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Healing the schism with traditionalists

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 18, 2009

Bishop Bernard Fellay, superior of the Society of St. Pius X, ordains a priest during a ceremony in Econe, Switzerland, June 29. (CNS/Reuters)

From a strictly demographic point of view, one could argue that the intense interest surrounding relations between the Vatican and the Society of St. Pius X, popularly known as the "Lefebvrites," is terribly exaggerated. Worldwide, the society has a little under 500 priests, roughly the same number as the Diocese of Buffalo. It claims one million faithful, a number impossible to confirm but which, even if true, would represent less than one-tenth of one percent of the global Catholic population.

Yet for a variety of reasons, the Vatican's effort to put Humpty-Dumpty back together again by reconciling with the Lefebvrites carries a significance way out of proportion to those numbers.

In the first place, the rupture triggered in 1988 by the late French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre represents the only formal schism in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. (Some traditionalists reject the idea that the society is in schism, usually offering a version of Ronald Reagan's famous quip about the Democrats: "I didn't leave the Democratic Party, it left me." Yet Pope John Paul II's 1988 *motu proprio* "Ecclesia Dei" was about as clear as possible, asserting that the ordinations "constitute a schismatic act.")

Healing the schism has been a special priority for John Paul II and Benedict XVI, both of whom participated in Vatican II. Throughout history, popes have always tried to end schisms, since it's a core principle of Catholic theology that any validly ordained bishop can ordain another bishop, and hence a schism can become self-replicating if not nipped in the bud.

When it comes to the Society of St. Pius X, several other constituencies also feel an investment in which way things go:

- Dissidents of various stripes complain that the Vatican's outreach to the Lefebvrites has not been matched by similar solicitude for other disgruntled Catholics;
- Theologians, church historians and ordinary Catholics alike wonder about the implications of bringing the Lefebvrites back into the fold in terms of the teaching of Vatican II, especially on ecumenical and inter-

religious dialogue and on religious freedom;
- Bishops and other church leaders grumble that offering the Lefebvrites too many concessions would mean rewarding them for disobedience;
- Experts in Jewish-Catholic relations worry about Jewish reaction to any deal, given the ambivalent track record of some traditionalists on anti-Semitism -- fears turbocharged by the recent cause célèbre involving Lefebvrite Bishop Richard Williamson and his comments on the Holocaust;
- Some liturgical traditionalists hope that readmitting the Lefebvrites, whose signature issue is the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass, will help tip the scales toward a more reverent, classical style of worship.

Not only are those perspectives different, they're usually put forward with more than a little bit of mustard. As a result, news that formal talks between the Vatican and the Society of St. Pius X are set for late October is inevitably a big deal, regardless of the society's demographic footprint.

The news was put into circulation on Monday by Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria, a theological protégé (and former graduate student) of Pope Benedict XVI as well as a member of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In an interview with the German daily *Passauer Neue Presse*, Schönborn said that talks between the Vatican and the Society of St. Pius X would begin soon, and that the Vatican would make clear "what is not negotiable."

In particular, Schönborn said, the legitimacy of the church's "dialogue with Jews, other religions and other Christian faiths" is not up for discussion.

In that sense, the model for the talks with the Lefebvrites is not so much the Middle East peace process, with each side giving up some ground in order to get a deal. It's more akin to negotiating a friendly corporate takeover, ironing out how much autonomy the smaller operation will still enjoy and where it must toe the line of its parent company.

In light of those comments, reporters in Rome pressed Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, for details. On Tuesday, Lombardi confirmed that talks will indeed take place toward the second half of October. He also identified three experts who will be participating for the Vatican:

- Swiss Dominican Fr. Charles Morerod, secretary of the International Theological Commission and *rector magnificus* of the Dominican-run Angelicum University in Rome;
- German Jesuit Fr. Karl Josef Becker, an emeritus professor at the Gregorian University in Rome and a longtime advisor to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith;
- Spanish Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, the vicar general of Opus Dei and an advisor to the Vatican's doctrinal congregation since 1986. (For the record, Ocáriz was actually born in Paris but to Spanish parents, so let's not quibble about nationality.)

A wag might be tempted to say that the talks have thus already produced one miracle: the Jesuits and Opus Dei are on the same side!

These three figures appear to be carefully chosen. Becker and Ocáriz were both major contributors to *Dominus Iesus*, the 2000 document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, led by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, on religious pluralism. That text strongly upheld the uniqueness and the universality of the salvation won through Christ, thereby addressing one of the Lefebvrites' major doctrinal objections to Vatican II. Morerod is a veteran of Anglican-Catholic and Orthodox-Catholic dialogues, and a figure known for bringing a thoroughly orthodox approach to ecumenical efforts.

It would thus be difficult to argue that these three theologians suffer from a fuzzy sense of Catholic identity, or

represent a sharp break with church tradition. In that sense, they're good interlocutors for the Society of St. Pius X, because they can't be accused of heresy (not credibly, anyway) when making the points to which Schönborn alluded, about dialogue with Jews, followers of other religions, and other Christians.

Ocáriz brings another bit of expertise that could be useful. One hypothesis occasionally floated about how to bring the Lefebvrites back into communion is to grant them a special canonical status, perhaps a personal prelature. To date, the only personal prelature in the church remains Opus Dei, so Ocáriz is in a position to evaluate the pros and cons of that idea.

As for the long-term prospects of these talks, all one can say is that the jury is still out. Speaking on background, Vatican officials generally say that they sense a division in the Society of St. Pius X between a "moderate" camp centered around the superior general, Bishop Bernard Fellay, which is seriously committed to reunion, and a more "hard-line" current that still thinks of the Lefebvrite movement as the Athanasius of the modern age, standing alone against the heresy of the post-conciliar church. That second group tends to view reconciliation with Rome in a more eschatological key.

If that diagnosis is correct, it remains to be seen which camp might prevail -- and whether the end result might actually be a "schism within a schism," with some elements of the society willing to accept reconciliation and others repudiating it.

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Now, for a bit of rumor control.

Last week I was in São Paulo, Brazil, for a seminar on church communications, and while in town I made a point of meeting Fr. Marcelo Rossi, a famous Brazilian priest whose charismatic-style Masses in a former bottle factory in São Paulo routinely attract tens of thousands of enthusiastic worshippers. I suppose it's testament to Rossi's high media profile that during my last speech on Friday afternoon, a woman asked me if it's true that I'm writing a book about Padre Marcelo. (Someone later explained that a columnist for a paper in São Paulo had actually written that my next book would probably be about Rossi.)

Herewith, for the record, my reply: No, it is not true that I am writing a book about Padre Marcelo Rossi.

Among other things, the idea of my doing such a book is fairly comical, since I don't speak a word of Portuguese and Rossi doesn't really speak either English or, despite his last name, Italian. Being able to actually communicate with the subject of a book has always struck me as something of a sine qua non.

That said, somebody certainly ought to do a book on the guy. It's the stuff of great drama, complete with plenty of conflict. Rossi has drawn fire from at least three groups:

- Liberation theologians and their followers, who don't see a sufficient social consciousness in Rossi;
- Liturgical traditionalists, who regard Rossi's pop-style liturgies as an abomination;
- Critics of both a Catholic and secular stamp, who see Rossi basically as a media phenomenon, a rock star, and who question his spiritual (and intellectual) depth.

Those currents are still very much in circulation, which may help explain why I got a phone call before I left Brazil from Bishop Fernando Figueiredo of Rossi's Santo Amaro diocese, obviously anxious to find out what my impressions were after talking to Rossi and seeing him in action. Figueiredo has been a major backer of Rossi, even concelebrating his TV Masses.

For myself, I realize that because Rossi is a public face of the church in the largest Catholic country on earth, some degree of critical reaction is both inevitable and healthy. Yet I'm also conscious that it's easier to criticize than to build, and my own sense is that Rossi has built a remarkable community of faith, one that's very much alive. Whatever its imperfections, that's no small accomplishment -- and, in a journalistic sense, it's a terrific story to tell.

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Pope Benedict XVI hits the road again next weekend, travelling to the Czech Republic Sept. 26-28. One highlight will be his participation in the Feast of St. Wenceslaus on Monday, Sept. 28, which is a national holiday. St. Wenceslaus is the patron saint of the Czech Republic.

In strictly capitalistic terms, if religion were a "product," the Czech Republic would arguably be one of the worst markets for that product anywhere in the world. Although secularization has spread all across Europe, Austrian sociologist Fr. Paul Zulehner reports that the former East Germany and the Czech Republic are really the only places where atheism has become in effect the "state church," meaning the conviction of a majority and the strongest culture-shaping force.

(The standard quip is thus that in East Germany and the Czech Republic, atheism is the only proven success of the erstwhile Communist regimes.)

Here's one sign of the times: The *Prague Post*, the country's leading English-language paper, has asked me to write an op-ed piece in advance of the trip, the working title of which is: "Does the pope still matter?" When the pope travels to other parts of the world, local media usually ask me to speculate on how he might try to deploy his influence. Only in some pockets of Europe am I asked to comment on whether he still has any.

Benedict XVI also faces several more immediate challenges.

For one thing, a draft concordat between the Holy See and the Czech Republic is still in limbo after being rejected by the Czech parliament in 2003, on the basis of objections from some politicians that it made too many concessions to the Catholic church. (Among other things, there are still church-state disputes over property confiscated under the Communists.) Czech President Václav Klaus, whom Benedict will meet on Sept. 26, is also a prominent Euro-skeptic and critic of claims about manmade global warming -- both positions tough to reconcile with the Vatican's official diplomatic line.

I'll be in the Czech Republic to cover the trip; watch the *NCR* Web site for my daily reports.

In the meantime, the Vatican says that Benedict XVI is considering a trip to Malta next April to commemorate the 1,950th anniversary of St. Paul's famous shipwreck on the tiny Mediterranean island. Officially, Malta is 98 percent Catholic, making it among the most Catholic societies on earth in terms of "market share."

John L. Allen Jr. is NCR *senior correspondent. He can be reached at* jallen@ncronline.org.

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