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Vatican, traditionalists name dialogue questions

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Oct. 27, 2009

VATICAN CITY -- In an atmosphere described as "cordial, respectful and constructive," Vatican officials opened a dialogue with representatives of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X and scheduled twice-a-month meetings over the coming months.

In a statement issued after the first meeting at the Vatican Oct. 26, the Pontifical Commission "Ecclesia Dei" said the process would focus on key doctrinal issues arising from the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

"The questions due to be examined concern the concept of tradition, the Missal of Paul VI (the post-Vatican II Roman Missal), the interpretation of Vatican Council 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," the statement said.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, said the meeting lasted about three hours and dealt primarily with setting an agenda and a schedule for the talks.

While he gave no idea how long the process would take, Lombardi said semimonthly meetings represented a "rather intense rhythm" and a serious attempt to heal two decades of separation between the traditionalists and the rest of the church.

In July Pope Benedict XVI placed the pontifical commission under the authority of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and said the commission would be responsible for talks aimed at restoring "full communion" with members of the Society of St. Pius X, founded by the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre.

Lombardi said the meeting Oct. 26 "marked a new phase in the relationship" between the society and the Vatican and he said that the dialogue was possible "thanks to the fact that the excommunications were lifted."

In January, Pope Benedict lifted the excommunications of four bishop members of the society, who were ordained against papal orders in 1988, and said he hoped the move would open the way for a serious dialogue about doctrinal differences between the church and the traditionalist group.

The pope later said that full communion for the group's members would depend on "true recognition of the magisterium and the authority of the pope and of the Second Vatican Council."

Lombardi said the commission's positive description of the climate of the meeting meant there was "a sense of trust that accompanied this meeting and its prospects."

"Finally, doctrinal questions are beginning to be discussed by competent people, representatives who are authorized by the two sides," Lombardi said.

The head of the Society of St. Pius X, Bishop Bernard Fellay, who was not at the Vatican for the meeting,

repeatedly has said he and the other members of the society have serious concerns about the way the teachings of the Second Vatican Council have been interpreted and implemented, particularly the teachings regarding religious liberty, ecumenism, liturgy and relations with other religions.

The delegation of the Society of St. Pius X was led by Argentine Bishop Alphonso de Galarreta, who was one of the four bishops originally excommunicated by Pope John Paul II. Lombardi said Bishop de Galaretta and the other representatives of the society lodged in the Domus Santa Marta, a hostel inside the Vatican, which houses cardinals during a papal conclave.

Religion News Service Adds:

Vatican hosts talks with ultraconservative group

Francis X. Rocca, Religion News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Representatives of the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX) met at the Vatican on Monday (Oct. 26) for the first of a planned series of talks aimed at reconciling the breakaway ultra-traditionalist group with the Catholic Church.

No details of the discussions were released, but a Vatican statement said they took place ?in a cordial, respectful and constructive climate.?

Founded by the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, the SSPX is the largest and most vocal group of ultra-traditionalist Catholics who reject the modernizing reforms ushered in by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), including the council's teachings on religious freedom and subsequent changes to the Mass.

The talks that started Monday will be held over coming months, probably twice a month, according to the Vatican, and will focus on the ?doctrinal differences still outstanding? between the SSPX and the Holy See, in areas that include liturgy, ?ecumenism, the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions, and religious freedom.?

The meetings are the fruit of significant concessions by Pope Benedict XVI designed to bring the group back into the fold. Benedict lifted restrictions on the so-called Traditional Latin Mass in 2007, explicitly as an overture to the SSPX, then readmitted four excommunicated SSPX bishops earlier this year.

Jewish groups were outraged after one of the readmitted bishops, Richard Williamson, told Swedish television that no more than 300,000 Jews ?perished in Nazi concentration camps ... not one of them by gassing in a gas chamber.? On Monday, a German judge ordered Williamson, who made the statement in Germany, to pay a fine that could rise as high as $18,000 (12,000 euro), depending on his income, for breaking the country's law against Holocaust denial. Williamson, whose lawyer told a reporter that he would probably fight the penalty, was given two weeks to file an appeal.

Another of the readmitted bishops, Alfonso de Galarreta, who is leading the SSPX delegation to the Vatican talks, recently told one of his group's publications that ?we have several years of discussions ahead of us.?

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