darkness of the Age* (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2019), p. 149.

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