

New man summoned to rein in traditionalists

Robert McClory | Jul. 2, 2012 NCR Today

The Holy Father's determination to bring traditionalist Catholics back into union with Rome appears to have no limits. The Vatican's latest overture of reunion to the Society of St. Pius X was rejected in mid-June. The society's superior general, Bishop Bernard Fellay, said he could not sign the offer, which was labeled "clearly unacceptable." This comes after three years of negotiations between the Vatican and the society, whose ongoing problem is Vatican II itself, especially its positions on liturgy, religious freedom, ecumenism and anti-Semitism. Its members seek a firm, unmoving, authoritarian church.

So what does Pope Benedict XVI do in the face of the umpteenth turn-down by this breakaway group? He has appointed Bishop Joseph Augustine Di Noia, secretary for the Congregation for Worship, to a new post as vice president of the Pontifical Commission "Ecclesia Dei" to keep working for a solution. The step was taken, said a Vatican statement, because of Benedict's "pastoral solicitude for traditionalist Catholics in union with the Holy See and his strong desire for the reconciliation of traditionalist communities not in union."

Di Noia was upbeat about the potential for solution.

"It is possible," he said, "to have theological disagreements while remaining in communion with the see of Peter. Part of what we're saying is that when you read the documents of Vatican II, you can't read them from the point of view of some liberal bishops who may have been participants at the council. You have to read them at face value. Given that the Holy Spirit is guiding the church, the documents cannot be in discontinuity with tradition." Uh oh!

I would like to inquire, who will decide what "face value" is in this case and what counts as "discontinuity with tradition"? Di Noia assures us from the start it will not be "some liberal bishops" who just happened to be at Vatican II. There's so much spin in those few words that I'm left reeling.

And who is Joseph Augustine Di Noia anyway? His name comes up regularly when there's a dispute about tradition and liturgy, usually on the side of the narrowest interpretation. He earned some notoriety some 17 years ago in 1995, when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (headed at the time by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) declared that women's exclusion from the priesthood "has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary universal magisterium." It was immediately noted by theologians that this may be the opinion of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, but no congregation is empowered to decide on its own authority what is infallible and what is not. Di Noia disagreed, arguing that the congregation's assessment was correct. He stepped in and offered a solution. Since reasons for the exclusion of women from ordination "are not accessible" to historical or scriptural proof, he said, the church must find "better reasons" to support the ban. He challenged Catholic theologians "to develop the kind of consensus that will catch up with the church's teaching about this mystery."

In other words, Di Noia said, since neither scripture nor tradition nor reason can make a firm case, the exclusion of women has finally been established by naked authority -- and would you theologians get together and provide

us with some reasons to back up what we've already decided?

With Di Noia in charge, I predict the prodigal Society of St. Pius X, with its entrenched opposition to Vatican II intact, will be back soon in the father's embrace, the fatted calf will be on the grill, and the ongoing disassembly of Vatican II will be one big step nearer to completion.

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