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SSPX head says Vatican sent mixed messages during reconciliation talks

Carol Glatz Catholic News Service | Jan. 4, 2013
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The head of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X said he has been receiving mixed messages from the Vatican for years over if and how the group might be brought back into full communion with the church.

Bishop Bernard Fellay, superior general of the society, claimed that top Vatican officials told him not to be discouraged by official statements from the Vatican, because they did not reflect Pope Benedict XVI's true feelings.

The Vatican press office declined to comment on the claims.

According to an audio recording posted Dec. 30 on YouTube, the bishop gave a nearly two-hour talk Dec. 28 at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Academy in New Hamburg, Ontario. He spoke about the society's three years of discussions with the Vatican over the society's future and explained how he interpreted behind-the-scenes communications about the talks.

Apparently speaking without a text, he also called the Jewish people "enemies of the church," saying Jewish leaders' support of the Second Vatican Council "shows that Vatican II is their thing, not the church's."

Those most opposed to the church granting canonical recognition to the traditionalist society have been "the enemies of the church: the Jews, the Masons," he said.

There was no response Friday from the society's Swiss headquarters to a Catholic News Service email request for comment.

Pope Benedict launched a series of doctrinal discussions with the SSPX in 2009, lifting excommunications imposed on its four bishops, who were ordained in 1988 without papal approval, and expressing his hopes they would return to full communion with the church.

In 2011, the Vatican gave SSPX leaders a "doctrinal preamble" to sign that outlines principles and criteria necessary to guarantee fidelity to the church and its teaching; the Vatican said the SSPX leaders would have to sign it to move toward full reconciliation.

But Fellay said he repeatedly told the Vatican that the contents of the preamble -- particularly acceptance of the modern Mass and the council as expressed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church -- were unacceptable.

He said the only reason he continued discussions with Vatican officials was because others "very close to the pope" had assured him that the pope was not in agreement with hard-line official pronouncements from the Vatican.

According to Fellay, retired Colombian Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos, then-president of the Pontifical Commission "Ecclesia Dei," the office responsible for relations with traditionalist Catholics, had told him in March 2009 that the society would be formally recognized.

When the bishop asked how that could be possible when recognition hinged on accepting the teachings of Vatican II, he said the cardinal replied that such a requirement was only "political" and "administrative" and that, "by the way, that is not what the pope thinks."

Bishop Fellay said he continued to get similar messages from other Vatican officials, even as the formal talks continued. The verbal and written messages were very credible, he said, because they came from officials who saw the pope "every day or every two days."

He said he wouldn't give names, but he did claim "the secretary of the pope himself" was among those who told him not to worry too much about hard-line Vatican positions.

Even if the doctrinal congregation ruled against the society, he claimed the secretary told him, the pope "will overrule it in favor of the society."

"So, you see, I got all of these kinds of messages which were not fitting together," Fellay said. "I got an official thing where I clearly have to say 'no' and I got other messages -- which are not official, of course -- but which say, 'No, that's not what the pope wants.'"

The unofficial assurances were what kept him engaged in talks, he said, since the Vatican's official demands, which carried the pope's approval, "would mean the end of our relation with Rome."

The Vatican has not made the preamble public, but said it "states some doctrinal principles and criteria for the interpretation of Catholic doctrine necessary to guarantee fidelity" to the formal teaching of the church, including the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, and that it leaves room for "legitimate discussion" about "individual expressions or formulations present in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the successive magisterium" of the church.

Fellay said Pope Benedict wrote to him, emphasizing that full recognition required the society accept the magisterium as the judge of what is tradition, accept the council as an integral part of tradition and accept that the modern Mass is valid and licit.

Fellay said, "Even in the council there are some things we accept," as well as reject, however, the group wishes to be free to say, "there are errors in the council" and that "the new Mass is evil."

The group will not accept reconciliation if it means no longer being able to make such pronouncements, he said.

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