

SSPX says doctrinal difficulties could prolong talks with Vatican

Carol Glatz Catholic News Service | Jun. 14, 2012

VATICAN CITY -- The breakaway traditionalist Society of St. Pius X said unresolved "doctrinal difficulties" with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and the Catholic church's subsequent liturgical reform could lead to a "new phase of discussions" over possible reconciliation with Rome.

The society released its statement Thursday, a day after the Vatican presented its superior general, Bishop Bernard Fellay, with an evaluation of the society's position on a series of doctrinal questions and a draft document proposing that the society become a personal prelate.

Fellay, who was accompanied by an assistant, met with U.S. Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Archbishop Luis Ladaria, congregation secretary, and Msgr. Guido Pozzo, secretary of the Pontifical Commission "Ecclesia Dei."

The SSPX statement said that Fellay listened to Levada's "explanations and clarifications" and offered the cardinal an explanation of the "doctrinal difficulties" that Vatican II and the subsequent reform of the Mass present for the traditionalists.

"The desire for further clarifications could lead to a new phase of discussions," the SSPX said.

A few hours before the society released its statement, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, told reporters that "the ball is in the society's court" to accept the Vatican's response and clarifications.

During the Wednesday meeting, Fellay was given the Holy See's evaluation -- including the opinion of Pope Benedict XVI -- of the society's April response to a "doctrinal preamble" that the bishop would need to sign in order to reconcile the society with the rest of the church, the Vatican said in a statement.

"The subsequent discussion offered an opportunity to provide the appropriate explanations and clarifications" on both sides, it said. "Bishop Fellay illustrated the current situation" of the society and promised to give the Vatican a response "within a reasonable lapse of time," the Vatican said.

Also, Fellay was given a draft document "proposing a personal prelate as the most appropriate instrument for any future canonical recognition of the society," it said.

A personal prelate is a church jurisdiction without geographical boundaries designed to carry out particular pastoral initiatives. It is headed by a prelate, who is appointed by the pope; currently the church's only personal prelate is Opus Dei.

When asked whether giving Fellay a formal proposal of a prelate was a sign the Vatican had approved the bishop's response to the doctrinal preamble, Lombardi told journalists that all doctrinal differences had to be resolved before any formal recognition could be made.

"However, evidently [the prelate proposal] was presented so that if the doctrinal issue is resolved, the

canonical part is ready," he said.

The discussion process is "still open," the Vatican spokesman said, but it seems the Vatican and the SSPX are "drawing closer to agreement in the formulation and presentation of the doctrinal questions" at hand.

The Vatican statement said, "The hope was expressed that this additional opportunity for reflection would also contribute to reaching full communion between the Society of St. Pius X and the Apostolic See."

Lombardi said the Vatican is showing its willingness and availability to reach an agreement, but that now it is up to Fellay to respond to the Vatican's position.

The Vatican spokesman said the society would be holding its general chapter in July, which would be "an occasion for reflection and exchange" of ideas concerning its next step.

The statement reiterated that the Vatican would be dealing with the society's three other bishops "separately and singularly," and Lombardi confirmed that only Fellay was actively engaged in discussions with the Vatican.

While Fellay has been generally positive about the possibility of reconciliation with Rome, leaked letters show that the society's three other bishops have had strong objections to such a move.

Pope Benedict's recent efforts to bring about reconciliation with the traditionalist group began when he lifted the excommunications incurred by Fellay and the three other SSPX bishops after they were ordained without papal permission. The pope also established a Vatican committee for doctrinal talks with society representatives in 2009. In September, the Vatican gave Fellay the "doctrinal preamble" to explain the "minimal, essential" elements on which the society would have to agree for full reconciliation, Lombardi had said.

When the Vatican's doctrinal discussions with the society began in 2009, both sides said the key issues to be discussed included the concept of tradition in general, as well as the Second Vatican Council's teaching on the liturgy, the unity of the church, ecumenism, interreligious dialogue and religious freedom.

The society's founder, the late French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who rejected some teachings of the Second Vatican Council and the modernizing reforms instituted in its wake, was excommunicated for ordaining Bishop Fellay and the three other bishops without papal permission in 1988.

In April, Fellay submitted to the Vatican his second official response to the "doctrinal preamble" outlining what the Vatican said were "some doctrinal principles and criteria for the interpretation of Catholic doctrine necessary to guarantee fidelity" to the formal teaching of the church, presumably including the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

The bishop's reply was studied by the cardinal-members of the doctrinal congregation and, ultimately, by Pope Benedict.

The cardinals and the pope had said Fellay's first response, which was submitted in January, was "not sufficient to overcome the doctrinal problems that are at the basis of the fracture between the Holy See and the society."

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