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Archbishop Di Noia urges SSPX to take new attitude in unity talks

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The traditionalist Society of St. Pius X will have a future only if it returns to full communion with the Vatican and stops publicly criticizing the teaching of the pope, said the Vatican official responsible for relations with traditionalist Catholics.

"Surely the time has come to abandon the harsh and counterproductive rhetoric that has emerged over the past years," U.S. Archbishop J. Augustine Di Noia, vice president of the Pontifical Commission "Ecclesia Dei," wrote to members of the SSPX in an Advent letter.

The archbishop's letter was sent several weeks before the SSPX superior, Bishop Bernard Fellay, gave a speech Dec. 28 in Canada in which he described the Jews as enemies of the church and described as "evil" the Mass as reformed by the Second Vatican Council.

In the speech, Fellay reviewed his group's so-far unsuccessful reconciliation talks with the Vatican. He said he had continued the discussions for three years because top Vatican officials told him Pope Benedict's true views were not reflected in official statements demanding the group accept the validity of the modern Mass, the Second Vatican Council as part of tradition and the magisterium (the church's teaching authority) as the judge of what is tradition.

Vatican Radio reported Sunday on the contents of Di Noia's Advent letter and provided links to the full text in both English and French. Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, told the French Catholic newspaper *La Croix* that the letter was a personal appeal from Di Noia.

While Di Noia said in the letter that the Vatican's relations with the SSPX "remain open and hopeful," he also said the Vatican would not and could not continue forever to remain silent when SSPX leaders misrepresent what is taking place in the discussions or publicly reject positions still supposedly being discussed with the Vatican.

"A review of the history of our relations since the 1970s leads to the sobering realization that the terms of our disagreement concerning Vatican Council II have remained, in effect, unchanged," the archbishop wrote.

Di Noia suggested that the focus of future discussions would need to change to avoid "a well-meaning, but unending and fruitless exchange."

Instead of focusing first on specific teachings of the Second Vatican Council and of the popes since the mid-1960s, he said, the starting place must be on God's will that his church be united and on the roles of various ministers and faithful within the church.

"Nothing less than the unity of the church is at stake," he said.

"Our souls need first to be healed, to be cleansed of the bitterness and resentment that comes from 30 years of suspicion and anguish on both sides," he said. But healing also is needed for the "imperfections that have come about precisely because of the difficulties, especially the desire for an autonomy that is in fact outside the traditional forms of governance of the church."

Di Noia also said a serious change of attitude was needed to move from a situation of stalemate toward reconciliation.

Humility must mark the followers of Christ, he said, and Christians must strive to recognize the goodness in others, even those with whom they disagree. "A divisive tone or imprudent statements" must be avoided, patience must prevail and if others need correction, it must be done "with charity, in the proper time and place."

"If our interactions are marked by pride, anger, impatience and inordinate zeal, our intemperate striving for the good of the church will lead to nothing but bitterness," the archbishop wrote.

The unity of the church is of such high value -- theologically and not just practically -- that Catholics are called to work to preserve or recover it "even if it involves suffering and patient endurance."

In order to maintain unity, he said, church members must recognize the rights and responsibilities each person has.

"Even if we are convinced that our perspective on a particular disputed question is the true one, we cannot usurp the office of the universal pontiff by presuming publicly to correct others within the church," Di Noia wrote.

For priests, including those of the SSPX, he said, "it is the faith that should be preached from our pulpits, not the latest interpretation of what we take to be problematic about a magisterial document."

He said the SSPX originally was founded by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and approved by the Vatican "to form priests for the service of the people of God, not the usurpation of the office of judging and correcting the theology or discipline of others within the church."

Theologians do have some room for engaging in a discussion with bishops and the pope about certain church teachings, but it must be done in a respectful way that aims at clarifying the truth, not trying to rally public opinion, said the archbishop, who has served as undersecretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

"It has been a mistake to make every difficult point in the theological interpretation of Vatican II a matter of public controversy, trying to sway those who are not theologically sophisticated into adopting one's own point of view regarding subtle theological matters," he wrote.

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