

Cardinal Robert Sarah is from the African country of Guinea. He is now past the age of 80 and is retired but he previously served as the prefect (head) of the Holy See's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. He is a loyal son of the Church, very insightful, clear thinking, and quite articulate. He has written several books. From his writings, his talks, and his interviews it is easy to see that he is truly a man of God, concerned only with the work of the Lord, the salvation of souls.

Cardinal Sarah recently gave an interview to a French periodical, addressing several questions related to the Church. As usual, his words and insights are profound, clear, and worthwhile reading. The following are some excerpts from that interview. The journalist's questions are in bold, Cardinal Sarah's reply is in normal font.

As a cardinal, is it permissible to have a critical analysis of a past pontificate? And how do you really judge the record of Pope Francis?

It is not only permissible, but sometimes necessary, to exercise discernment regarding a period in the life of the Church. This discernment, however, must be carried out with fear of God, with love for the Church, and without ever falling into irreverence. A cardinal is not a courtier. Before God, he is a servant of truth and a collaborator of the Apostolic See. To love the Pope does not mean suspending all critical thinking; it means speaking with loyalty, sobriety, and charity.

I will therefore refrain from worldly assessments, as if it were a matter of evaluating a political mandate. A pontificate always leaves a mixed legacy: pastoral insights, spiritual emphases, but also sometimes areas of unease or confusion. It would be unjust to attribute to a single man a crisis that predates him by a considerable margin. I have had the opportunity to speak privately with Pope Francis to humbly share my concerns that practical ambiguity might obscure doctrinal clarity.

My true judgment, therefore, is this: we must pray for the popes, reject emotional oversimplifications, but also recognize that an era can leave wounds of confusion. The duty of pastors is not to fuel polemics; it is to help restore to the Church a clearer, more peaceful, and more theological message.

From Fr Kuhn: The reason for including this question from the journalist is not so much because of an interest in the question but rather because of Cardinal Sarah's clear, on target, and respectful response.

You mention a return of paganism within the Church itself: what exactly are you thinking of?

I think first of all of an internal phenomenon: living amidst holy things without having any sense of God. Paganism is not merely the worship of visible idols; it is also the loss of the meaning of worship itself. When faith is reduced to sociological language, liturgy to mere entertainment, morality to perpetual negotiation, and the Church to an institution that must adapt to the desires of the times, then something of paganism returns, not in ancient forms, but in the modern form of man placing himself at the center.

This paganism is recognizable by several signs: the effacement of the sense of sin, discomfort with the affirmation of revealed truth, the trivialization of the liturgy, a fascination with worldly categories, and the forgetting of the supernatural purpose of the Church. When God is no longer primary, even in the Church, everything else is corrupted.

This paganism is a fluid ideology that seeps into everything. Every time we renounce God's light when making a decision, every time the criteria of worldly popularity take precedence over the beatitudes, our hearts are overcome by this insidious paganism of living as if God did not exist.

Your analysis of the situation of the Church is often severe: what characterizes its permeability to the spirit of the times?

It is characterized primarily by the fear of displeasing the world. Consequently, ambiguity is preferred to clarity, accompaniment without conversion to healing mercy, communication to contemplation, and horizontality to adoration. People end up believing that the Church will be better listened to if it speaks like everyone else. But the world does not expect the Church to repeat its words; it expects it to open Heaven to it.

Permeability to the spirit of the world is the great heresy of our time. There have been periods when the Church was too closely tied to secular powers. It was then sometimes prevented from preaching the Gospel freely. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church freed itself from these constraints. I am thinking of the great Gregorian Reform around the year 1000. A millennium later, the world is once again trying to bind the Church. He no longer acts through military and political means; he wants to confine the Church within a culture whose dogmas he himself defines. The Church must now free itself once again from this worldly culture. It must break free from media dogmas to preach the word of God, as transmitted by Christ, in complete freedom. This reform is not institutional; it is internal.

Do you see a revival?

Yes, this renewal exists wherever the meaning of silent prayer, confession, adoration of the Eucharist, and doctrine transmitted with love and precision is rediscovered. I see it in young people who are not seeking a watered-down religion, but a complete faith; in priests who want to become men of God again; in families who are willing to live against the grain; in religious communities where the liturgy is truly oriented toward the Lord. I believe that the internal reform of the Church has begun. It was not decreed from above. It is being stirred up by the Holy Spirit in souls.

How do you see the future of the liturgical question? And what consequences would episcopal ordinations without papal mandate, announced for July 1st, have on the part of the Society of Saint Pius X?

Fr Kuhn: the Society of St Pius X (SSPX) broke away from the Church after the Second Vatican Council. The reason for including this part of the interview is not because of SSPX (in fact I left that out) but rather because of the clarity with which he speaks about liturgy in introducing his response. This is applicable to all.

The future of the liturgical question cannot be a war of sensibilities. The liturgy belongs to the Church, not to political parties. We must move beyond a logic of mutual suspicion. The real question is not: which side will win? The real question is: how can we restore to the entire Catholic liturgy its sacred dignity, its continuity, its orientation toward God, and its capacity to lead souls into the mystery of Christ?

It is therefore not simply a matter of making room for people attached to a particular liturgical form, even if that is absolutely necessary. It is a matter, for the whole Church, for every parish, of rediscovering the very essence of liturgical worship. The task is immense because we have largely forgotten that the liturgy is first and foremost the worship of divine majesty, as Vatican II expressed it.

In your opinion, are there any doctrinal points of Vatican II and the Magisterium that followed it that deserve clarification, or even correction?

I would speak first of clarifications rather than corrections. A council must be read within the continuity of the faith as it has always been. Where certain texts have given rise to divergent, even opposing, interpretations, it is legitimate to call for a deeper examination in order to avoid readings that represent a break with the faith. The Church has nothing to fear from clarity. This interpretation falls to the Magisterium. It was largely initiated by John Paul II and Benedict XVI...The Church's teaching does not contradict itself. It is always the same since it is nothing other than the revelation transmitted by Christ, constantly deepened and ever better understood.

Is relativism inherent to the functioning of a democracy? What weapons does the disciple of Christ have against this relativism?

Democracy is not inherently relativistic. It can be a legitimate political framework. But it becomes relativistic when it claims that the majority is sufficient to define good and evil. No procedure can create truth. If democracy cuts itself off from natural moral law, it empties itself of its soul and ends up becoming the fluctuating management of dominant desires. A democracy that does not recognize an objective and transcendent limit to its power becomes a dictatorship of relativism. The weapons of the disciple of Christ are simple and formidable: prayer, doctrinal formation, sacramental life, *lectio divina*, the courage of truth, and above all, charity. Relativism advances when Catholics themselves doubt that there is a truth to be loved. It recedes when they show, by their lives, that truth is not violence, but light.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn