



# John Lane: inside look at a Catholic writer

*John Lane as interviewed by Kathleen Plumb*



John Lane is an Australian traditional Catholic, and one of the world's better known sedevacantist writers. He established a Website entitled *The Aquinas Site* in 1998, and published articles and pre-V2 resources to assist other Catholics. In 2006, Mr. Lane established the *Bellarmino Forums*, the premier discussion site for serious traditional Catholics in the English-speaking world. The forums were closed in 2015, but the archives remain open for viewing, and Mr. Lane still uses the forums as a means of publishing new documents from time to time.

## Tell us a bit about yourself and why you're a traditional Catholic?

I am 47, West Australian, married to an exceptional wife, who has raised our nine children with the most amazing energy and dedication. Her family is outstanding, traditionalist right through from V2 itself, never went to the New Mass, ten children who all practice as adults, just something special. We really tried to emulate what her parents achieved, and I guess that really sums up how we approach things. We're traditional. We haven't tried to reinvent the wheel. We aren't dogmatic or speculative or extreme, I don't think, we just recognise that it's extraordinarily difficult to be Catholic parents in this era and we need to learn from what others have done and try and imitate what works. You know the Romans had a saying, never judge a man until you've met his adult children. So that's always struck me as not just wise, but also it's a good reminder of what our vocation is, what we're here for – we're here to raise Catholic children, populate heaven, God willing.

## How did you find tradition?

I was really fortunate in so many ways. My mother hated the changes but we lived in the country, on a farm, hundreds of miles from any traditional Mass, and she used to be so upset on many Sundays, with the latest nonsense. My father, who is an Anglican, bless him, would tell her, "Just don't go if it upsets you!" but of course that wasn't conceivable. So we just went. But the Dominican nuns who taught me in primary school were brilliant. Most of them were solidly Catholic, and the core group of them ended up splitting from the Modernist Dominicans in the 1980s and have remained traditional to this day. They're now in New South Wales, in a little town called Ganmain. Their Mother Superior, Sister Mary Augustine, is a Lane also, one of my father's cousins. I can still remember childhood lessons from them, stories about the Faith, and the principles of faith they inculcated with such care and love. They were really just marvellous.

For example, the story of St. Augustine who was wrestling with the mystery of the Holy Trinity, thinking that he could work it all out. There he was walking on the shore, watching a small boy who was taking water from the sea and putting it into a hole in the beach, and St. Augustine asked him what he was doing. "Oh, I'm putting the sea into this hole." "But you'll never get that done!" "Well, I'll do it before you understand the Trinity!" And then the boy disappeared.

So that stuck, the notion that some things are mysteries, that we have to accept them with faith and know that they are beyond our full comprehension. This is the absolute foundation of Theology. It's also crucial for a correct outlook on the Faith itself, putting faith and reason in their right order and proportions. There are probably three or four such great, fundamental, truths contained in that story – it speaks of Providence, of humility, of many things. Anyway, I was just incredibly blessed to get that foundation, those faithful nuns teaching us the Faith, and that became obvious even to me at a very young age when I went off to boarding school, a Christian Brothers College in Geraldton. I was twelve then, 1981, and I remember like it was yesterday this religious education lesson, which consisted of three or four moral conundrums being put to us, and we had to write down our solutions. Things like the lifeboat problem, in which three men are stranded and there's only food sufficient for a few days, so what lawful options are there? Can they tip one fellow overboard for the sake of the other two,

or can one sacrifice himself for the others? That kind of thing. Well, of course I had no idea. I wrote down some answers, probably all heretical, and handed them in. I thought, this will be enlightening, but the Brother who took up the papers went to leave the class without further comment. So I put my hand up and asked him, "Brother, what are the correct answers?"

He replied, "Oh, there are no correct answers, that's not the point of the exercise. This is just a way of helping you to clarify what your own principles are."

I thought, what rubbish, so I asked him, "Brother, what does the Church teach?" and he replied, "The Church doesn't *teach* any more."

At this point I realise what's going on, maybe not very clearly, but I realise that this bloke is the kind of liberal that pushed the changes that so upset my mother.

So I asked him, "Well Brother, what did the Church teach when she used to teach?" And you know what? He answered with a rapid, completely clear and thorough statement of moral principles, that evil can never be directly intended, even for a greater good, the principle of the double effect, proportionate reason, the whole thing, and then concisely applied them to each problem. He was an expert. His problem wasn't that he didn't know the Faith, his problem was *he didn't want to tell us about it*.

After the Brother had given the Catholic Church's answers to those moral problems, I said to him, "Thank you, Brother, that's what I believe now." I think he wanted to kill me.

The other thing probably worth mentioning about my schooling is that I got into debating, and I found that I loved it, and I was good at

it. I was a natural. Likewise public speaking, although I don't think I have ever been as good at that as I was and am at debating, because I am just intensely embarrassed to speak, but when debating I'm fired up and I forget all about embarrassment. I just go for it. That's one really useful thing I received from private schooling. I also learned some math, physics, and Italian. Not much else!

After I left school I was pretty ignorant, I mean, really ignorant of the Faith. They simply didn't teach us anything about it. Those five years were a wasteland of religion for me. I forgot most of what I learned from the nuns, not the principles, those stuck, but I just didn't practice, in any real sense, because we didn't have the Mass, we had "liturgies" and all of that. It took me years after I found the true Mass to recover the proper meaning of the term "liturgy" actually. In my mind it was a kind of home-baked amateurish session of vague and worldly religion, surrounding a home-baked amateurish presentation of the memorial meal of the Last Supper. I hated it.; it brought to mind those swirly line-drawing pictures from 1960s missals and 1970s hymnals, and bad, bad, music.

I also had a head full of liberal ideas. I definitely held that liberty is the highest good, for example. I was interested in everything, and I read a lot. At school my nickname was "Prof" and that probably tells you what kind of exciting and fun personality I had. I read a lot of political theory, I loved physics, history, the theory of money, Social Credit, everything really. The school wasn't going to teach me much that was worthwhile, I worked that out pretty quick, so I read books. I think what saved me from complete mental chaos was Chesterton. I loved Chesterton, read a fair bit of him, and I really am grateful to him. Chesterton makes his readers *think*. He doesn't do your thinking for you, and he turns everything upside down and wrecks all

the modern, liberal, hidden assumptions which underlie so much of the nonsense we are fed.

I ended up involved in conservative politics and started public speaking, and I was on a speaking tour of New Zealand when a contact there asked me if I wanted to go to Mass the next day, which was Sunday, and I said yes, of course. Now, I had never seen a traditional mass, and didn't know anybody involved in the traditionalist milieu. Somehow I'd heard, probably from my mother, that the altar used to be up against the wall and the priest faced the same direction as the people. So I was pondering the whole thing at a Novus Ordo mass one day in East Fremantle, and I just imagined the priest the other way around, and the altar against the wall, and suddenly it just made sense, and I could see that he would be *leading* the congregation in prayer, in worship, and he wouldn't be the center of attention, God would be. And I thought "WOW!" that's what they've done, they've wrecked this, it's all wrong. But that's about all I knew.

So I was in New Zealand a few months after this little epiphany and that Sunday morning we ended up at this little hut on the outskirts of Auckland – this was late 1988, so I was just twenty – and we were ten minutes early. I remember thinking, "This is irritating, we're going to have to wait for Mass to start, ten minutes." But it was weird, it was completely silent, no chatting, everybody seemed to be praying. I'd never seen anything like it. Then it started, and the priest walked out and stood back to the people, and I realised, Oh my goodness, this is it! This is the Latin Mass. This is tradition. It was quiet, reverent like nothing I'd ever witnessed, beautiful. And I was just mesmerised, and I decided right there and then I was NEVER going to a New Mass again, God help me. And I never have, and God willing, I never will, I would die first.



So that was my introduction, and it was an SSPX Mass center. When I got home to Perth, I intended to look up Fr. Augustine Cummins, CSSR, whom I heard was there and offered the old Mass, and I told my mother excitedly, you won't believe it, there's a Latin Mass here, and she said, "Yes, I know, I went on Sunday, Fr. Cummins." So that was all providential. I'm very grateful, as you can imagine.

**Yes, a feeling of realization... So how did your thinking about the crisis develop?**

Well, of course initially I was just grateful to find tradition, and I spent a lot of time with Fr. Cummins, I used to go and see him and just sit and ask him things, and I met people at the church and I spent time with them, including my future brother in law, and then through him, my wife's family. Her father was Patrick Henry Omlor, who was this kind of legendary figure in many traditional circles, because he had reacted to the changes so early, and he wrote these wonderful essays under the title *Interdum* back in the late 'sixties and early 'seventies. Of course, he also wrote the book, "*Questioning The Validity of the Masses using the New, All English Canon*" which was really hugely influential in the USA particularly. I think it saved a lot of people's Faith, by warning them off the novelties and motivating them to find a traditional Mass and stick to it. Pat Omlor's theology was very Thomistic, he owned a copy of the *Summa*, he had been in a De La Salle Christian Brothers house of formation for several years after he left school, so he was well educated, much better educated than most people, in the Faith. A mathematician by trade, so very clear minded, logical, and highly intelligent. He was also a very pious man, not in a showy way, but really incredibly solid, grounded, and he had a wonderful sense of humor. He didn't take himself seriously at all, and would tell jokes for hours if we encouraged him to keep going, which we did, often! He had met Archbishop Lefebvre and held him in high esteem. He actually served as

his driver when the Archbishop came to Australia for a traditionalist Eucharistic conference in, I think, 1973. He had subsequently donated a lot of money to the Society of St. Pius X, I think tens of thousands, huge money back then. This came out, not in public, just privately in the family, because of an ugly

sound. It's at the heart of the mysteriousness of this crisis – how do we explain what has happened to the Church?

Now, that question, how to understand the crisis, came to dominate my thought for the next three decades. I still think about it every day. That will

was an electrical engineer. He passed away many years ago, on the Feast of St. Therese of Lisieux, and I always remember him with great affection. A really good fellow, solid, honest, and he loved the Church. The Sede List was just for us to thrash out our own thoughts, it was not promot-

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incident, which came out of the blue in maybe 1989. There was some priest of the SSPX that had some idea that if you're a sedevacantist you must be against the Society, and he wrote something to the effect that Patrick Henry Omlor was an opponent of the Society. Well that was nonsense, and very hurtful, as you can imagine, and Pat wrote a letter to *Catholic*, the Australian trad newspaper run by Don McLean, and refuted it. He didn't mention his donations to the Society, I think, but he mentioned those to me and his family at the time, I guess expressing his hurt over such an allegation. So I think that was my introduction to the notion that some people, some trads, can't let you have your own ideas, they will make trouble for you, and they will be unjust to you merely because you hold a view about the crisis that differs with theirs. The whole thing was just ridiculous, Pat didn't even promote sedevacantism, I don't think the people at our chapel generally even knew what his views were, to them he was just a nice American fellow with loads of kids. And it wasn't a Society of St. Pius X chapel, so he wasn't even a bad example, if I can put it that way, to Society people.

I myself had adopted the sedevacantist view by then, of course, chiefly because I couldn't reconcile the fact that Paul VI had authorised a Missal with a sacramental form which had been tampered with. I really knew nothing, so it wasn't a position I came to by some lengthy process of study and thought, but even today I think the principle is

sound obsessive, perhaps, but really, what could be more fascinating, than the Passion of the Mystical Body? And when you think, we have been chosen to witness this, we are blessed, despite the horror of it and all the difficulties, it's a blessing. That's how I see it. And the notion that Paul VI, particularly, wasn't pope, seems to make the picture clear in a way that nothing else does. With Paul VI as pope we seem to have a Church in auto-demolition, which is really a blasphemous notion, and without him, we have the Church being assailed by enemies, as she always has been. Anyway, it's an opinion, it's my opinion, and the more arguments I see against it, the more I find myself confirmed in it, because the arguments are so incredibly *bad*. I mean, weak, or unorthodox, or incredibly ignorant. And you think, well if that's the kind of thing you end up saying in trying to defend Paul VI, then that's a really bad recommendation for the theory that he was pope!

I ended up doing a fair bit of reading, and by the late 'nineties I was, I wouldn't say well educated, but at least I think I had the main principles clear and I could express them, and by then the Internet had arrived – I think it was '95 or '96 when everybody here started to get on the 'net. And I found that there were people attacking the sedevacantist position, and misrepresenting it, and saying really very ugly things, and I reacted by starting to write. I had been on an e-mailing list of sedes, the Sede List it was called, run by a wonderful man called Jim McNally, who had I think ten kids and he

ing sedevacantism and I don't think anybody that I knew was interested in promoting it. We were certainly interested in understanding the crisis, and some of us were interested in defending ourselves and our ideas, but we weren't about proselytising. But anyway, I put up what was then the Aquinas Site, in '98 I think, and started publishing documents pertinent to the crisis in the Church. I think when I reflect upon it, I wrote as much for my own clarity of thinking as for others. I just want to understand. Writing is a great way to clarify your thinking. Really, probably the best way.

**So what were your ideas, apart from the sedevacantist stance, and where did you get them?**

Well, and this is hard, because I'm trying to trace back where certain ideas came from and when they hit me, but one thing is the notion that at the heart of Christianity is the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. The centrality of this notion is kind of implicit in all of us who have the Faith, we all know that the Faith is about the Church, that our religion is about the Church, that we practice our religion in and with the Church. The individualism of Protestantism is about the most anti-Christian idea one could have. Now I think that I got that idea, well the basic teachings about the Mystical Body from Pat Omlor. He had this little section of bookshelf, maybe a foot long, with his favorite books there within reach, probably eight or ten books. One of them was

*Heliotropium*, another Donoso Cortes on Liberalism, Socialism, and Catholicism, and another was the Abbé Anger on the Mystical Body. That last book I think, knowing his writings very well as I do, was enormously influential on Pat. You can see it all through his writings. And it's entirely Thomistic, it's all based upon St. Thomas, quite explicitly. Anger really just went through the *Summa* and made a synthesis of St. Thomas on the Mystical Body, which is a phenomenal achievement, but in one sense not that difficult because St. Thomas mentions the Church all the time, constantly. It's always there in his mind, associated with every doctrine he's presenting. Once you've read Anger you see that so clearly, and wonder why you never saw it before. Pat also told me about this notion that the Mystical Body re-lives the life of Christ in a mystical manner down through the ages. Actually, I am sure it was in one of his essays, because I can recall the actual day I read it, and where I was. I got up immediately, and left the house, and drove straight to Pat's place, which was probably half an hour away and I walked in and I said, you have got to tell me more about this, it's stunning. That was in about 1991. So we discussed that, and it's been seared on my mind ever since. The other thing about Anger, well really about the truths that Anger presents so brilliantly, is that once you have them, you love the Church. You kind of cannot not love the Church, if you see what I mean. Once you have a clear picture of what She is, you're in love. Pat was in love with the Church, and he infected me with that love too.

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Continued in September...