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Lefebvrite schism may be nearing an end

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NCR Today

The Vatican confirmed Wednesday that the Society of St. Pius X, the traditionalist movement founded by the late French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, has responded to a doctrinal preamble presented in September as a precondition for reunion with the Catholic church.

A terse statement released by the Vatican's Ecclesia Dei Commission, responsible for relations with the traditionalists, said only that a response has been received and will be studied by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and eventually submitted to the pope.

Sources indicate, however, that the Lefebvrite superior, Swiss Bishop Bernard Fellay, has communicated a largely positive reaction to the preamble, proposing only small changes described as "non-substantive."

That concession could clear the way for formal readmission of the Society of St. Pius X into full communion with Rome.

If that happens, one option for doing so would be a "personal ordinariate," similar to the structure Benedict XVI authorized in 2009 to incorporate former Anglicans and their communities into the Catholic church. Other observers believe the Vatican might instead offer the Lefebvrites a "personal prelature," a canonical structure akin to a nonterritorial diocese led by a prelate. Currently, the lone personal prelature in the church is Opus Dei.

Either option would allow the Lefebvrites to maintain much of their distinctive spirituality, including celebration of the older Latin Mass.

Should reunion take place, it would mark an end to the only formal schism to follow the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Experts caution, however, that similar breakthroughs have been rumored several times

previously, only to fall apart at the last minute.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, said Wednesday that "we cannot consider the discussions [with the Lefebvrites] concluded," but called the positive response from Fellay "encouraging" and "a step forward" with regard to earlier reactions from the Society of St. Pius X.

Although the Vatican has not officially released the text of the doctrinal preamble presented to the Lefebvrites in September, sources indicate the two-page text consisted mostly of the profession faith that office-holders in the church are required to take, pledging "religious submission of intellect and will" to official church teaching.

The Lefebvrites have long questioned much of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, especially on matters such as religious freedom and ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. In a statement last fall, a Vatican spokesperson indicated that acceptance of the preamble did not signify an end to "legitimate discussion, study and theological examination of single expressions or formulae present in the documents of Vatican II."

The proposed preamble capped a three-year series of negotiations between the Society of St. Pius X and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, launched in the wake of Benedict XVI's 2009 decision to lift the excommunications of the four bishops ordained by Lefebvre in 1988.

That decision set off a global cause célèbre when one of the bishops, Richard Williamson, gave an interview to Swedish television minimizing the Holocaust.

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Amid that controversy, the Vatican's Secretariat of State issued a statement insisting that "the full recognition of Vatican Council II and the magisterium of Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul, John Paul II, and of Benedict XVI himself, is an indispensable condition" to any form of reconciliation.

That Feb. 4, 2009, statement also called on Williamson to "publicly and unequivocally distance himself from his positions concerning the Shoah."

Vatican sources say Fellay's response could be studied by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith later this month. If a formal reunion is in the cards, it will likely take at least several more weeks to work out the canonical details.

Longtime observers say it remains unclear whether all the Lefebvrites would accept such an arrangement, even if Fellay and other leaders of the Society of St. Pius X embrace it. One possible scenario, they say, could be a further rupture within the society, as some elements enter communion with Rome while others balk.

According to its own figures, the Society of St. Pius X includes some 500 priests and 200 seminarians present in 31 countries, with the bulk located in France. In the past, the society has claimed a total following of 1 million faithful.

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