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Benedict's reconciliation move stirs controversy

by Thomas C. Fox



Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre presides at the 1988 ordinations of bishops. (CNS photo)

In a gesture billed as an "act of peace," but one destined both to fire intra-Catholic debate about the meaning of the Second Vatican Council and to open a new front in Jewish/Catholic tensions, the Vatican today formally lifted a twenty-year-old excommunication imposed on four bishops who broke with Rome in protest over the liberalizing reforms of Vatican II (1962-65).

Ironically, news of the move came just one day before the 50th anniversary of the announcement by Pope John XXIII of his intention to call Vatican II.

The four bishops had been ordained in defiance of the late Pope John Paul II in 1988 by French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, whose Priestly Fraternity of St. Pius X clung to the old Latin Mass after Vatican II and also expressed deep reservations about both ecumenism and religious freedom. Lefebvre died in 1991.

The four prelates involved are Bernard Fellay, superior of the Fraternity of St. Pius X; Alfonso de Gallaretta; Tissier de Mallerais; and Richard Williamson. Their legitimacy as bishops has never been in question, since under Catholic law, Lefebvre was a legitimately ordained bishop and hence any ordination

he performed is considered 'valid' but 'illicit'.

The text of the Jan. 21 decree from the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops, released this morning in Rome, presents the act of pardon as a 'gift of peace at the end of the Christmas season ... intended to promote 'unity in charity' in the universal church, and to take away the scandal of division.'

While Catholics will likely see the decree as a victory for a conservative reading of Vatican II, it has also sparked protest in Jewish quarters for a different reason: One of the four Lefebvrite prelates, Richard Williamson of Great Britain, recently made comments that appeared to cast doubt on the historical truth of the Holocaust.

In an interview with Swedish television recorded in November but aired in January, Williamson said that he did not believe the Nazis had used gas chambers.

'Between 200,000 and 300,000 Jews perished in Nazi concentration camps, but not one of them by gassing in a gas chamber,' Williamson said, according to a transcript of the program.

Speaking to reporters today in Rome, a Vatican spokesperson insisted that the Vatican does not share Williamson's views, and that his recent comments had 'nothing to do' with the decree from the Congregation for Bishops.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi said that the decree is not tantamount to 'marrying the ideas and the statements' of Williamson, which 'have to be judged on their own merits.'

Likewise, Fellay distanced himself from Williamson's comments, saying they represented a 'personal opinion' which were being 'instrumentalized' to discredit the Fraternity of St. Pius X.

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Nonetheless, Jewish reaction has been critical. As rumors of a possible reversal of the excommunication began to circulate late last week, the Anti-Defamation League 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 especially prominent, called Williamson 'a contemptible liar whose sole objective is to reawaken centuries-old hatred against the Jews.' In a similar vein, the Chief Rabbi of Rome said the rehabilitation of Williamson opens 'a deep wound' in Catholic/Jewish relations.

The row seems likely to aggravate what was already a difficult period in Catholic/Jewish ties, related in part to Benedict XVI's 2007 revival of the old Latin liturgy, which includes a controversial Good Friday prayer for the conversion of Jews. Some Jewish leaders have also expressed alarm over recent comments by the pope to the effect that 'inter-religious dialogue, in the strict sense, is not possible.'

Recently Italian Jewish leaders announced their withdrawal from an annual 'Day of Judaism' sponsored by the bishops' conference in Italy, in protest of these developments.

Watch Archbishop Lefebvre ordain four bishops on June 30, 1988 in defiance of Pope John Paul II.

Meanwhile, the lifting of the excommunication is likely to stir mixed Catholic reaction.

While some Catholics will welcome it as a gesture of reconciliation intended to heal the only formal schism that followed Vatican II, others, especially those on the church's liberal wing, are likely to see it as another indication that a "conservative," or "traditionalist," reading of the council is gaining ground under Benedict XVI.

Lombardi today took pains to emphasize the more benign interpretation, calling the decree "an important step on the path towards full communion" with those traditionalist Catholics who followed Lefebvre into a break with Rome.

The Society of St. Pius X claims roughly a million followers in different parts of the world.

Ever since the break with Lefebvre in 1988, efforts to heal the breach have been a top Vatican priority. The late Pope John Paul II reached out to the Lefebvrite bishops on several occasions, and Benedict XVI met with Fellay shortly after his election to the papacy in 2005.

In part, observers see this outreach as the sort of pastoral attempt to end a schism that any pope would feel obliged to make. In part, too, however, Benedict XVI has repeatedly insisted that Vatican II must be interpreted in "continuity" with earlier eras of church history, and this decree is a symbolically powerful way of making that point.

Vatican solicitude for the Lefebvrites has long been a source of frustration for some on the Catholic left, who complain that there's no similar concern to heal alienation among liberals. Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, for example, charged in a 1997 lecture: "As long as dissenters stay in the church they are treated like pariahs, but schismatics such as Lefebvre are wooed at the highest level. After you have been in schism long enough, you are honored and loved as separated brothers and sisters, even if you hold more extreme views than those of Catholic dissenters."

Whether it will result in "full communion" with the complex galaxy of traditionalist Catholics, at least right away, remains to be seen. In a letter to members of the Fraternity of St. Pius X announcing the lifting of the excommunication, Fellay confirmed the group's "reservations" about Vatican II.

Nonetheless, the mere fact that the four bishops wrote to the Vatican in December to request the lifting of the excommunication may itself be a sign of willingness to meet Rome halfway. In the past, spokespersons for the Lefebvrites have always dismissed the 1988 decree of excommunication as "invalid."

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