

Sedevacantist Watch...

FR. CEKADA'S NOVEL THEORY: THE "SIN" OF HERESY CAUSES THE LOSS OF OFFICE

“[T]he General Council declares the fact of the crime *by which* the heretical pope has separated himself from the Church and deprived himself of his dignity.” (Wernz-Vidal)¹

Because Sedevacantists know they have no authority to judge a Pope for the *crime* of heresy under canon law, they have come up with a complete novelty to get around the problem: They argue that the Pope loses his office and jurisdiction for committing the *sin* of heresy, and then appoint themselves as the judge and jury of the sin by a nebulous appeal to “Divine law.” Pretty convenient, huh? And it is fair to say that this error is one of the major blocks in the false foundation upon which the Sedevacantist thesis has been erected. As we demonstrate in great detail in *True or False Pope?*, the “sin of heresy” error is two-fold: First, the sin of heresy is a matter of the internal forum of which God alone (or the priest in confession) is the judge. Second, the sin of heresy alone *does not cause the loss of office*.

While many quotations from leading Sedevacantists could be provided, the Sedevacantist priest, Fr. Anthony Cekada, is one of leading promoters of this error, having peddled it for many years in his articles and videos. In fact, this is Fr. Cekada’s favorite defense of Sedevacantism, which he uses in almost every one of his attempted “rebuttals” of his opponents’ arguments. For example, in attempting to respond to one of his critics, Cekada wrote a piece called “Sedevacantism Refuted?” in which he says the following:

“Like many who have written against Sedevacantism, one fundamental flaw runs through [author] Mr. Sparks’ article: he seems utterly unaware of the distinction between human ecclesiastical (canon) law and divine law, and how this distinction applies to the case of a heretical pope.”

¹ Wernz-Vidal, *Ius Canonicum* (Rome, 1943), II, p. 518.

“Heresy is both a crime (*delictum*) against canon law and a sin (*peccatum*) against divine law. The material Mr. Sparks quotes deals with heresy as a *delictum* and with the ecclesiastical censure (excommunication) that the heretic incurs.”

“This is mostly irrelevant to the case of a heretical pope. Because he is the supreme legislator and therefore not subject to canon law, a pope cannot commit a true *delictum* of heresy or incur an excommunication. He is subject only to the divine law.”

“It is by violating the divine law *through the sin (peccatum) of heresy* that a heretical pope loses his authority – ‘having become an unbeliever [*factus infidelis*],’ as Cardinal Billot says, ‘he would by his own will be cast outside the body of the Church.’”²

Using his own words, Fr. Cekada “seems utterly unaware” that the sin of heresy does not, by itself, cause a Pope to “lose his authority.” This is why Fr. Cekada is forced to creatively edit the quotations he claims supports his position (an editorial tactic he consistently uses, as we expose in our book). In this last quotation above, after Cekada claims (in his own words) that the “through the sin of heresy the heretical pope loses his authority,” he deceptively quotes only half of a sentence from Cardinal Billot about how “unbelievers” are “cast outside the body of the Church,” evidently to give the impression that Billot is saying the sin of heresy expels one from the Church.

What Cekada failed to tell his readers (or even indicate by an ellipsis) is that Cardinal Billot was not referring to the sin of heresy, but public and notorious heresy – that is, is the canonical *crime* of heresy in the *external* forum – which severs one from the “body of the Church.” Here is the full sentence from Cardinal Billot:

“Given, therefore, the hypothesis of a pope who would become notoriously heretical, one must concede without hesitation that he would by that very fact lose the pontifical power, insofar as, having become an unbeliever, he would by his own will be cast outside the body of the Church.”³

Because “notorious heresy” is a “crime” under canon law (see canons 2197, 2^o and 2197, 3^o of the 1917 Code) means that Cardinal

² “Sedevacantism Refuted?” at <http://www.traditionalmass.org/articles/article.php?id=15&cat name=10>.

³ *De Ecclesia*, 1927, 5th ed., p. 632 (emphasis added).

Billot, like his predecessor theologians, held that the *crime* of heresy (not the *sin* of heresy) causes the loss of ecclesiastical office. In their commentary on the 1917 Code of Canon Law, Wernz-Vidal teach the same:

“[T]he General Council declares the fact of the crime by which the heretical pope has separated himself from the Church and deprived himself of his dignity.”⁴

This reason a Pope can only lose his office for the crime of heresy, is because the *internal sin* does not sever the *external bonds* of unity, which themselves suffice for a Pope to retain his office. If it did, a Pope who fell into occult (secret) heresy would also cease to be Pope, which is contrary to the teaching of St. Robert Bellarmine and “all the theologians” Bellarmine cites in his book *De Ecclesia*, as we amply demonstrate in *True or False Pope?*⁵ We also show that the person must be a public and notorious heretic by the *Church’s* judgment, not simply by individual private judgment. Fr. Cekada’s half-sentence hatchet job on the Billot quote, which he surely read in its entirety before applying his creative editing, strikes yet another blow to Cekada’s already tarnished credibility.

Fr. Cekada used the same fallacious argument in response to John Salza’s article against Sedevacantism in the April 2011 edition of *Catholic Family News*.⁶ In the article, Mr. Salza explains that expulsion from the Body of the Church is not a matter of sin in the internal forum, but requires a determination of the crime in the external forum. In Cekada’s “rebuttal” article,⁷ he begins by glibly stating: “Mr. Salza does nothing more than recycle the same mythical objections to Sedevacantism that I and others have answered over and over for at least twenty years.” Then, under his subtitle “Crime and Sin Confused,” Cekada actually *confuses* “Crime and Sin” as he unwittingly points out that Salza’s arguments “pertain to the **canonical crime** of heresy...and not to the **sin** of heresy” (emphasis in original). Yes, Fr. Cekada! We concur.

Fr. Cekada then repeats his error by boldly stating: “In the matter at hand, when canonists and theologians say that ‘heresy’ automatically deprives a pope of his office, they are referring to the **sin** of heresy, not to the **canonical crime** of heresy” (emphasis in original).

⁴ Wernz-Vidal, *Ius Canonicum* (Rome, 1943), II, p. 518.

⁵ *De Romano Pontifice*, bk. 2, ch. 30.

⁶ Salza, “Sedevacantism and the Sin of Presumption,” *Catholic Family News*, April 2011.

⁷ <http://www.fathercekada.com/2011/04/11/salza-on-Sedevacantism-same-old-fare/>.

Fr. Cekada goes on to provide two quotes from the canonist Michel who explains the requirements for the sin of heresy, but who never says such sin “automatically deprives a pope of his office,” as Cekada claims. That is because the internal sin of heresy alone does no such thing, and not a single quotation cited by Fr. Cekada in any of his articles proves otherwise, which is why he is reduced to citing *half sentences* (out of context) to support his position.

In his recent video “Stuck in a Rut,” Fr. Cekada regurgitates the same nonsense. He rattles off the names of a number of other theologians (such as Beste, and Wernz and Vidal) who he claims agree with his sin of heresy theory, but when one takes the time to look them up, we again discover their unanimous teaching that the *crime* of heresy – *judged by the Church* – and *not* the sin of heresy – *judged by Fr. Cekada* – causes the loss of office. For example, Beste says: “Not a few canonists teach that, outside of death and abdication, the pontifical dignity can also be lost by falling into certain insanity, which is legally equivalent to death, as well as through manifest and notorious heresy.”⁸ Speaking of the case of a manifestly heretical Pope, Wernz and Vidal also say “the General Council declares the fact of the crime by which the heretical pope has separated himself from the Church and deprived himself of his dignity.”⁹

Fr. Cekada will search in vain for a *complete* sentence from his theology manuals which says the internal sin of heresy *alone* (without the judgment of the Church) causes a Pope to lose his office, *and yet his entire case is based upon this fundamental error*. As noted above, if his theory were true, the Church would never have certainty that an elected Pope was a true Pope or an antipope – a believer or a pretender – since man is unable to see into the heart of another man to determine whether the sin has been committed (and claiming to judge an internal sin by considering external actions does not suffice). If the loss of papal office occurred secretly (without the Church being involved) due to the sin of heresy, and was left to the private judgment of individual Catholics to “discern,” there would be chaos. There would be no certainty regarding the Pope’s binding decrees, and this uncertainty would infect the entire Church. As we demonstrate in our book, one advocate of Fr. Cekada’s theory now claims there have been no true Popes *since the year 1130*. The practical consequence of Cekada’s novel theory alone is sufficient to reveal the error of his main defense of the Sedevacantist thesis. And that mean’s Cekada’s case is dismissed.

⁸ H. *Introductio in Codicem*, 1946.

⁹ Wernz-Vidal, *Ius Canonicum* (Rome, 1943), II, p. 518.

Unfortunately, many unsuspecting laymen have fallen for the “sin of heresy” under “Divine law” theory of Fr. Cekada, and then used it in their own defense of the Sedevacantist position. Such people include Mario Derksen (a.k.a. “Gregorius” at NovusOrdoWatch), Richard Ibranyi, Steven Speray, Mike and Pete Dimond, and Gerry Matatics – all of whom feature prominently in *True or False Pope?* One of the more embarrassing but not uncommon examples of parroting Fr. Cekada’s theory occurred when a Mr. Jerry Ming wrote an “Open Letter to John Vennari,” the Editor of *Catholic Family News*, in response to the aforementioned article by John Salza. Here is an excerpt from the “Open Letter.” See if any of it sounds familiar:

“So, it should be clear to all, that heresy is a crime against canon law and a sin against the divine law. ‘It is by violating the divine law through the sin of heresy that a heretical pope loses his authority – ‘having become an unbeliever...’ as Cardinal Billot says, ‘he would by his own will be cast outside the body of the Church.’”¹⁰

Notice that Mr. Ming not only parrots Fr. Cekada *verbatim* (a common trait among Sedevacantists), but he even quotes the same *half sentence* from Cardinal Billot (out of context) to make his point! This only goes to show the danger of following Sedevacantist priests, such as Fr. Anthony Cekada. It also reveals how Sedevacantism, like Protestantism, is a movement of “the blind leading the blind” (*cf.* Mt. 15:14). And, as Our Lord said, when that happens, both will fall into the pit.

¹⁰ “Open Letter to John Vennari.” http://www.novusordowatch.org/open_letter_to_John_Vennari.htm.