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# Cold feet in match between Rome and Lefebvrists

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 14, 2012

Bishop Bernard Fellay, superior of the Society of St. Pius X, is pictured near a photo of Pope Benedict XVI at the society's headquarters in Menzingen, Switzerland, May 11. (CNS/Paul Haring)

**ROME** -- Cold feet, of course, are fairly common before any wedding. It?s thus probably no surprise that as Rome and the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, popularly known as the ?Lefebvrists,? prepare to walk down the aisle, important voices on both sides of the match are having some second thoughts.

Leaked correspondence shows that three of the four bishops of the society are strongly opposed to a deal, while the top French traditionalist has denounced the ?plague? of the Second Vatican Council. The society?s superior has openly admitted a split may be in the works.

Meanwhile in Rome, even some of the pope?s best friends are voicing concern that a deal should not signal a retreat from Vatican II.

Sources say that an offer for reunion could be made by the end of May, along the lines of a ?personal prelature?, a non-territorial diocese status currently held by Opus Dei. In mid-April, the superior of the Society of St. Pius X, Swiss Bishop Bernard Fellay, approved a ?doctrinal preamble? laid out by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Though long opposed to Vatican II?s teachings on liturgy, religious freedom and ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue, the society did not split from Rome until 1988, when the late French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre ordained four bishops in defiance of Pope John Paul II.

While a deal to heal that breach seems imminent, there?s trepidation within the society.

A traditionalist web site recently posted correspondence between Fellay and the other three bishops ordained in 1988: Frenchman Tissier de Mallerays, Spaniard Alfonso de Gallareta, and English prelate Richard Williamson. (It was Williamson?s comments questioning the Holocaust which caused a cause célèbre in January 2009, when Benedict XVI lifted their excommunications.)

On April 7, Mallerays, de Gallareta and Williamson wrote to Fellay insisting that ?agreement is impossible with

Rome,? because after Vatican II ?the official authorities of the church separated themselves from Catholic truth?.

The three prelates warned of the dangers of ?placing ourselves in the hands of conciliar bishops and modernist Rome,? and said that Fellay is leading the society to ?a point of no return? and a ?deep division.?

On April 17, Fellay wrote back, telling his fellow prelates that they have an ?overly human and fatalistic conception of the church,? seeing ?dangers, plots and difficulties, but not the grace of the Holy Spirit.? tFellay argued the traditionalists should embrace Benedict?s overture, since the pope ?knows very well it would have been easier for him, and for us, to leave things as they were.?

That line apparently hasn?t convinced everyone, as evidenced by an essay published on ?Porte Latine,? the website of the French district of the Society of St. Pius X, in early May. (France is home to the world?s largest concentration of Lefebvrists, with some 120 of the society?s 500 priests.)

Fr. Régis de Cacqueray, superior of the French district, wrote that Benedict XVI still does not see ?the calamitous consequences of the new religion which has unfolded over the last half-century in the church,? asserting that he?s under ?grave and deep illusions? about Vatican II.

Cacqueray urged the society to ?distrust like a plague the novelties introduced by Vatican II, and the popes which have come after the council.?

Such sentiment may be what Fellay had in mind when he told the Catholic News Service in early May that ?there might be a split? should a deal with Rome occur.

In Rome, meanwhile, influential voices around the pope are quietly insisting that a deal should not come at the cost of abandoning Vatican II.

Opus Dei Fr. Johannes Grohe, a leading church historian, defended Vatican II?s authority during a May 3-4 conference on the 50th anniversary of the council at the Opus Dei-run University of the Holy Cross, insisting that its teaching is ?binding? and ?must be accepted by those who want to enter into communion with the Catholic church.?

Grohe called for a ?profession of faith?, including the teachings of Vatican II, for anyone who wants to join the church.

An even blunter warning came from Franciscan Fr. David Maria Jaeger, speaking on the council?s document Nostra Aetate, concerning non-Christian religions. Jaeger serves as a judge on the Roman Rota, the Vatican?s primary court.

Jaeger criticized ?a tendency ? to look with indulgence on marginal groups with an exaggerated media profile who truly denounce the doctrine of the council.? He expressed ?the lively hope that ?we won?t settle for quasi-adherence which is only a sham, accompanied by obvious verbal and mental reservations.?

Fellay has warned that a deal is not yet in place, and that the devil is in the details. ?We are not going to do suicide here,? he said.

Yet even if an agreement is reached, that almost certainly won?t be the end of the story. It remains to be seen how many Lefebvrists will actually walk through the door ? and what sort of reception will be awaiting them once they arrive.

[John L. Allen Jr. is NCR senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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