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Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, and F

Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Fr. Davide Pagliarani, superior general of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, are pictured at the Vatican Feb. 12. (OSV News/Courtesy Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith)



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Vatican City — February 12, 2026
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The Vatican has proposed a renewed "path of dialogue" with a traditionalist Catholic society that has threatened to consecrate new bishops without papal approval, offering an off-ramp from the dissident group's path toward automatic excommunication from the Catholic Church.

Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández offered to continue doctrinal discussions with the group. It's a last-ditch effort to avoid a repeat of the Society of St. Pius X's 1988 illicit consecration of four bishops, an act that Pope John Paul II called "schismatic" and which led to the excommunication of the society's founder.

Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith which oversees the Vatican's relationship with SSPX, met Feb. 12 with the society's superior general, Fr. Davide Pagliarani, and proposed further talks on issues that "have not yet been sufficiently clarified," including adherence to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

The Society of St. Pius X holds a canonically irregular status in the church and denies key teachings of Vatican II. It rejects interreligious dialogue and has described the council's liturgical reform, which introduced the form of the Mass celebrated by nearly all Catholics worldwide since 1970, as "evil."

Fernández and Pagliarani met one-on-one following the society's Feb. 2 announcement that it would consecrate new bishops without papal approval on July 1. The move was widely seen as a power play intended to pressure the Vatican into addressing the society's crisis of dwindling and aging bishops, who are needed to ordain new priests and ensure the society's survival.

Two of the four bishops illicitly consecrated in 1988 have died in recent years, leaving only Bishops Alfonso de Galarreta and Bernard Fellay, respectively 69 and 67, to grow the society's ranks of priests worldwide.

The society includes 733 priests worldwide as of December 2025, 254 of whom are in the United States. Its seminary in Dillwyn, Virginia, hosts some 95 seminarians, according to the latest figures provided by the society.

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By announcing the new bishop consecrations, the society is testing how Pope Leo XIV will respond to open defiance from the church's conservative wing.

Yet in the Feb. 12 meeting, explicitly approved by the pope, Fernández sought to keep the door open to dialogue while quelling the prospect of illicit consecrations.

A statement released by the dicastery following the meeting stated that "the possibility of carrying out this dialogue presupposes that the Fraternity suspend its decision regarding the announced episcopal ordinations."

Pagliarani is expected to present the proposal to the society's general council before issuing a response.

The proposed dialogue would address topics such as "the distinction between the act of faith and the 'religious submission of mind and will,' or the different degrees of assent required by the various texts of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and their interpretation," in addition to other matters raised by the society.

Ultimately the dialogue is intended to lay out "the minimum requirements necessary for full communion with the Catholic Church and, consequently, to outline a canonical status for the Fraternity."

The group has long strained relations with Rome.

Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre presides at the 1988 ordinations of Bishops Richard Williamson, B

Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre presides at the 1988 ordinations of Bishops Richard Williamson, Bernard Tissier de Mallerais, Bernard Fellay and Alphonso de Galarreta in Econe, Switzerland. Archbishop Lefebvre and the four new bishops were excommunicated after participating in the ordination that had been forbidden by Pope John Paul II. (OSV News/Catholic Press)

Almost 20 years after John Paul declared that its founder, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, had incurred excommunication along with the four bishops he had illicitly ordained, Pope Benedict XVI lifted the penalties in 2009 in an effort at reconciliation.

The decision prompted widespread protest after it emerged that one of the bishops, Richard Williamson, had publicly denied the Holocaust.

Pope Francis granted special faculties for priests belonging to the society to validly hear confessions, and he allowed local bishops to authorize the society's priests to celebrate marriages. At the same time, the late pope was a frequent target of criticism from within the society.

And the society has signaled that tensions with Leo are unlikely to ease.

Pagliarani, the superior general, stated in an interview conducted by the society that part of the reason for proceeding with the bishop consecrations is because Leo and

other church leaders have made clear that the "Second Vatican Council remains more than ever the compass guiding today’s churchmen, and they are unlikely to change course in the near future."

"An explicit determination to preserve the line of Pope Francis as an irreversible trajectory for the entire church is discernible," he said.

The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.