Vatican
Vatican News
Analysis



Seminarians and priests walk in procession to the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Aug. 21, 2025. The men were among about 8,000 people who joined a pilgrimage sponsored by the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, which exists in an "irregular" state of communion with the wider Catholic Church. (CNS/Cindy Wooden)



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Vatican City — February 2, 2026
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A traditionalist Catholic society whose founder was excommunicated during the pontificate of St. John Paul II has announced plans to ordain new bishops without Vatican approval, a move that directly challenges Rome and tests how Pope Leo XIV will respond to open defiance from a group long at odds with the Vatican.

Fr. Davide Pagliarani, superior general of the Priestly Society of St. Pius X, "publicly announced his decision to entrust the bishops of the Society with the task of proceeding with new episcopal consecrations" on July 1, according to a statement released by the order Feb. 2.

The Society of St. Pius X, which celebrates the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass and rejects key teachings of the Second Vatican Council, claims to have roughly 700 priests worldwide and to minister to about 500,000 people. Its strongest presence is in France and the United States.

In the statement, the society said Pagliarani had written twice to Pope Leo XIV requesting an audience and that he "explicitly expressed the particular need of the Society to ensure the continuation of the ministry of its bishops."

According to the society, the Vatican replied with a letter that "does not in any way respond to our requests."



Fr. Davide Pagliarani, center, was elected July 11, 2018, as the new superior general of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X during the society's general chapter in Econe, Switzerland. Pagliarani is pictured after his election with his assistants, Bishop Alfonso de la Galarreta, left, and Fr. Christian Bouchacourt. (CNS/Courtesy of fsspx.news)

The society’s announcement places Leo on a collision course with a group that has repeatedly tested the limits of Vatican authority. Any response on his part, or lack thereof, will be highly scrutinized as a sign of how the pope intends to handle open defiance from the church's conservative wing.

The planned consecrations revive painful memories of 1988, when the society's founder, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, ordained four priests as bishops against the express prohibition of the pope. John Paul II declared the act schismatic and Lefebvre and the four newly ordained bishops incurred automatic excommunication (latae sententiae), setting off decades of strained relations between the Vatican and the traditionalist group.

Church law holds that "no bishop is permitted to consecrate anyone a bishop unless it is first evident that there is a pontifical mandate" (Canon 1013).

Pope Benedict XVI, who sought reconciliation with Catholics attached to the pre–Vatican II liturgy, lifted the excommunications of the four bishops in 2009 and restructured the Vatican commission charged with dialogue with the society, though full canonical recognition was never achieved.

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Pope Francis closed the commission in 2019, and supervision of the society was entrusted to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. He then went further to apply far-reaching restrictions on celebrating the pre-Vatican II liturgy, arguing that its widespread use threatened the unity of the church and in turn sparking outrage among traditionalist Catholics.

The prospect of new illicit consecrations places Leo in a delicate position. Some Catholics wary of Vatican-II reforms hoped his pontificate would signal greater openness toward traditionalist Catholics who felt marginalized under Francis. In October, Leo allowed U.S. Cardinal Raymond Burke, a prominent conservative voice, to celebrate a pre-Vatican II Latin Mass in St. Peter's Basilica during a traditionalist pilgrimage to Rome.

Since then, however, Leo has repeatedly affirmed the authority of the Second Vatican Council. In a catechesis series launched during his Wednesday general audiences, the pope said the council's magisterium "constitutes the guiding star of the church's journey."

Unity has emerged as a defining theme of Leo's pontificate, but the pope is also a canon lawyer known for his careful adherence to church law. How he responds to the society's planned consecrations will signal whether Rome is prepared to impose sanctions once again or whether it will seek a different path to keep the church from fracturing.

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