

# **“Perpetual Successors” to St. Peter**

**(2002, 2003)**

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## **Response to an objection against sedevacantism.**

**Note:** *Father Stépanich is a Franciscan priest who was ordained in 1941 and who holds a Doctorate in Sacred Theology from the Catholic University. He has never offered the New Mass and over the years has carried on an extensive apostolate of correspondence with Catholics who resist the Vatican II errors.*

*The following letters are his response to an objection one frequently hears made against sedevacantism.*

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November 30, 2002

Dear Correspondent:

You quote the passage from Vatican Council I, Session IV, which states clearly that St. Peter, the first pope, has “perpetual successors in the primacy over the universal Church...”

You, understandably, wonder how it could be that there are still “perpetual successors” of St. Peter if the men who have claimed to be popes in our times have been in reality public heretics, who therefore could not, as heretics, be the true successors of St. Peter.

The important thing here is to understand just what kind of “perpetual succession” in the papacy Our Lord established.

Did Our Lord intend that there should be a pope on the Chair of Peter every single moment of the Church’s existence and every single moment of the papacy’s existence?

You will immediately realize that, no, Our Lord very obviously did not establish that kind of “perpetual succession” of popes. You know that, all through the centuries of the Church’s existence, popes have been dying and that there then followed an interval, after the death of each pope, when there was no “perpetual successor,” no pope, occupying the Chair of Peter. That Chair became vacant for a while whenever a pope died. This has happened more than 260 times since the death of the first pope.

But you also know that the death of a pope did not mean the end of the “perpetual succession” of popes after Peter.

You understand now that “no pope” does not mean “no papacy.” A vacant Chair of Peter after the death of a pope does not mean a permanent vacancy of that Chair. A temporary vacancy of the Chair of Peter does not mean the end of the “perpetual successors in the primacy over the universal Church.”

Even though Our Lord, had He so willed it, could have seen to it that, the moment one pope died, another man would automatically succeed him as pope, He nevertheless did not do it that way.

Our Lord did it the way we have always known it to be, that is, He allowed for an interval, or interruption, of undesignated duration, to follow upon the death of each pope.

That interruption of succession of popes has, most of the time, lasted several weeks, or a month or so, but there have been times when the interruption lasted longer than that, considerably longer.

Our Lord did not specify just how long that interruption was allowed to last before a new pope was to be elected. And He did not declare that, if the delay in electing a new pope lasted too long, the “perpetual succession” was then terminated, so that it would then have to be said that “the papacy is no more.”

Nor did the Church ever specify the length or duration of the vacancy of the Chair of Peter to be allowed after the death of a pope.

So it is clear that the present vacancy of the Chair of Peter, brought on by public heresy, despite the fact that it has lasted some 40 years or so, does not mean that the “perpetual succession” of popes after St. Peter has come to an end.

What we must realize here is that the papacy, and with it the “perpetual succession” of popes is a Divine institution, not a human institution. Therefore, man cannot put an end to the papacy, no matter how long God may allow heresy to prevail at the papal headquarters in Rome.

Only God could, if He so willed, terminate the papacy. But He willed not do so, because He has made His will known to His Church that there will be “perpetual successors” in the papal primacy that was first entrusted to St. Peter.

We naturally feel distressed that the vacancy of the Chair of Peter has lasted so long, and we are unable to see the end of that vacancy in sight. But we do realize that the restoration of the Catholic Faith, and with it the return of a true Catholic Pope to the Papal Chair, will come when God wills it and in the way He wills it.

If it seems to us, as of now, that there are no qualified, genuinely Catholic electors, who could elect a new and truly Catholic Pope, God can, for example, bring about the conversion of enough Cardinals to the traditional Catholic Faith, who would then proceed to elect a new Catholic Pope.

God can intervene in whatever way it may please Him, in order to restore everything as He originally willed it to be in His Holy Church.

Nothing is impossible with God.

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March 25, 2003

Dear Faithful Catholic:

Your letter of February 21, 2003, tells me about “doubting Thomases” who say that they “just can’t believe” that the Chair of Peter could have been vacant for as much as 40 years, or even for only 25 years, without the “perpetual succession” of popes being thereby permanently broken.

Those “doubting Thomases” presumably grant that the “perpetual succession” of popes remains unbroken during the relatively short intervals that follow upon the deaths of popes, and you indicate that, at least for a while, they have even understood – to their credit – that a public and unrepentant heretic cannot possibly be a true Catholic Pope and that the Chair of St.

Peter must necessarily become vacant if it is taken over by such a public heretic.

But, as you sadly say, those “doubting Thomases” changed their views after they read the Declaration of Ecumenical Council Vatican I (1870) which you quoted from Denzinger in your letter of November 8, 2002. Vatican I declared that “the Blessed Peter has perpetual successors in the primacy over the Universal Church...”

Notice carefully that Vatican I says nothing more than that St. Peter shall have “perpetual successors” in the primacy, which obviously means that the “perpetual succession” of popes will last until the end of time.

Vatican I says nothing about how long Peter’s Chair may be vacant before the “perpetual succession” of popes would supposedly come to a final end. Yet the “doubting Thomases” imagine they see in the Vatican I declaration something which just isn’t there. They presume to think that “perpetual successors in the primacy” means that there can never be an extra long vacancy of Peter’s Chair, but only those short vacancies that we have always known to occur after the deaths of popes. But that isn’t the teaching of Vatican I. It is the mistaken “teaching” of “doubting Thomases.”

Curiously enough, the “doubting Thomases” never suggest just how long a vacancy of Peter’s Chair would be needed to put a supposedly final end to the “perpetual succession” of popes. Their imagination has gotten them into an impossible situation. They “just can’t believe” that the vacancy of Peter’s Chair could last for 25 or 40 years or more, while, at the same time, they “just can’t believe” that a public heretic could possibly be a true Catholic Pope. At one and the same time, they do have a Pope, yet they do not have a Pope. They have a heretic “Pope,” but they do not have a true Catholic Pope.

Not being able to convince the “doubting Thomases” that they are all wrong and badly confused, you have hoped that some unknown “Church teaching” could be found in some book that would make the “doubting Thomases” see the light.

But you don’t need any additional “Church teaching” besides what you have already quoted from Vatican I. You can plainly see that Vatican I did not say anything about how long a vacancy of Peter’s Chair may be. You also know that Our Lord never said that the vacancy of the Papal Chair may last only so long and no longer.

Most important of all, never forget that men cannot put an end to the “perpetual succession” of popes, no matter how long public heretics may occupy Peter’s Chair. The Catholic Papacy comes from God, not from man. To put an end to the “perpetual succession” of popes, you would first have to put an end to God Himself.

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(*Sacerdotium* 14, Spring 1995).

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