

Interview with Father Louis-Marie de Blignières regarding his article.

"A church district dedicated to the ancient Latin rite."

(The article was published in *Sedes Sapientiae*, No. 165, September 2023, pp. 17-44; the interview below is from *Tu es Petrus*, No. XLI, January-February-March 2024).

1. *Why do you now propose the creation of an ecclesiastical circumscription for the Ancient Latin Rite?* Because a completely new situation was created with the publication of the *motu proprio Traditionis custodes* on July 16, 2021 and with that of the documents of the Dicastery for Divine Worship in December 2021. These texts led to a stalemate for Catholics faithful to hierarchical communion and linked to "earlier forms of the Latin tradition" (*Motu proprio Ecclesia Dei*, no. 5). Pope Francis ended the period of relative calm that followed the *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* (2007-2021), which aimed to give the "Extraordinary Form" its rightful place in the very structures of the dioceses. Instead of mourning what could have been, we must now offer something stable to Catholics faithful to the Holy See and the traditional teaching of the faith. This group, instead of constantly having to negotiate its status with prelates, bishops or parish priests, who often have difficulty understanding it (or who fear for the peace of their dioceses by showing favoritism toward it), should in our opinion be represented within the hierarchy itself.

2. *What does this church constituency consist of?*

"Ecclesiastical circumscription" is a generic term used by canonists to group together very different situations. These are hierarchically structured communities of the faithful that are either dioceses (or particular churches), or entities created for special reasons and legally assimilated to dioceses. Military ordinariates and personal apostolic administrations are examples. They could serve as a model for the case we are presenting. Vatican II encouraged the development of these formulas, which had existed for some time. "The adaptability of ecclesiastical organization to the pastoral realities of the faithful is one of the essential aspects of the last ecumenical meetings [the last Council]" (Dominique Le Tourneau, *Manuel de droit canonique*, Wilson et Lafleur, Montréal, 2012, p. 193).

3. *Who can decide whether or not to erect it? And who can make the request?*

Who decides on erection? The Code of Canon Law states, "It pertains solely to the supreme authority to erect particular Churches; these, once legitimately erected, enjoy by law itself juridical personality" (canon 373 § 1). Such erection is therefore the responsibility of the Holy See, through the Dicastery for Bishops or, in mission lands, through the Dicastery for Evangelization. This is how the Congregation for Bishops, in a decree dated Jan. 18, 2002, erected the Personal Apostolic Administration of St. John Mary Vianney in the Diocese of Campos, Brazil. Paragraph II of the decree states:

*"The Apostolic Administration is attributed the faculty to celebrate the Holy Eucharist, the other sacraments, the Liturgy of the Hours and other liturgical actions according to the Roman Rite and the liturgical discipline prescribed by St. Pius V, with the modifications introduced by his successors up to Blessed John XXIII."*

Who can apply? In my article I explain that, over the past thirty-five years, requests have been made by community superiors, individually or in groups, and by lay presidents of associations such as *Una Voce*, and that suggestions have come from the Pontifical Commission *Ecclesia Dei*. The Church is not a place of free will, where anyone can ask for whatever they want. But from time immemorial, lay people and priests have presented to the hierarchy the right insights they have, according to their own charism, for the common good of the Church ... and the Church has often taken them into account. This would be a proposal to solve a serious problem that has lingered since the closing of the Council and to contribute to genuine renewal in an increasingly recognized crisis. It would, of course, be desirable that this renewed request be supported by the bishops. The Church's traditional practice is clearly set forth in the current Code:

*"In a manner commensurate with the science, competence and prestige they enjoy, they have the right, and indeed sometimes even the duty, to manifest to the sacred Pastors their thoughts on that which concerns the good of the Church; and to make them known to the other faithful, without prejudice to the integrity of faith and morals and respect for the Pastors, bearing in mind also the common utility and dignity of persons" (canon 212 § 3).*

4. *Who would be in charge and who would appoint him? If it were a bishop chosen from among the priests of the ex-Ecclesia Dei communities, would the choice of one rather than another not create problems?*

It is also the Holy See that appoints the Prelate of ecclesiastical circumscriptions. This is the case with military ordinariates:

*"To the Military Ordinariate there is assigned, as his own, an Ordinary normally invested with episcopal dignity, who enjoys all the rights and is bound by the obligations of diocesan bishops, unless the nature of things or particular statutes establish otherwise. The Supreme Pontiff freely appoints the military Ordinary or establishes or confirms the legitimately designated candidate" (Apostolic Constitution *Spirituali Militum Curæ*, III, §§ 1-2).*

The Ordinary of this structure could be a religious or diocesan priest, or even a willing bishop, who would present all the necessary aptitudes for this task, especially a love of doctrine, a good knowledge of traditional rites, and the confidence of those who will be subject to him. In our opinion, such people are not lacking. If the Ordinary is a priest from a former *Ecclesia Dei* Institute, his appointment will benefit everyone. It will be appropriate to put aside personal preferences, however legitimate, and look to the common good of the

Church. As we saw in February 2022, the Decree obtained in favor of St. Peter's Priestly Fraternity changed the climate and, through the application of the principle of canonical analogy, benefited all Institutes.

5. *How will its prerogatives be articulated with those of the diocesan bishops?*

In military ordinariates and personal apostolic administrations, the faithful do not cease to belong to their diocese of origin, according to their domicile. There is the so-called *cumulative jurisdiction* of the local Bishop and the Prelate of the circumscription, the conditions of which are specified by the statutes of the circumscription.

6. *How to go about belonging to one? Can one belong to both a church district and one's own diocese?*

Yes, because of cumulative jurisdiction, the faithful belong to both structures. In the case of personal apostolic administration, "membership is obtained by registration in an *ad hoc* register of the faithful who request it" (D. Le Tourneau, *op. cit.*, p. 200).

7. *How would the worshippers attached to the ancient rite obtain places of worship?*

There would be no reason for existing places of worship to disappear. They would continue as they do today, if the local Ordinary prefers this solution. If the Ordinary wanted it, they would be taken over by the circumscription. In this case, the priests serving there, if they are diocesan, could bind themselves to the district, incardinating into it. If they are members of an Institute, agreements would be made between the circumscription and the Institute, as is currently done with local ordinaries. For the opening of new places of worship, the Prelate of the circumscription, being a bishop, will have more strength to negotiate with the local Ordinaries. And the latter will be all the more likely to give the go-ahead since they will no longer have the heavy burden of serving and managing these places.

8. *Would this structure allow priests to celebrate all sacraments according to the *vetus ordo* without conditions?*

Yes, of course that is its purpose. See the Decree for Campos cited above.

9. *Where would the clergy of this church district come from?*

The proposed constituency would be able to accommodate diocesan priests who wish to devote themselves to an apostolate according to traditional pedagogy. No doubt they are more numerous than one would imagine. It could also establish its own seminary and thus form an incardinated clergy. "These [personal ecclesiastical] circumscriptions belong to the hierarchical organization of the Church: they therefore have a church, the seat of the ordinary or prelate, a curia, possibly their own seminary and court, etc." (D. Le Tourneau, *op. cit.*, p. 198).

Former *Ecclesia Dei* Institutes will certainly be eager to help the church constituency by offering teachers to train seminarians. Some young men may have a real

priestly vocation to traditional rites, without having the vocation corresponding to the particular charisms of these Societies of Apostolic Life, which are the St. Peter's Priestly Fraternity, the Institute of Christ the King High Priest and the Institute of the Good Shepherd. Since the harvest is plentiful, we should rejoice that these young people can find a suitable context for the good of the faithful.

10. *Why would Rome agree to establish such an entity when it is trying to eliminate the ancient rite?*

The answer to your question must take into account the long history of the Church. On the one hand, the will of "Rome," despite the famous accompanying Letter to *Traditionis Custodes*, is not so clear. The position of Archbishop Arthur Roche's Divine Worship Dicastery is clearly in favor of the total eradication of traditional rites. But it cannot get a decisive text from the Holy Father who, after his decree in favor of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter, seems less concerned about the issue. For the time being, the Dicastery for Religious is limited to its mission of controlling the conformity of the lives of the members of the Institutes to their Constitutions.

On the other hand, we must be cautious in making pessimistic predictions about the future of the Church. On May 24, 1976, when St. Paul VI vigorously expressed the prohibition of the traditional Roman rite, who would have predicted that on July 7, 2007, his successor would restore this rite to its rightful place in society, further stating that it "must be held in due honor for its venerable and ancient use (...) and never abrogated" (*Summorum Pontificum*, art. 1).

In the Church, there are never good reasons to give in to ultimate despair. Will the solution we propose be implemented under the pontificate of Pope Francis? Perhaps not, but how to think of it as a certainty? If so, it would not be the first surprise the Holy Father has in store for us, after the facilities granted in 2016 and 2017 to the St. Pius X Priestly Fraternity and the 2022 Decree for the St. Peter's Priestly Fraternity. It is significant that Father Henri Donneaud, o.p., who wrote a vigorously forceful article against the retention of the ancient Roman rite in dioceses, at the same time believes that a dedicated ecclesiastical circumscription would be a possible solution to the crisis "from above" 1: "There is a legitimate place for the plurality of rites in the Latin Church, insofar as each expresses in the liturgy the cultural and spiritual traits proper to a particular Church or religious family" (*Nouvelle revue théologique*, no. 144, January-March 2022, p. 48).

11. *Which believers already benefit from such an organization within the Church?*

The Pontifical Yearbook 2023 lists only one Personal Apostolic Administration, that of Campos, which we have already mentioned, and the three Personal Ordinariates for former Anglicans, erected by Benedict XVI in 2011 and 2012.

12. *Would such an organization be more durable than what a motu proprio can grant? Would it be more durable than a personal prelature, which has recently been stripped of its substance by Rome?*

His question reflects the distrust that has been created in traditional circles (and one can partly understand the reasons for this...) since the beginning of the long crisis that the Church has been going through. In 1988, the St. Pius X Priestly Fraternity repeated that our *Ecclesia Dei* Institutes would be suppressed very soon, yet they have lasted and developed steadily for thirty-five years... Apart from the divine hierarchical structure formed by the successor bishops of the Apostles and the Primacy of Peter and his successors, no canonical figure of the Catholic Church (not even the concrete boundaries of dioceses) enjoys the promise of eternity. Neither, of course, does the stable structure we are advocating! But it is a well-recognized canonical configuration that must and can endure as long as the causes that presided over its erection and the good it brings to the Church persist.

*"The particular Churches, in which and from which subsists the one and only Catholic Church, are first and foremost the dioceses, to which, if nothing else is found, are assimilated the territorial prelature and the territorial abbey, the apostolic vicariate and the apostolic prefecture, and likewise the apostolic administration permanently heretical" (can. 368).*

*"Apostolic administration is a certain portion of the people of God which, for special and particularly grave reasons, is not erected as a diocese by the Supreme Pontiff and whose pastoral care is entrusted to an Apostolic Administrator, who governs it in the name of the Supreme Pontiff" (can. 371 § 2).*

The "particularly serious" reason for the creation of the recommended district is not only to end the marginalization of traditional pedagogy, but also to give it a stable and peaceful framework in which to take place, relieving diocesan bishops and ensuring the peace of the Church. This can take place over a very long period of time.

13. *Could membership in this entity harm the unity of the Church? Can you remind us of the criteria of ecclesial communion?*

Faced with the abuse of this notion, I have been prompted in several contributions to recall the true criteria of communion (cf. *Sedes Sapientiae*, no. 113, September 2010; no. 130, December 2014; no. 159, March 2022). "The notion of communion, as it is widely experienced in the Church today, seems marked by a shift from *intelligible content* (received through faith, informed by sacramental charity, structured by law) to the *existential experience* of the group: in essence, by a shift from the primacy of the true to that of the one. Such *communion* is certainly linked to some aspects of modernity, which dislikes the intelligible but privileges the group, the instantaneous and the emotional. But it is also one of the expressions of the crisis of the Church" (*Sedes Sapientiae*, no. 113, p. 10) The criteria of Catholic communion are profession of faith, recognition of the seven sacraments in their various rites, and hierarchical communion with the bishops who are successors of the Apostles and with the Pope.

14. *If Rome agreed to create such a structure for the Old Latin rite, it would not be a matter of*

*A kind of disavowal of the 1969 liturgical reform?*

Not necessarily. The argument for disavowal is that of the unconditional supporters of the reform, who see the ancient rite as impermissible competition for the reformed rite. But some bishops and priests (in growing numbers) are aware that the reform promulgated by Paul VI is not "the Vatican II Mass," contrary to what some (progressives or traditionalists) repeat. They will be happy that there is a liturgical reference point in the Latin Church that allows them to celebrate Masses according to the reformed rite, in line with the Council's indications expressed in *Sacrosanctum concilium*.

15. *Do you think the creation of this ecclesiastical constituency would relieve diocesan bishops who are sometimes forced by their entourage, against their will, to be strict with "tradis"?* Yes, undeniably. On the contrary, some bishops, concerned that these faithful do not leave their jurisdiction, will be more willing to accept them as they are in the diocesan sphere, and this, too, will be good.

16. *What other solutions do you propose to solve this crisis?*

The repeal of *Traditionis custodes* and the return to *Summorum Pontificum*, but with the systematic creation of personal parishes recommended by this motu proprio (Art. 10).

17. *How is this repeal possible?*

Through the normal channels: bishops, theologians and "a healthy Catholic public opinion," to use Pius XII's words. We must go through those bishops who see the great scandal that *Traditionis custodes* has caused many of their faithful, and not only traditionalists. Exasperated by the petty control measures imposed by the Dicastery for Divine Worship, they aspire to a return to relative peace, as it was before 2021. One way to facilitate this would be the full publication of the preliminary inquiry, which as we know was largely in favor of maintaining *Summorum Pontificum*. We should also encourage theological studies that increasingly challenge the progressive canon in liturgical matters and show the doctrinal and pastoral importance of traditional pedagogies of the faith in a disintegrating Western world.

18. *To justify legal changes to the situation of traditionalists, you say it would not be the first time in the history of the Church that the *dirite* has evolved in line with the wishes of the faithful. What are the examples?*

In my article I give the example of the statutes of the Mendicant Orders. "The Church takes its time, but never lets itself be overwhelmed by difficulties. One example is the insertion of the Mendicant Orders into the ecclesial fabric of the Middle Ages, in the 13th century. Controversy at times violent, offensive and counter-offensive on the part of those concerned, favorable and then very restrictive measures on the part of the Holy See: for seventy years the issue was agitated, before finding a stable solution that, essentially, gave satisfaction for seven centuries" (*Sedes Sapientiæ*, no. 165, p. 39).

One could also recall the long period of trial and error in modern times, from Pius IX to the

Vatican II, to give the Eastern Catholic rites a legal configuration that corresponds to their rightful place in the Catholic Church. Or the evolution of liturgical and disciplinary arrangements regarding adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and Eucharistic communion...

19. *Tailor-made structures have been granted by Rome to some groups to facilitate their integration into the Church (some Eastern Churches, the Anglicans, etc.). Would not the case of the traditionalist faithful be different, since they are already in the Church?*

Of course it does! Church law is oriented to the salvation of souls and is imaginative when necessary. It is not uniquely frozen on one formula or another and creates structures that respond to new needs (cf. can. 372 § 2). Benedict XVI has wisely encouraged the return of Anglicans to full communion through the new personal ordinariates. The serious situation created by the crisis in the Church (and especially by the decades-long prohibition and persecution of traditional rites) is new. Given its gravity, it calls for an original approach. Pope Francis or one of his successors, certainly for reasons other than simple reintegration into the communion-maybe with a view to the deployment of all Catholic forces for the evangelization of a world submerged by materialist technocracy-will, I am convinced, have the opportunity to show creativity for traditional pedagogies of the faith.