

PAIX LITURGIQUE

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France: The Proportion of Ordinations for the Extraordinary Form Continues to Climb

The increasingly anemic Church of France has its eyes more and more tightly riveted on its annual ordination figures, which come out in June every year. The 2012 figures confirm the trend: a decrease in the overall number of seminarians and ordinations but a continuous increase in the proportion of candidates and priests for the Extraordinary Form. Beyond the statistics, analyses also indicate a slow 'traditionalization' of the French diocesan clergy . . . or, more precisely, of what will be left of it.

I - THE FIGURES FOR 2012

Last April, in our [letter #27](#) on the number of seminarians, we announced that 2012 would unfortunately be a lean year in terms of new priests. As a matter of fact, the French Conference of Bishops did indeed announce, in a communiqué dated June 15, that **only 96 diocesan priests would be ordained this year**. Since the figure was 109 last year, this represents an 11% drop this year. In fact, this number amounts to a return to the 2010 figure. Meanwhile, **every single year, the Church of France sees roughly 800 of its priests retire**.

With respect to Extraordinary Form ordinations, we have twenty ordinations of French priests destined for work in dioceses, including nine for Ecclesia Dei communities and eleven in the SSPX. In 2011 there were eighteen new French priests, of whom eleven in the Society of Saint Pius X.

Hence, while there were six diocesan priests for every "extraordinary" priest in 2011, this year the ratio is of 5:1. Therefore the trend, even though it is based on numbers that are low and hence sensitive to even the slightest change, favors the Extraordinary Form.

Furthermore, since we regularly keep tabs on candidates entering French seminaries, **we are in a position to estimate that 30% of French candidates to the priesthood have the spirit of Summorum Pontificum--i.e. , they have every intention of celebrating the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite down the line, be it occasionally or regularly**. This French observation, in fact, corresponds to those in many other countries: future priests aspire to celebrate 'in utroque usu' (in both uses).

II -THE GRADUAL TRADITIONALIZATION OF WHAT IS LEFT OF THE DIOCESAN CLERGY

This is a fact that all those involved in the formation of future priests are now noting: seminarians are more and more explicitly attracted to the traditional forms. The desire of many young priests and future priests of exercising their priesthood also in the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite constitutes, in the short and long run, a growing potential for the spread of the traditional Mass.

Let's not imagine, however, that we are headed for an inevitable "return" of the traditional liturgy. From the strictly liturgical point of view, we ought not to ignore the difficulties confronting the Extraordinary Form, however much future Levites and new priests may desire to celebrate it.

a) On the one hand, the pushback from part of the clergy of all ranks (including clericalized layfolk) who want to preserve the gains of the "spirit of the Council" remains very strong.

b) On the other hand, there is the rupture in culture and worship brought about by the secularizing reform that followed Vatican II. Knowledge of Latin, the teaching of which is at best an option in French seminaries (a little for ideological reasons, a lot because of the generalized collapse of liberal education in France), has become very weak for many seminarians and new clergy. More than this, the immemorial ritual habitus that was the Roman liturgy has disappeared among the younger ranks of the French ecclesiastical body. So there often is a handicap to overcome for priests who wish to celebrate the Extraordinary Form or to become familiar with it (likewise for the faithful, even with the best of wills). As soon as one adopts the Extraordinary form or even comes near it, one is immersed in a ritual universe that has in fact become foreign--if only because unlike the liturgical universe of Vatican II, it is essentially and powerfully rite-based, although it does immediately and obviously provide great richness in terms of transcendence and catechesis, as well as the intense feeling of stepping into an immemorial tradition. Still, this remains a handicap which, though it is by no means impossible to overcome, requires the appropriate effort.

Nevertheless, there is a greater and greater intermingling of "ordinary" clergy and liturgy and "extraordinary" clergy and liturgy. It is important to realize that this fact cannot be ignored for a realistic future reorganization of the fabric of the French priesthood in a time of extreme shortage.

In France, Ecclesia Dei and SSPX priests that are akin to diocesan priests (i.e. excluding religious priests) number over 300. These priests serve in over 400 Sunday Mass locations and are chaplains for a network of about a hundred unsubsidized schools (50 schools in the SPPX group and about 40 in the Ecclesia Dei group). Soon, common sense will demand that these priests be put to use in the dioceses, while taking into account their choice to celebrate Mass in the extraordinary form. Many and increasingly larger diocesan territories are faced with a diminishing or even practically vanishing Church presence because of the priest shortage. One of the New Evangelization dynamics ought logically to consist in stemming the spread of this priestly desert with existing traditional forces.

III - THE THOUGHTS OF PAIX LITURGIQUE

We can only repeat and complete the thoughts we expressed in our Letter on the statistics of seminarians for the dioceses of France.

1/ It is obvious that the increase in vocations and ordinations for the extraordinary form is not going to be enough, not even by long a shot, to fill the priestly deficit in France. This would require 20,000 seminarians going through formation whereas they number only 850 as of 15 November 2011: 710 in diocesan seminaries and 140 for the extraordinary form, including 50 for the SSPX. It would take at least twenty times more seminarians than there are now to fill the current deficit. Is this a sufficient reason not to take any account at all of today's 140 traditional seminarians?

2/ The liturgy as reformed after the Council, at least in the interpretation that is made of it, seems to be one of the major elements that allowed for the tidal wave of secularization and the reduction in the sense of mission. Conversely, **all that "goes with" the traditional liturgy--catechesis, doctrinal formation of the youth, schools, movements, and above all priestly vocations--has obvious missionary value** which, at the very least, limits the damage. The thousands of young pilgrims on the traditional Pentecost pilgrimages attest to the sacramental and missionary vitality of those Christian communities that live the rhythm of the Extraordinary Form Mass. From their ranks issue generations of young priests, who thus prove the spiritual and vocational fruitfulness of traditional communities.

3/ Over 15% of new priests in France are "bred" by barely 4% of practicing Catholics: those who have access to the traditional liturgy every Sunday. The number of young people who are committed to the extraordinary form is ready to grow, if the means to allow for it are provided (this concerns in the first place those responsible for priestly formation in the Extraordinary Form, i.e. Ecclesia Dei institutes, and secondly the psychological and pastoral capacity of diocesan leaders to receive these young people). In keeping with the good old principle that one loves only what one knows and practices, undoubtedly **the more the Extraordinary Form is made available at the parish level, the more young people will discover what they did not even know existed** and will be in a position possibly to choose it. In one large French metropolis, the parish dedicated to the Extraordinary Form produces five vocations per annum on average, some for the diocesan seminary. Now it cannot be said that if all the larger parishes of the same big city practiced the extraordinary form the diocesan seminary would become too small, but it would certainly have more entries. Especially if it made room for the Extraordinary Form in its weekly schedule

4/ In other words: while **one new priest in six is "bred" by less than 4% of practicing Catholics**, this exceptional (when compared with a bankruptcy situation) vocational breeding ground could be markedly greater. It is patently clear that the "offer" of traditional celebrations ought better to correspond to the "demand," for while only less than 4% of practicing Catholics get to live their faith to the rhythm of the Extraordinary Form of the Roman rite, our surveys show time and again that at least a third of the faithful (and up to two thirds in the diocese of Rennes!) wish to be able to attend regularly the traditional liturgy in their parish. Opening up more parishes to the celebration of the Extraordinary Form of the Roman rite, satisfying the desire of the faithful, and bringing those who do not know it to discover this liturgical form would cause the number of Summorum Pontificum seminarians to keep increasing, with an immediate influence on the curve of diocesan vocations.

5/ Lastly, let us point out that **forty-three out of ninety French dioceses are not ordaining a single priest this year** Among these forty-three dioceses, some do not even expect any ordination in the next few years. It would be worthwhile to study, on a case by case basis, the welcome the Motu Proprio of Benedict XVI has received in those dioceses. For while societal changes explain part of this tragedy, the rejection or even persecution of families attached to the extraordinary form is certainly not altogether unconnected with it