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Pope's move called 'a grave mistake'

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Vienna, Austria —

Pope Benedict at his general audience at the Vatican Jan. 28 when he explained that he lifted the excommunication of four traditionalist bishops in the hope they would take further steps toward unity. (CNS)

Criticism of Pope Benedict XVI's decision to lift without conditions the excommunications of four Lefebvrite bishops who deny the authority of the Second Vatican Council has been strongest in German-speaking countries.

Now comes a bombshell of an article recently published by one of Germany's most eminent theologians. Writing in the March issue of *Herder Korrespondenz*, Peter Hünemann, professor of theology at the University of Tübingen, says the pope's move is "a grave mistake," one that will be very difficult to correct.

Hünemann emphasizes that any lifting of an excommunication first requires an act of contrition on the part of the excommunicated party. This first step of repentance is essential, he writes, quoting canon law

(paragraphs 1371, 1358, 1347 and 1341). The excommunication, he notes, can only be lifted as a second step.

But the four Lefebvrite bishops, validly but illegitimately ordained, and the priests and people who follow them, far from being repentant, have every intention of continuing Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre's opposition to the council's work. Hünemann draws attention to the letter written by their leader, Lefebvrite Bishop Bernard Fellay, in 2005 to Cardinal Darío Castrillón Hoyos, in which Fellay expressly stated their society's loyalty to Lefebvre.

In his article, Hünemann shows how from 1970 onward the Lefebvrites placed themselves in the tradition of the defeated monarchists of the French Revolution. Lefebvre, who had taken part in Vatican II while increasingly rejecting the reforming direction taken by the bishops, held that the council had given in to the revolutionary principles that the church had always previously rejected: liberty (religious freedom), fraternity (ecumenism) and equality (the doctrine of collegiality of pope and bishops).

From this "adulterous union" with the French Revolution, contended Lefebvre, there had come in the liturgical reform a "bastard" rite of the Mass. The Vatican II reform of the liturgy is crucial to the controversy, Hünemann emphasizes, as the council reform was a witness of "the development of tradition and its purification" -- condemned by the Lefebvrites.

Hünemann gives two examples from the Good Friday prayers of changes that Lefebvre thought "criminal": "Heretics and schismatics" (Protestants and Orthodox) became "all our brothers and sisters who share our faith in Jesus Christ"; and "the perfidious Jews" became "the Jewish people, the first to hear the word of God."

Meanwhile, religious conservatism went together with political conservatism. Hünemann notes that Lefebvre admired the French Vichy regime of Marshal Pétain, which collaborated with Nazi Germany, and the right-wing extremism of Jean-Marie Le Pen. After ordaining priests in the teeth of opposition from his local bishop and Rome, he was suspended by Pope Paul VI.

In 1988 during the papacy of Pope John Paul II, Lefebvre incurred automatic excommunication when he ordained the four bishops at the center of the current controversy.

Benedict has stressed that the Lefebvrite bishops remain suspended until they accept the work of Vatican II. But Fellay's letter to Castrillón Hoyos reiterates their reservations about Vatican II and their hope for Lefebvre's rehabilitation. It is the Lefebvrites, Fellay states in his letter, who stand in the true tradition of the church.

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In the light of such statements, how could it have been possible, Hünemann asks, for Benedict and the curial cardinals to think that Fellay and his fellow bishops had shown repentance? To the contrary, after the excommunications were lifted, the Society of St. Pius X founded by Lefebvre expressed its thanks to Benedict for his "courageous deed" and its willingness to help him "apply the cure for the present [church] crisis that is ... shattering the Catholic world." They were "happy," they said, at the prospect of talks with the Holy See "that will go into the basic doctrinal reasons that we think are the source of the present difficulties" affecting the church.

The function of the papal office is to safeguard the faith and morals of the church, Hünemann writes. But

he argues that this is not being done by dispensing the Lefebvrite bishops from accepting Vatican II. Benedict himself explained that he had acted out of clemency in his desire to end this schism in the Catholic church, but the question at hand is whether the pope can dispense anyone from recognizing the essential, valid teachings of a church council. In Hünemann's judgement, "The answer is an emphatic 'no.' "

The pope and the cardinals, Hünemann states, are just as bound to a valid and accepted council as every other Catholic is. The lifting of the excommunications was therefore a "grave mistake" on the pope's part, Hünemann argues, concluding that the pope's action is null and void under paragraph 126 of canon law.

He says the pope has allowed a schismatic group to impose on him and his cardinals. It seems obvious, he writes, that Fellay, on being received by the pope in 2005, "made certain conditions that had to precede any reconciliation." Hünemann quotes a society communication of 2006 that reiterated that the Tridentine Mass, recognized by the Lefebvrites, cannot be "narrowed down" to an extraordinary form. The communication states: "It is not only a privilege reserved for a few, but all priests and all the faithful have a right to it." This is precisely what Benedict later affirmed.

The pope and the church must regain their freedom to act, Hünemann declares in his article. The authentic interpretation of Vatican II cannot be made dependent on negotiations with a schismatic group. "Much prayer, U-turns at all levels, and the help of the Holy Spirit" are necessary so that the church can "cleanse itself," he writes. But this will be "very difficult," Hünemann fears. For "the pope has publicly characterized this decision as his own decision."

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