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Pope names US archbishop to new post to aid talks with traditionalists

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- In an effort to aid reconciliation attempts with traditionalist Catholics, Pope Benedict XVI has named U.S. Archbishop J. Augustine Di Noia to fill a newly created post of vice president of the Pontifical Commission "Ecclesia Dei."

"The appointment of a high-ranking prelate to this position is a sign of the Holy Father's pastoral solicitude for traditionalist Catholics in communion with the Holy See and his strong desire for the reconciliation of those traditionalist communities not in union with the See of Peter," the Vatican said in a written statement Tuesday.

The statement, released by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which oversees "Ecclesia Dei," said the New York-born Dominican is a respected theologian who has devoted much time and attention to the doctrinal issues under review in current talks with the breakaway traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, led by Bishop Bernard Fellay. The society rejects some of the teachings of Vatican II as well as the modernizing reforms, especially to the liturgy, that followed in its wake.

Di Noia told Catholic News Service the Vatican needed to help people who have strong objections to the council see "that these disagreements don't have to be dividing or keep us from the same Communion table."

"It is possible to have theological disagreements while remaining in communion with the see of Peter," he said.

"Part of what we're saying is that when you read the documents (of Vatican II), you can't read them from the point of view of some liberal bishops who may have been participants (at the council), you have to

read them at face value," Di Noia told CNS. "Given that the Holy Spirit is guiding the church, the documents cannot be in discontinuity with tradition."

The doctrinal office said the archbishop's experience as secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments since 2009 "will facilitate the development of certain desired liturgical provisions" in the celebration of the 1962 Roman Missal, commonly known as the Tridentine rite.

Di Noia, who said his reassignment from the worship congregation after only three years had left him "flabbergasted," will be replaced in that job by Bishop Arthur Roche of Leeds, England, the Vatican announced.

The doctrinal congregation also emphasized that Di Noia enjoys "broad respect" in the Jewish community, which "will help in addressing some issues that have arisen in the area of Catholic-Jewish relations as the journey toward reconciliation of the traditionalist communities has progressed."

In addition to the highly publicized position of Bishop Richard Williamson, a traditionalist bishop who denies the Holocaust, public statements by Fellay, the society's superior general, leave in doubt whether the society as a whole accepts the entirety of "Nostra Aetate," the Vatican II document stating that the Jewish people cannot be blamed for the death of Jesus Christ.

"Ecclesia Dei" oversees the pastoral care of Catholics who have a special devotion to the older Latin liturgy. Pope Benedict placed the commission under the doctrinal congregation in 2009 to better address the doctrinal issues emerging from talks between the Vatican and the Society of St. Pius X.

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U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada remains president of the commission and Msgr. Guido Pozzo continues as the commission's secretary.

The archbishop's appointment is significant as it dedicates additional expertise and manpower to the questions still under consideration by the Society of St. Pius X.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, told journalists the new position is a sign of "the importance and delicate nature of the kind of difficulties" with which the commission is dealing and should not be seen as an indication of how things are proceeding with the society.

Questions under examination when talks began in 2009 included the concept of tradition; the post-Vatican II Roman Missal; the interpretation of Vatican II in continuity with Catholic doctrinal tradition; the themes of the unity of the church and the Catholic principles of ecumenism; the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions; and religious freedom.

At a high-level meeting June 13 at the Vatican, Vatican officials presented Fellay with a draft document proposing a personal prelature as the most appropriate instrument for any future canonical recognition of the society, in the event doctrinal differences are resolved. Vatican officials also gave Fellay their evaluation of the society's latest statement on those doctrinal differences.

Following the meeting, the society said that unresolved "doctrinal difficulties" with Vatican II and the church's subsequent liturgical reform could lead to a "new phase of discussions" over possible reconciliation with Rome.

The talks have focused on the wording of a "doctrinal preamble" outlining what the Vatican has said are "some doctrinal principles and criteria for the interpretation of Catholic doctrine necessary to guarantee fidelity" to the formal teaching of the church.

In a letter Monday to SSPX bishops and priests published on the Internet, the society's secretary general, Fr. Christian Thouvenot, wrote that Fellay considered the Vatican's latest version of the preamble to be "clearly unacceptable."

Di Noia said his task will be to help resolve the impasse over the terms of an agreement.

"The theological dialogue has gone on for three years but now (the pope) is hoping to find the language or the modality for a reconciliation," Di Noia told CNS. "We're at the stage of finessing, to help them find a formula which respects their own theological integrity."

"It seems to everyone that (a reconciliation) is close, but now it needs a kind of push," he said.

When Di Noia was undersecretary of the doctrinal congregation, he was involved with the pope's establishment in 2009 of the personal ordinariates, special structures for former Anglicans who want to be in full communion with the Catholic church while preserving aspects of their Anglican spiritual and liturgical heritage.

"It's possible that (Pope Benedict) had that experience in view" when selecting him for his latest job, the archbishop said.

Blessed John Paul II named then-Fr. Di Noia to the No. 3 spot at the doctrinal congregation in 2002, when it was headed by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. The archbishop has worked extensively with Pope Benedict, especially as a member of the International Theological Commission when the current pope was its president.

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