

VTMS News: Statement of the Priestly Fraternity of ST. Peter

VTMS wrote:

Dear Fr. Devillers: The entire Vancouver Traditional Latin Mass Community is praying for you, Fr. Bisig and the FSSP in these trying times. We hope and pray that all things will remain essentially as they are and with no novelties or changes introduced.

Here is the result of your prayers:

Statement of the Priestly Fraternity of ST. Peter

February 15, 2000 Since it was announced last summer that there would be a special meeting of all the members of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter in Rome, rampant speculation about the Fraternity's future has been the order of the day for journalists on at least two continents. There is no small irony in the fact that two seemingly disparate groups of observers have reached the same dramatic, but wholly erroneous, conclusions: those who have believed since the Fraternity was founded in 1988 that the Roman authorities would not long tolerate this indication of the larger revival of interest in the traditional liturgy, and those who are scandalized that permission to celebrate the traditional Mass has been given to any priest, much less to an entire community.

In fact, the meeting outside Rome that concluded on February 12 brought no such sweeping changes to the Fraternity. To attempt to compile a complete catalog of rumors which have now been proven false would be a project of truly vast scope, but it seems prudent to deal with some of the most widespread, lest it be suggested that we are being disingenuous in failing to address one point or another.

Rumor One: the Fraternity is about to be suppressed entirely.

This is simply without foundation. The Fraternity's status as a society of apostolic life governed by a Superior General is not only intact but was confirmed at the meeting by Vatican officials. The General Chapter of the Fraternity, long scheduled for the summer of 2000 and to which delegates were elected in 1999, will proceed as planned.

During the same time stories about the Fraternity being "under siege" from the Curia appeared in many journals, the Superior General spoke to the Synod of Europe and

met privately with the Holy Father-hardly the signs of a concerted effort by the Vatican to destroy the Fraternity.

Rumor Two: Fraternity priests will soon be required to celebrate the Novus Ordo Missae of Pope Paul VI instead of the traditional Roman liturgy.

This rumor, certainly one of the most peculiar since it would strike at the very reason for the Fraternity's existence, is absurd. It imagines that the Fraternity would be stripped of its *raison d'etre* while at the same time priests in hundreds of dioceses and religious communities around the world remain free to celebrate the traditional Mass.

Rumor Three: Father Josef Bisig is about to be replaced as the Fraternity's Superior General, or an apostolic administrator is soon to be named who will take over most of Father Bisig's powers.

Not only is this not accurate, but the request of the Commission Ecclesia Dei that Father Bisig not make personnel changes until a number of administrative issues have been resolved has been rescinded. Father Bisig has the same authority as the elected head of any similar community, such as the Dominicans or Jesuits.

Rumor Four: this meeting was an attempt by Rome to prevent a majority of Fraternity priests from charting their community's future, and came in response to a letter from a handful of French priests.

This special meeting had no authority to make decisions or even recommendations about the Fraternity's future. The Fraternity's General Chapter will meet this summer, as it does every six years. The Chapter--not this special General Assembly--alone has the authority to make decisions about the Fraternity's future. The Chapter consists of the men who serve on the Fraternity's Council and delegates who were elected by the membership at large in the spring of 1999.

There are unquestionably divisions within the Fraternity's French District, as there are in any religious community, organization, or family. These divisions are in some cases unfortunately rooted in conflicts of personality and in others in disagreement about a variety of substantive issues. While there certainly exist differences of opinion between Fraternity priests on a variety of subjects, the pervasive distrust which has been all too evident in France cannot be found elsewhere, and especially not in North America.

The extent of these disagreements should not be exaggerated, though: no priest or deacon has left the Fraternity because of this controversy, in France or anywhere else in the world. The free and frank exchange of views at the meeting may well prove to be the first step in healing some of the divisions in France.

Rumor Five: Fraternity priests are now required to offer the Novus Ordo Missae from time to time, to concelebrate on Holy Thursday or whenever they are asked to do so by a bishop, or to celebrate the new Mass when they "fill in" for diocesan priests who are ill or traveling.

It was never suggested that a Fraternity priest could be forced by a bishop, superior, or anyone else to celebrate or concelebrate the new Mass--indeed, canon law explicitly states that no priest can ever be required to concelebrate.

Rumor Six: The Roman meeting was simply an occasion for Roman officials to berate Fraternity priests for their attachment to the traditional rite and to put pressure on them to celebrate the new Mass.

Neither of these things took place at the meeting, which was instead a courteous and constructive exchange of views. It is not realistic to imagine that any religious community exists in a vacuum, with no contact with Rome or with priests who do not share that community's charism. Were such a situation to exist, it would fly in the face of the unity of the Church and the brotherhood of priests.

Rumor Seven: because the retreat house where the meeting was held was too small, Fraternity priests were forced to concelebrate the new Mass with curial officials--something that had been their goal all along.

This story, which appeared in print at least once, is simply silly: no retreat house in the world has one hundred side altars, and the problem was easily solved by having priests celebrate their Masses at different times throughout the morning. More than thirty altars were available for private Masses.

With the Roman meeting done, it is time to turn our attention to the future of the Fraternity. Many of the issues which prompted the meeting in Rome will be discussed at the General Chapter meeting this summer, and steps will be taken to resolve them. In the next few months, twelve men will be ordained priests for the Fraternity--an increase of more than ten percent in the number of priests. In addition to the seven men who will be ordained to the priesthood in North America, eight deacons will be ordained this spring, so 2001 will see eight more priests ordained here.

This month, the Fraternity's work will extend for the first time to the Southern Hemisphere as Father John Rizzo inaugurates an apostolate in Melbourne, Australia. An apostolate will be launched in Vancouver, British Columbia this summer, and it is likely that apostolates will open in a few more dioceses as well before the end of the year.

Both the Seminary of St. Peter in Wigratzabad, Germany and Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary in the United States will move into new buildings at the beginning of the 2000-2001 academic year. Particularly at a time when vocations to the priesthood are rare in the West, it is an extraordinary blessing to have so many vocations that we have been forced to construct two new seminary buildings.

It should come as no surprise that after a dozen years of rapid growth, the Fraternity has internal matters that must be addressed; so too would any organization that has grown so explosively. Some of these issues are important ones, questions that address how the Fraternity can best minister to the faithful in various countries. They are not questions, though, that can be allowed to take precedence over the mission of the Fraternity: to carry out the work of the Church and in particular the formation of priests, animated by a full liturgical life and the riches of the ancient Roman liturgy.

This realization is shared by every member of the Fraternity, even those who disagree about particular issues. While the Fraternity is certain to again face "growing pains" in the years ahead, the Roman meeting accomplished at least this much: a renewed sense of common purpose among the priests and deacons of our community and a shared determination to see the Fraternity's growth continue in this new century, the first of the third Christian millennium.

Fr. Arnaud J. Devillers, FSSP, District Superior, Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter