

Q&A: Does the SSPX Promote Donatism?

By Dorothea Ludwig-Wang, 22 October 2022

Q. Generally speaking, I agree with the SSPX position on the *Novus Ordo*. It is not a new “form” of the same Latin rite, was likely never promulgated by Paul VI, and presents a new theology which undermines the priesthood, the notion of sacrifice, and the Real Presence. I believe that it is a non-Catholic rite and cannot fulfill the Sunday obligation. However, I saw an SSPX article¹ recently that raises some concerns. Specifically, this passage: “...the celebrant must intend to do what the Church does. The *Novus Ordo Missae* will no longer in and of itself guarantee that the celebrant has this intention. That will depend on his personal faith (generally unknown to those assisting, but more and more doubtful as the crisis in the Church is prolonged).”

This would essentially mean that we can *never* have moral certitude about the validity of any *Novus Ordo* Masses, even those celebrated properly, because the validity of the priest’s intention would depend on the his personal faith, which we likely know nothing about. So does the SSPX promote Donatism?

A. The *Novus Ordo Missae* and its new theology on the priesthood, the propitiatory sacrifice, and the Real Presence are certainly no guarantee, in and of themselves, that the celebrant believes what the Church teaches. While the essence of the Mass, the re-enactment of Our Lord’s sacrifice at Calvary in an unbloody fashion, consists of the transubstantiation alone through the double consecration, the three essential elements of the liturgical rite (Offertory, Consecration, and Communion Rite) are necessary to properly manifest that sacrifice externally. This is no longer done in the *Novus Ordo*: for example, the ambiguity presented by the removal of genuflections immediately after each consecration no longer unequivocally excludes (even if it does not directly teach) the belief that it is the faith of the congregation, rather than the sacramental form, that brings about the transubstantiation.

Many other examples may be given, but because there are already many studies on this subject, it seems unnecessary to belabor the point, particularly since we (along with the SSPX) are already in agreement.² A celebrant who falls into theological error as a result of liturgical innovation does not intend what the Church *intends*; nevertheless, it is still possible that he intends to do what the Church *does*. It is *de fide* that the minister need not have faith to celebrate baptism validly, and the same teaching is *sententia fidei proxima* with respect to the other sacraments, including the consecration of the Eucharist.³ This means that provided that there is the proper matter, form, and intention, a minister who lacks faith can still validly celebrate the sacraments, although he does so illicitly. If intention is required but faith is not, then the true question here is what exactly is meant by “*intendere facere quod facit Ecclesia*.”

1 “Question 5: What is wrong with the *Novus Ordo Missae*?” *Archives.SSPX.org*, http://archives.sspix.org/SSPX_FAQs/q5_novus_ordo_missae.htm.

2 For more information on the Society’s own critique of the *Novus Ordo Missae*, see Society of St. Pius X, *The Problem of the Liturgical Reform: A Theological and Liturgical Study* (Kansas City, MO: Angelus Press, 2001).

3 L. Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 1974), 342.

The common opinion of theologians is that a merely *external* intention, which means that the minister desires to properly perform the ceremonies but *internally* lacks the intention to confect the actual sacrament, is insufficient.⁴ Acting with a merely external intention would consist of simply using the matter and form, eliminating the need for the final cause (proper intention) to be listed as an additional requirement at all. A merely external intention would lead to the simulation of a sacrament, or simply the appearance that it has been confected. What distinguishes a simulated sacrament—which is performed by a minister who only wishes to go through the motions—from a truly celebrated one is the internal intention to do what the Church does, which is the performance of the rite with the proper matter and form *as a religious rite*.

Faith is not required for validity because the minister need not intend what the Church *intends* (e.g. to give grace), but merely intend to do what she *does* (to perform a sacred rite). St. Thomas teaches: “Sometimes [the minister] intends to do what the Church does, although he considers it to be nothing.”⁵ For example, a non-Catholic can validly perform a baptism using the proper matter and form, although he himself does not believe what the Church teaches concerning the necessity and effects of baptism. An intention to perform a religious rite is sufficient; the minister need not specifically intend to wash away original sin and confer sanctifying grace. If called upon to baptize in danger of death, he can do so validly, provided that he at least have the internal intention to perform a religious rite that *Christians* regards as sacred, even if he regards it as nothing. As succinctly summarized by theologian Ludwig Ott:

Objectively considered, the intention of doing what the Church does suffices. The minister, therefore, does not need to intend what the Church intends, namely, to produce the effects of the Sacraments, for example, the forgiveness of sins; neither does he need to intend to execute a specific Catholic rite. It suffices if he have the intention of performing the religious action as it is current among Christians.⁶

Because internal intention cannot be perceived by others, it must be manifested externally through the celebration of the sacrament *secundum ritus Ecclesiae*. If the minister uses the proper matter and form, then he *does* what the Church *does*, and so we presume that he *intends* to do what the Church does. In the absence of other causes for doubt, we presume that his intention aligns with his actions. Now one may argue that because the *Novus Ordo* is not a true rite of the Church, we cannot presume that a minister intended to do what the Church does, because by celebrating the *Novus Ordo*, he did not do what she does. The essential elements of the liturgical rite, which manifest the propitiatory sacrifice, are the Offertory, Consecration, and Communion Rite, and all three parts in the *Novus Ordo* have undergone enough changes to present a new theology. One might argue that because the *Novus Ordo* is not a true *ritus* of the Church, a consecration performed during its celebration is not *secundum ritus Ecclesiae*, and thus, the necessary condition (manifestation of intention) for moral certitude regarding validity is not met.

This argument fails, however, because it does not make a necessary distinction between the two senses in which the word “rite” is used: it may describe the totality of a liturgy (e.g. the

4 Ott, 344.

5 IV Sent., dist. 6, Q.1 A.3, sol 2, ad 1.

6 Ott, 344.

entire *Novus Ordo*) or a specific act within it (e.g. the consecration of the Eucharist). The surrounding ceremonies of the *Novus Ordo* present a new theology and are not Catholic, so the totality of this “rite” is not Catholic and does not manifest what the Church intends, which is the re-enactment of Calvary in an unbloody fashion. However, the specific rite of the consecration remains Catholic: the essential form and proper matter are still “of the Church,” and a priest who performs the consecration properly—even in the context of the *Novus Ordo*—still manifests the intention to do as the Church does. Given that the erroneous translations of the past have been fixed, thus alleviating other sources of potential doubt, the essential words of consecration—which are still valid and Catholic—suffice to signify the intent to do what the Church does, even if the *totality* of the new rite is not Catholic.

We do not arrive at moral certitude about the validity of the consecration on the basis of the surrounding ceremonies any more than we arrive at moral certitude about the validity of a baptism on the basis of *its* surrounding ceremonies. The full traditional rite of baptism clearly conveys the Church’s theology on the sacrament, while the new rite does not—and yet no one challenges the intention of the minister simply because the *totality* of the rite is deficient. Even when those other ceremonies are completely absent, as in the case of an emergency baptism in danger of death, the essential words alone, along with the use of proper matter, are sufficient to signify the minister’s intent to baptize. When the Church says that even non-Catholics can baptize if they do it *secundum ritus Ecclesiae*, she is referring to only those elements essential to validity, and not the entire rite of baptism with all its accompanying elements (e.g. exorcisms, profession of faith). Thus, a *valid* consecration of the Eucharist may be presumed even if the minister omits all the surrounding ceremonies entirely, although such an act would be gravely *illicit*.

If there can never be moral certitude regarding the validity of any *Novus Ordo* Masses, even those celebrated without abuses, then we ought to avoid adoring the Blessed Sacrament in diocesan churches and avoid genuflecting before their tabernacles. This is absurd, and the SSPX has always held that we still presume that these churches have the Real Presence: in fact, there would be little reason for us to protest against communion in the hand if the communicants at such churches most likely do not even receive Our Lord. The validity of *Novus Ordo Missae* is not *per se* subject to positive doubt, even if many actual celebrations of it may be invalid. The validity of intention is not dependent upon the minister’s “personal faith” in the propitiatory sacrifice, the Real Presence, or any other doctrine, but solely upon whether or not he intends to perform a religious rite. For theological error to have an indirectly invalidating effect, the minister would have to reject the idea that his actions have any religious significance at all.

The SSPX article thus contains an error that does indeed come close to Donatism. That being said, this position seems to be an outlier, and nearly every other resource distributed by the Society on this subject presumes that not only is the *Novus Ordo* valid in itself, we can also have moral certitude about a celebrant’s intention provided that he does not personally use defective form or matter. In other words, as long as he performs the consecration properly, even in the context of a non-Catholic rite, we can presume that it is valid. The contrary position is simply the opinion of that particular author, rather than the official position of the Society itself, and it should be noted that the article comes from the archived site, which has not been updated since 2013, and does not appear to have been republished elsewhere. Thus, the SSPX does not promote Donatism as part of its official position, the error of the cited author notwithstanding.