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In meeting with Fellay, Pope Francis shows double standard in the 'culture of encounter'

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

Earlier this week, *NCR's* Joshua J. McElwee reported that, on April 1, Pope Francis met with Bishop Bernard Fellay, the Superior General of the Society of St. Pius X. Founded in 1970 by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, the Society widely rejects the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

According to the society's website, the "false teachings" of Vatican II include the Council's exhortations on religious liberty, ecumenism, liturgical reforms, collegiality and what they call the "modernist" idea that "that the human conscience is the supreme arbiter of good and evil for each individual." The society is an ardent defender of the Tridentine Mass (Fellay's liturgical dress rivals any garb donned by Cardinal Raymond Burke) and believes passionately in the supremacy of the Roman Catholic church over all other religions.

In 1988, Lefebvre decided, against orders of then-Pope John Paul II, to consecrate four new bishops. Lefebvre consecrated these men out of concern that, in the event of his death, there would be no truly orthodox bishops to ordain new priests for the society. St. John Paul II in turn excommunicated Lefebvre and his four newly minted bishops, including Fellay.

In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI lifted those excommunications in an attempt to repair relations with the group. But his efforts to bring the Society back into the fold eventually broke down.

By meeting with Fellay this past weekend, Pope Francis has taken a new step toward returning the Society of St. Pius X into full Communion with the Roman Catholic church.

According to McElwee's report, Fellay believes that "Francis may consider his group as existing on the 'periphery' and thus needing to be accompanied back to the church."

This isn't Francis' first overture towards the society. Back in September, the pope announced that, during the Year of Mercy, the society's priests would have their faculties restored to offer absolution "validly and licitly" to those who come to them for confession.

"This Jubilee Year of Mercy excludes no one," the pontiff said in September. "I trust that in the near future solutions may be found to recover full communion with the priests and superiors of the Fraternity."

While some may admire the pope's latest meeting with Fellay as yet another example of his commitment to a "culture of encounter," it also demonstrates that the Year of Mercy has its double standards.

If Francis can offer a forty-minute, private meeting to a formerly excommunicated bishop who has been performing the sacraments illicitly for decades and who believes that the Catholic church is laced with false teachings, why can't the pope also extend the same invitation to Catholic theologians, ethicists, and lay ministers who challenge the church's teaching on women's ordination, the use of contraception, and the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons?

If Francis truly wishes to cultivate a culture of encounter and to include everyone in the Year of Mercy, why not welcome those women and men who have been excommunicated for expressing their belief that women deserve an equal role in decision-making authority and sacramental leadership in the church?

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Why not open up a dialogue with the Roman Catholic Womenpriests movement whose first priests were ordained by a valid Roman Catholic bishop? Not unlike Lefebvre, Roman Catholic Womenpriests have moved forward with consecrating their own bishops and, not unlike the society, they continue to perform the sacraments validly but not licitly. Why, then, can't they get a hearing from the pope, too?

In the three years since his election, Pope Francis has welcomed a stunning spectrum of people to the Vatican. He has greeted everyone from actor Leonardo DiCaprio to discuss climate change, to American Evangelical leaders to discuss religious liberty and evangelization, to the founder of Twitter to discuss the power of social media.

The Pope has flown to far away places to participate in historic encounters, most recently traveling to Havana, Cuba, to chat with Fidel Castro and to sign a joint declaration with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all of Russia.

And, yet, like popes before him, Francis still can't seem to find time on his dance card for the members of his own flock who seek to make the Roman Catholic church a better reflection of mercy, justice, and equality.

This is tragic, since according to a 2014 Univision Poll of Catholics on five continents, a significant number (if not substantial majorities) of Catholics in countries around the world disagree with the church's teachings on women's ordination, contraception, divorce and same-sex marriage. These Catholics

surely exceed the slim number of those who would adhere to the society's anachronistic beliefs.

The pope's meeting with Fellay shows us who among "dissenting" Catholics is worthy to encounter Francis, and who is not.

Members of the Society of St. Pius X flagrantly reject the Catholic church's rite of the Mass, its teachings on the primacy of conscience, and its respect for the truths expressed by other religions. Yet they are beckoned back into the fold.

But Catholics who (based on decades of theological and historical inquiry) challenge the church's teachings on women's ordination and sexual ethics are still locked outside of the doors of mercy.

One can only conclude from this situation that a spirit of welcome and dialogue are available to anyone -- except Catholics who question the Vatican on issues of gender and sexuality. Until they, too, are invited to talk to the pope, the notion of a culture of encounter remains dubious.

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