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April may be cruel month for relations with traditionalists

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 24, 2011 NCR Today

For anyone hoping that longstanding ruptures between Rome and the traditionalist wing of the Catholic church are on the brink of swift resolution, it may turn out that April is indeed the cruelest month.

tSometime in early April, two developments are set to come down the pike, each with implications for relations between the Vatican and so-called ?traditionalists?, meaning Catholics attached to the old Latin Mass and who harbor deep reservations about the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

tFirst, the Vatican?s ?Ecclesia Dei? Commission, responsible for relations with the traditionalists, will bring out an instruction concerning implementation of Pope Benedict XVI?s 2007 document *Summorum Pontificum*, which installed the older Mass as an ?extraordinary form? of the Latin rite.

tSecond, what could be the final round of talks will take place between the Vatican and the Society of St. Pius X, the traditionalist body founded by the late French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, which broke with Rome in 1988.

tAs is often the case, both moves will probably be seen in the Vatican as important gestures of outreach, but among some traditionalists they?ll likely be taken as further confirmation that Rome can?t be trusted.
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tIn some traditionalist circles, the impending instruction has generated alarm, with commentators suggesting that it could effectively undercut the prerogatives for celebration of the old Mass which Benedict XVI promised in his 2007 *motu proprio*. That would be in response, according to the speculation, to pressure from bishops around the world who?ve never been wild about the Latin Mass, and who haven?t exactly bent over backwards to make it more widely available.

tSpeaking on background, Vatican officials insist that?s not the case.

Instead, they say, the instruction will confirm that the *moto proprio* is now the universal law of the church, and insist that bishops apply it. Among other things, it will call for seminarians to be trained not just in Latin, but in the older rite itself, at least so they will know how to execute it faithfully and understand what?s being said.

The instruction will also confirm that the older Mass must be available wherever ?groups of faithful? request it, without specifying how many people it takes to constitute a ?group.?

tThe instruction will likewise confirm that the older liturgy is to be celebrated during Holy Week wherever there?s a ?stable group? of faithful attached to it, as well as in religious orders which use the extraordinary rite.

tOn the other hand, the instruction will probably not satisfy all traditionalist hopes. For example, it will probably not give a seminarian in a regular diocesan seminary the right to be ordained according to the pre-Vatican II ritual, in part because that ritual presumes ordination to ?minor orders? and the sub-diaconate, which were suppressed under Pope Paul VI.

tAs far as the talks with the Society of St. Pius X go, signs suggest they may end with a whimper rather than a bang.

tAn ad-hoc Vatican group empanelled in 2009 to conduct the discussions is composed of five leading figures on the Roman scene:

- Italian Monsignor Guido Pozzo, secretary of the Ecclesia Dei Commission;
- Italian Jesuit Archbishop Luis Ladaria, secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith;
- German Jesuit Monsignor Karl Becker, a longtime adviser to the doctrinal congregation;
- Spanish Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz of Opus Dei, another consulter to the doctrinal congregation;
- Swiss Dominican Fr. Charles Morerod, rector of the Angelicum University, and also a consulter to the congregation.

For its part, the Society of St. Pius X put together a delegation led by Spanish Bishop Alfonso de Galarreta, one of the four prelates ordained by Lefebvre in 1988. Insiders say that the figures tapped by the society generally represent the more ?hard-line? current in the traditionalist body, while the Vatican?s participants are theological conservatives inclined to meet the Lefebvrites halfway.

The talks have focused on four themes, which represent the core concerns for the traditionalists:

- Liturgy
- Ecclesiology, including ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue
- Religious freedom
- The magisterium of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65)

In each case, the process has been for a traditionalist participant to prepare a paper on the subject, and then a Vatican participant writes a response. (If time permits, one of the traditionalists may pen a response to the response). The two sides then get together for several hours of talks, with the most recent such get-together coming this past February.

Meetings are held in the offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome. Generally the Lefebvrites speak in French and the Vatican delegates in Italian, with simultaneous translation.

In a recent interview posted on the American web site of the Society of St. Pius X, the society?s superior, Bishop Bernard Fellay, announced that the talks are coming to an end without resolution, because, in Fellay?s view, Rome refuses to concede the ?contradictions? between the eternal Catholic faith and the innovations introduced by Vatican II.

Fellay also said that two new stumbling blocks have emerged: Benedict XVI?s plan to host an inter-religious summit in Assisi this October, and the May 1 beatification of Pope John Paul II.

That interview seemed to seal the fate of the talks. One Vatican delegate has quietly spoken with American Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, about whether the time may be approaching to pull the plug.

(For an instant in February, the traditionalists apparently thought that moment had already come. A meeting between the two sides was scheduled in the offices of the doctrinal congregation, in the same room where an unrelated gathering had taken place the day before. A card with Levada?s name was still at the head of the table.

The prefect doesn?t normally take part in the talks with the traditionalists, so when they saw his name on the table, they reportedly wondered if he was coming to bring down the curtain. In fact, the meeting went ahead as usual.)

tAfter the early April meeting, participants are expected to write papers summing up the results of the discussions and submit them to their superiors. In the present climate, most observers say, this may well be the end of the line, at least for now.

tDepending on how things play out, both reaction to the instruction and the talks may therefore point to a common conclusion: Bridging the gap with the traditionalist world remains a long-term project.

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