

Tridentine Community News

April 23, 2006

Our Agency in Rome: The Pontifical Commission Ecclesia Dei

The story of the Tridentine Mass movement is very much a “people story,” and perhaps nowhere else is that more evident than in the corridors of the Vatican itself.

In the wake of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre’s illicit consecration of three bishops in 1988, our late Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, issued the now-famous *motu proprio*, “Ecclesia Dei Adflicta,” which encouraged bishops to grant “wide and generous” permission for the Traditional Latin Rite of the Church to be celebrated. To help facilitate the reconciliation of members of Lefebvre’s Society of St. Pius X (“SSPX”), and to serve as a resource for Catholics around the world who wished guidance in how to approach their bishops for permission for the Tridentine Mass, Pope John Paul II established the Pontifical Commission Ecclesia Dei (“PCED”). A Tridentine Ombudsman, in essence.

Initially, the PCED issued “celebrets,” or certificates of permission for specific priests to celebrate the Tridentine Mass without the permission of their local bishops. The PCED soon stopped providing these documents, presumably after bishops voiced their objections to being overruled. Today, any priest in possession of a celebret may technically be grandfathered in to a special privilege, but may be crossing an unwise political boundary were he to exercise that right against his bishop’s will.

Since the inception, a Cardinal has been appointed to serve as President of the PCED. This is not necessarily a full-time assignment. The present leader is Dario Cardinal Castrillón Hoyos, who also serves as head of the Congregation for the Clergy. (Note that he is properly referred to as Cardinal Castrillón, not Cardinal Hoyos.). Cardinal Castrillón has been the most actively engaged leader the PCED has seen since its establishment. He was the first Cardinal to celebrate a Tridentine Mass in a Roman Basilica since Vatican II. He has held numerous negotiating sessions with SSPX leadership to advance their reconciliation. In recent weeks, he has tirelessly and repeatedly advocated to his fellow members of the Curia that wider permission for priests to celebrate the Tridentine Mass be granted. All of us who love the Traditional liturgy should include Cardinal Castrillón in our prayers, as this noble and energetic man is more capable of assisting the growth of the Tridentine Mass than any other in Rome save the Pope.

Other members of the Roman Curia (the “Pope’s cabinet”) also serve on the PCED, much like a Board of Directors. However, the day-to-day operations of the PCED are actually carried out by a small, full-time staff.

If you have ever written the Ecclesia Dei Commission, you have most likely received a response signed by Msgr. Camille Perl, the Secretary. A little-known fact is that virtually all English correspondence is actually written by Msgr. Perl’s assistant, Msgr. Arthur B. Calkins. Organizational rules require that Msgr. Perl’s name be on all correspondence.



Knowingly or not, therefore, Msgr. Calkins is the face of the Ecclesia Dei Commission to North Americans. In some circles, Msgr. Calkins has gained a reputation of not

being favorable to tradition. Having known Msgr. Calkins for many years, this author suggests a different viewpoint: As more or less the manager of the “Complaint Desk,” Msgr. Calkins has to respond with realistic suggestions to those who write. Because the PCED cannot impose its will on bishops, Msgr. Calkins must use his knowledge of what approaches actually work, when advising those who write. Those responses may not be exactly what writers wish to hear, but they are the voice of actual experience and political savvy. No one else in the English-speaking world is as aware of worldwide successes and failures as he.

Beware: Msgr. Calkins is a meticulous keeper of records. When corresponding with him in 1998, this author was surprised to receive a response which mentioned a previous letter from 1989. During a later visit to Msgr. Calkins’ office, he proudly showed off a room of filing cabinets, in which all correspondence was kept. There may be a file on you in the Vatican!

Besides his role on the PCED, Msgr. Calkins is an academic with a particular interest in Marian theology. He has authored an immense number of articles and treatises on our Blessed Mother.

He is a regular speaker at Latin Mass conventions, including the 2001 Latin Liturgy Association meeting at Chicago’s St. John Cantius Church that some of the members of our cluster attended.

Msgr. Calkins is very much aware of our efforts here at St. Josaphat and St. Michael’s. He puts a human, helpful, and yet realistic face on the Vatican, and his connections to countless Vatican officials give us insight that cannot easily be gained by other means.