

A Short Refutation of Sedevacantism

By Dorothea Ludwig-Wang, 23 July 2020

Given the current crisis in the Church, there is no surprise that sedevacantism, which claims that there has been no pope since the death of Pius XII in 1958, has become an attractive theory for many Catholics troubled by the role the conciliar and post-conciliar pontiffs have played in bringing about this situation. One certainly cannot fault those who, upon seeing the damage unfold before their eyes in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, genuinely questioned whether the apparent pope was truly who he claimed to be. However valid sedevacantism as a theory may have been at the time, after what has occurred throughout this supposed *interregnum* period, it must be concluded that not only is it improbable today, it is *impossible* because its logical implications deny the visibility, authority, apostolicity, and indefectibility of the Church.

The Church is a perfect society established by Our Lord to continue His work of redemption for all time, for the salvation of souls. All members of the Church “profess the faith of Christ, partake of the same sacraments, and are governed by their lawful pastors under one visible head” (*Baltimore Catechism*, q. 489). The visibility of the Church is necessary because it would be illogical and unjust for Our Lord to command us to obey a Church—outside of whom there is no salvation!—who “could not be seen and known” (*ibid.*, q. 513). The visibility of the Church is made manifest by her visible hierarchy, exercising its authority in a distinctly visible manner through two powers: orders and jurisdiction.

The power of orders grants ministerial authority, while the power of jurisdiction grants the authority of teaching and governing. Ordinary jurisdiction was established by divine institution and cannot be abrogated by the Church (1917 CIC, c. 196), as every visible society needs public authority to make laws, decide cases, and apply punishments. Delegated and supplied jurisdiction, the latter of which is legitimately exercised by traditional bishops and priests during the current crisis in the Church, are by their very nature dependent upon the existence of ordinary jurisdiction: those with delegated jurisdiction do not act in their own name but in the name of the one who delegates (c. 197), and supplied jurisdiction is simply a tacit delegation in response to certain circumstances.

If the Church is visible, then it must be possible to without doubt identify her: as professed in the Nicene Creed, she is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The apostolicity of the Church exists not only because she was founded upon the Apostles and continues to teach what was transmitted by them, but also because she is governed by their successors. Now, the power of governance can only be exercised by one who has jurisdiction, and this jurisdiction must be attached to a certain office so that the office-holder may oversee a particular territory. It follows that the apostolicity of the Church is dependent not only upon the existence of validly consecrated bishops, but bishops who hold ecclesiastical office and the jurisdiction attached to those offices.

The First Vatican Council, in the *First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ*, refers to “that ordinary and immediate power of episcopal jurisdiction, by which bishops...have succeeded to the place of the Apostles,” and declares that “just as [Our Lord] sent the

Apostles...in like manner it was his will that in his Church there should be shepherds and teachers until the end of time.” To be truly shepherds and teachers (*pastores et doctores*), bishops require ordinary jurisdiction, the use of supplied jurisdiction during times of emergency notwithstanding, as only office-holders engage in the power of governance. Thus, there must be bishops who possess ordinary jurisdiction until the end of time, lest the Church lose her visibility, teaching and governing authority, and apostolicity. Our Lord established a visible and apostolic Church with such authority, so the occurrence of such an event would destroy indefectibility as well.

If it were true that Pius XII was the last valid pope, then a problem arises: the last bishop appointed by him on 11 February 1958, Bishop Bernardino Pinera Carvallo, passed away on 21 June 2020. While bishops can still be validly consecrated during an *interregnum* period and thus be endowed with the fullness of the power of orders, they cannot possess ordinary jurisdiction unless they are appointed by the pope, since “jurisdiction passes to bishops only through the Roman Pontiff” (Pius XII, *Ad Apostolorum Principis*, 39). Since the summer of 2020, all bishops who claim to possess ordinary jurisdiction were appointed by John XXIII or subsequent (putative, as the sedevacantists would claim) pontiffs, which would entail the disappearance of the entire *Ecclesia docens*, and thereby the destruction of the Church altogether, who will not have remained as Christ established her.

The implications of the sedevacantist thesis—which deny the visibility, authority, apostolicity, and indefectibility of the Church—indicate that there is no longer any Church at all. Further, it is inherently contradictory, and in adhering to it, sedevacantist clergy deprive themselves of all authority; without a Church, they cannot argue that supplied jurisdiction renders their ministry legitimate. While sedevacantism was certainly a valid theory when it was first proposed, before ordinary jurisdiction would have allegedly disappeared, the passage of time has demonstrated that it is untenable.

Thus, while the theory itself is not heretical, it is suspect of heresy and at least erroneous, as its consequences will inevitably lead to the practical doubt or denial of several dogmas and theologically certain truths. It is not only an overreaction to the current crisis but also a desperate final attempt to deny its gravity: certainly, it is less difficult to believe that the pope cannot spread error throughout the Church, and that consequently, the conciliar and post-conciliar popes cannot be valid. However, it does the Church no good to deny simple reality: the tree is rotting from within, but sedevacantists seem to prefer uprooting the entire tree over attempting to salvage its life.