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Newly consecrated bishops, from left, Pascal Schreiber, Michael Goldade, Michel Poinsinet de Sivry and Marc Hanappier, wearing their miters and holding their pastoral staffs, pray at the end of their consecration ceremony in a tent set up outside the Society of St. Pius X seminary in Écône, Switzerland, July 1, 2026. (AP/Baz Ratner)

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Rome — July 3, 2026
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The ultraconservative Catholics who defied Pope Leo XIV and caused a schism defended their actions July 3, insisting they were merely saving souls and were victims of an unjust sanction by the Holy See.

The head of the Society of St. Pius X wrote to Leo a day after the Vatican excommunicated the group's bishops and priests and warned its faithful they too could be excommunicated for participating in the schism, or rupture in church unity.

The society, known as SSPX, celebrates the ancient Latin Mass and opposes the modernizing reforms of the Catholic Church. On July 2, it consecrated four new bishops without papal consent during a massive ceremony at its seminary in Écône, Switzerland, committing one of the gravest crimes in church law.

Leo had begged the SSPX not go ahead with the ceremony, but the SSPX defied his will. Within 24 hours, the Vatican declared an exceptionally harsh punishment that surprised even the SSPX's toughest critics.

In his letter to Leo, the SSPX superior, the Fr. Davide Pagliarani cast the SSPX as the defiant guardian of the church's tradition and the victim of an unjust sanction by Rome.

"What the Society of Saint Pius X has done, and will continue to do, is nothing other than an extraordinary initiative for the salvation of souls, amidst the doctrinal and moral confusion into which the church is plunged," he wrote.

Despite the "unjust and invalid" sanctions, the SSPX will love the church even more and "offers up the suffering caused by these new sanctions for the good of the universal church and of Your Holiness," Pagliarani wrote.



Four newly consecrated bishops hold their crosiers at the end of their consecration ceremony in a tent set up outside the Society of St. Pius X seminary in Écône, Switzerland, Wednesday, July 1, 2026. (AP/Baz Ratner)

French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre founded the SSPX in 1970 in opposition to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, which revolutionized the church's relations with other Christians, Jews and people of other faiths and allowed Mass to be celebrated in the vernacular rather than Latin.

While now a fringe movement on the Catholic right, the SSPX has been a thorn in the Vatican's side for five decades because it claims to be even more Catholic than the Holy See. The harshness of the Vatican's response suggested that after trying to negotiate with the SSPX over three pontificates, the Vatican under Leo had had enough.

Fr. Robert Gahl, an ethics expert at the Catholic University of America, said the speed and decisiveness with which the Vatican responded to the consecrations was significant in clearly alerting the SSPX faithful that they were participating in a

schism. Doing so, he said, exposed how the SSPX falsely claims to be "more Catholic than the pope."

The SSPX claimed it had to proceed with the consecrations, "that they had a case of necessity because of the need of the faithful to receive their sacramental care, while claiming that their sacramental care is somehow better than what the rest of the church offers," Gahl said. The Vatican's decisive response "calls them out and says, 'If you want the salvation that the church offers, you have to belong to the church, and you stepped out of full communion by disobeying the pope's explicit command."

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