Opinion
Guest Voices



Archbishop Edward Weisenburger delivers his first homily during his installation Mass at the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Detroit March 18, 2025. (OSV News/Detroit Catholic/Tim Fuller)

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Catholic social media has been abuzz in recent days over the news that three professors at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit were dismissed from the faculty by Archbishop Edward Weisenburger. Eduardo Echeverria, Ralph Martin and Ed Peters — each of whom had taught at the seminary for over two decades — were outspoken critics of Pope Francis and openly challenged the orthodoxy of his magisterial teachings.

The news came as a shock to me, because despite loud assertions by his adversaries that he was a "dictator" or "tyrant," the most vicious and persistent anti-Francis reactionaries rarely experienced any repercussions from publicly attacking the pope. Even the most extreme cases — such as those of the openly schismatic Bishop Joseph Strickland and Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò — remained unresolved for years before they suffered any consequences.

Much like Viganò and Strickland, the removal of Martin, Echeverria and Peters came long after their dissent from the magisterium was manifest. Reports of the "Francis-free zone" at the Detroit seminary were public knowledge. Church-watchers noted the poorly formed priests who had emerged from the institution and counted down the minutes until Weisenburger's predecessor, Archbishop Allen Vigneron, reached the mandatory retirement age of 75.



This is a file photo of the campus of Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. (OSV News file/The Michigan Catholic/Kristin Lukowski)

When the professors' terminations were announced, I expressed on social media that this was long overdue, given the scandal of openly dissident professors involved in the formation of seminarians. I was quoted in an article by Jonathan Liedl in the National Catholic Register, who said I am "known for his harsh criticism of those he perceives as disloyal to the late pontiff."

This description of me by yet another anti-Francis Catholic misses the point completely. This has nothing to do with loyalty or disloyalty to any pope. Loyalty is nice but it is not the issue. My criticism is of those who publicly reject the legitimacy and orthodoxy of teachings on faith and morals promulgated by the Roman pontiff. It is unacceptable for a Catholic seminary professor to publicly and unapologetically dissent from magisterial declarations, exhortations and encyclicals.

Martin, Echeverria and Peters have openly violated the doctrine taught in the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* (no. 25), the Catechism (no. 892), Canon Law (can. 752), and the *Professio Fidei* (third paragraph), which teaches that religious submission of intellect and will must be granted to the pope's ordinary magisterial teachings on faith and morals, even when he is not teaching definitively, according to his manifest mind and will. This leaves no room for devising creative interpretations that are more palatable — something that all three have done.

An Our Sunday Visitor article by Lauretta Brown documented a few of the professors' problematic statements, such as when Echeverria said in 2022 that Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* is not orthodox. Pedro Gabriel debated Echeverria on this point a month later. Peters has written many articles for Catholic World Report trying to invent canonical loopholes and alternate interpretations of Pope Francis' teachings, including *Amoris Laetitia* and the revision to the Catechism on the death penalty. Martin wrote an open letter in 2018 that advanced the claims of Viganò against Pope Francis and a series of anti-Francis talking points before questioning the very foundations of Francis' message, writing, "Has false compassion and presumption on God's mercy replaced true love, which is based on truth, and the only appropriate response to God's mercy — faith and repentance?" Martin has also expressed distress at the notion of Pope Francis stating his hope that hell is empty, contradicting his own belief that hell is very full.

There are many more examples, but my point is that all three seem to openly embrace the "standard" anti-papal narrative that became popular in the past dozen years.

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A false 'orthodoxy'

Many people on social media asked me why I described the former seminary professors as *heterodox* and said they *dissent from the magisterium*. After all, they have been widely hailed as orthodox and faithful in the U.S. conservative Catholic milieu for decades. But it is not orthodoxy, it is an ideological worldview.

From their perspective, fidelity to the Catholic Church has more to do with holding to a list of doctrinal precepts deemed "traditional" and absolutely unchanging. It is static and rigid. Such Catholics have no capacity to accept correction from legitimate authority, because everything is already settled. Even the pope or a bishop or a synod or an ecumenical council is a threat to this worldview because such a thing can only disrupt the careful and unchanging order that they believe must be protected to save the church. Some call this traditionalism, and Pope Francis called it backwardism. Whatever it's called, it is not orthodox Catholicism.

This flawed understanding does not see membership in the church as belonging to the people of God, in communion with and in obedience to the church that Christ founded, led by the successors of the apostles (the bishops), with and under the successor of Peter (the pope) who is the visible source of unity in the church and guarantor of fidelity to the word of God. They don't see that the church journeys through history together as a people. In this view, the faith is an individual's fight for salvation, sometimes against the church itself.

This false orthodoxy that infects the U.S. church (which is a form of fundamentalism) seems to be grounded in a lack of trust in Christ's promises to the church: that the gates of hell will never prevail and that Peter is the rock whose never-failing faith will endure, through his successors, until the end of time.

This promise is reflected in our history: despite the evils that have been perpetuated in the name of the church; in spite of the weak and sinful men (including Peter himself) who have held the office, the chair of Peter has endured as a beacon of truth for nearly two millennia. Maintaining communion with the successor of Peter has come with challenges: when we look at the practices of the church in the past we often see corruption, discrimination, abuse, selfishness, oppression, even violence. We have not always lived up to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This includes popes. These sins and scandals have caused division, dissent and schism. The church is constantly in need of reform, and true church reform necessarily requires the leadership of the pope.



Ralph Martin, then a professor at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit, reads the first reading as Pope Benedict XVI celebrates the closing Mass of the Synod of Bishops on the new evangelization in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Oct. 28, 2012. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Francis was a reformer pope. Pope Leo XIV has stated his intention to carry out what Francis began. Some Catholics are determined to resist this reform, and one thing they're doing is actively working to undermine the official magisterial teachings Francis has promulgated. *Amoris Laetitia*, the revision to the teaching on the death penalty, *Fiducia Supplicans* and all the teachings by Pope Francis on faith and morals are, by definition, part of the ordinary magisterium of the church. The church has long taught that such teachings require the faithful to grant *religious submission of intellect and will*.

There is a loud contingent of Catholics in the U.S. who have promoted (and normalized) the false view that these teachings should be rejected or can be twisted in such a way to make them meaningless. This is *dissent*, but rather than admit that, they call themselves orthodox and accuse the pope of teaching error and even

heresy.

Intentionally or not, these former professors have advanced a widespread anti-Catholic ideology. This mindset has become the *mainstream* view promoted by media outlets like EWTN, National Catholic Register, The Pillar, Ignatius Press, Crisis, One Peter Five, The Remnant, LifeSiteNews, First Things, The Catholic Herald — virtually all of "conservative Catholicism" in the English-speaking world. Bishops like Raymond Burke, Charles Chaput, Athanasius Schneider, Strickland, Alexander Sample, Thomas Paprocki, and so on adhere to and promote this ideology.

Scholars like Martin, Echevarria and Peters, who have studied Catholic theology and law extensively, should know better, but they have campaigned for this warped ecclesiology against the pope for years. Should they be entrusted with teaching seminarians?

This ideology is heretical. It rejects the primacy of the pope. It was the fundamental error of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (founder of the Society of St. Pius X). Unless this trend is reversed, the inevitable result of this error is schism. This has nothing to do with playing favorites or being mean or unsympathetic to people's feelings. It is recognizing that the church is the body of Christ and that the pope is its visible head.



Pope Leo XIV presents the pallium to Archbishop Edward Weisenburger of Detroit during Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican June 29, 2025, the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul. The pallium symbolizes the archbishop's authority and unity with the pope. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

The traditionalist mindset

I should add that this ideology/heresy is dominant among those who promote the celebration of the Tridentine Mass. Prior to Pope Francis, I was under the impression that those who loved the Latin Mass but remained in communion with the church also accepted Vatican II, assented to the teachings of the post-Vatican II popes, and accepted the legitimacy of the liturgical reform (despite their preference for the older form). Pope Benedict XVI was under this impression as well, and he said so in his letter accompanying *Summorum Pontificum*. Unfortunately, he was mistaken. So was I.

At this website, we have extensively documented the dissent of the clergy and public spokespeople of the traditionalist movement. I have yet to find a noteworthy traditionalist priest or pundit who does not adhere (to one degree or another) to this ideology. Yes, some traditionalists are more extreme than others, and this is to be expected. Like Protestantism, traditionalist groups splinter and divide without papal authority.

Whenever I speak to an ex-traditionalist, they will confirm that the ideology is pervasive. Whenever I speak with a current traditionalist, they will tell me it's just a few bad apples on the internet. Even the bad apples will tell you it's just bad apples. Once, an ex-traditionalist told me, "Every traditionalist thinks they're a 'good' traditionalist." I suppose that's all relative, in a movement that includes Nazi sympathizers and violent white nationalists.

I don't know how many times a traditionalist has told me to ignore the heterodoxy of virtually every public-facing traditionalist while insisting that the non-extremists don't have time to write articles or go on social media and stand up to the public voices of the movement. Or they claim that such views are not present "in my community."

If such Catholics do exist, they need to speak out against their leaders or they are going to lose the Latin Mass. They need to encourage their priests to concelebrate Chrism Mass with their bishops. They need to stop inviting heretical speakers like Fr. Chad Ripperger and Peter Kwasniewski to speak at their parishes. If these non-extremists do exist, they need to stop tolerating antisemitism and antipathy for the pope.

Pope Francis promulgated *Traditionis Custodes* in order to save traditionalists from themselves. Restrictions against the Latin Mass are not "mean" or "cruel" or hatred of traditionalists. They are attempts to limit the spread of a toxic ideology, which has become uncontained in the internet age.

A sacramentary is seen on the altar during a traditional Tridentine Mass July 18 at St. Josapha

A sacramentary is seen on the altar during a traditional Tridentine Mass July 18 at St. Josaphat Church in the Queens borough of New York City. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Reject ideology and renew your faith in Christ

Many people reading this will likely think I am pushing a heterodox position. This is because the fundamentalist view has become predominant in many sectors of the church. They take this ideology for granted. It is in the air we breathe. It is espoused or ignored by many U.S. priests and bishops. Yet it is erroneous. It is not church teaching. But we think it is because many of the Catholics we've been taught are "rock solid" (Scott Hahn, Burke, Ripperger, Chaput, Ralph Martin) promote it.

These figures have turned Catholics against the pope. The pope! Against the church. And many have become so accustomed to it that they don't remember what it was like to be obedient to the pope. U.S. conservative Catholics are extreme outliers in the global Catholic Church but are so numbed to it that they don't even notice.

I don't know the solution to this problem, but I do know that if I was able to break free from this dangerous worldview, anyone can.

This story was originally published at Where Peter Is.