

A Critical Examination of Bishop Sanborn's Directives

Overview

Several years ago, Bishop Sanborn founded the “Roman Catholic Institute”, a group of traditionalist clergy and seminarians who share similar views on the present crisis in the Church.

In establishing the Institute, Bp. Sanborn published a series of directives on theological, liturgical, and pastoral issues, in order to clearly enunciate and crystallize the group's beliefs and practices. The underlying idea being that an explicit statement of the Institute's positions will help ensure it consistently adheres to them going forward¹.

These directories constitute rules to which the members of his Institute must adhere.

This article will analyze a few points of the Directives.

Theological Directory

The Theological Directory is presented as a profession of belief². It starts by affirming that the Second Vatican Council and the doctrinal, disciplinary, and liturgical reforms preceding therefrom deviate *substantially* from the Catholic religion, and thus constitute a new and false religion. It further affirms that none of this could come from the Catholic Church, because the Church is infallible.³

The directory further states that the “Novus Ordo hierarchy” does not possess authority to rule the Church, because they are imposing a false religion. While Bishop Sanborn is obviously referring at least in part to the “bishops” presently occupying the diocesan sees of the Latin Rite, it would be helpful if he were to clarify if he means to include Eastern Rite bishops within the category of the “Novus Ordo hierarchy”. If he does mean to include all such bishops, it is not apparent upon what principles he bases this contention. The arguments he has put apply to bishops who are imposing a new religion. Are the Eastern Rite bishops imposing a new liturgy, as their Western contemporaries have done? No. Have they imposed a new set of beliefs? Perhaps, but this is a factual question which

¹“About Us.” Roman Catholic Institute. Accessed June 27, 2021.
<http://romancatholicinstitute.org/about/>.

²“Theological Directory of the Roman Catholic Institute.” Roman Catholic Institute, July 6, 2017.
<http://romancatholicinstitute.org/hello-world/>.

would require evidence on a case-by-case basis. Is there another, unstated, principle, by which Bishop Sanborn universally rules out of their offices every single bishop who has failed explicitly to reject the new doctrines of Vatican II? None is listed here.

Bp. Sanborn then enunciates the Guerardian view that members of the “Novus Ordo hierarchy” are *materially* but not *formally* members of the hierarchy of the Church. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a full discussion of the Guerardian thesis, so readers are directed to John Daly’s commentary on it instead⁴.

On “Opinionism”

Thereafter, the bishop claims that it is a “certain theological conclusion” that the hierarchy promulgating the false religion is not the Catholic hierarchy. He further claims it is “necessary” for every Catholic to agree with him in that judgment, and that none of this may be regarded as a theological “opinion” by Catholics.

In order to assess the strength of these claims, it is necessary to understand precisely what is meant, in Catholic philosophy, by the terms “certainty” and “opinion”.

These terms are defined in *epistemology*, the branch of philosophy that investigates human knowledge⁵. “Certitude” is “the firm and unwavering assent of the mind to known truth”, excluding all fear of error⁶. “Opinion” is “at best, a hesitant or tentative assent involving fear that the opposite of what is assented to may be true”⁷.

It is important to note that both these terms refer to *states of the mind*. That is, they do not refer to the degree to which something is *true*, but instead to the degree to which something is *known* to be true.

⁴Daly, John S. “A Few Comments on the Thesis of Fr. Guérard De Lauriers.” Romeward : Articles written, translated or selected by John S. Daly, 2004. <https://web.archive.org/web/20210416222846/https://romeward.com/articles/239026951/a-few-comments-on-the-thesis-of-fr-guerard-de-lauriers>.

⁵Coffey, Peter. *Epistemology, or the Theory of Knowledge: An Introduction to General Metaphysics* 1, 1:xv. London, England: Longmans, Green and Co., 1917.

⁶Glenn, Paul. *Criteriaology – A Class Manual in Major Logic*, 141–53. St. Louis and London: B. Herder Book Co., 1933. <http://strobertybellarmine.net/certainty.html>.

⁷ Ibid.

For instance, the proposition, “the Earth is a sphere” is true, and it is possible for men to know this truth with certainty. However, it is likewise possible for men to hold this truth tentatively, without being *completely sure* whether it is actually true. It may in fact be prudent for a man in particular circumstances to withhold final judgment on the matter. For example, imagine a man living in the jungles of Africa with no formal schooling, and with no knowledge of scientific matters. One day a scientist comes to his village and tells him the Earth is a sphere. The scientist seems reliable and knowledgeable enough, but he provides no evidence for his claim about the Earth. In that case, the African may very well think that the scientist is *probably* right, but he would like the scientist to prove his claim so that he may be certain. The African’s state of mind is that of *opinion*, and this state of mind is the most reasonable state for that particular man’s mind to be in.

This of course does not mean that *all* may reasonably doubt that the Earth is a sphere, or that the issue is seriously contestable by educated persons. Rather, it just means that it is possible and justifiable for some particular man’s intellect to be in a state of uncertainty regarding the question.

The same principles apply to the problems posed by the crisis in the Church. In our situation, it is entirely possible for some Catholic to hold the proposition, “Francis is not the pope”, as an opinion, because he lacks the evidence that would move his mind from uncertainty to certainty. It’s not even that hard to imagine how this might come about. Suppose a man who has hitherto not considered the question, comes across sedevacantist literature on the Internet. He reads the arguments and finds them persuasive. He thinks the sedevacantists are probably right, but he would like to do more research before deciding for sure. His state of mind is that of *opinion*. Condemning this does not make much sense.

But if by condemning “opinionism”, Bishop Sanborn means the position is not lawfully disputable, his arguments do not justify this either. Bishop Sanborn argues that because non-sedevacantist theories of the crisis logically imply erroneous, heretical, or otherwise absurd conclusions, sedevacantism may not be held as an opinion. However, this argument is a *non sequitur*. Even if his premises are right, all Bishop Sanborn would be proving is that sedevacantism is true. But his argument does nothing to prove that a Catholic mind cannot legitimately be unsure of the matter, or that it is unlawful for a Catholic to take the opposing position.

Bishop Sanborn then asserts that priests may require the faithful to assent to the vacancy of the Holy See. His only attempted justification for this startling claim is that “it requires no ecclesiastical authority to insist that the faithful be consistent in their rejection of Vatican II and its reforms, and that they avoid the implicit heresy of associating the promulgation of Vatican II and its reforms with the authority of Jesus Christ....”

While it is true that a priest does not need authority to *argue* for sedevacantism, it is quite another matter to claim that a priest can *coerce* someone to agree with him on a question not settled by the Church. Once again, Bishop Sanborn's argument is a *non sequitur*.

Further, if Bishop Sanborn proposes to bind the consciences of the faithful on a question not settled by the Church, the onus is on him to prove that he can do so. In this directory, he has not done so, and I am not aware of any place in which he has. A doubtful law does not bind, and it would be difficult to imagine how this particular contention could conceivably rise even to the level of *doubtful*.

Moreover, it also runs counter to what The Nine (including then-Fr. Sanborn) wrote to Archbishop Lefebvre in 1983.

The present situation in the Church has generated many unprecedented problems of a theological and practical nature — for example the question of the *in se* validity or invalidity of the New Mass, as opposed to the question of the attendance at the New Mass. On the one hand, the definitive resolution of speculative theological questions must await the restoration of normalcy in the Church. On the other hand, we must apply Catholic moral and dogmatic principles to practical problems.

The Society must not presume to settle such speculative questions in an authoritative and definitive fashion, since it has absolutely no authority to do so. Any attempt by the Society to teach and impose its conclusions on matters of speculative theology as the only positions suitable for a Catholic to embrace is dangerous and opens the door to great evils —for it assumes a magisterial authority which belongs not to it but to the Church alone.⁸

Bishop Sanborn has never publicly repudiated the contents of that letter, a letter which is of foundational importance to him, and to the other prominent ex-SSPX sedevacantist clergy in the USA.

On the “una cum” clause

In the Canon of the Mass, the priest prays for the pope by name. When there is no reigning pope, the prayer for him is omitted. Clergy who believe Francis is the pope include his name in the Canon and pray for him as pope. Clergy who do not believe he is the pope omit the prayer.

⁸“Letter of ‘The Nine’ to Archbishop Lefebvre,” March 25, 1983.

<http://www.traditionalmass.org/images/articles/NineLetter.pdf>.

Bishop Sanborn claims that Masses in which the priest prays for Francis as pope are “objectively sacrilegious”. This claim is at best disputed. Readers are directed to John Lane’s analysis of that position⁹.

Liturgical Directory

The Liturgical Directory is presented as a statement of principles and practices¹⁰.

Bishop Sanborn forbids members of the Institute from using Gothic-style vestments, mandates the sole use of the Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible when citing or reading the Scriptures in English (even though there are other approved translations), and “rejects the use of” the Pius XII Psalter and the Dialogue Mass.

Without addressing the merits of these rules, I would simply note that it is inconsistent with the approach taken by the Nine in 1983, when they criticized Archbishop Lefebvre for imposing the 1962 Missal on the Society of St. Pius X.¹¹

Pastoral Directory

Withholding the Sacraments

The Pastoral Directory begins by asserting that “[t]he administration of the sacraments requires not only valid ordination but jurisdiction as well”¹². While I concede that the Sacraments of Confession and Matrimony require jurisdiction, I am unaware of any reason to think the rest of the Sacraments require it. As Bishop Sanborn provides no evidence for us to conclude that the distribution of the other Sacraments requires jurisdiction, his claim is an *ipse dixit*. Further, and ironically, it is a typically *Novus Ordo* novelty. A Google search for the term “sacramental jurisdiction” reveals numerous of examples of its use by Novus Ordites; a search of

⁹Lane, John. “An Analysis of the Status of Such Masses and Their Availability to Catholics.” The Question of Assistance at the Mass of a Priest Who Professes Communion With John Paul II as Pope, September 10, 2002. http://strobertbellarmine.net/una_cum.html.

¹⁰“Liturgical Directory of the Roman Catholic Institute.” Roman Catholic Institute, July 6, 2017. <http://romancatholicinstitute.org/liturgical-directory-of-the-roman-catholic-institute/>.

¹¹“Letter of ‘The Nine’ to Archbishop Lefebvre,” March 25, 1983. <http://www.traditionalmass.org/images/articles/NineLetter.pdf>. “Furthermore, and with all due respect, religious superiors do not, under the canons and traditions of the Church, have any power to legislate in liturgical matters. Such power belongs to the Roman Pontiffs who are themselves limited.”

¹²“Pastoral Directory of the Roman Catholic Institute.” Roman Catholic Institute, July 7, 2017. <http://romancatholicinstitute.org/pastoral-directory-of-the-roman-catholic-institute/>.

pre-Vatican II theology books reveals that the term is rare, and when found, concerns only faculties for Confession.

Bp. Sanborn goes on to assert (again, without evidence) that while this mysterious “jurisdiction to distribute the sacraments” is normally granted by the bishop of the diocese, since according to him the Novus Ordo “bishops” are illegitimate, in our day it would come from the principle of epikeia.

Bishop Sanborn also claims that the priests of the Institute may only lawfully give the Sacraments to those who have “repudiated the Vatican II religion”. The justification of this contention is that since Catholics may under normal circumstances only receive the sacraments from clergy authorized by the Church, it would be logically inconsistent for someone who thinks the Vatican II religion is Catholicism to receive the sacraments from his chapels, since he wouldn’t regard those chapels as authorized by the Church. As an attempt to vindicate his policy of withholding the Sacraments from Catholics who disagree with him on unsettled matters, this is another *non sequitur*. Merely pointing out that it is logically inconsistent for someone who attends the Novus Ordo to also frequent his chapels does not in itself prove that a priest may lawfully withhold the sacraments from that person. Demonstrating that would require a separate argument, which Bishop Sanborn does not provide. It is also a strangely subjective test for a question of law: it is either the law that one may receive sacraments at a particular class of chapels, or it is not. Confusion, doubt, or even certitude in the mind of a given individual cannot alter the law. The most that it could do is affect the question of the morality of the *individual’s* decision. It could not affect the lawfulness of the priest’s distribution of the sacraments.

And in the case of withholding Holy Communion, he is clearly mistaken. As Fr. Anthony Cekada explained (citing Canon 879), every baptized Catholic has a *right* to receive Communion unless forbidden by law¹³. If Bishop Sanborn wants to deny Communion to a Catholic, the onus is on him to cite the law that allows him to do so.

Bishop Sanborn also mandates the denial of Sacraments to those who (1) attend Masses approved by the “Novus Ordo hierarchy”, (2) attend Masses in which members of the “Novus Ordo hierarchy” are prayed for in the Canon, (3) think the Novus Ordo hierarchy is the hierarchy of the Church, or (4) who think one may legitimately hold that the Novus Ordo hierarchy is the hierarchy of the Church. For these dictates, Bishop Sanborn doesn’t offer any justification.

¹³Cekada, Anthony. “The Great Excommunicator,” 2002.

<http://www.traditionalmass.org/images/articles/GreatExcommunicator.pdf>.

Conclusion

Many people look to Bishop Sanborn for guidance in our insane world. For this reason, it is especially important that each of his ideas and arguments are critically examined, so that others can see if they are founded on sound reasoning and reliable evidence. As we can see, many of these ideas are not.