

*OPINION*

# Bishop Strickland: 'It is clear that Archbishop Lefebvre walked an apostle's path'

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Abp. Marcel Lefebvre (third from right).

Bishop Joseph E. Strickland

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([LifeSiteNews](#)) – Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

At this time of year, as we wait for Our Lord, I want to draw our attention for a moment to St. Joseph, a mostly silent but very important person in the Advent of Our Lord. We know St. Joseph as a carpenter because St. Matthew and St. Mark used the Greek term *tekton* to describe his work which is a common term for a worker in wood, a builder, a “joiner” – one whose woodworking skills include “joining” pieces of wood together. The Latin fathers interpreted this word as “carpenter.”

The word “joiner” is an apt word for St. Joseph because in so many ways he was called to be a builder of staircases that provided steps for heaven to “join” earth, and earth to “join” heaven. The Blessed Virgin Mary was called to be the Mother of God, and St. Joseph built a staircase by offering her marriage and a home where the Christ Child could live on earth. Jesus Christ dwelled in the house St. Joseph provided, and although a house and any steps St. Joseph built would have been made of earthly materials, heaven walked upon them, so it could be said that he built a staircase that connected heaven to earth.

As we think of staircases, and things that “join” heaven and earth, we think naturally of Christ’s Church, for as Catholics, we stand on a staircase, or a bridge, built by Christ that connects earth to heaven. The steps on this staircase are the sacraments which bridge the abyss that separates the Creator from the created, and the Deposit of Faith is the framework. As long as we stand securely on this staircase, then we, like Mary holding the infant Christ, can gaze into the face of God. For in His Church, Christ truly meets us on earth, as in His Church He is truly present. The sacraments are efficacious signs for they truly bring to earth (and join) what they symbolize. In order for this to happen, as we know, it must be “symbolized” correctly (the staircase must be constructed of the right materials) both in “form” and in “matter.” If either is changed, the form (the words spoken) or the matter (the physical part of the Sacrament), then the validity is destroyed. Therefore, every board of this staircase is an integral part of the whole.

This staircase, or bridge, which connects earth with heaven has always stood firm, despite constant attacks from the outside throughout the history of the Church. However, we now see attacks originating from within the Church Herself, and originating from those who claim to have the authority to wage this war. What is occurring now is the culmination of what the fallen have systematically, with diabolical intent, planned, and what has been prophesied by many saints throughout the history of the Church. However, the boards of this staircase were given by Christ Himself, and any substitute materials that are put in their place will not bear the weight of what we have been given. Therefore, it is of grave concern to me, as a bishop, that the faithful not lose sight of the true staircase and then find themselves standing on a staircase build of substitute materials, wondering why their Church seems so empty. Christ will always be present in His Church, standing on the staircase that He has built, but we must be sure that is where we are standing also, and that we have not been waylaid by the “ape of the Church” as Archbishop Fulton Sheen aptly called it.

As a bishop, I have promised – no matter the cost – to stand firm on the true staircase which was given by Christ and rests in Him, and whose framework is the Deposit of Faith, and indeed to protect it from all who would attempt to pry off the boards. I am called to remember that the precious blood of Christ marks this staircase, and that it is also stained by the blood of martyrs, and that I must also be willing to shed my blood to protect it. For Christ to die for us, it was required for Him to become man and to surrender to the atrocity of death while holding the very key of life. This took unparalleled will – it took the Will of God. And that is where He calls each of us – to walk completely in the Will of God.

When did the attempted destruction of this staircase begin? Many point to Vatican II as the culprit. I was born in October of 1958, the same year and month that Pope John XXIII was elected to the Chair of Saint Peter as Pontifex Maximus (Supreme Pontiff), which means great bridge builder. I mention this because very often this year is highlighted as the beginning of the turmoil in the Church which we presently see boiling over in countless ways. It is true that his pontificate and his decision to convene the Second Vatican Council was a pivotal moment in Church History. On October 11, 1962, Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council; however, he died in June of 1963, and Paul VI, his successor, took his place. The fourth and final session of the Council ended in December of 1965.

Was this the beginning? It does seem that there has been a systematic attempt at the demolition of what had been considered “unreformable” before Vatican II. And yet how have those responsible attempted to destroy what is eternal? They have done this by attempting to confine what was of heaven to an earthly definition, and this is done most effectively by attempting to substitute man-made materials for what was given from heaven. However, when one end rests on earth and one end rests in heaven, as does the Church, then man cannot destroy it. What he can do, though, is obscure the Truth by offering the “ape of the Church” in its place.

There can be no doubt that much changed after Vatican II. There was a new emphasis on the Church walking with the “world,” and this definitely opened the door to theological views that compromised the Church’s unique identity. Ideas like ecumenism struck a blow to the staircase, for Christ never said His Church should be a part of the world; in fact, He said the opposite.

With Vatican II, a focused movement began to encourage the Church to engage in “dialogue” with other denominations. Yet I have to ask, “What was there to dialogue about?” Christ gave us His Church. It is clear now that it has been the logical progression of what came forth from Vatican II that we are now at the point where the Holy Father can make a statement like, “All religions are paths to God,” and the majority of bishops and cardinals just nod, never saying a word.

And yet they know – they cannot help but know – that they are abandoning the staircase they have promised to protect. What Pope Boniface VIII in his Bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302) infallibly taught is on that staircase: “We are compelled in virtue of our faith to believe and maintain that there is only one Catholic Church, and that one apostolic. This we firmly believe and profess without qualification. Outside this Church there is no salvation and no remission of sins. Thus, the spouse proclaims in the Canticle, ‘One is my dove: my perfect one is but one. She is the only one of her mother, the chosen of her that bore her’ (Cant. 6:8). Now this chosen one represents the one mystical body whose head is Christ, and Christ’s head is God. In her there is ‘one Lord, one faith, one baptism’ (Eph. 4:5). For at the time of the deluge there existed only one ark, the figure of the one Church.”

There are many divinely inspired words on the staircase that would lead us to conclude without exception that “No, all religions are NOT paths to God.” For, as Pope Benedict XV stated in his Papal Encyclical *Ad Beatissimi* (1914), words that are also on this staircase: “Such is the nature of Catholicism that it does not admit of more or less, but must be held as a whole or as a whole rejected: ‘This is the Catholic Faith, which unless a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved’ (Athanasian Creed). There is no need of adding any qualifying terms to the profession of Catholicism: it is quite enough for each one to proclaim, ‘Christian is my name and Catholic my surname,’ only let him endeavor to be in reality what he calls himself.”

The Catholic Church has ALWAYS condemned the false belief that all religions are good and “of God.” This is the false doctrine of religious indifferentism, and it is a board which should never be placed on this sacred staircase. There have been many, many other boards that men have attempted to place since Vatican II that are made of man-made materials. They have tried to substitute man-made materials for heavenly ones because they thought that the original materials were “out-of-date.” However, what heaven has built never becomes out-of-date.

Much that came out of the Second Council represented a movement from the Catholic Church to the conciliar church. What is especially tragic is that it was likely at this point that we lost the focus of bringing the world to Christ.

Nothing was as damaging to the staircase, though, as the changes that occurred in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. It seems now much of the Church asks with St. Mary Magdalene as she encountered the empty tomb, “Where have they laid Him?” The changes that the Church has witnessed in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass since Vatican II have left many unaware of where He is and of His loving sacrifice for all humanity as belief in the Real Presence has fallen substantially.

The Old Mass was suppressed in 1970, and many Catholics left the Church, as Pope Paul VI actually accused any who observed the Old Mass as rebellious against the Council. As I reflect on the changes that came about in the Mass as a result of Vatican II, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre comes to mind. Archbishop Lefebvre, who founded the Society of Saint Pius X (the SSPX), a traditionalist priestly society, was labeled disobedient, a rebel and even schismatic in the 1970’s and 1980’s for refusing to celebrate the New Mass. However, Lefebvre felt the Church was experiencing a profound “crisis of faith” due to the infiltration of modernism and liberalism. He felt that there was an active attempt to pry off the boards of the staircase and to replace them with boards of the world. He consecrated four “tradition-minded” bishops without papal approval (although he had repeatedly sought approval for years after having been previously told that approval would be granted) because he felt that without bishops who upheld traditional teachings and the Tridentine Latin Mass that the continuity of the Church’s Tradition would be at risk. And, thus, he made sure the staircase was preserved intact.

In 1976, when Lefebvre was about to ordain 13 priests into the Society, Archbishop Giovanni Benelli from the Vatican Secretary of State office wrote him requiring fidelity to the conciliar church, and Archbishop Lefebvre replied, “What is that church? I know not a conciliar church. I am Catholic!”

I, myself, having been in seminary at a time when Latin was not even taught, and having always as a priest and bishop celebrated the Novus Ordo (New Mass), have been on a journey to understand this issue. I would urge all of us to recognize, as I have come to recognize, that the issues with the Holy Mass began because of an attempt to move the focus away from Jesus Christ and His sacrifice which IS the Holy Mass.

I believe that we should each strive to be first century Christians in the twenty-first century, and this is especially significant in the area of the Holy Mass. The dawn of the Church included the celebration of Holy Mass, the Last Supper, making present Christ's once-and-for-all sacrifice of Himself. Accounts like that of St. Justin Martyr offer us very early descriptions of what occurred at Holy Mass, and the beauty of these accounts is that they are so close in time to the sacrifice that the Mass commemorates. We must keep our focus on Jesus Christ as the earliest Christians did, so that the temporal distance from His Sacrifice falls into insignificance because we are focused on the same Crucified and Risen Lord as the early Christians.

There is no doubt that with the New Mass there has been a diminished focus on Jesus Christ. This has often been seen in subtle ways, but we have also witnessed drastic neglect of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ that rises to the level of blasphemy in many instances since Vatican II. When the liturgy shifted its focus to the people and away from Jesus Christ, it opened the door to extreme neglect of His Sacred Presence.

It is interesting that although the Novus Ordo is usually celebrated in the vernacular, the common language of the country where it is celebrated, while the Traditional Mass is celebrated in Latin, the normative language of the Novus Ordo is also Latin. Although provisions were made for the Mass to be celebrated in the local vernacular for pastoral reasons, it was always assumed that the Mass would continue to be celebrated in Latin, and Pope Benedict XVI urged the reintroduction of Latin into the Novus Ordo.

When the Novus Ordo was introduced, many altar rails were removed. However, the altar rail helped us to maintain the distinction between the sanctuary (where the altar is and which represents heaven, where our staircase leads) and the rest of the Church (which represents earth, and where our staircase begins). In the Traditional Latin Mass, communicants kneel at the altar rail (the gate to heaven) and receive the Eucharist on their tongues from the priest.

Although there are many sacred and beautiful Novus Ordo masses celebrated consistently, it is a fact that the New Mass represented a break in centuries of Liturgical continuity. And with that has come a massive decline in Mass attendance, vocations, and belief in core Catholic teachings. Pope Benedict XVI addressed these concerns with his 2007 motu proprio *Summorum Pontificum* in which he expanded access to the Traditional Latin Mass. However, in his 2021 motu proprio *Traditionis Custodes*, Pope Francis severely limited access to the Traditional Latin Mass again. But let us read these words of Pope Pius V in his Apostolic Constitution *Quo Primum* from 1570 regarding the Traditional Latin Mass:

Furthermore, by these presents [this law], in virtue of Our Apostolic authority, We grant and concede in perpetuity that, for the chanting or reading of the Mass in any church whatsoever, this Missal is hereafter to be followed absolutely, without any scruple of conscience or fear of incurring any penalty, judgment, or censure, and may freely and lawfully be used. Nor are superiors, administrators, canons, chaplains, and other secular priests, or religious, of whatever title designated, obliged to celebrate the Mass otherwise than as enjoined by Us. We likewise declare and ordain that no one whosoever is forced or coerced to alter this Missal, and that this present document cannot be revoked or modified, but remain always valid and retain its full force notwithstanding the previous constitutions and decrees of the Holy See, as well as any general or special constitutions or edicts of provincial or synodal councils, and notwithstanding the practice and custom of the aforesaid churches, established by long and immemorial prescription...

The words that Archbishop Lefebvre spoke at the ordination of 13 priests in 1976 are words we should take to heart. He stated, “For if the most holy Church has wished to guard throughout the centuries this precious treasure which She has given us of the rite of Holy Mass which was canonized by St. Pius V, it has not been without purpose. It is because this Mass contains our whole Faith, the whole Catholic Faith: Faith in the Most Holy Trinity, Faith in the Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Faith in the Redemption of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Faith in the Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ which flowed for the redemption of our sins, Faith in supernatural grace, which comes to us from the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, which comes to us from the Cross, which comes to us through all the Sacraments. This is what we believe. This is what we believe in celebrating the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass of all time. It is a lesson of Faith and at the same time a source of our Faith, indispensable for us in this age when our Faith is attacked from all sides. We have need of this true Mass, of this Mass of all time, of this Sacrifice of Our Lord Jesus Christ really to fill our souls with the Holy Ghost and with the strength of Our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Pope Benedict XVI said, “What earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us, too, and it cannot be all of a sudden entirely forbidden or even considered harmful. It behooves all of us to preserve the riches which have developed in the Church’s Faith and prayer.”

I feel that it is also important to state here that the SSPX is not outside the Catholic Church, and that although it is canonically irregular, it is not schismatic. Bishop Athanasius Schneider has done extensive study on the SSPX, and as a result, he has given a clear and consistent defense of the Society. He has stated that Catholics may attend SSPX masses and receive sacraments from its clergy without concern. Although he acknowledges the “irregular canonical situation” of the SSPX, he states that this does not equate to being outside the Church, and he has praised the SSPX for upholding traditional Catholic faith and liturgy. Bishop Schneider has also called for their full canonical recognition by the Vatican, asserting that the SSPX adheres to traditional Catholic teachings and sacraments as they were practiced for centuries before Vatican II.

In conclusion, I would like to quote a famous declaration that Archbishop Lefebvre made in 1974. It is clear that Archbishop Lefebvre walked an apostle’s path and was led to establish a safe place, a refuge, where could be found the Mass of the ages in its pure form, a place where the Deposit of Faith would be protected, and the staircase preserved intact, even while the ape of the Church was pulling off boards and throwing out all that is most precious. Here is Archbishop Lefebvre’s declaration:

We hold fast, with all our heart and with all our soul, to Catholic Rome, Guardian of the Catholic Faith and of the traditions necessary to preserve this faith, to Eternal Rome, Mistress of wisdom and truth.

We refuse, on the other hand, and have always refused to follow the Rome of neo-Modernist and neo-Protestant tendencies which were clearly evident in the Second Vatican Council and, after the Council, in all the reforms which issued from it.

All these reforms, indeed, have contributed and are still contributing to the destruction of the Church, to the ruin of the priesthood, to the abolition of the Sacrifice of the Mass and of the sacraments, to the disappearance of religious life, to a naturalist and Teilhardian teaching in universities, seminaries and catechetics; a teaching derived from Liberalism and Protestantism, many times condemned by the solemn Magisterium of the Church.

No authority, not even the highest in the hierarchy, can force us to abandon or diminish our Catholic Faith, so clearly expressed and professed by the Church’s Magisterium for nineteen centuries.

‘But though we,’ says St. Paul, ‘or an angel from heaven preach a gospel to you besides that which we have preached to you, let him be anathema’ (Gal. 1:8).

Is it not this that the Holy Father is repeating to us today? And if we can discern a certain contradiction in his words and deeds, as well as in those of the dicasteries, well we choose what was always taught and we turn a deaf ear to the novelties destroying the Church.

It is impossible to modify profoundly the *lex orandi* without modifying the *lex credendi*. To the Novus Ordo *Missae* correspond a new catechism, a new priesthood, new seminaries, a charismatic Pentecostal Church—all things opposed to orthodoxy and the perennial teaching of the Church.

This Reformation, born of Liberalism and Modernism, is poisoned through and through; it derives from heresy and ends in heresy, even if all its acts are not formally heretical. It is therefore impossible for any conscientious and faithful Catholic to espouse this Reformation or to submit to it in any way whatsoever.

The only attitude of faithfulness to the Church and Catholic doctrine, in view of our salvation, is a categorical refusal to accept this Reformation.

That is why, without any spirit of rebellion, bitterness or resentment, we pursue our work of forming priests, with the timeless Magisterium as our guide. We are persuaded that we can render no greater service to the Holy Catholic Church, to the Sovereign Pontiff and to posterity.

That is why we hold fast to all that has been believed and practiced in the faith, morals, liturgy, teaching of the catechism, formation of the priest and institution of the Church, by the Church of all time; to all these things as codified in those books which saw day before the Modernist influence of the Council. This we shall do until such time that the true light of Tradition dissipates the darkness obscuring the sky of Eternal Rome.

By doing this, with the grace of God and the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and that of St. Joseph and St. Pius X, we are assured of remaining faithful to the Roman Catholic Church and to all the successors of Peter, and of being the *fideles dispensatores mysteriorum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi in Spiritu Sancto*. Amen.

The Archbishop did not write this in a spirit of rebellion – but rather as a rallying cry for all those who want to fight for Christ the King. I offer this same declaration as also my battle cry to fight for Him.

As I conclude this letter, I do so with a renewal of our focus on Jesus Christ. The Church is His, the Mass is His, He offered Himself to the Father once and for all for the salvation of our souls. Let us resist any further attempts to diminish our focus on Him and instead draw all the Church – ordained, religious and laity – to know Him more deeply “in the breaking of the bread.” And proclaim to the world that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord of all.

And to my fellow bishops I quote the words of St. Pope John Paul II, “We must defend the truth at all costs, even if we are reduced to just twelve again.”

May Almighty God bless you and may our Holy and Immaculate Mother protect you and guide you always to her Divine Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Bishop Joseph E. Strickland

Bishop Emeritus

*Editor's note: Following the publication of this letter Bishop Strickland published the below post on X, formerly known as Twitter.*

Regarding my recent letter about staircases, I want to state that bridges aren't meant to live on forever – they provide a passage to a safe place. For example, the staircase or bridge that is the Church leads to heaven if we stay firmly on it. However when there is interference on the path – for example the “ape of the Church” is attempting to pull off boards and lay down man-made materials in their place then a bridge is given to guarantee safe passage – a bridge where the ground is solid and the “ape of the Church” isn't allowed entry. The SSPX is one place that is serving that function right now. Of course I am not advocating for an SSPX church or any other kind of church except the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church that Christ established. And neither was Archbishop Lefebvre. He was just providing a bridge for safe passage.

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However when there is... [pic.twitter.com/DEDdVdtjJq](https://pic.twitter.com/DEDdVdtjJq)

– Bishop J. Strickland (@BishStrickland) [December 15, 2024](#)

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