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What do China, Israel, and the Lefebvrites have in common?

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 25, 2011 NCR Today

It sounds like the set-up to a bad barroom joke: What do Communist China, the State of Israel, and the traditionalist Catholic Society of St. Pius X (popularly known as the ?Lefebvrites?) have in common?

In reality, there?s a serious answer. All three are bodies with which the Vatican is involved in seemingly eternal, and notoriously unresolved, dialogues. In each case, there?s a familiar rhythm ? every six months or so, some new step forward is heralded, only to be followed by another step back as surely as night follows day.

tThe latest case in point comes with news this week that the leader of the breakaway St. Pius X group, the no-longer-excommunicated Swiss Bishop Bernard Fellay, will travel to Rome next month to meet American Cardinal William Levada, head of the Vatican?s doctrinal office. The purpose of the meeting is to review a recent round of talks between the traditionalists and a Vatican delegation.

tI?ve learned from hard experience that prediction is a hazardous business, but here?s one I feel safe in making: Anyone expecting this meeting to end the dispute between Rome and Écône (the Swiss headquarters of the traditionalists) is going to be disappointed.

tLast year, I prepared, but didn?t publish, a background piece on the dialogue between the Vatican and the Society of St. Pius X, just ahead of a meeting in April 2010. At the time, it seemed like too much insider baseball and so I consigned it to a folder on my computer and forgot about it.

tIn light of this week?s news, I?ll offer it here. It?s a bit dated, but it nevertheless adds some flavor to the present discussion.

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[FROM MARCH 2010]

tAn update now on another celebrated Vatican dialogue, this one with the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X ? the ?Lefebvrites,? whose break with Rome in 1988 is considered the only formal schism to follow the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

tIn a nutshell, the dialogue seems destined to end with a whimper rather than a bang.

tThe current round of talks was launched in 2009, after Pope Benedict lifted the excommunications of four traditionalist bishops ordained in 1988 in defiance of Pope John Paul II. In tandem with Benedict?s 2007 decision to authorize wider celebration of the older Latin Mass, defense of which has always been the signature issue for the Lefebvrites, the time seemed ripe for rapprochement.

tA commission was assembled to conduct the dialogues, composed on the Vatican side of five figures:

- Monsignor Guido Pozzo, secretary of the Ecclesia Dei Commission responsible for relations with the

traditionalists;
- Jesuit Archbishop Luis Ladaria, secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith;
- Jesuit Monsignor Karl Becker, a longtime adviser to the doctrinal congregation;
- Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz of Opus Dei, another consulter to the doctrinal congregation;
- Dominican Fr. Charles Morerod, rector of the Angelicum University, and a consulter to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

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

In other words, in terms of the through-the-looking-glass politics of Vatican/Lefebvrite relations, the Vatican sent its doves while the traditionalists dispatched their hawks.

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. The 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, the head of the Society of St. Pius X, Bishop Bernard Fellay, announced that the talks with the Vatican 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.

That seemed clear during the February meeting, which occurred just after the interview appeared. Pozzo chairs the sessions, and at one point he turned to a Vatican delegate to ask if he?d like to contribute something. Not known for being shy, this delegate shot back: ?Bishop Fellay has said that the purpose of these talks is for the society to explain what it means to be Catholic. Do I actually need to speak??

Even before the interview appeared, some participants on the Vatican side quietly reported being ?fed up,? saying that there didn?t appear to be any movement among the traditionalists.

One Vatican delegate said he has 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 thought that moment had already come. The meeting was held on a Monday, in a same room where the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had held an unrelated gathering on Saturday, and a card with Levada?s name was still at the head of the table. He doesn?t normally take part in the talks with

the traditionalists, so when they saw a place set for him, some wondered if he was coming to bring down the curtain. In fact, the meeting went ahead as planned.)

The next round of talks is scheduled for early April, in the run-up to Easter. The idea is to sum up the results of the discussions so far, and then submit them to higher authorities on both sides in order to decide where things go from here.

Though they may be heading nowhere fast, the talks have at least produced a few moments of mirth.

At one point, a Vatican delegate attempted to break the ice by putting things this way: ?You think we?re in error, even if personally we?re not sinners because we?re in a state of invincible ignorance. You also say that error has no rights. Yet if you really believe that, what are you doing here talking to us??

According to people in the room, that line didn?t exactly produce a seismic shift in positions, but it did at least make some of the traditionalists smile.

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