

# PAIX LITURGIQUE

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## France: While the vocations crisis goes on, the traditionalist tendency continues its trend

Earlier this year, the French Conference of Catholic Bishops (CEF: “Conférence des Évêques de France”) published the results of an “Investigation on the situation of candidates to the priestly ministry, 15 November 2011.” It confirms the critical situation of diocesan vocations in France and gives no indication of any improvement for the foreseeable future. This month we present and comment on these results by comparing them with data we have gathered regarding enrollment in institutes geared towards the extraordinary form of the Roman Rite.

A -- HISTORICALLY THE LOWEST LEVELS EVER OF SEMINARIANS STUDYING FOR FRENCH DIOCESES

### 1) Admissions to diocesan seminaries

As was the case last year, there has been a 3% drop in candidates to the priesthood (from 732 on 15 November 2010 to 710 on 15 November 2011).

**In order to evaluate these data over a longer period, let us recall that enrollment in French seminaries had been 4,536 at the end of the Council in 1966; it was 1,297 in 1975 during the explosive years of the liturgical reform; 1,103 in 1996 during the John Paul II years; 784 in 2005 when Benedict XVI was elected, and 710 today.** There is therefore an observable 85% drop since Vatican II and nothing seems to be able to stop it . . . at least so long as the outlook at the parish level remains unfavorable to the renewal of the priesthood.

The investigation of the Commission for Ordained Ministers and Laypeople in Church Mission concerns candidates to the priesthood in formation at the philosophy and theology levels throughout French seminaries (diocesan, interdiocesan, Groups in University Formation, university seminaries, apostolates, the “Studium de Notre-Dame de Vie de Vénasque,” the Notre-Dame de la Strada community in Brussels, the French seminary in Rome, not to mention postulants to the priesthood in overseas dioceses, the “Mission de France,” and the Diocese of the Military).

In order to reach the precise number of those intending to join the priesthood in the dioceses of France (directly or by belonging to a community), this number of 710 ought to be lowered since it includes seminarians not destined for French dioceses, notably those of the Foreign Missions of Paris (25) and foreign seminarians who will return to their home dioceses as soon as their formation is over or after a few years of ministry in France. On the other hand, since the Commission does not take into account the seminarians of the Communauté Saint-Martin (about sixty), practically all of whom are destined to diocesan ministries, one can after all use the number of 710 as that of vocations actually destined for the dioceses. This represents the lowest level on record since the French Revolution in 1789.

### 2) Priestly ordinations at the diocesan level

The CEF’s investigation also records ordinations. In this matter it has trouble giving precise numbers down to the unit.

> For 2010, the CEF commission announced 83 ordinations for June, but corrected this up to 96 in November. This was likely done by including 3 ordinations at the Communauté Saint Martin, 2 ordinations at the Communauté Saint Thomas à Becket, and 8 ordinations of the non-religious Ecclesia Dei communities. The inclusion of these very conservative profiles (particularly the 8 Ecclesia Dei who explicitly chose the extraordinary form) is encouraging since such an integration into comprehensive statistics affirms the ‘normalcy’ of their vocations. This constitutes a step in the right direction; the next step would be to mention them explicitly rather than on the sly.

> For 2011, the CEF said somewhat unclearly in the month of June: “The Conference of French Catholic Bishops’ evaluations for 2011 yield 111 diocesan priest ordinations. 103 are for the dioceses of France, of whom 5 from the Emmanuel Community and 6 from the Foreign Missions of Paris for the Church in Asia. This is without counting Religious ordained within congregations or members of priestly societies.” In its yearly assessment, the Commission gave a figure of “106,

including six off-curriculum” but it did not include the 8 ordinations for the Communauté Saint-Martin. There were, then, about fifteen more ordinations in 2011 compared to 2010. Yet one cannot speak of an upturn because the number of deacons in 2012 is lower than 80 (77 deacons were ordained in 2011 to become priests in 2012). 2012 therefore may well be a particularly lean year for ordinations, even if one throws in ordinations in communities.

## B -- A NOTABLE SHIFT TOWARDS A MORE TRADITIONAL “SENSIBILITY”

Within an ever more disastrous context (approx. 100 ordinations per year vs. at least 800 retirements [1]), one must also point out, as does the CEF’s commission, that the diocesan seminarians identifying with the Communauté de l’Emmanuel, which is by far the most conservative among the new communities, number 38 whereas they amounted to only 27 last year.

Note also that the Foreign Missions of Paris, which by definition do not intend their candidates for French dioceses, nevertheless do draw from France’s vocation pool. But since the change of that Society’s leadership and the election of Father Georges Colomb—who is a far more orthodox Catholic than his predecessor—as its superior general, recruitment has undergone a significant upturn.

The increased presence of the Communauté Saint-Martin needs to be underscored. Its members are always in their cassocks, follow the ordinary form in Latin at the seminary in Candé, they study Gregorian chant, and receive Thomistic training. Their membership is in spectacular expansion: 60, versus 43 last year (which is perfectly in line with the constant reinforcement of this community’s presence in French dioceses over the last few years). Anymore, nearly all bishops, even the most progressive ones, are in favor of the community’s coming to their diocese. As far as this congregation, which was born under the aegis of Cardinal Siri, is concerned, the days of ostracism appear to be over for good.

Two diocesan seminaries are always at the top of the list, ahead of many interdiocesan seminaries: those of Toulon and Paris, each at over 70 seminarians and both on the increase [2]. Naturally, this figure and increase are proportionately far more remarkable for the diocese of Fréjus-Toulon than for Paris. These results are undeniably due its bishop’s orientation: Bishop Rey, who comes from the Communauté de l’Emmanuel and is quite open both to the New Evangelization and to the *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum*. In Paris, the enrollment figures for Parisian seminarians had exceeded 100 at their peak under Cardinal Lustiger, fell to 54 in 2007, and are now undergoing a measurable upswing (74 in 2011, of which 62 are from Paris). It should be noted that the Parisian seminary now seems to be open to “all tendencies,” meaning to the most traditionalist among postulants who, until now, had been invited to go and look elsewhere.

Among the “smaller” dioceses, one cannot fail to point out the case of Vannes, which has about 30 seminarians, and Bayonne, which now boasts about fifteen seminarians, even though it had only two in 2009. It should be noted that in Vannes (Bishop Centène) as well as in Bayonne (Bishop Aillet, named late in 2008) the bishops may be considered to be fully in synch with Benedict XVI’s pontificate, and that this is not without some impact on the dynamism of local vocations. One may without exaggeration estimate the proportion of French diocesan seminarians who are directly sensitive to the Reform of the reform that Benedict XVI desires, including the *motu proprio*, at 30%. And to these diocesan seminarians must be added all those who choose to go the way of so-called traditionalist seminaries.

## C -- THE TRADITIONALIST POOL

1) The criteria we use in our yearly investigations on traditionalist seminarians of every stripe are the following:

-we take into account only seminarians from communities whose ministry is comparable to a diocesan ministry, i.e. we leave out all strictly religious communities;

-we also leave out first-year seminarians in their “year of spirituality,” which corresponds to the first college year in the diocesan seminarians;

-we distinguish two categories: on the one hand the Society of Saint Pius X and on the other hand the “official” traditionalists taken as a whole (Ecclesia Dei communities and “extraordinary” seminarians who are supported by their diocese outside of those communities);

-since the traditionalist communities are international and sometimes entrust ministries in France to foreigners and foreign ministries to Frenchmen, we consider only these communities’ French candidates so as to establish a plausible comparison with French diocesan candidates.

2) The results of our investigation on the basis of these criteria are as follows:

-The SSPX numbers 49 French seminarians (48 in Ecône, one in Winona), exactly the same figure as last year. Among SSPX candidates (150 men) these candidates represent a proportion of one third, which has been constant over the past few years. This seems to be in keeping with the stability of the SSPX’s apostolate in

France for the past ten years: the number of the faithful concerned is not currently on the increase.

-The “official” French traditionalists amount to 91 seminarians vs. 95 last year, a stable figure for all intents and purposes. Here too this stability is explained by the fact that the number of parishes or celebrations entrusted to priests from Ecclesia Dei communities has been progressing very, very slowly, which makes their priestly apostolate difficult.

**A total of 140 traditionalist French candidates to match diocesan seminarians, whereas 18 French priests were ordained for the extraordinary form of the Roman rite in 2011, of which 11 were for the SSPX** (16 French priests had been ordained in 2010, of which 8 for the SSPX).

3) Our remarks on these results

>Because the figures for “ordinary” seminarians are waning and those for “extraordinary” seminarians remain stable, the proportion continues to increase slowly in favor of the “extraordinary” ones (a little over 16% versus a little less than 84%).

>But the raw figures show stability after a continuous increase in former years (the numbers of French candidates to the priesthood for the Tridentine rite were 120 in 2005, 130 in 2007, 136 in 2008, 140 in 2009, 144 in 2010, 140 in 2011)—which corresponds to the very slow increase in the number of celebrations according to the extraordinary form.

>Is it not the case that the liturgy as it was reformed after the Council, or at least the common interpretation that has been given to it and that seems to be integral to it, is one of the major elements to have allowed for the tidal wave of secularization to overwhelm Christian society? Conversely, does not all that “comes with” the traditional liturgy (catechism, doctrinal formation of the youth, schools, movements, and above all priestly vocations) have an obvious missionary value?

> It must be noted that the current stability, after a slow increase, is less significant than the overall proportion: over 15% of French seminarians are generated by hardly 5% of practicing Catholics—those who have access to the traditional liturgy every Sunday. Yet for our part we believe that the number of young people intending themselves for the extraordinary form would likely increase if only the right means were provided. According to the good old principle that one loves only what one knows and practices, there is no doubt that the more the extraordinary form is offered at the parish level, the more young people who until then were ignorant of it will discover it and, should the case arise, be in a position to choose the extraordinary form when they go to seminary.

**If more parishes were opened up to the celebration of the extraordinary form of the Roman rite, if satisfaction were given to the desire of the faithful, and if this liturgical form were made more available for those who do not know it to discover it, then the number of “Summorum Pontificum” seminarians would undergo a considerable increase. This would have an immediate influence on the diocesan vocations curve. Why not do so?**

> And so, to finish, we express a wish that seems also to be common sense: that the extraordinary form of the Roman rite may find its rightful place in the celebrations of the Year of Faith that is about to begin.

*[1] 20,000 seminarians in formation would be needed to make up for the dearth of priests. In this regard see Fr. Thierry-Dominique Humbercht, *L’avenir des vocations* (Les Plans sur Bex, Switzerland: Parole et Silence, 2006).*

*[2] After these come interdiocesan seminaries totaling about 50 seminaries (Lyons and Toulouse), then those of Orleans or Issy-les-Moulineaux with about forty seminarians, then the many seminarians numbering about thirty candidates (Lille, the French seminary in Rome, the “Séminaire des Carmes” in Paris, Vénasque, etc.).*