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The lifting of excommunications

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

Late last month Pope Benedict XVI revoked the excommunications of four schismatic bishops, all members of the Society of St. Pius X, a group founded in 1970 by the French archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (d. 1991) in protest against the reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65)?reforms that had the full approval of Popes Paul VI (d. 1978) and John Paul II (d. 2005).

The four bishops had been validly but illicitly ordained by Archbishop Lefebvre, whose own ordination as a bishop was never in question but whose ordaining of the four priests to the episcopate in 1988 had been in direct violation of canon 1382.

That canon imposes an automatic excommunication on a bishop who presumes to consecrate someone a bishop ?without a pontifical mandate.? The excommunication also applies to the person who receives such a consecration.

So when Archbishop Lefebvre was excommunicated in 1988, it was not because Pope John Paul II thought that he deserved such a penalty and therefore imposed it. According to the church?s Code of Canon Law, the excommunication is automatic.

To be sure, John Paul II could have subsequently lifted the excommunication because it is ?reserved to the Apostolic See,? but he was unable to do so, in spite of his repeated efforts to achieve reconciliation, because Archbishop Lefebvre and the four newly consecrated bishops were unrepentant. Indeed, they regarded their excommunication as ?invalid.?

But the situation changed in December when the four bishops wrote to the Vatican requesting the lifting of the excommunications, an act that was interpreted as a sign of their willingness **to meet Rome halfway** (John Allen, *National Catholic Reporter* on-line, 1/24/09).

According to the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops, Pope Benedict's action was intended as a "gift of peace at the end of the Christmas season ... to promote "unity in charity" in the universal church, and to take away the scandal of division."

The lifting of the four excommunications has provoked controversy not only within the Catholic church, but also within the Jewish and U.S. communities. One of the bishops, Richard Williamson, has publicly denied the Nazis' use of gas chambers to exterminate Jews during the Holocaust and has charged that 9/11 was an American plot to provoke a war.

Not only the Vatican but also the head of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Pius X have repudiated Bishop Williamson's views, the former insisting that Williamson's comments had "nothing to do" with the decree from the Congregation for Bishops.

But the damage has been done. Many Jewish leaders have denounced the Vatican's action. The Anti-Defamation League has warned that "it could become a source of great tension between Catholics and Jews".

A federation of Jewish organizations in France, where the Lefebvrite movement is prominent, called Williamson "a contemptible liar whose sole objective is to reawaken centuries-old hatred against the Jews."

And the Chief Rabbi of Rome said that Bishop Williamson's rehabilitation opens "a deep wound" in Catholic-Jewish relations.

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A news analysis in The New York Times disclosed that key Vatican officials, such as Cardinal Walter Kasper, head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, which includes the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, were not consulted in advance (Rachel Donadio, "Healing Schism, Pope Risks Another," 1/26/09).

The most benign interpretation of this latest papal initiative is that Benedict XVI is trying to do what the new U.S. President has been attempting to do early in his Administration, that is, reaching out across party lines to develop a new and healthier post-partisan political atmosphere in Washington.

President-elect Barack Obama's selection of Pastor Rick Warren to deliver a prayer at the Inauguration stirred acute opposition from gay-rights groups and others. But Mr. Obama also invited Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, a partnered gay, to offer a prayer at the Lincoln Memorial on the day before the Inauguration.

Unfortunately, there has been no such effort within the Vatican to balance its outreach to the Society of St. Pius X with a corresponding outreach to disaffected progressive constituencies in the Catholic church.

Only recently theologian Jesuit Fr. Roger Haight was forbidden to teach or to write by order of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith and formal reconciliation has never been achieved between the Vatican and the famous Swiss theologian, Hans Küng.

As Küng himself has noted, the pope seems focused on the world of the Vatican, while failing to see how his actions in this case and others are alienating him from the rest of the church and from the larger world.

As the church is about to begin another Lenten season, these are concerns worth pondering.

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