



# CATHOLICS FOREVER

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## OFFICIO VACANTE

What does it mean to have a Pope materially but not formally? That such is the case with the Church today - and has been since II Vatican Council and the papal promulgation of teaching clearly contrary to the infallible Magisterium - is the thesis of Mgr. Gerard des Lauriers, O.P. In the light of it your editor has been forced to abandon his own opinion favoring the sedevacantist position that there is no Pope at all. (See our May issue.)

Or may we say, modified our stand? For the arguments used by the sedevacantists serve not to prove a Sede vacante or papal vacancy but rather, if you will, an Officio vacante - a vacant office rather than, strictly speaking, a vacant chair or throne.

Yes, there is a difference! In practice not much, but theoretically important for what potentially the difference may lead to disastrously doing: the attempt to elect a Pope and fill a chair not in fact empty! The result would be simply schism and a woeful complicating of a situation already unprecedented in the history of the Church and too much for the average Catholic to believe.

First, however, a word about differences or distinctions - so important in Logic and to the discovery of truth. Among Thomistic philosophers (students or disciples of the Common Doctor St. Thomas Aquinas) there is the axiom: "Never deny, seldom affirm, and always distinguish." Error lurks in ambiguity, as traditionalists well instructed in their Catholic faith know only too well from the Protestant-like generalities of the II Vatican Council and its aftermath Establishment.

And to fully (if possible) comprehend the stupendous situation in the Church today, how many distinctions must be ferreted out! How many ambiguities lie in ambush! It is in the failure to make necessary distinctions (if nothing else) that men are divided in their search for truth, and that among philosophers and theologians different "schools of thought" arise. Blessed are we traditional Catholics, in the humble opinion of this writer, for having with us, "yet a little while," the light of a consummate Thomist in the venerable Bishop and worthy son of St. Dominic, Mgr. Guerard des Lauriers. In his "Cassian Thesis" (La These de Cassiciacum) recently published and explained in book form by a disciple, Abbe Bernard Lucien, distinctions until now overlooked by traditionalists, or poorly appreciated, seem apt (God willing) to better unite them - both Bishops and priests - for their task of carrying on the mission of the Church.

Abbe Lucien's work, however, *LA SITUATION ACTUELLE DE L'AUTORITE DANS L'EGLISE*, is not easy reading even for the French-speaking! It is a book presupposing a good background in Scholastic Theology and philosophy, which goes to show how complex indeed is that "actual situation of authority in the Church" today.

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To return, then, to the difference of which we were speaking between Sede vacante (vacant chair) and what we ourselves would style Officio vacante (vacant office). It is the application of Bishop Gerard's distinction between the Matter and Form of the papacy, a distinction which he himself takes from the great Doctor of (and on) the Church, St. Robert Bellarmine. (Matter and Form play an important part in the Theology of the Sacraments.) The one duly elected to the papacy is "matter" or recipient for the divine Authority or "form" which by right belongs to him. But just as there is a logical difference between a person and the authority he may hold, so too can they be separated in reality, even if as it were by force and unnaturally. In the case of one holding an ecclesiastical office, loss of the office (such as by contracting a civil marriage or publicly defecting from the Faith) does not itself erase the person's appointment to the office. Until he is officially or juridically replaced or otherwise removed from his "munus" (appointment, position, function) - for which indeed Canon Law makes provision - he must be considered as still holding his office materially. Formally, however, he has lost it, no longer having the authority - the power or jurisdiction - normally and by right (de jure) attached to the office, as form united to matter, as "soul" to "body."

So in the case of the papacy today, and since at least the end of the Council when there was papal pronouncement of religious freedom plainly contrary to the infallible Magisterium, we are prevented by force of the Faith itself from recognizing the "form" of the papacy - divine Authority infallibly assisted by Christ - in those otherwise officially elected to the office. They are but Popes materially, not only making no effort to correct their errors but continuing to favor heresy in many ways. To recognize them as Popes formally - as actually possessing papal authority - as many supposed traditionalists do, is to deny in effect the dogma of Infallibility and the impossibility of the Church contradicting herself in matters of doctrine.

On the other hand we cannot disregard the human aspect of the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, and its divine constitution as a society, regulated like other, natural ones by juridical or official procedures. To do so and attempt, as it were, to begin anew in this regard would be to disrupt the Apostolic continuity of the Church, beginning a new one - so far as its natural institution anyway is concerned. It is not for those having no part in the juridical organization of the Church - whatever their sacramental power of Holy Orders may be - to "take the law in their own hands," pronounce for all to hear and heed that the papacy as such is altogether vacant, and proceed to elect a Pope - a Pope at best for themselves alone! As a Catholic can lose the State of Grace and yet remain a Catholic by reason of retaining the virtue of Faith, so is it possible for the canonically established hierarchy of the Church to lose its share in divine authority (simultaneously with the Pope losing his own) and still exist as the Catholic hierarchy on the juridical side of things - still the hierarchy, if only materially and not formally so. Until such time, please God, as some (if not perhaps some one) of its members (validly ordained Bishops) recant their own compliance in the doctrinal deviations of the Conciliar establishment and serve official, canonical notice on the Pope of his own, the most that the traditionalist clergy, priests and Bishops, can do is carry on the supernatural Mission of the Church to save souls through the teaching of sound doctrine, the preservation of the "clean oblation" in the offering of the true Mass, and the administration of the Sacraments. The government of the Church - its "Session" if you will - is in the hands of (as a captive!) the material hierarchy.

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"But manifest heretics, including the Pope," cry the sedevacantists, "are automatically

excommunicated and altogether outside of the Church. There is no question of our doing anything but to recognize what the Church herself recognizes and act accordingly."

Adverting again to necessary distinctions, we reply that while Cardinal Wojtyla - remember, not formally Pope, and on him let us re-focus our attention - seems clearly enough a material heretic, it is only the official Church, through canonical warnings (in accord with Scripture: Titus 3, 10) that, short of his open avowal or admission, can convict him of formal heresy. The essence of heresy (being a sin) is stubbornness or pertinacity - the deliberate will to reject divine revelation as presented by the Church - and it is not for us as private individuals, nor even as a group or community, to judge any man's conscience, no matter how grave may be our suspicions! The presumption of malice and guilt, mentioned in Canon Law for those publicly espousing heresy, must be understood in the context of an official or juridical process, not outside of it. Even though all such procedure and ecclesiastical laws in general are presently paralyzed by the dis-empowered prelates materially occupying their episcopal sees and controlling the Church's government or "Sessio", we on the outside, again, cannot presume to overthrow or ignore the natural necessity of juridical order intrinsic to society.

Nevertheless, public or manifest heresy and apostasy, even materially considered, do divest those holding an ecclesiastical office ipso facto or automatically of their office itself - their jurisdiction or authority - as we have indicated, leaving them only materially, not formally, in the office; that is, in the "munus" or function which is the basis or "matter" for receiving the "form" of that office, which is the jurisdiction proper to it. No Catholic, therefore, as the instinct of Faith itself, if not common sense, dictates, should pay any heed to such "authorities," only not denying them the respect due the priesthood itself. Authority (materially considered) which, blatantly or manifestly, contradicts its natural function and purpose of procuring the common good for those in the society to which it pertains, simply nullifies itself, as St. Thomas clearly teaches. Canon Law is not meant for the destruction of the Church!

As for the possible invalidity or illegitimacy of "John Paul's" election to the chair of Peter, we unfortunately have to consider it legitimate in the absence of unmistakable proof to the contrary. It will not do, as we have seen, to - unofficially - charge him, his predecessors, or their electors with formal heresy.

As for the papal Bull "Cum ex apostolatu" of Paul IV long ago nullifying the election - even to the papacy - of anyone having so much as "deviated" from the Faith before his appointment or election to office, it like all other ecclesiastical laws previous to the present (1917) Code of Canon Law, no longer retains its force, except for what part or trace of it may yet be found in the Code. And a Church law essentially that Bull is, not a Divine Law, as this writer himself before thought. Even human laws are divine derivatively, being in some way positive determinations of God's Eternal Law (to be true laws at all). Besides, the "deviation" from Faith mentioned in the Bull is again something to be understood in the context of official or legal procedure. What would become of order in the Church or any other society if "every Tom, Dick, or Harry" could judge with the force - moral if not physical - of law?

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Let it be seen, then, that in recognizing a Pope materially in Cardinal Wojtyla, we do so, not as defending his claim or election so much as being constrained by the "facts", or by reasoning carefully, if you will. But then to be Pope materially is to be no Pope formally! Form to Matter, as the Scholastics teach, is as soul to body. A dead man is not, strictly speaking, a "man" at all, no longer being composed of body and soul. At best he is but a man materially speaking - a "corpse" or "cadaver" - not a "man" without the qualification "dead", or absolutely speaking. To be Pope materially is to be a powerless Pope - to be "actually" no Pope, but only "potentially" one, for such too is the relation of Form to Matter.

Yet we should note that potentiality, being the opposite of actuality, is not the opposite of "reality." It is the condition or state presupposed to actuality, or to the form. By reason of his having been canonically elected and the person thereby designated for the papal office or authority, there is in Cardinal Wojtyla the real "potential" for actually receiving the papacy (that office) if, please God, he should - with or without official notice and warning from others in the hierarchy (the "Session") - be converted to orthodoxy and take steps to correct all that is amiss. (The same holds for the Bishops at large in relation to their respective dioceses.) To that extent there is ground for hope!

But apart from that possibility and the impossibility of traditionalist clergy themselves electing a Pope as things stand, there seems little, if any, practical difference between this "Cassian thesis" of Bishop Gerard and the position of the Sedevacantists - very little at least in comparison with that which divides them both from the Lefebvrists and other traditionalists who treat the Pope as if he were formally one: Pope in the full, ordinary sense of the word. Is the difference between the first two any more than the difference between Sede vacante and Officio vacante? The "seat" or throne is to the office as matter to form.

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Let us close with a comparison which may best summarize and simplify what we have labored at length to explain in answering the question with which we began. Suppose the election of a Pope in normal times who after his election and during the course of his pontificate was suddenly struck with insanity. He begins to issue bizarre commands, permit all kinds of abuses, preach incoherently, and even dress like a clown. There is question of committing him to a mental hospital.

What would be the authority of a Pope in such a condition? Would the faithful have to obey him? Could they obey him and take him seriously in his sad derangement? Obviously not. Yet has he ceased to be Pope? Can the College of Cardinals proceed to a new election without at least a formal declaration of the papacy being vacant? What if, on the verge of their doing so, the demented man should just as suddenly regain his sanity? Would he not also regain his office?

Here we have the difference between being Pope formally and materially. When he went berserk the poor man ceased to be Pope formally, no longer being able to exercise authority and command obedience, but he remained Pope materially, and when restored to sanity regained his office, again becoming Pope formally. But as long as his insanity lasted, he was Pope only in body, not in mind - only materially not formally.

So it is with the Conciliar Popes of today. Spiritually speaking they have plainly gone berserk (less plainly only to Catholics either ignorant of their Faith or predisposed by LIBERALISM to spiritual insanity themselves). Is not heresy, in whatever guise, spiritual insanity? Popes these remain, but only potentially, not actually - materially not formally. Let the all important Mission of the Church proceed - that mission as committed by Christ to the Twelve Apostles directly, to be transmitted in the Sacrament of Holy Orders, and in respect of which He promised to be ever with them - and leave the problem of the Session in the Church in the hands of God. The end matters more than the means, and that He can produce even without the customary means. †