

Rome's gesture is just confusing

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Editorial

One might see the act as an extraordinarily generous gesture, the shepherd leaving the flock to seek the lost sheep. But implicit in the scriptural instinct for such a dramatic move is a certain humility on the part of the lost, a certain correction of one's path. The four bishops, followers of the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, give no such indication. In fact, the movement and its leaders have consistently denounced the Second Vatican Council, and the movement's adherents have repeatedly condemned all popes since Pius XII.

Much of the ire since Benedict lifted the excommunication has understandably been directed at the rehabilitation of the English Lefebvrite Bishop Richard Williamson, an outrageously bizarre and offensive character who denies the Holocaust, believes that the 9/11 attacks were not carried out by hijacked jets but by "demolition charges," and once expressed sympathy for the Unabomber's dislike of technology.

The fact that Benedict welcomes him back into the fold immediately raises questions among both Catholics and Jews about whether this pope is prepared to jeopardize more than 40 years of progress in interreligious dialogue for the sake of a questionable quest for "unity" with an extremist fringe group.

Benedict's move is the most recent step, say those in the know, toward a dialogue with the Lefebvrites, an attempt, in the words of one French bishop, to find a "path to walk together." What a lovely notion, were it applied equally throughout the community -- including to those who have not condemned popes and completely dismissed the council but instead wish to explore its deeper meanings and implications, or to people who press those questions that are reasonable extensions of the council.

It would have been better at the start if Lefebvre and his band of malcontents had simply been strongly denounced and then ignored. Excommunication is a blunt instrument that rarely accomplishes any long-range good, a tool of authoritarians with diminished authority.

The Lefebvrites represent a tiny portion of the Catholic community. They believe intently in some indistinct period in which the church had reached near-perfection. In that sense they are fundamentalists of a sort that Catholicism rejects in other denominations and faiths. Theirs is a reverence for a romanticized past carried on today with props and a script from bygone eras. They are, in the words of Catholic author Eugene Kennedy, the Catholic equivalent of Civil War reenactors.

Reconciliation, as a goal, is laudable and at the core of our faith. Reconciliation, however, is a matter of mind, heart and spirit, and has, in the end, little to do with any formal edict of excommunication or any subsequent lifting of such an edict.

Benedict apparently thinks unity lies in looking backward and accommodating those who denounce the major work of the church in the modern age. Let them go. The future lies elsewhere.

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