

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What makes a church “Catholic”?

The word “Catholic” is neither trademarked nor copyrighted; therefore, any church can call itself “Catholic”. Many will recall that the marks of the true church are four: it is one, holy catholic, and apostolic. Those Catholic churches which share our faith, our governance, our 7 sacraments, and our unity under the Pope and the bishops in union with him, we regard as “truly” Catholic. Many other organizations that use the word are often lacking *one or more of these elements*. We speak of them as “not being in communion” with the Catholic Church.

2. What do we mean when we say “communion with Rome”?

- a. The concept of 'communion' implies a two way and mutual relationship.
- b. Communion with Our Lord , with each other and the communion with the church He founded and the hierarchy who governs the church, the pope and the Bishops
- c. According to the Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, the Catholic Church is understood to be "a corporate body of Churches," united with the Bishop of Rome, who serves as the guardian of unity.

3. Some of these churches call themselves “traditional Catholic churches”? What does this mean?

After the Second Vatican Council, many Roman Catholics found the changes in the manner of celebrating Mass and other sacraments difficult to understand and, frankly, personally unpleasant. Some, including some bishops and priests, departed from communion with the Holy Father. Others sought the continued use of the older forms within the Church. Both groups have used the word “traditional” or “Tridentine” to describe the form in which Mass is said or celebrated.

4. How can anyone know which of these is in full communion with the Catholic Church?

Often the best indicator is who administers the church. In the Diocese of Richmond, those in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church are served by member of the Fraternitas Sacerdotalis Sancti Petri (FSSP), in English, the **Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter** who say Mass and administer the sacraments in union with the Roman Catholic Church according to the ritual books of 1962.

Another body using the Latin ritual books but not in full communion with Rome is the Society of St. Pius

X. A further group, a split from the SSPX are called sede vacantists because they believe there has been no legitimate pope since Pope Pius XII! The bishops and priests of the latter groups [do] not have a canonical status in the Church, [and] its ministers do not exercise legitimate ministries in the Church” (Pope Benedict XVI, Letter of March 10, 2009).

5. *Does the Fraternity of St Peter have any parishes in the Diocese of Richmond?*

Yes, there are two. The FFSP parishes are considered “personal parishes”. A Personal Parish serves some spiritual need that is not specifically addressed in other parishes. It must be designated as “Personal” by the Diocesan bishop, and its unique purpose must be explicitly described. These two parishes are:

- **Saint Benedict Parish**
521 McCosh Drive
Chesapeake, Virginia 23320
- **Saint Joseph Parish**
828 Buford Road
Richmond, Virginia 23235

6. *If I attend an SSPX Mass or receive sacraments there, are these recognized by the Catholic Church?*

A more basic question would be, “Do you consider yourself a Roman Catholic in communion with the Holy Father and all the bishops united with him or not? The response to that question provides part of the answer. Generally, Roman Catholics should be approaching their proper parishes for formation, for Mass and for celebration of the sacraments. Those not in full communion with the Holy Father have parted company with the Catholic Church not only in discipline but also in matters of doctrine. Questions of the validity or the legitimacy of the sacraments celebrated by those not in full communion can vary. One example suffices: prior to the Jubilee Year of Mercy, the right of SSPX priests to give absolution to Catholic penitents was questionable. During the Jubilee Year, Pope Francis extended the faculty to hear confessions, to absolve validly, and to remit certain penalties to those priests. In his recent letter *Misericordia et misera*, Pope Francis has extended the faculty beyond the Jubilee Year “lest anyone ever be deprived of the sacramental sign of reconciliation through the Church’s pardon”. The entire text of this letter can be found at...” http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20161120_misericordia-et-misera.html

7. *What about Mass and the other sacraments?*

As you can see from #6, the Catholic Church draws a distinction between what is “invalid” that is, having no effect whatever regardless of the intention of people, and what is “illegitimate”, implying the action performed is somehow imperfect. Let’s consider each of the sacraments:

- a. Baptism: any person with the intention to baptize, doing so in the Name of the Holy Trinity and with water, baptizes validly. The SSPX does so;

- b. Confirmation: the only ordinary minister of Confirmation is a bishop. Despite their separation from full communion, bishops in the SSPX are regarded as validly, but not legitimately, exercising that office regarding Confirmation;
- c. Holy Eucharist: again, priests of the SSPX are considered to have been validly ordained; however, the question of legitimacy is particularly pointed when it comes to Roman Catholics receiving Holy Communion at their hands. In the Catholic Church, reception of Holy Communion implies communion in the larger sense mentioned above. To receive Communion in any other church or Ecclesial body implies a unity which doesn't exist. It is not to be done. As to "fulfilling a Sunday obligation", if one is unable to attend Catholic Mass whether for reasons of ill health, travel or some other grave reason, the obligation doesn't hold. In short, one may attend Mass at an SSPX church or chapel; but one is NOT to receive Communion.
- d. Penance: "As of Pope Francis letter Misericordia et misera (Nov. 20, 2016), priests of the SSPX absolve penitents validly and licitly until such time as another provision is made. (See #6)"
- e. Anointing of the Sick: the reforms of the Second Vatican Council were quite extensive in this Sacrament; whatever the status of Extreme Unction, the situation of dying persons allows several exceptions, notably absolution in danger of death (see above). One may want to speak to a Catholic priest, particularly a priest of the **FSSP**, for a proper understanding of the relationship between the forms of the Rite of Anointing;
- f. Holy Orders: the validity and legitimacy of Orders conferred in the SSPX has been implied above. Validity is seldom questioned; the legitimate exercise of the Orders received is problematic, as already seen;
- g. Matrimony: since the 16th century, the Latin (or Roman Catholic) Church has imposed a particular form of marriage on Roman Catholics, namely that the exchange of their consent must take place in the presence of a properly delegated cleric (priest or deacon) and two other witnesses. The key words in this definition are "properly delegated", an authority which comes from a Catholic bishop, a local ordinary (that is, the vicar general or a territorial vicar), or the pastor of the territory in which the wedding will take place. Pastors of the FSSP parishes can delegate any Catholic priest to witness the marriage of one of their parishioners, but an SSPX priest cannot witness the marriages of Roman Catholics without a dispensation from form granted by the Catholic bishop.

8. *I understand the SSPX is opening an international seminary in Buckingham VA, St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary? I've also heard it said the seminary may offer religious education classes; may members of my family and I attend these classes?*

The answers above should assist you in making this determination. If a person or group of persons aren't in full communion with the Catholic Church for disciplinary and doctrinal reasons, is it likely you and your family will be receiving truly Catholic formation? The simple answer is, "No." The proper place for formation is in and through your Catholic parish whether this be done in formation classes at the parish or through home schooling programs overseen by the Catholic diocese in cooperation with the parish *NDC 60*).

A seminary is intended for the philosophical and theological formation of future priests. It is not a parish, nor is it structured for the full and proper catechesis that your pastor and parish can offer.

For your further consideration: Conversation with Archbishop Guido Pozzo, the Secretary for the Pontifical Commission "Ecclesia Dei"

- a. The fact that the Society of Saint Pius X does not possess a canonical status in the Church is not, in the end, based on disciplinary but on doctrinal reasons. As long as the Society (of St Pius X) does not have a canonical status in the Church, its ministers do not exercise legitimate ministries in the Church" ([Pope Benedict XVI, Letter of 10 March 2009 to the Bishops of the Catholic Church concerning the remission of the excommunication of the four bishops consecrated by Archbishop Lefebvre](#)).
- b. the lack of canonical recognition, which is not the thing they're considering right now, I can say that canonical recognition by the Holy See is an essential condition for a Catholic organization to be in full ecclesiastical communion, conforming to the law. There is no canonical recognition, we are working on it, but canonical recognition is not something notarial, it is essential!
- c. They are always the same questions of doctrinal and disciplinary order: they are questions concerning the Magisterium, tradition, the issues of Vatican II.

There has been a recent suggestion that the SSPX might someday enjoy the status of a **personal prelate**. A personal prelate is made up of a particular group of faithful and is structured in a hierarchical manner, with a prelate who is its head and source of unity and with priests and deacons who assist him; hence, it is a part of the Catholic Church. The specific function of personal prelates is

to foster Christian life and the Church's evangelizing mission in a way that complements the dioceses, to which the faithful who form part of a personal prelature continue to belong.

The role a personal prelature plays in complementing the dioceses can respond to various needs, always related to the spiritual good of the faithful. It might happen, for example, that the desire to encourage a greater participation of immigrants in ecclesial life leads to a prelature being organized with a clergy trained to attend to their specific needs. Or as is the case with the prelature of Opus Dei, an ecclesial reality that stems from a charism (that is, from a gift of God to the Church) might have the characteristics suited to a personal prelature. Until such time as all the matters raised by Archbishop Pozzo about the SSPX have been answered, that Society will not be declared a personal prelature.

*UPDATED December 7, 2016