

Is the SSPX a Cult?

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I. Introduction

Is the SSPX a cult?

We are simply Roman Catholics who are continuing to follow the unchanging Faith of 2000 years as expressed in Tradition. But more particularly, the Society of St. Pius X is merely a pious union of priests and religious that has the object to form priests. If the faithful who attend the Mass centers operated by the Society (because unfortunately the faithful cannot usually go to their own local parish due to the infection of Modernism and the dangers of the New Mass) adhere to the SSPX, it is because they recognize that the priests offer them the Church's true doctrine and sacraments without any compromise with Modernism.

The question of whether or not the SSPX is a cult has been asked enough times that the SSPX itself felt the need to answer it with the statement above, taken from the [“Responding to](#)

[False Accusations](#)” page of their website. This is intriguing, considering no diocesan website or other Catholic traditionalist group such as the FSSP has felt the need to publicly pose the same question about themselves. Why is it that this question is asked often enough that the SSPX recognized the need to issue a public-facing response? And why do so many former adherents of this group describe it as a cult? After spending years in SSPX circles, I understand why. And my objective is to answer that question here.

For some background, I attended St Mary’s Academy, lived in St Mary’s for a time, and worked in St Mary’s during college, so I had exposure to its mentality out of an academic context. My wife also did all of these things. We were married in St Mary’s as well (in hindsight, this is one of my greatest regrets, but what’s done is done). At the time, my issues with them more or less extended to dissatisfaction with some of the things I’d heard them say from the pulpit, and some strange incidents I’d read about in decades prior, but like so many people I knew, I was convinced of their legitimacy because their sacraments were valid (this was after Pope Francis gave them faculties to hear confessions, and after Archbishop Joseph Naumann made provisions for their marriages to be valid). I saw their behavior as perhaps a kind of religious eccentricity, or an attitude fostered by living in a small town that could happen to anyone who was disconnected from the “outside world.” I wouldn’t have recommended integrating into their community, but I saw no legitimate reason to warn Catholics not to receive their sacraments.

However, as my wife and I distanced ourselves from them over the years, gaining more of an outsider’s perspective and examining the patterns of behavior reported by siblings and other relatives who still were involved with the Academy, we grew more alarmed. More recently (within the last year or so), hearing personal testimonies from former adherents around the country finally convinced me that St Mary’s is not the odd one out among SSPX communities. These cult-like patterns of behavior were manifesting across multiple locations. Finally, after doing some serious research about cults and their characteristics, I came to the undeniable conclusion that the SSPX, as an organization, almost universally meets the criteria for a cult group.

This is a message that must be shared, especially in the light of the uptick in interest in “Tridentine Catholicism” over the last few years. Many Catholic faithful are seeking out masses celebrated according to the 1962 missal, and couldn’t care less which group or which priest is saying it, as long as they can participate in a reverent liturgy. But they must be made aware that the SSPX has serious problems that go far beyond canonical discrepancies, and that they should be avoided at all costs. See what Archbishop Lefebvre himself had to say regarding sedevacantist communities, from “[Fideliter](#)” no. 79 (Jan-Feb 1991); it applies just as well to SSPX communities.

*There also people say: 'The Mass is fine, so we go to it.' Yes, there is the Mass. That's fine, but there is also the sermon, there is the atmosphere, the conversations, contacts before and after, which make you little by little change your ideas. **It is therefore a danger** and that's why in general, I think it constitutes part of a whole. One does not merely go to Mass, one frequents a milieu. There are obviously some people who are attracted by the beautiful ceremonies, who also go to Fontgombault, where they have taken up the old mass again. **They are in a climate of ambiguity which to my mind is dangerous.**'*

The archbishop himself concedes that a desire for reverent liturgy is not enough to remain in a problematic environment. The people, the ideas that the community is steeped in, the attitudes of the followers towards fellow believers; all will “little by little change your ideas.” This is undeniably accurate regarding SSPX communities as well. I have heard of many instances where someone bemoaned their family member attending an SSPX community after seeing how it negatively affected their opinion of the church, the hierarchy, the mass, and so much more. The SSPX’s public image of large families, beautiful liturgies, and traditional aesthetics is a veneer over the turmoil that simmers under the surface. They are mired in discontent, rebellion, and an air of superiority, and have been the cause of disruption and spiritual disillusionment in my own family and in many others.

This is not the place to examine their theological or canonical irregularities, for two reasons. 1) I am not a canon lawyer nor a theologian, and so have no authoritative weight behind any claims I might make in this regard, and 2) I have found that even with the most irrefutable of evidence from the most authoritative of sources, i.e., public declarations from the Pope himself (Pope Benedict XVI’s [statement](#) that “its ministers do not exercise legitimate ministries in the church”), or a canon that contains no room for exception (for example, [Canon 265](#): “...unattached or transient clerics are not allowed at all”, or [Canon 1215 §1](#): “No church is to be built without the express written consent of the diocesan bishop”), the SSPX will casually ignore it if it is inconvenient to their cause (more on this in points #3 and #5). For this reason, the ever-raging debate of schism, jurisdiction, and other related issues will not be addressed here, although I have linked a number of articles that discuss these issues if readers are interested in further research.

II. Resources and Criteria

This research was conducted using criteria outlined by the **International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)** and the **Cult Education Institute (CEI)**.

International Cultic Studies Association

From their website:

Founded in 1979, the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) is a global network of people concerned about psychological manipulation and abuse in cultic and other high-control environments. ICSA is tax-exempt, supports civil liberties, and is not affiliated with any religious or commercial organizations. ICSA is unique in how it brings together former group members, families, helping professionals and researchers.

NB: Canon lawyer Peter Vere, who has [written extensively about the SSPX](#) and his [reasons for leaving them](#), has collaborated with the ICSA before, writing an article called *Sifting the Wheat From the Tares* in the ICSA e-Newsletter (Vol. 4, No. 2, 2005), explaining Fr. Francis G. Morrissey's 15 warning signs regarding newly established associations in the Catholic Church (some of which apply to the SSPX, such as no sense of belonging to the local church, lack of cooperation with diocesan authorities, special status of the founder, etc). He has also co-authored a book with Patrick Madrid, [More Catholic Than the Pope](#), which details the problematic history and current issues of the SSPX.

Cult Education Institute

From their website:

The Cult Education Institute (CEI) is a nonprofit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization devoted to public education and research. CEI's mission is to study destructive cults, controversial groups and movements and to provide a broad range of information and services easily accessible to the public for assistance and educational purposes online through the Web.

CEI maintains a large public database on the Web to assist researchers, the media, professionals and those concerned with accurate information about various cults, groups and movements and related issues of interest.

NB: While the ISCA does not maintain a list of reported groups on their website, the CEI does, and the SSPX is on that list, with over 40 articles and sources referenced. In one of them, an unnamed American cult expert says the SSPX “is a group I’ve had very, very serious complaints about,” and Rick Alan Ross (the CEI’s founder and Executive Director) says it is “an extremely controlling and legalistic group and very extreme.”

In preparation for this paper, I compiled the criteria from the ICSA’s [Characteristics Associated with Cultic Groups](#) and the CEI’s [Ten warning signs of a potentially unsafe group/leader](#) into a survey and sent it to former adherents of the SSPX, asking them if it accurately described the group, its environment, and their experience in it. Naturally, many of the points on the two lists overlapped, so I combined the most similar ones into one question and left the unique ones separate. I sent this survey individually to a number of people I knew personally, and also shared it in two separate Facebook groups of those who have left the SSPX, one having about 60 members and the other about 80 (as of the time of this writing). I relied on my own experiences, my wife’s, and the claims of several other relatives. I will also cite from two extensive articles published in *Fidelity* magazine in the 1990s, entitled [The Society of St Pius X Gets Sick](#) (abbreviated as *The SSPX Gets Sick*) and [In the Line of Fire: Fr John Rizzo, Ex-SSPX](#) (abbreviated as *Line of Fire*), both of which I recommend reading in their entirety. I also cite from the ICSA’s book [Wounded Faith: Understanding and Healing from Spiritual Abuse](#) (citations here correspond to the Kindle edition), and from cult counselor Steven Hassan’s book [Combating Cult Mind Control](#).

This paper is primarily intended for those who are either considering joining or considering leaving the SSPX, and who may need some feedback to assist in their decision. If, for example, parents are willing to overlook their irregular canonical state for the sake of sending their children to what they believe is a good school, my hope is that pulling back the curtain on their behavior and beliefs might give them pause. Reconciling “church politics” or “canonical ambiguities” with seemingly competing quotes or statements is much easier to do than refuting behavior that is attested to by many who have left the SSPX. As Steven Hassan says in his book *Combating Cult Mind Control*, p 139, “The best way to learn about a specific group is to locate a former member, or a former member’s written or video account. Ex-members are a great source of information.” If people choose not to heed Pope St. John Paul II’s [exhortation](#) “of ceasing their support in any way for that movement” due to its “erroneous interpretations and arbitrary and unauthorized applications in matters of doctrine, liturgy and discipline,” then perhaps they can be persuaded by firsthand accounts of the psychological and spiritual damage it imparts. I hope the feedback provided by former adherents is informative, and I hope this report contributes toward the growing awareness of their behavior that unfortunately most do not see until they have been entrenched in the community for years, at which point it is extremely difficult to disconnect.

III. Cult Characteristics

1. **Unquestioning commitment to leader/group**

ICSA: “The group displays excessively zealous and unquestioning commitment to its leader and (whether he is alive or dead) regards his belief system, ideology, and practices as the Truth, as law.”

CEI: “The group/leader is the exclusive means of knowing "truth" or receiving validation, no other process of discovery is really acceptable or credible.”

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Statements from former SSPX adherents:

Being raised in the SSPX, my parents never considered anything to be true or good if it didn't come from Lefebvre or his priests. And no one even thought of questioning Lefebvre's position on things or asking the question... what if he is wrong? It was just assumed that everything he had said and believed was golden.

Archbishop Lefebvre (deceased) is the word of law in the SSPX organization. His writings, his mission, his ideas, etc. are what their organization is based on and are continually upheld. He is regarded as an authority and is a prominent figure to the point of having his photo in places of reverence in the home and school, and a statue of him placed on the Church. Followers adhere to him and his actions in unquestioning and blind obedience.

Definitely! You never criticize in any way, shape, or form the founder (Marcel Lefebvre), and never speak poorly of any priests of the SSPX unless you want to find yourself shunned by the other members!

Any questions concerning VII and the New Mass are always directed towards the SSPX websites or books written by Abp. Lefebvre.

I definitely have seen this behavior in my own family regarding the founder of SSPX. They don't look to the magisterium, but to the Archbishop, for the answers to questions that come up.

We were taught he was chosen by God- a modern Noah if you will, protecting the very few chosen in the ark of the SSPX.

If you're not all in on Marcel Lefebvre, you're not a good Catholic. "We stand by Archbishop Lefebvre" is their rule of faith.

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There is a certain irony that, in the statement answering whether or not they are a cult, the SSPX claims to provide “the Church’s **true doctrine and sacraments** without any compromise.” They readily admit that they believe they are the source of truth in the church, and that doctrine and sacraments outside of their boundaries are “compromised.” This alone should be enough to support this first point. I have heard from its followers that it would be incorrect to say that the SSPX itself is the sole means of salvation, but when their official stance is that the missal of Paul VI contains positive error, and is a “danger” and “evil”, and other traditionalist groups approved by the church are similarly compromised due to their acceptance of this “evil”, they are implying that only with them is the authentic faith to be found, and only through their masses and their sacraments can the faithful have the best means to attain their salvation. (Further comments below from former adherents attest to this.)

Steven Hassan says in *Combating Cult Mind Control*, p 140: “The [cult’s] doctrine allows no outside group to be recognized as valid (or good, or godly, or real), because that would threaten the cult's monopoly on truth.” To the SSPX, no “outside group” is worth investing your material or spiritual efforts in. To them, the Church at large and all other traditionalist groups are “compromised” and only through them and their “true” understanding of tradition can your spiritual needs be fulfilled. For example, even though the FSSP provides sacraments according to the older form, they still “accept Vatican II” and are imbued with its “modernism and error,” and therefore should be avoided.

This sentiment is best summarized by their founder himself, [who said](#) “...we truly represent the Catholic Church such as it was before, because we are continuing what it always did. **It is we who have the notes of the visible Church**: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. That is what makes the visible Church. **[S]alvation is in Tradition and not in the Conciliar Church** which is more and more schismatic.”

The SSPX’s official stance is that Marcel Lefebvre saved the mass and the church through his actions, reprehensible as they were. His word and ideology is given the highest honor in the SSPX, above that of other prelates (including the popes of the last several decades, several of whom are canonized saints). SSPX adherents revere him as a saint and claim he’s worthy of canonization, despite the fact he died excommunicated from the Catholic Church (though they will deny this), and they believe that only through him was authentic ‘tradition’ retained and the Latin mass preserved. “St Marcel Lefebvre, pray for us!” is a common refrain in SSPX circles.

As Gary Campbell, a former priest of the SSPX, [said in 1999](#) when explaining to his superiors why he was leaving: “Another unusual quality of the Society is its adherence, in matters of faith & morals, to the opinions of its Founder. For example, in "Legitimacy and Scope of our Marriage Tribunals" (1998, Rev Violette’s translation) it is stated "**The authority of our founder suffices for us to accept these instances** (that is, the proposal to create a canonical commission) in the same way as we have accepted the episcopal consecrations of 19[8]8.”...[W]e find in our ranks that such and such an opinion is held, because Archbishop Lefebvre held it. [...] I was once told by a priest, quite high up in the Society ranks, that if Archbishop Lefebvre had said that John Paul II were not the Pope, he would believe him. On his authority!”

2. No questions allowed

ICSA: “Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged or even punished.”

CEI: “No tolerance for questions or critical inquiry.”

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Statements from former SSPX adherents:

Questioning, doubt, and dissent were considered equivalent to heresy or blasphemy since they necessarily indicated a lack of “faith.” The quickest way to get labeled rebellious in the SSPX was to voice concerns about any of their teachings, whether personal or doctrinal. And God forbid you were very young when you started to use discernment or reasoning, because then you were also a major embarrassment to your parents.

If you have doubts or are even curious about why things are the way things are, and then ask questions the response is anger and shame for even being curious let alone asking questions. To ask questions, to question authority is in itself a sign of disrespect and disobedience, and considered evidence of a rebellious heart.

I was told that my questions would sort themselves out with continued attendance and was encouraged to stay after mass for "catechism" class which was really sad little lectures that provided no actual formation.

Obedience was always held up as one of the highest virtues for the parish and students in the academy. At one parent's conference the girls' principal talked about upholding a minor uniform rule being debated because obedience was such an important virtue for the girls to learn. When I was in high school, I was scolded and told not to be skeptical by a nun. My crime was questioning the theory she was teaching us about a secret mathematical code in the bible that could predict the future.

I was told by an aunt that I had referred a book to that the priest told her not to read it. It was in support of the Church and answered questions regarding Vatican 2.

As a teacher in an SSPX school, when I would report to the priest in charge about abusive mean spirited behavior towards students fueled sometimes by egotistical teachers on a power trip, I would not be heard. I witnessed a type of mental abuse towards families and students that of course were not part of the inner circles. I was asked to be docile or some other such words . Basically to be quiet. Nothing to see here.

In a one-on-one meeting with Father, I brought up how I played volleyball with some FSSP kids and I was wondering why they were so villainized since the mass was the same and the only difference I could see as a 16 yr old was that they were attached to the diocese. He proceeded to berate and yell at me that I was damaging my soul by associating with "those who turned their back on and betrayed the archbishop" and was told to never question it again.

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Fr Dwight Longenecker in his article [Cults, Cliques, and Common Sense](#), states that in a cult, “complete loyalty is demanded of the followers. Dissent and criticism is not permitted. Those who dissent will be marginalized, excluded from decision making and demonized. If the leaders cannot get rid of the dissenters they will be isolated and given a name. They will be ‘the troublemakers’ or ‘the grumblers’. The dissenters from within will be considered the most dangerous ones and you will find that there are divisions—those who are loyal followers and those who are suspected of being ‘disloyal’ or ‘rebellious’.” (This labeling of “dissenters” has been attested to by former SSPX members, with that exact term used.)

From *Wounded Faith*, p 195: “Cultic and abusive churches want to suppress questions and critical thinking, which they do by falsely equating doubts and questions with rebellion.” See the quotes above to support this point. “*To ask questions, to question authority is in itself a sign of disrespect and disobedience, and considered evidence of a rebellious heart.*”

In the Atlantic’s article [The Christian Withdrawal Experiment](#), written about the daily life of the SSPX in St Marys, author Emma Green says the following: “While parents may choose

SSPX for their children, those children don't always want to live according to its moral strictures. **And the Society spares little room for dissent.**" A former adherent, Tiffany Joy-Egly, described how her sister "got engaged to a Catholic man who attended Mass at Immaculate Conception, the townie church. [T]he SSPX priest announced from the pulpit that anyone who attended the wedding would be committing a sin." (This same story is attested to by another former member in *The SSPX Gets Sick*: "Sandy Cossette's daughter planned to marry a young man from town who was not a Society member. She was denounced publicly from the pulpit. Her family was shunned. Now that family, still living in the town, is condemned to hell, according to the priests at St. Mary's.") Tiffany stated later in the interview for the article, "You give up everything to come into this community [...] **and do what you're told.**"

As the comments above state, any questioning or "dissent" is immediately shut down. The SSPX has the answers, and you are not allowed to question them. As Steven Hassan says in *Combating Cult Mind Control*, p 142, "Absolute obedience to superiors is one of the most universal themes in cults. Individuality is bad. Conformity is good." (The irony that the SSPX only exists because of an act of grave disobedience by their founder and perpetual disobedience by their priests to lawful church authorities, yet they still demand unquestioning obedience of their followers, is apparently lost on them.) I spent several hours after school one day trying to make sense of their defenses and logic with a priest, and he yielded no ground. The SSPX was right, and the Church was wrong. Which leads to my next point.

3. The group is always right

ICSA: "Mind-altering practices are used in excess and serve to suppress doubts about the group and its leader(s)."

CEI: "The group/leader is always right."

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Statements from former SSPX adherents:

Always an excuse for any questioning behavior from leadership. They are an untouchable deity. What they say Is.

Yes, of course I didn't see that as much when I was in the cult but as I was working my way out of it my mind was continually blown at how much mind control and gaslighting has gone on all these years. My parents are to this day brainwashed by them.

The control of information helped with this, i.e. discouraging people from using the internet, making outside information sinful, etc.

*There is continued fear mongering of hell, shaming, and demand for perfection from the earliest ages. It can certainly be mind-altering to young childrens' minds as they grow and form in that environment, and even adults who spend enough time there. **Even spying and interrogation tactics have been employed to use followers to reveal the "wrongdoings" of other followers all while being told they are doing something good.** The constant tearing down and negativity fosters judgment and discord among followers. They dismiss doubt with comparison of their mission to that of heroic military or sports figures.*

The attitude/belief that the leader(s) can never be wrong or their judgment questioned definitely exists. This is something that is not explicitly taught, but is in reality practiced.

The priests were our superiors in every way and to criticize them was tantamount to damning yourself.

Yes, witnessed this in the form of clericalism when it came to the priests. I also witnessed this when trying to speak out about problems, doubts I saw with a family or two (leaders in the parish) but fell on deaf ears.

*Outside the SSPX there is no salvation...that was a very real tactic that worked to keep young minds from questioning (and not so young ones) overly much. **Telling a child that their doubts are equivalent to nailing Jesus to the cross with their own hands is devastating.***

There is so much emotional manipulation happening coming from the pulpit and the church leaders, as well as fear mongering and "othering." The priests are "Christ on earth" and questioning them is questioning God himself. Any "proof" against a clergy member is dismissed as lies or the devil.

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From *Wounded Faith*, p 30: "Abusive churches and cults do not teach their members to tolerate diversity of opinion. Instead, they insist that there is one way, their way, and that all other views are simply wrong."

This is a perfect description of the SSPX. If there is seemingly a discrepancy between their ideologies and what the Church dictates, they simply insist that they are right and the Church is wrong, based on an appeal to “tradition.” (Again, notice in their cult response in the introduction, they claim to follow the faith “as expressed in Tradition.”) Everything is viewed and judged through a lens of whether it is “traditional” or not. (One has to wonder how they reconcile the dogma of indefectibility when their position is that the Church, as a whole, teaches and promotes positive error, and that only they have the “true doctrine” and “true tradition.” Have the gates of hell prevailed?)

They even go so far as to deem the Church wrong on her interpretation of what “tradition” means! They defer to their own judgment on the criteria by which they believe things should be judged! Even when this erroneous view is addressed specifically by the Pope himself, as Pope St. John Paul II said in *Ecclesia Dei*, “It is impossible to remain faithful to the Tradition while breaking the ecclesial bond with him to whom, in the person of the Apostle Peter, Christ himself entrusted the ministry of unity in his Church.” Naturally, they have issued a refutation to this statement on multiple occasions, once again claiming that their interpretation of tradition is correct and the Pope’s is not. This broad umbrella of “tradition” and its application trickles down into their everyday interactions and functions. Since they are the ones determining the definition, they also determine when and how it applies.

Stephen Hassan, the cult psychologist mentioned in the introduction who runs the [Freedom of Mind Resource Center](#), developed a diagnostic tool called the [BITE Model](#) (Behavior, Information, Thought, and Emotional) for analyzing cult behavior. Under the ‘Thought’ category, one of the methods used by cults to exercise control over its followers is “Use of loaded language and clichés which constrict knowledge, stop critical thoughts and reduce complexities into platitudinous buzz words.”

The SSPX has reduced the vastly complex issues in the church to phrases and buzz words that its followers frequently use in their defense to halt any critical discussion or debate. They accept what their priests and peers tell them, and do not remain open to the possibility that perhaps they were wrong. Discussions that try to keep an open mind to the reforms or lend some measure of approval to the missal of Paul VI are shut down by a barrage of these buzz words and phrases. “Vatican II was only a pastoral council!” “The Latin mass can’t be abrogated because of Quo Primum!” “That’s a Protestant mass!” “Read the Ottaviani Intervention!” “Bugnini was a Freemason!” “Our Lady of La Salette said Rome would lose the faith!” The list goes on and on.

These phrases and ideas are taught in their Religion classes as well, most certainly falling under the “mind-altering practices” mentioned in the ICOSA’s quote. At St Mary’s Academy, assignments in high school ranged from writing a 1-page essay answering the question “Is the New Mass Catholic?”, to answering pop quiz questions such as “What are the three errors of

Vatican II?” or “Why are we not permitted to attend the FSSP?” or “Give 5 reasons Latin mass is better than the Novus Ordo.”

These are words, ideas, and theories that are all quite easily refuted if one puts in the time and research, but because they form a cocoon of safety around the SSPX and seemingly justify its existence and ministry, its adherents are not willing to follow the trail that might lead them to question these things (and, unsurprisingly, they tend to display extreme vitriol and anger when the safety of this cocoon is threatened by papal condemnations, historical evidence, and other refutations). Over years and even decades, these same phrases are repeated, suppressing any doubt about the SSPX and its actions. To them, the SSPX has the answers, and it is futile to look to the Church, as it is corrupted by modernism and has abandoned “tradition.”

4. Us-vs-them mentality / Fear or rejection of “the outside world”

ICSA: “The group has a polarized us-versus-them mentality, which may cause conflict with the wider society.”

CEI: “Unreasonable fear about the outside world, such as impending catastrophe, evil conspiracies and persecutions.”

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Statements from former SSPX adherents:

They get sucked into every conspiracy theory. Talk of Hell is predominant in every many households and at every admonishing sermon. Discouraged from ever associating outside the circle.

100% hits the nose on both of those. Anything or anybody outside the SSPX was evil and we were always discouraged from even meeting and being friends with others who were not in the SSPX.

Absolutely. Bishop Williamson and Fr. Gruner were particularly good at impending catastrophe etc, but the whole culture was rife with it. You still find good examples of it in the fundraising appeals, which talk about the increasing darkness of the world as a reason to give them money.

The SSPX community keeps itself very separate from the rest of society in the idea that they see themselves as better, chosen for something greater, and that all others who are not SSPX are lost. They constantly preach of the dangers of the "world" which is defined as anyone and anything that is not them, and the dangers and certain hell that await anyone who is drawn away or gives into the world. They consider themselves martyrs and as persecuted by the rest of the world.

Without a doubt these types of attitudes exist in many, if not most, of SSPX supporters. It seems to be much more pronounced by those members living in close proximity to communities in which the SSPX has a large presence, such as Post Falls, ID and St. Marys, KS.

Our Lady of La Sallette's revelations were used to justify their no-contact with the new mass and to scare me from attending. I was told the priests had faculties to say the mass, that if I was unable to come, I should pray the rosary instead of attend the mass at the Novus Ordo because that would be harmful to my soul. The priest did not like that I continued to go to eucharistic adoration at my local church. I told him that it was Jesus in consecrated form and he told me it wasn't "ideal". Repeatedly after mass conversations were going on about the goings on in Rome, how the FBI was infiltrating trying to shut the mass down.

100%!! They've fostered this idea of separation from the Church by calling it "the Conciliar Church". There aren't just Catholics anymore. They're Novus Ordo Catholics and considered no better than Protestants.

Absolutely! All of this! I always felt like I could not enter a regular Catholic Church, or go to a regular Catholic mass, because it was wrong, and would be sinful. Always with the impending doom and gloom.

It is very much an us vs them mentality. From small children we are taught that the SSPX is the last standing bastion of the church, the protectors of the faith and we have to stand strong against the rest of the church who are actively trying to destroy the church from within. I'll quote an SSPXer when told she couldn't stay in their little bubble their whole lives, she said, "Isn't it better to be in a bubble so we can protect our kids from the evils of the outside world?" Which is just her repeating what we were constantly told from the pulpit, that we are lucky to be in St. Marys where we were protected from the world.

I can't speak on behalf of the entire SSPX, but the circles I grew up in were all about hellfire and the end of the world. Prophecies were always being discussed. On a broader scale, anyone professing to be Catholic outside SSPX was considered a fallen away or pretend Catholic who chose to have their heaven on earth and not hold true to the teachings of the

church. “You can choose to be happy now on Earth temporarily, or forever in Heaven when you die. Which will you choose?” It got to the point it was scary to be happy.

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[A quote from Lefebvre](#) to begin this section: “Obviously, **we are against the Conciliar Church** which is virtually schismatic, even if they deny it. In practice, it is a Church virtually excommunicated because it is a Modernist Church.” From their founder himself, they are against the church. It is not difficult to discern that Pope Benedict XVI was referring to the SSPX when he wrote in *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p 389, that those who believe the council was wrong and should be reversed “represent a sectarian zealotry that is the antithesis of Catholicity.”

Their opposition to the church is frequently defended by invoking conspiracy theories about Communists and Freemasons in the church, opinions that the new form of the mass is evil and harmful, etc. Conspiracy theories abound in the ranks of adherents, as stated in the comments above. Steven Hassan says in *Combating Cult Mind Control*, p 141: “The ‘huge conspiracies’ working to thwart the group are, of course, proof of its tremendous importance.” Lefebvre [invoked the 3rd Secret of Fatima and the La Salette apparition](#) as reasons for his illicit consecrations, regardless of the fact that the La Salette apparition he cited was [condemned by Rome](#) and placed on the Index of Forbidden Books. The 3rd Secret was at the time unknown and unpublished, and his reasoning was based on personal opinion and interpretation (“it *must have* made an allusion to this darkness,” “And *surely it is because of this*, without a doubt, that John XXIII judged it better not to publish the Secret.”) Hardly a justifiable defense for consecrating bishops against the will of the Pope.

In *Line of Fire*, a former SSPX adherent says, “They didn't teach the Fathers, they weren't teaching Chrysostom. . . **The Society got too wrapped up with conspiracies in Rome**...They got too caught up with the policies of the current crisis in the Church and they should have been talking about Augustine and Chrysostom and the basics of the Faith.” I can attest to this after spending time in their school. An entire semester in high school Religion class was devoted to discussing “The Crisis,” but I never received instruction in basic theology or ecclesiology, something that would have been immensely helpful.

The “us-vs-them” conflict, as well as vying against “Novus Ordo Catholics,” is manifestly clear in their feud with the FSSP, who they view as traitors after they departed from the SSPX and reconciled with Rome in 1988. Their website has an article called “SSPX vs FSSP,” and the Facebook page “SSPX Faithful,” which is not an official account of the Society but has 10,000 members, says in its list of rules, “Endorsing or condoning the existence and actions of the Fraternity of St Peter is not welcome in this group,” as well as “Traditional

ecumenism, the practice of accepting any organization/priest solely with the criteria that they celebrate the Latin Mass, is not welcome here.”

5. No accountability

ICSA: “The leader is not accountable to any authorities.”

CEI: “Absolute authoritarianism without meaningful accountability.”

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Statements from former SSPX adherents:

No, there was no ultimate authority that the SSPX had to answer to.

The SSPX answers to no one. Archbishop Lefebvre's superior was the Pope and he directly disobeyed him. The SSPX then set up Lefebvre as their authority and now that he is gone they have no superior. They have internal superiors within their organization for their different schools and districts but those men do not answer to any bishop or cardinal or authority in the Church hierarchy.

Again, this is an attitude/belief that is held among SSPX adherents, though they would deny holding such attitudes.

Authorities in the SSPX 100% disobey and ignore authority in Rome and within their own dioceses.

Leaders are accountable to no one, except themselves.

The leader being the founder of the SSPX had no authority above him. He refused to submit to the Pope on certain teachings of the Church and continued to disobey him till the end of his life. One of his consecrated bishops followed in his footsteps and disobeyed the leadership that was then in place over him and now there is another rogue bishop that has no authority over him.

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The SSPX is not accountable to any authority for their actions. Indeed, how could they be? When their organization only exists because of disobedience to the highest authority in the church, and disregard of the penalties that were imposed as a result of that disobedience, to whom and for what are they accountable? If they can disregard the sentence of excommunication, the highest ecclesiastical penalty, why should they submit to a lesser censure like a suspension? Not once have I heard them admit that a penalty imposed on them or a canon restricting their actions actually held any weight that they must submit to. Lefebvre [has stated](#) how his “apparent disobedience” was in fact the way of “true obedience,” and that “the way of apparent obedience [is], in reality, disobedience.” One of their Crisis videos (Episode 44) opens with Benedict XVI’s quote about the SSPX’s illegitimate ministry (see the Introduction of this paper) and then the priest proceeds to explain how it doesn’t apply because of the “exceptional crisis” (and the caption, once again, states that it is because “the hierarchy of the Church is working against Tradition”).

From *Wounded Faith*, p 14: “When churches are led by men or women who have the drive to establish an independent community and also feel they have a more direct or correct understanding of God or the Bible than mainstream communities, and when, absent the accountability of a mainstream religious community, these church boards are unquestioningly loyal to the pastor, the churches have the potential to become the pastor’s ‘kingdom.’”

All of the above describes the SSPX (albeit in the context of Christian non-denominational language, through which this book is directed). It is led by priests who think they have a more correct understanding of the faith than the hierarchy and the bishops of the world, and, absent the accountability of any diocesan bishop or other lawful superior, they are unquestioningly loyal to their own group and ideology, and their chapels can become their “kingdom,” where they do not have to answer to any authority. As Eric Hoyle says in his excellent research paper [Independent Catholic Traditionalism is Wrong](#), “By their way of acting, independent traditionalists assert a universal defection of the Church, because they regard their ministry as necessary in every single diocese in the world. **Nowhere do they recognize a Catholic bishop now in office whose permission is needed for a public ministry in his diocese.**”

With this in mind, let’s examine [the following quote](#) from Archbishop Lefebvre: “Inasmuch as the present Roman authorities are imbued with ecumenism and modernism, and that their decision and the new law are as a whole influenced by these false principles, **we must institute authorities to supply for these deficiencies**, which faithfully adhere to the Catholic principles of Catholic Tradition and Catholic law.” In other words, since we deem the lawful authorities to be compromised, we must establish our own authorities by which to operate (yet again, authorities that adhere to “Tradition.” The pattern continues to emerge). This is a stunning admission. One might think the SSPX would want to distance themselves from language such as

this, as it quite clearly dictates the position they typically try to navigate around, but it is available directly from their website.

On paper, the SSPX will say that Marcel Lefebvre and their current bishops were/are accountable to the Pope, but in practice, how are they accountable if they exist in a perpetual state of disobedience to the will of the Pope, not to mention the local bishops who are subject to him? A summary of Lefebvre's acts of disobedience can be found [here](#), in the reply to the Introduction, while the (continuous) acts of the SSPX against the hierarchical church can be found [here](#), in the section "The Consequences of these Errors" (with an exception to point #3, as this has been addressed since 1992 when the article was written). This article concludes the previously mentioned section neatly with the following statement: "To sum up, then, here is an organization which pays no regard whatsoever to the commands and laws of legitimate authority in the Church and which refuses to do the express will of the supreme pontiff in matters of great importance for use visible unity of the Church. Put all of these things together and what we have is **an autonomous organization, a *petite eglise*, an independent Church.**"

6. Fear of leaving; disconnecting and shunning those who do leave.

ICSA: "The most loyal members (the "true believers") feel there can be no life outside the context of the group. They believe there is no other way to be and often fear reprisals to themselves or others if they leave (or even consider leaving) the group."

CEI: "There is no legitimate reason to leave, former followers are always wrong in leaving, negative or even evil."

~ ~ ~

Statements from former SSPX adherents:

Absolutely. Complete disownment. You leave and you are shunned. You misbehave and you are dragged before a priest.

They teach the Church and the Pope cannot be trusted so the SSPX is on their own. Anyone who leaves is forgotten and dismissed and the general explanation for their leaving is that they were disobedient or rebellious. Those that leave are pariahs and their family is discouraged from keeping in contact with them.

*The only thing I disagree with in the above statements is the part that says "subtle forms of persuasion". **There is nothing subtle about the treatment of those who leave their group. People who leave the group face the real possibility of losing family, friends, and even sometimes their jobs and spouse over a break with the SSPX.***

Goodness, yes! The family has turned a cold shoulder to those of us who have left. We are no longer "in the fold". You have to wear skirts and dresses if you are a woman, of a certain length etc, otherwise you are not quite good enough. Just one example

*Absolutely! I was terrified to leave. **When my husband and I made the decision to leave the SSPX, I cried the whole day, not because I didn't want to leave, but because I was terrified of the backlash.** We were interrogated by the secretary and given the run around for months when we asked for our marriage certificate and that same treatment has continued every time we need one of our children's baptismal certificates. We were told we were playing with our children's souls and would never know if the sacraments they received were valid.*

The rumors of wrong doing concerning anyone who left were excessive. Only hushed tones were used to discuss the transgressions of those poor souls. "May God have mercy on them."

From a very young age we had families and even relatives we were close with decided to leave the SSPX and bam! That was it. We never saw them again, heard from them, nor were we allowed to even mention their names. Even if they went to another trad Latin Rite group, it was still a death sentence because they left the only true way.

If family members or friends doubt the theology of the SSPX or actually leave it, most adherents are expected and told to cut them off "for the good of their souls". We pray for them to come to the "true Faith" but we do not associate with them.

*Yes and it continues even while a member. **We had several people completely cut us out of their lives for the sole reason of no longer attending SSPX.** It didn't matter that we are still catholic and still attended a Latin mass, it wasn't SSPX, and, therefore, we were losing our faith and going down the path to hell.*

~ ~ ~

From *Wounded Faith*, p 20: "Especially telling is how church leaders try to make an individual who is contemplating leaving feel guilty. Leaders in healthy environments will recognize that some people need to move on in their spiritual journeys, and the leaders will not try to manipulate them to stay. The more toxic the environment, the more manipulative and

controlling church leaders may be, not leaving much room for those who do not wholeheartedly endorse the ideologies of the church.” (Note that this last sentence connects to point #1.)

This point is best left explained by the statements above. Those who have left the SSPX will readily admit that their family and friends cut them off after they left the SSPX (whether or not they joined the “Novus Ordo church”) often going on to berate them and explain how they are risking the salvation of their souls. Family tensions and disconnections abound where the SSPX is present. As Steven Hassan writes in *Combating Cult Mind Control*, p 109, “Family ties can enforce silence on disbelieving second-generation members. It is easier to go along with the cult than express their true opinions.” One surveyee said they had heard someone make “*a comment of ‘my dad would beat me with a belt if I ever opposed SSPX’.*” I myself have heard from the pulpit, “People don’t stop to think what God thinks of them when they leave the SSPX.” To this day, my wife has friends and relatives who she is afraid to tell that she left the SSPX, as she knows it would not be well received and would cloud the relationship. (There is a reason this paper is written anonymously.)

7. Followers controlled by shame/guilt.

ICSA: “The leadership induces feelings of shame and/or guilt in order to influence and/or control members. Often, this is done through peer pressure and subtle forms of persuasion.”

CEI: “Followers feel they can never be ‘good enough’.”

~ ~ ~

Statements from former SSPX adherents:

Yes. When I was younger I solidly believed I was destined for hell. I’d read Dante’s Inferno to see where I’d fit.

True. Especially the children being raised in this organization. From little on you are never good enough and most likely will never be good enough unless you become a priest or religious.

The general impression given is that there is no salvation outside of the SSPX. That they are their followers only hope. That even to be buried in a non-SSPX cemetery would be to be buried in unholy ground. That attending mass and the sacraments anywhere other than an SSPX

chapel is a grave sin and danger, leaving them as the only option. People are encouraged to fully make their life part of the SSPX community, assimilating their businesses, their education, and most aspects of their life to it.

Always told you can only have true happiness if you follow Tradition, ie SSPX, and if you left your life would fall apart and you would never be able to find happiness and there would always be a hole where something was missing. The rest of the world just pretended to be happy but inside everyone was miserable.

Very critical eye towards one another. This comes from the top down. I've listened to a few that have suffered one form of abuse or another and just accept it . They are happy to suffer for the cause. There is not healing with them. Yet, they know that they can find help elsewhere but will not go outside of the group-think.

If you left the SSPX you're immediately assumed to be a bad person. They use fear and peer pressure to make sure that no one leaves and if they do leave they are painted as under the influence of the devil and going to hell. We weren't even allowed to go to other churches for services.

Absolutely. There were "tiers" in the group, depending on how involved you were and how much money you had. If you were poor and sent your kids to a public school instead of the SSPX private school you were shunned and looked down on. If you only went to church on Sundays and holy days instead of every day, you were looked down on.

As far as never being good enough, even when one strives for absolute perfection and follows all the rules it is understood that there is still a pretty great chance that you will not be saved. Even saying during homilies that "most of the people here today will not make it to Heaven." There is little an SSPX follower can do to be pleasing to God other than focus on one's sins and suffer.

~ ~ ~

From *Wounded Faith*, p 171: “[...] God is often portrayed in abusive groups as a vengeful, wrathful, punishing god whom the members must somehow placate. They experience fear and performance-based insistence that leads to submission to the leader, who claims to hold the key to members’ acceptance by God. Over time, the devotees adopt the cult’s view of God and have difficulty leaving because of their fear that doing so means they are leaving The Faith and even God himself.”

Like other passages from this book, this very accurately describes the SSPX landscape. The love of God is not a motivating factor in their circles. “If you do that, it’s a mortal sin!” (and/or “you’ll go to hell!”) is the motivating factor. As previously attested in the survey responses, an obsession with hell and occult topics is pervasive in the SSPX environment. Stories of demonic possession, exorcisms, demons, etc are frequent topics of conversation, even with young children. Stories about saints and their encounters with the demonic are used to frighten children into remembering to say their prayers or pay attention at mass. This closely ties in with point #6, where members are controlled by fear and are afraid to speak up or leave.

The SSPX also has a habit of inventing faults to keep members in line, chief among them the “sin” of attending a Novus Ordo mass. They publish several resources that include examinations of conscience with “Did I attend the New Mass?” (and “Did I receive Holy Communion in the hand?”) listed as sins. They say that it is wrong to homeschool your children and that you have an obligation to send them to a Catholic school (read: their school). They say it is a sin for women to wear pants (more on this later). I know of a couple whose marriage classes were halted after the priest learned they would be attending an FSSP chapel after they got married, as he said “it would be a sin” for him to proceed knowing they would not be staying with the SSPX.

8. Similar experiences from former members

CEI: “Former members often relate the same stories of abuse and reflect a similar pattern of grievances.”

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Statements from former SSPX adherents:

The fact that there is an entire community of ex-SSPX members who all share the same experiences and literal trauma (some with diagnosed PTSD from their time in the SSPX) answers this question very well I think.

Vast majority of those who cease attending SSPX services experience alienation by family and friends who remain faithful to the organization.

I am shocked by how common my experience was, the alienation from the true church, how I longed for meaningful friendships but the fellowship did not extend beyond Sundays.

Every person I have talked to, listened to, or read comments from who has left the SSPX have similar experiences and opinions as my husband and I do about the things that ultimately led us to leave and also just similar life experiences in general when talking about the SSPX.

It's amazing how many fellow victims of sexual abuse by SSPX priests were shamed into silence. But even aside from that the amount of camaraderie and even incredulity that takes place when reminiscing with other people who left - it's hard to wrap your head around how people in higher stations got away with even a quarter of what they did! And how on earth did the people we care about fall for that? And why are they still there?!!!!

~ ~ ~

It was this factor that pushed me to write this paper. I thought that perhaps being localized and tight-knit, the aberrancies I was seeing in St Mary's were characteristic of it being a kind of "pressure cooker," as one priest friend termed it. But after speaking with others from around the country and listening to testimonies from people nowhere near St Mary's, and seeing consistent patterns across all, it solidified the suspicion. The same authoritarianism, unable to question anything, even down to little things like unfamiliarity with the idea of dioceses or the local bishop.

Simply run a Google search for "SSPX cult" and you will find a plethora of blog posts, Reddit threads, podcasts, video interviews, etc from former members detailing their experiences, all of them lining up with the criteria in this paper: fear-based control, us-vs-them ('them' being the Church), strict dress codes for women, justification of their disobedience, etc. I have confirmed with a licensed clinical counselor who specializes in religious trauma that the SSPX mirrors the problematic patterns found in other cult groups.

9. The ends justify the means

ICSA: "The group teaches or implies that its supposedly exalted ends justify whatever means it deems necessary."

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Statements from former SSPX adherents:

SSPX apologists regularly state that their goal (the salvation of souls) supersedes any Canon Law that forbid or restrict their actions, such as the providing of sacraments to the faithful.

"Necessity knows no law", "state of necessity" gives them a free pass to avoid Rome.

They repeatedly assert that they stand with Archbishop Lefebvre and treat him like a saint and imply that the current church is corrupt and a source of evil against souls.

We are always told that even though the rest of the church and even the pope condemned the actions of the archbishop, he was completely justified in order to preserve tradition and save souls. This is the answer for anything anyone might bring up when questioning the sspx...there is always an excuse.

~ ~ ~

Any SSPX adherent, whether current or former, will admit that this is absolutely true. It's their modus operandi. As they say, the salvation of souls is the ultimate goal, and they will do whatever they deem necessary to attain that end, whether that be shrugging off canonical penalties, disregarding canon law, disobeying superiors, etc. This is closely tied in with point #5.

Fr Terrance Chartier of the Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate explains the situation well in a homily online entitled "[The Marks of a Cult](#)." In it, he says the following: "In a cult, the ends justify the means. This can very often happen. For example, the SSPX would like to preserve the 'true church'. It's a good end. The means that they use to reach that end is by celebrating five of the seven sacraments illicitly. The priests in the SSPX have a suspension *a divinis*; what does that mean? They can't celebrate the sacraments publicly or privately, except for hearing confessions and witnessing marriages (*NB: where the local bishop has given them the faculty. This is not the case in every diocese.*) [...] It's all done under the false principle that the ends justify the means. In reality, both the ends and the means have to be good for an action to be good. That's moral theology 101." The Catechism of the Catholic Church, [paragraph 1753](#), states: "A good intention (for example, that of helping one's neighbor) does not make behavior that is intrinsically disordered, such as lying and calumny, good or just. **The end does not justify the means.**"

They jump through any and all hoops to explain how the excommunications weren't really legitimate, how the pope was wrong to call the consecrations a schismatic act, how it isn't even disobedience at all, and how the goal of saving souls permits them to do these things. (They would benefit from reading Bl. Pius IX's [Quartus Supra](#) from 1873, condemning the schismatic Armenians in Constantinople: "They argue that the sentence of schism and excommunication

pronounced against them [...] was unjust, and consequently void of strength and influence. They have claimed also that they are unable to accept the sentence because the faithful might desert to the heretics if deprived of their ministrations. **These novel arguments were wholly unknown and unheard of by the ancient Fathers of the Church.**” Another eerily similar parallel.)

10. Elitist mentality

ICSA: “The group is elitist, claiming a special, exalted status for itself, its leader(s), and its members (for example, the leader is considered the Messiah, a special being, an avatar—or the group and/or the leader is on a special mission to save humanity).”

~ ~ ~

Statements from former SSPX adherents:

You don't get much more elitist than claiming your founder is the sole savior of the entire Catholic Church.

They credit themselves with being saviors of the traditional Latin mass and attribute any Latin mass being offered as their work. They laud Archbishop Lefebvre as saint and they are the faithful remnant of the church, the true church.

They definitely consider themselves better than others, especially the rest of the church because they hold with "tradition" and don't compromise themselves by accepting anything from Vatican II or anything they consider to be modernism.

“Many are called but few are chosen” was a favorite quote. I grew up thinking we were the only good people left in the world. And I wanted to try extra hard to please God since no one outside the society loved Him anymore. I was so sad for God.

They believe they are the only "sect" of true Catholics and that everyone else including other Catholics or Christians are wrong and going to hell. The priests are considered to be Christ on earth and what they say goes. The bishop(s) in charge calls all the shots.

~ ~ ~

From *Wounded Faith*, p 20: “The more elite a church is, the more likely that abuse can occur. When church leaders believe they and their church have exclusive knowledge of true Christianity in its doctrine and structure, or they claim that others within Christianity are not as faithful, this attitude of elitism can be a breeding ground for other extreme forms of behavior.”

Something worthy of note is a certain piece of artwork on the ceiling of the Immaculata, their “Mass center” (as they term them) in their epicenter of St Marys KS:



This depicts that very church building, the Immaculata itself, as Noah’s Ark, carrying the last, tiny remnant of those faithful to God through the flood waters. Now perhaps their intention was to imply how the Church, the Bride of Christ, is the Ark, as typology indicates, but using their own church building to illustrate this is quite audacious, and gives the impression that it is worth memorializing how *this* church and their organization is the “remnant”, as many have attested. Outside the ark/SSPX, there is no salvation? Whatever their intentions, it certainly is not obvious to everyone. Each person I have shown this image to has reacted in the same way-seeing an elitist mentality on display, not a depiction of the “signum foederis” (“sign of the covenant”).

Listen to Fr. John McFarland in the Crisis podcast series, Episode 46: “If what you really want to do is oppose the present crisis in the church at its root, in its causes, then where you should be is with the Society of St Pius the Tenth. [...] **that’s where every Catholic should be.**” Along these lines, a sermon I once heard at an SSPX chapel I attended while traveling was a call to parents to enroll their children in the SSPX’s local school, because as the priest explained, public schools were unacceptable, “Novus Ordo schools” may teach some good things but were lacking in the area of religion, and homeschooling was discouraged (echoing my own experience in marriage classes). This sermon put their entire outlook into words: we have something nobody else does, and we are the best option.

The SSPX possesses a quasi-gnostic attitude, holding to the belief that the “true Tradition” or “true faith” is something hidden, something only they possess that necessarily needs to be “discovered” by those looking to join the Catholic Church, and which they would not attain if they were to join the church through their legitimate local parish. According to them, those people would be joining the “Conciliar” and/or “Modernist” Catholic Church, which is deficient in ways the SSPX is not, and that only in the SSPX can someone find the fullness of Catholic tradition.

From *Combating Cult Mind Control*, p 141: “As a community, cult members feel they have been chosen - by God, history, fate or some other supernatural force - to lead humanity out of darkness into a new age of enlightenment. Cult members have a great sense not only of mission, but also of their special place in history. They believe they will be recognized for their greatness for generations to come.” The SSPX constantly reassures its adherents that “Rome will thank us one day”, ([Lefebvre himself said](#), “...in several years—I do not know how many, only the Good Lord knows how many years it will take for Tradition to find its rights in Rome—we will be embraced by the Roman authorities, **who will thank us for having maintained the Faith...**”) that Marcel Lefebvre will be declared a saint (or even a doctor of the church!), and that they are preserving the truth in this age of spiritual darkness in the church, which will one day fade away, and the void that remains will be filled by their communities that upheld “Tradition.”

11. Records of historical abuse

CEI: “There are records, books, news articles, or television programs that document the abuses of the group/leader.”

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Statements from former SSPX adherents:

There have been several reports over the years. To name two off hand, Fidelity magazine and Church Militant have reported on behavior of SSPX.

[Y]ou can follow up on many abuse cases [reported by Church Militant] by checking local news sources to verify them.

There is a wealth of information about SSPX's sex scandals, how they are still operating outside the church but I was told these were calumnies.

Yes. Absolutely. You can simply Google "SSPX" and find tons of articles on abuse and allegations against the group/clergy members.

~ ~ ~

As mentioned in the comments and introduction, two extensive articles were published in *Fidelity*, the first from 1992 and the second from 1995. A passage that stood out to me from *The SSPX Gets Sick*:

If you have read previous articles describing pernicious cults, you will recognize all the marks of a cult in the fortress at St. Mary's. A 10-year-old boy was brought to the clinic for a checkup. The doctor told the mother, "if I thought it would do any good, I'd turn you in for child abuse if you send that boy back to St. Mary's." The parents removed the boy from St. Mary's and placed him in public school, even though the priests taught the children that a child sent to public school would go to hell.

Psychological tests given public school entrants revealed a boy so traumatized that he was judged unable to function in a classroom setting. The family has now left the Society and left town.

[Ali Fegan](#), a Swedish journalist, was the first to report on (ex-SSPX) Bishop Williamson's anti-Semitism in his report *The Swedish Crusade* for the Swedish investigative journalism program *Uppdrag Granskning*. He also produced two other reports for this program in 2017: 1) *New cover-ups of assaults by Catholic priests*, regarding the "Golden Prison" where priests with allegations against them are sent for "prayer and penance" ([Article here](#); [video here](#)); and 2) *Sex offenders used SSPX to contact children - priests were warned but did nothing*, regarding the case of Kevin Sloniker in the SSPX's community of Post Falls, ID. Sloniker is a former SSPX seminarian who is currently [serving a life sentence in prison](#) for molesting seven boys over a period of about 10 years ([Article here](#); [video here](#)).

Jan Biles of *The Topeka Capital-Journal* has written several articles on the SSPX in 2008. Access to their archives requires a subscription, but you can read one of them copied [here](#), which also includes some statements from Fr John Rizzo. Commentary from the priest who runs the linked blog admits of the perhaps too-trusting behavior of some parishioners, "If there aren't boundaries, then it sounds more like a sect or a cult of personality in the darkest sense."

As stated, Church Militant has an extensive record of reports, articles, videos, interviews, and other materials about the cult-like behavior of the SSPX. The SSPX's followers will protest about the integrity of their journalism, but they do provide linked sources, and arrest records, recorded phone calls, and emails don't lie. I know that quite a few people left the SSPX ranks when their first major Spotlight investigation aired in spring of 2020. (Fr John Rizzo is among their interviewees, and recounts some of his experiences that were written about in *Fidelity*.)

12. Leadership dictates rules in great detail

ICSA: "The leadership dictates, sometimes in great detail, how members should think, act, and feel (for example, members must get permission to date, change jobs, marry—or leaders prescribe what types of clothes to wear, where to live, whether or not to have children, how to discipline children, and so forth)."

~ ~ ~

Statements from former SSPX adherents:

Yes yes yes! Just live for 6 months in one of the communities where SSPX has a large presence and you will know this to be true.

Women were expected to veil and wear drab dresses. I became preoccupied with my skirt lengths and trying to meet their modesty requirements. Women pointed out other's infractions.

My parents were called into Father's office to give their permission for me to get married. There is also a very strict dress code (for women). One of the nuns once ordered me to bring a skirt I had worn to a parish function to school the next week so she could "dispose of it properly" because my knees showed when I sat down and she deemed it too tight despite me having plenty of room to move in it.

All of the above for sure. But modesty sure was an issue. I lived in Idaho when the priests decided to refuse to give communion to any women with a slit in their skirt that was even a 1/4 inch higher than they accepted. Two fingers below the collar bone was the lowest acceptable dip for a top, and priests were saying that anything lower created a distraction when they were distributing communion to them. Ewww. Because I knew I couldn't have children BEFORE I got married I was told I needed a dispensation. I chose not to get married in the SSPX.

My parents would not make parenting decisions without first asking a church leader, there were specific types of clothing we were or weren't allowed to wear, music we were or were not allowed to listen to, books we were or were not allowed to read. Almost everything was dictated by church leaders.

I was wearing inappropriate (to them) clothing. It was sleeves above the elbows and skirts with a slit. I was told by a priest that I was destined to be a whore.

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As many previous comments confirm, modesty and the dress code (mainly for women) is a huge issue in the SSPX, likely stemming from Bishop Williamson's opinions on the matter in the group's early days. I do not have much to personally offer on this point, but I know that to this day, the issue of modesty and women's clothing is a prevalent topic. I recall in a sermon, the priest was berating the congregation because a young woman in the parish was spotted in a picture on social media wearing jeans. He then proceeded to say, "Ladies, when you sit down in the pew, your skirt should be covering your knees." (I will note that no such strict modesty guidelines exist for men, however. Men meet the criteria as long as they're not wearing shorts or graphic T-shirts in church.)

Reading others' experiences in blogs and social media, one finds the same complaint. Women are nervous to be seen in public wearing pants, skirts that are deemed too short, sleeveless shirts or dresses, etc. Echoing the comment above about parents giving their permission for children to get married, I have relatives who have experienced the same thing (and were in their early 20s). Regarding how members should think, I recall a statement from a friend who had left the SSPX and said their attitude was one of "let us do your thinking for you, because you will be tricked into being a Modernist."

IV. Conclusion

I would like to present [this letter](#) written in 2009 and published at Catholic Culture. Inevitably, when people provide feedback about their time in the SSPX, they cover multiple of the above criteria.

I grew up in SSPX since I was 3. I was schooled in SSPX schools. I always knew about the excommunications, but never once did I hear that they actually had NO canonical status!

When I first heard that SSPX priests marry as civil celebrants I was shocked and didn't believe it. When I got married two years ago I was fed up with the way my family and the priests were trying to manipulate me and the way they treated my fiancé. My fiancé was a devout Catholic, non-SSPX, however not anti at all. They treated him very well while he was doing his research on the situation but, when he finally came to his conclusion that he wasn't comfortable receiving sacraments from SSPX, instead of respecting his decision they turned very sour. (Point #3 - The group is always right.)

I was very confused about how a good Catholic who had a simple, beautiful faith was suddenly a 'danger' to me. (Point #4 - Us vs them) When we decided to get married by a local diocesan priest in the Traditional Rite, the SSPX priests were very angry. When I was asked why by one priest, I said very politely that it was our decision as that is what we were most comfortable with. I didn't want to be disrespectful as I believe SSPX adherents have the right to make their own choices as I should be able to make my own. I was shocked when the priest told me off for "being ungrateful for my schooling and to my parents." (Points #1, 7 - Unquestioning commitment / Control by shame and guilt)

Many of the new generation Y of SSPX are losing the faith. Among my friends, few knew who the current pope is, let alone who their 'local' bishop is. Many have had enough of SSPX's rigid, strict ways, especially regarding women for the strictness of dress. One inch too short, etc., and you are told you're immodest! (Point #12 - Detailed rules from leadership)

It's sad when you hear so many young people complain about how crazy SSPX is and that they are only attending Mass there to keep their parents happy! (Point #6 - Fear of leaving. Also see the citation from Steven Hassan on page 20 regarding second-generation members.)

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There are several other points on the cult criteria lists that former members agreed with (obsession with bringing in money, encouraging members to only socialize with other group members, etc) but I think the above suffice to make the point. This is less of a checklist that can issue a definitive judgment, and more of a guide to help analyze behavioral patterns and find parallels with other problematic groups. As the ICSA says, "The following list of social-structural, social-psychological, and interpersonal behavioral patterns commonly found in cultic environments may be helpful in assessing a particular group or relationship. [...] This is not so much a diagnostic instrument as it is an analytical tool."

The only statement that surveyees broadly did *not* agree with is the ICSA's statement of "The group is preoccupied with bringing in new members." Former SSPX adherents were unanimous that the SSPX prefers to isolate itself, or "hunker down," and wait for people to come

to them. As one respondent said, *“I actually noticed the opposite. It seemed that they didn't like outsiders. And were suspicious of people who came in and weren't dressed or didn't fall into line acting the way they were supposed to act.”*

As demonstrated here, those who have left the SSPX agree that they have seen or experienced these things, and that they are not isolated incidents. And I understand that not every one of their priests or members may think as strongly about some of these things. I'm sure there are individual SSPX priests who would say you can attend an FSSP church, for example, but these are the trends I have seen, made clear in their publications and other media like their Crisis podcast series.

The patterns are clear. Here we have a group that reveres their founder and current leaders above the lawful church authorities, discourages dissent and questioning from their beliefs and ideologies, works in opposition to the entire ecclesiastical structure of the Catholic Church, convinces its members that the authenticity of the faith is either absent or compromised outside of their structure, and shames those who leave. Many former SSPX members have described them as cult-like, and these criteria certainly seem to back up that claim. Research from many other cult specialists also serve to support these points as being characteristic of problematic groups (see, for example, [Carol Giambalvo](#), a consultant with the ICSA; [Leona Furnari](#), a licensed clinical social worker who deals with religious trauma and cultic groups; [Rosanne Henry](#), a licensed professional counselor who works with people exiting cultic groups and abusive organizations; or [Dr Alexandra Stein](#), who works in cult recovery counseling). As one former member said to me after reviewing the criteria, “The SSPX is 1000% a cult based on this survey.”

If you are reading these criteria or this paper, and you insist that these are not an accurate representation of the SSPX and your experience, I truly am glad you have not been subject to this behavior, but it's undeniable that many have. As the saying goes, the plural of anecdote is data. As stated in the introduction, and as cult research dictates, it is only after being in a problematic group for some time that its true colors begin to emerge. Attending an SSPX chapel for the last several years after searching for a church that was still open during Covid, for example (which is the position of many current adherents and defendants), is not enough to form a well-rounded evaluation of the group. Those who have grown up in the SSPX for the last ten, twenty, or thirty years, and who have since left them behind, all attest to the same behavioral patterns. To those looking to the SSPX for refuge, take it from those who have been in that world; it's not what you think.