

MT. ST. MICHAEL
Tuesday Evening Doctrine Classes – 6:30-7:30 p.m.

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE ON THE PAPACY

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April 2, 2019

SEDEVACANTISM NOT A MERE “OPINION,” BUT A NECESSARY THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSION

This class is a digest of the excellent article by Most Rev. Donald Sanborn (written 2004, updated in 2006). You can find the article in entirety at <http://www.traditionalmass.org/images/articles/Opinionism.pdf>

1. Maybe you’ve been asked why you’re so sure about Benedict XVI not being the pope. This class is to help you realize there is NO room for opinion on the matter. For sure he is not, based on Catholic theological principles.
2. **State of the Question (an agonizing one):** Traditional Catholics are sharply divided on the question of the Pope. They recognize the evil of the doctrinal and liturgical changes of Vatican II, but *steadfastly follow two different paths*:
 - a. “Recognize the Pope, but resist him” (“R & R”), i.e. follow him when he’s right, but not when he’s wrong
 - b. Conclude that the Vatican II Popes are no popes at all (“Sedevacantism”), i.e. don’t follow him at all.
3. **Origin of “Opinionism”** can be traced to a statement of Abp. Lefebvre in 1980, when he condoned some SSPX priests *privately* withholding John Paul II’s name from the Canon of the Mass, being “secret sedevacantists,” so to speak: “I do not say that the pope is not the pope, but I do not say either that one cannot say that the pope is not the pope.” In other words, he might be the Pope, but he might not be the Pope.
4. **What is “Opinion”?** An opinion is an idea or doctrine which is probably true, but its opposite may be found to be true. You lean towards one idea, but accept that you may have to change your view if better evidence is found for the opposing idea. An example: medical diagnosis.
5. **What is “Theological Opinion”?** A doctrine on a theological issue which has not yet been defined by the Church. There are some issues on which reputable and approved theologians can have different opinions, e.g. when a person is legitimately excused from the law of fast during Lent. The moral principle of fasting is not in question; all must do penance. The opinions might be different on what constitutes a *sufficient excusing cause in a particular case*.
6. **A Theological Opinion is NOT the same as a Theological Conclusion!** A conclusion is a firm and certain doctrine that flows from premises based on Divine Revelation and right reason, e.g. “God gives all men the sufficient grace to save their souls.” This fact is not directly revealed, nor is it declared by the Church, but it is held by all theologians as absolutely certain. It cannot possibly be a mere “opinion.”
7. **Opinions in daily life**
 - a. (on a cloudy day) It will rain tonight.
 - b. It won’t snow again this season.
 - c. President Trump will be re-elected in 2020.
 - d. This patient is (probably) suffering from bronchitis.
8. **Necessary conclusions we encounter in daily life**
 - a. On a more practical level, $2 + 2 = 4$ is NOT an opinion! The “4” is a necessary conclusion that follows when 2 and 2 are put together.
 - b. Valid Syllogisms are perfect examples of necessary conclusions:
 - i. All dogs are animals. (major premise)
 - Spot is a dog. (minor premise)
 - Therefore, Spot is an animal. (conclusion)

To deny the conclusion is, in effect, to deny the premises!

9. **“Theological Opinion” cannot be applied to the Vatican II Popes.** Bp. Sanborn identifies 5 errors to those who say it can be an opinion.
- The first error is that it places the identity of the Roman Pontiff, i.e., whether Ratzinger is the Vicar of Christ or not, in the category of “theological opinion.”
 - The second error is that it relegates the question of the identity of the Roman Pontiff to a mere theological opinion, as if it were a discussion among theologians as to how many angels can fit on the head of a pin.
 - The third error is that it confuses a theological conclusion and a theological opinion.
 - The fourth error is that someone may be free to hold that Ratzinger is or is not the pope for the sole reason that the Church has said nothing about it.
 - The fifth error is that neither position is offensive to the Faith.
10. **There is no room for opinion on the part of “R & R” or on the part of “Sedevacantists.”**
- “R & R” types *know the following for certain*:
 - a legal election which was universally accepted;
 - Ratzinger’s own acceptance of the election;
 - Ratzinger’s functioning as pope;
 - the universal acceptance of Ratzinger as a legitimate pope.
 - “Sedevacantists” (and indeed the “R & R” folks, should as well) *know the following for certain*:
 - that Ratzinger has promulgated to the universal Church false doctrines, false moral teaching, and evil disciplines;
 - that he has said heretical things
 - that he has acted like a heretic, even an apostate, on many, many occasions;
 - that he has appointed heretics and/or apostates to the Roman Curia and to episcopal sees, maintains them in power, and is in communion with them.
11. **The necessary conclusion to draw is that Ratzinger is NOT the Pope:** Bp. Sanborn: “If, however, it is certain that Vatican II and its reforms are contrary to faith and morals, then it is certain that they are not promulgated by the Church. If, in turn, it is certain that they are promulgated by the Church, then it is certain that those who promulgate them do not represent the Catholic Church. Then it is certain that Ratzinger is not the pope.”

A syllogism to express this necessary conclusion:

True popes cannot authoritatively teach and rule in a heretical manner.
Ratzinger has authoritatively taught and ruled in a heretical manner.
 Therefore, he is not a true pope.

12. **The identity of the Pope has enormous consequences for all members of the Church!**
- Our faith depends upon his teaching. We are obliged to give assent to the teaching of the Church. But the authority of this teaching comes from a single source, the authority of Saint Peter. Without this authority, there is no binding doctrine. No magisterium can take place, either solemn or ordinary.
 - Our very salvation depends on our submission to the Roman Pontiff. We go to hell if we are disobedient to him in a serious matter, or worse, if we are not submitted to him.
- Bp. Sanborn: “So how can anyone be so blasé about the identity of the Roman Pontiff, so as to say that it really does not matter, in the practical order, what you think about him? It is as if the Roman Pontiff were merely a decoration in the Catholic Church, something the Church could even dispense with, a purely accidental accessory, a bagatelle. It is as if you can conduct your own version of Roman Catholicism without the Roman Pontiff. Opinionists are great for saying that the question of Ratzinger’s papacy should not divide us. They think that all traditionalists should get along, no matter what they think about him. Such an attitude, however, is not Catholic. The very identity and unity of the Roman Catholic Church is intimately and essentially bound up in the Roman Pontiff, and his identity cannot be a mere matter of “opinion.” Likewise our salvation — the question of heaven or hell — is bound up in the Roman Pontiff, and to be opinionist about his identity is tantamount to being indifferentist about which church is the right church.”
13. **Despite the lack of a binding, juridical decision as to the non-Papacy of the Vatican II “Popes,” necessary conclusions still need to be drawn!**
- What is needed for the Church is for true Cardinals (and Bishops, in their default) to declare to all the Catholic faithful, in a binding and juridical manner, that the Chair of Peter is vacant, and to proceed to the election of a Pope.
 - In today’s circumstances, this would be a first-class miracle! ☺.
 - The closest thing to a binding declaration was Archbishop Ngo-Dinh-Thuc’s 1982 that the Chair of Peter was vacant due to heresy. He also condemned Vatican II and the other heretical doctrinal & liturgical changes.