

Address to the AGM, 2026

Joseph Shaw

I'd like to welcome everyone to the Latin Mass Society's Annual General Meeting, and thank you for coming to what, for most of you, is I expect an unfamiliar venue. I hope you think the trip was worthwhile. The Church and Shrine of Our Lady of Willesden should be better known, and I hope a Latin Mass Society pilgrimage here will become an annual event. The shrine dates back to 1892; the present church was completed in 1931, though the fine altar dates from 1944. That period, of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the 20th century, was one of Catholic revival, and that means restoration. Willesden was one of a number of Medieval Shrines restored during those years: Our Lady of Walsingham received a new shrine in 1897, which moved into the Slipper Chapel in 1931; Our Lady of Caversham was a relative latecomer in 1958.

England was not alone in needing this restoration. The Church here was laid pretty low by the Protestant Revolt and subsequent persecution, but a great deal of restoration was also necessary after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars in France and beyond, of everything from the fabric of church buildings to schools and religious orders. The same was true in Italy after the anti-clerical campaigns of the newly united Kingdom after 1870; in Germany after the *Kulturrekampf*; in Spain after the Civil War; and so on. In the late 19th century Benedictine monasticism had to be rebuilt, almost from the ground up, and the chant which they had safeguarded had to be restored as well. The Jesuits also had to be refounded. Well, perhaps they didn't *have* to be, but they were anyway.

It is a curious thing that during the last pontificate an attempt was made to make the term 'restorationist' derogatory. It is particularly curious that Pope Francis used this term to pick out people who, he suggested, rejected the Second Vatican Council, since the Council's self-understanding was as a call for restoration: in Latin, *instauratio*. In the Council's decree on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, we never hear calls for innovation, but no fewer than ten times it demands *instauratio*, or uses the cognate verb *instaurare*. This is somewhat obscured by the different ways these words are translated, ranging from restore to reform, so you need to refer to the official Latin text. On other occasions the decree uses the very similar verbs *restituere* and *recognoscere*.

It wasn't Pope Francis who created the confusion between restoration and novelty, nor was it even the translators of the decrees of Vatican II. In the Apostolic Constitution *Missale Romanum* of 1970, which introduced the liturgical reform, Pope Paul VI coins the oxymoronic phrase '*instaurationis novitas*': literally, the novelty of the restoration. Nor do I lay all the blame with Pope Paul, because while some of the suggestions of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* were for real restoration, such as giving Gregorian Chant pride of place in the liturgy, others were novelties, even if not called by that name, such as the call for a multi-year Lectionary, which had never existed in any Catholic rite of east or west. When it came to implementation, even before 1990 the contrast between the notion of *instauratio* and what was actually done became ever more striking. In the end, the language of restoration disappeared more or less completely, and we just hear about 'reform'.

A concrete example here in Willesden can be seen in the shrine chapel. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* praised the Church's 'treasury of art which must be very carefully preserved'. (123). A few paragraphs later priests are told 'to appreciate and preserve the Church's venerable monuments' (129). The way they implemented that here in Willesden was to wall off the apse of the shrine chapel, so that the altar with its marble embellishments would be hidden from view, while the shrine image was placed on a shelf on the wall, behind a new altar built for *versus populum* celebration. Today we see the shrine restored to its former glory: the restoration of 1931 has been restored, after an intervening period of philistinism.

There is nothing particularly special about the year 1931, any more than there is about the year 1962 or any other moment in the recent history of the Church, but the work of restoration is a practical one, and with limited resources and respect for the work of previous generations of restorationists we tend to go back to the most recent high point, before contemplating more ambitious projects. This instinct is more than simply practical, in fact: it helps maintain a sense of continuity, where a more radical restoration might appear too unfamiliar, too revolutionary, and to sacrifice too much of value: this has been said, for example, of the rather half-hearted attempts to restore the ancient Offertory Procession, or the practice of receiving Holy Communion standing and in the hand. Martin Mosebach observed that when a modern Catholic is told to stand for Holy Communion he does not think 'oh how lovely, I'm doing it like the early Church', he just brushes the dust off his knees and says 'Oh, so it wasn't so very important after all.'

Restoration, therefore, doesn't simply mean adopting the oldest thing we can identify and destroying everything which happened in the centuries or millennia since then. A key figure in articulating the nature of restoration was Violet le Duc, who restored Notre Dame in Paris after the damage it sustained in the Revolution, along with many other French churches. Le Duc did not try to return it to how it looked in the 14th century, or some other moment in the distant past, but he re-presented it to the public as a living and evolving monument which owed something to every century it had passed through, while retaining its essential medieval character. That is exactly what we find with the ancient Roman liturgy: it is truly ancient, despite being embellished by every succeeding age.

I don't think it is controversial to say that, in 2026, the Church is in need of restoration, here in England and world wide, just as our bishops judged it to be in 1892, and the Council Fathers judged it to be in 1963. Although much good work of restoration has been done, particularly since the 1990s, decay of various kinds, to say nothing of deliberate harm, have continued to afflict the Church. The restorationist is constantly reminded that what can be destroyed cheaply and quickly can be restored only at great cost in time and money. Listeners might be reminded of the words of Tolkien's character Saruman, who had been wrecking the Shire in the absence of Frodo and his companions, near the end of *The Return of the King*. He boasted to them: 'I have already done much that you will find it hard to mend or undo in your lives.'

At any rate, the restorationist is not short of work. The work of the Latin Mass Society is mainly the restoration of practices, above all liturgy and chant, rather than physical artefacts, but the artefacts also have their importance. Our affiliated Guild of St Clare is dedicated to the restoration of vestments, and we have recently contributed to the restoration of the sanctuaries of St Walburge's, Preston, and St Mary's, Warrington, churches in the hands of the Institute of Christ the King Sovereign Priest and the Fraternity of St Peter respectively. We take up this task in imitation of our predecessors of all ages, going back to the restoration of the Temple sanctuary by Hezekiah, Josiah, and Nehemiah. Restoration is not something new: it is part of the permanent mission of the Church.

The Latin Mass Society is able to do this for two reasons. First, we are not part of the Church's establishment, and so not ensnared by the passing fads of officialdom. I don't mean to be rude: these fads seemed solid and convincing at the time, and the people following them are generally well meaning enough, but it is no longer controversial to say that a lot of harm was done to church buildings between about 1964 and 1990 for no real gain. Our bishops clearly agree with this proposition because they have permitted and encouraged much restoration work in their dioceses, including some of their own cathedrals: in Birmingham most famously, and before that in Portsmouth, and more quietly in other sees. It is also evident that harm was done in the area of liturgy by banning public celebrations of the Traditional Mass, except in England and Wales, from 1971 to 1984, a ban which Pope John Paul II reversed, and which has never been reimposed.

It can be painful to hear one's favourite notions being criticised, and when an elite has become mesmerised by a set of exciting new ideas, the people who don't go along with this can become very unpopular. And yet such dissidents to intellectual fashions are immensely valuable: by demanding proper justifications and pointing out inconvenient facts they slow down destruction and they speed up the return of sanity. No one today would say that the poet John Betjeman's opposition to the post-War bulldozing of fine Victorian buildings was a waste of energy, or that he should have focused on something that had official approval at the time. On the contrary, there is a statue of him on one of the platforms of St Pancras Station, to show the nation's gratitude for his saving of that extraordinary building, among many others, in the teeth of the planners' insistence that it was redundant.

It would be nice to imagine a statue of the late Michael Davies being erected in front of Westminster Cathedral, in gratitude to a man who dedicated so much time and energy to pointing out things that the ecclesial establishment of the 1970s and 1980s would rather have ignored. That doesn't seem very likely, but it is a fact that he, and the movement he represented, has been vindicated in its most fundamental position: that the prohibition and persecution of the Traditional Mass was harmful to souls, and that this sacred edifice, this construction of symbolic action and sacramental forms, should continue to exist in the Church for the good of souls.

The second reason the Society has been able to do its work is a contrasting one. It is because, although not wedded to the ecclesial establishment, we are nevertheless inside the structures

of the Church. By this I mean that we engage with parishes, shrines, and bishops, and are answerable to canon law and the hierarchy. On the one hand, we are dissenters, not from the Faith, I hope, but from the fashionable ideas I was talking about, and a lot of people would rather we simply disappeared somehow. On the other hand we are not disappearing: our members and supporters are in parishes, and as an organisation we are writing to bishops, we are coming to shrines like this one, and we are sometimes even officially listed as a Catholic organisation.

This positioning of the Society makes our work possible. Our work is not about creating a parallel institution in which everything is the way we want it, but to improve what is going on in the mainstream, above all to make the Traditional Mass available to as many Catholics as possible.

I note this because of the very different attitude of Fr Davide Pagliarani, the Superior General of the Society of St Pius X. I don't normally comment on the SSPX, but in the current moment it is not unreasonable for people, and not just supporters of the SSPX, to ask us why we don't accept Fr Pagliarani's arguments. Why do we remain under the authority of our bishops, whereas the SSPX carries on its work without reference to them? I therefore think I should say something about this.

Fr Pagliarani explains his decision to consecrate new bishops for the Society by reference to a 'state of necessity'. In a recent interview, which has become widely diffused, he explains what he mean in these terms:

It is sad to acknowledge, but it is a fact that, in an ordinary parish, the faithful no longer find the means necessary to ensure their eternal salvation. Missing, in particular, are both the integral preaching of Catholic truth and morality, and the worthy administration of the sacraments as the Church has always done. This deprivation is what constitutes the state of necessity. In this critical context, our bishops are growing older, and, as the apostolate continues to expand, they are no longer sufficient to meet the demands of the faithful worldwide.

Let me break this paragraph down a bit.

Two categories of things are necessary, Fr Pagliarani tells us, to supply the ‘means of salvation’. One is ‘the integral preaching of Catholic truth and morality’. It is of course correct that preaching is a means by which the Church saves souls, but it is not as directly and proximately connected to salvation as the sacraments, and unlike the sacraments it is quite hard to pin down. How bad does preaching have to be for the people to be deprived of the means of salvation?

This question matters less if we have a more clear-cut justification for the state of necessity in the case of the sacraments, so let us consider Fr Pagliarani’s claim about those: ‘the worthy administration of the sacraments as the Church has always done’ is, he says, ‘missing’ from the ‘ordinary parish’. This is at first sight puzzling because, bad as things certainly are, it is not actually impossible to get baptism and confession in the ordinary or typical Catholic parish, and if you are unlucky enough to be refused either of these in one parish you can not only report the priest to his bishop but receive them from the next parish down the road.

However, on closer examination I don’t think Fr Pagliarani is denying that baptism and confession are widely available in Catholic parishes, but something slightly different: that they be offered in a ‘worthy’ way, and they be offered ‘as the Church has always done’. I take it that ‘worthy administration’ means administration by a good priest without liturgical abuses, and ‘as the Church has always done’ means in the pre-Vatican II form.

Now these are both excellent things, but Fr Pagliarani does not say that the new Rite of Baptism or the post-Vatican II words of Absolution are invalid. It follows that he is not claiming that the means provided by the Church for reconciling us with God are absent from the ordinary parish. The state of necessity, then, on his view, is not a strict absence of the sacramental means of freeing oneself from original and mortal sin. The emergency is the lack of the traditional liturgical forms, alongside the lack of what we might call really good preaching.

The lack of these two things is certainly very regrettable, but you can decide for yourselves what kind of emergency this lack creates. I want to consider the next step in Fr Pagliarani’s argument. The SSPX’s actions are necessary, in this situation, because the SSPX is providing these things which are otherwise not available. To *whom* is it providing them? To those who frequent their chapels. We might ask: were the SSPX to be reconciled, were they to accept

some vague statement about the legitimacy of the reformed Mass and the validity of Vatican II, such as other reconciled communities have accepted and that Pope Francis might have asked of them, would they have been prevented from ministering to the congregations of their chapels as they had done before? The answer is obviously ‘no’. Would they have found it impossible to find bishops to carry out ordinations and confirmations for them? Well, there are other priestly institutes and religious communities who want the old Roman Pontifical for the ordination of their seminarians and the confirmation of their faithful, and they have been able to get it, consistently, since the first of them were erected or reconciled in 1988.

I know how SSPX supporters respond to this observation. They claim that it is only because of the existence of the SSPX outside the structures of the Church that the traditional institutes and communities inside the structures of the Church have been allowed to operate in relative peace. If the SSPX were reconciled the policy of the Holy See would change.

At this point we are moving into a new kind of argument, about what would happen in a hypothetical situation, or might have happened in a hypothetical situation in 1988 or some subsequent date. I don’t agree with this argument, but I’m not going to be able to persuade anyone who thinks like that with anything I could say today, and my concern here and now is to clarify what is at stake rather than develop a knock down argument. The lesson I want to take away from what this dialogue is that the problem comes down to one of *mutual trust* and *mutual respect*. The problem of the SSPX’s canonical situation is a problem which will be solved, if it is ever solved, by a process of building up trust and respect between them and the Holy See, and this process will take time and sustained effort from both sides.

While, as I say, I don’t accept the SSPX argument, it is inevitable that they will look at the way traditionalists who do accept the authority of their bishops are treated, and to draw conclusions from what they see. I think it would be fair to say what they have been able to see over recent years has been pretty mixed. No doubt Pope Leo is aware of this. We must pray that he sees the value and urgency of reassuring Catholics attached to the Church’s traditions of his pastoral concern.

In the final part of this address I want to say something more about the relationship between traditional Catholics and the hierarchical Church, with the help of Fr Louis-Marie de Blignières, Superior of the Fraternity of St Vincent Ferrer, a traditional religious community which uses the Dominican liturgy, which was aligned with the SSPX from its foundation in 1979 until 1988, when it was reconciled to the Holy See.

In an article on the blog *Rorate Caeli* he examines the position of Fr Pagliarani and other SSPX spokesmen on a question I have not yet broached, which is their theological disagreements with Vatican II and subsequent teaching. I recommend this article; here I am going to draw from it only some of Fr de Blignières' points.

It is well known that the founder of the SSPX, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, was a participant at the Second Vatican Council, and signed all the Council's documents. The position of the SSPX has never been that the Council was not a valid General Council of the Church, but they do regard it nevertheless as problematic in some ways. The way this works is expressed by Fr Jean-Michel Gleize, an SSPX theologian:

In reality, there is: 1° a gravely failing authority in Rome, to the point of gravely scandalizing souls; [...] The whole question is whether one accepts point 1°. If one does not accept it, if the New Mass is not a bush full of venomous reptiles, if the Second Vatican Council does not endanger the faith, if religious liberty is not contrary to the teachings of Pius IX, if ecumenism does not call into question the dogma of the uniqueness of the salvific value of the Catholic Church, if Collegiality does not call into question the dogma of the uniqueness of the subject of the Primacy, then *everything is fine* and the Superior General is a madman and the whole Fraternity along with him.

Fr de Blignieres comments:

This text reveals a binary vision. For Father Gleize, either the Magisterium is heretical (Vatican II is full of errors contrary to the faith, the reformed liturgy is full of 'venomous reptiles'), or there is no crisis in the Church ('everything is fine'). There is no middle ground.

This binary attitude is directed particularly to Traditional Catholics like us who remain under the authority of our bishops. Our failure to come over to the SSPX is taken as a refusal to accept the most over-heated assessment of the problems currently being experienced by the Church, and that in turn is taken to imply that we think ‘everything is fine’.

I don’t say this *is* the position of the SSPX, but it is commonly taken up in defence of the SSPX. It has a mirror-image in the position of some theological conservatives, who say that in order to be in good standing in the Church, one must indeed say everything is fine, not only in the sense that they want to insist that the clerical abuse crisis is made up and the vocations crisis is the Holy Ghost telling us about the importance of lay leadership or some such, but that we are not permitted to make the smallest criticism of the official acts of the Church.

One might say that the SSPX and these hyper-papalists prop each other up by polarising the debate. Either you accept the lightest word, not just of the pope but of curial officials, and whoever runs the papal Twitter account, and live out your life as a Catholic in a permanent Prozac-fuelled haze of admiration for everything about the Church today, or everything is so bad that even relatively good things in the Church must be avoided. Indeed, as Fr de Blignieres quotes Bishop Bernard Fellay, the former SSPX superior, the good things in the post-Conciliar Church should be avoided even more than the bad things, because their imperfections are better disguised: they are, in Bishop Fellay’s favourite metaphor, a poisoned cake.

The truth, however, is that in this life, even with the assistance of divine grace, documents, initiatives, seminary programmes, liturgies and everything else that comes out of the hierarchical Church, are imperfect. If you get hold of some of these imperfections and build a big edifice upon them, you could go quite badly wrong, and for this reason you need balance, a sense of history, and a lively informed debate. That debate does indeed take place, with or without the contribution of traditional Catholics. Did the editing of the ancient collects in the *Novus Ordo* go too far? Should the *Novus Ordo* Sign of Peace be moved away from the Offertory? Is the emphasis in Vatican II’s *Gaudium et spes* on human potential over the top? It is interesting to note that the Third Edition of the *Novus Ordo* gave new versions of many collects which are indeed closer to the ancient sources. The Holy See took the question of the

Sign of Peace sufficiently seriously to have a whole Synod of Bishops on the subject under Pope Benedict. And listen to these words written on *Gaudium et spes*:

The whole text gives scarcely a hint of the discord which runs through man and which is described so dramatically in Rom 7:13-25. It even falls into downright Pelagian terminology when it speaks of man *sese ab omni passionum captivitate liberans finem suum persequitur et apta subsidia... procurat*.¹

To give a slightly longer translation of the passage of *Gaudium et Spes* referred to:

Man achieves such dignity when, emancipating himself from all captivity to passion, he pursues his goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for himself through effective and skilful action, apt helps to that end.²

Who was this theologian, you ask, so bold as to question the words of a Pastoral Constitution of a General Council of the Church? Was it a Protestant? A Lefebvrist? A liberal? Step forward the Fr Josef Ratzinger. Because yes, we can criticise the theological formulations of magisterial texts, even in strong terms.

Fr de Blignieres notes:

The SSPX can recognize the magisterial character of Vatican II while adhering to each proposition according to the differentiated degree of authority it carries. This implies, *salva reverentia*, a certain freedom of judgment with regard to the very numerous pastoral and disciplinary considerations present in the text of Vatican II. A reading of the Council in the light of Tradition does not entail any adherence to erroneous doctrines.

What he means by a ‘differentiated degree of authority’ is that different propositions in the Council documents have different levels of authority. Some reiterate (or indeed quote)

¹ Joseph Ratzinger “The Dignity of the Human Person” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* Vol. V, trans. W. J. O’Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) p138

² *Gaudium et Spes* 17

infallible statements from previous exercises of the magisterium; at the other extreme there are observations about modern culture, prudential judgements, historical claims, and other statements which were certainly not intended by the Council Fathers to join the articles of the Apostles' Creed as things all Catholics must believe if they wish to be saved.

Fr de Blignieres quotes from the 1988 Protocol of Agreement which was approved by Cardinal Ratzinger on behalf of Pope John Paul II, and signed by Archbishop Lefebvre:

Regarding certain points taught by the Second Vatican Council or regarding later reforms of the liturgy and of canon law, which seem to us difficult to reconcile with Tradition, we commit ourselves to having a positive attitude of study and communication with the Apostolic See, avoiding all polemics.

This is what the Holy See asked of the SSPX in 1988, and this is what Holy Mother Church asks of all her children when we are presented with non-infallible statements, laws, and liturgical reforms. We must accept them in the sense that they are genuine exercises of the authority of the Church, but that does not imply that they have the inspired and inerrant status of Scripture. They can be misguided, they can be wrong – that is literally what ‘fallible’ means – and we can express our opinions about them, but please, let us study the question seriously, express ourselves with due respect for persons, maintain a positive attitude, and avoid polemic.

All of us here at the Latin Mass Society's Annual General Meeting know the *cost* of remaining within the structures of the Church. The distances we have had to drive to get to Mass; the efforts, sometimes useless, we have made to build relationships with parishes, schools, and bishops; the insults we have borne; the marginalisation we have endured – yes, let us not pretend otherwise. Many of our fellow Catholics appear to think we are bad people and would be delighted to see us depart, but we aren't going anywhere. We are going to remain, and we are going to keep asking, politely but persistently, for what Pope John Paul II called our rightful aspiration of the Traditional Liturgy. Where Modernism, Docetism, Arianism, sexual libertinism, gender theory, and other errors make their appearance, for example in Catholic schools, we will continue to raise polite and well-informed objections, and make even more people dislike us.

I don't condemn anyone who has made a different judgment in good conscience. My concern here is simply to express my own position, and to articulate what may be the position of many people here. It is summarised in a quotation Fr de Blignieres gives at the end of his article, with which I will end my own presentation, from St Dionysius of Alexandria.

We ought to endure all things rather than rend the Church of God, and martyrdom in refusal to worship idols is no more glorious than that in refusing to make a schism; for in the former case one lays down one's life for the sake of one's own soul, but in the latter for the sake of the whole Church.