

Rome Notebook: Lefebvrites, Vatican Bank, and is the hierarchy abusive?

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 14, 2012 NCR Today

ROME -- If I had a nickel for every time reunion between Rome and the breakaway traditionalist Society of St. Pius X was rumored to be imminent over the last 25 years, I wouldn't have to worry about a 401(k) plan for my golden years. As a result, I tend to be naturally skeptical every time a new rumor crops up.

That said, today's Vatican news is that reunion between Rome and the traditionalists may actually be imminent.

On Wednesday, Bishop Bernard Fellay, leader of the Society of St. Pius X, had a meeting with Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which reportedly lasted more than two hours. The agenda was for Fellay to receive the final version of a "doctrinal preamble," a sort of profession of faith, which Fellay has been asked to accept as a condition of reunion.

The Vatican today released a statement indicating Fellay has promised to give his answer "within a reasonable lapse of time."

The contents of the preamble remain secret, but presumably they refer, among other points, to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

An initial version of the preamble was presented to Fellay earlier this spring, to which he submitted a variety of proposed modifications. Yesterday he received the final version, approved by Pope Benedict XVI.

Today's Vatican statement, released in Italian, French and English, also said Fellay was presented with a draft document proposing the creation of a personal prelature, a sort of non-territorial diocese status currently held only by Opus Dei, to incorporate the traditionalists.

Of course, even if Fellay signs on the dotted line, it remains to be seen how many members of the Society of St. Pius X will follow him back in communion. Already the three other bishops of the society have expressed serious reservations, and the Vatican has said their cases will be handled separately.

The most likely scenario, therefore, is that when the dust settles, there will still be a traditionalist body on the outside looking in, presumably still led by validly ordained rebel bishops, but reduced in size and significance because some of its former members and leadership will be back in Rome's good graces.

In other words, there will probably still be room for speculation about when the rift will be completely healed -- and for more metaphorical nickels toward my retirement fund.

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As part of the Vatican's ongoing transparency campaign related to finances, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi today announced that next Friday, a group of 40-50 journalists will be shown around the Institute for the Works of

Religion, better known as the Vatican Bank.

The unusual opening follows a similar recent event for a group of ambassadors accredited to Holy See.

As was the case for the ambassadors, the bank's director, Paolo Cipriani, is expected to offer a detailed slide overview of the bank's structure and operations, and to answer questions. Lombardi stressed it won't be a press conference, but there will be time for Q&A.

Lombardi said there won't be any TV cameras or live feed from the event, because it's designed as a background briefing.

All this, of course, is part of the Vatican's efforts to respond to persistent press reports regarding alleged intrigue in its financial operations, which tend to center especially on the bank, known by its Italian acronym IOR.

Cipriani has recently given an interview to an Italian journalist responding to some of the most common rumors about IOR, such as that it has secret encrypted accounts and that several high-profile Italian politicians are among its depositors. (He denied both.) This will be the first time, however, that IOR has been opened to a group of journalists.

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Civiltà Cattolica is usually described as a "quasi-official" or "semi-official" Vatican organ, because though the bimonthly journal is published and edited by the Jesuits, it's read by the Vatican's Secretariat of State prior to publication.

While that doesn't mean that every word carries a stamp of approval, it does suggest that in a big-picture sense, *Civiltà Cattolica* is usually a reliable guide to the thinking of officialdom.

That makes an essay in the June 16 issue especially interesting, published under the deliberately provocative headline, "Is the Church's Hierarchy Abusive?"

The essay, by Jesuit Fr. Giandomenico Mucci, is not a reflection on specific alleged abuses by the hierarchy, such as its handling of the sexual abuse crisis or the Vatican's recent crackdown on a nuns' group in the States. Instead, Mucci argues that the hierarchy of the Catholic church necessarily attracts scorn and resistance, quite apart from its specific policy choices, because it cannot help but seem "abusive" to the basic presuppositions of the post-modern world.

The result, Mucci asserts, is that the media is fascinated by dissent, and exalts the dissenters as the "true, mature Catholics," as opposed to the church's power structure.

First of all, Mucci claims, the secular mind finds it hard to accept "the central position that the Catholic church and its head continue to occupy in contemporary history, despite all the broadsides launched against them."

Secularism felt it had consigned religion to the sphere of a purely private affair, Mucci argues, and therefore resents the fact that "religion has returned to a protagonist's role all across the West."

That rubs secularists especially wrong, Mucci writes, when it comes to politics: "The secular world has only one non-negotiable value," he says, "which is the secular nature of the state."

Further, Mucci writes, the secular understanding of religion is rooted in two basic philosophical convictions:

- The supreme religious authority is the conscience of the individual, not any institution;
- An empiricist and rationalist understanding of divinity, according to which the transcendent can only be investigated by reason.

In such a mental world, Mucci claims, the hierarchy "can only appear to be a foreign body."

Finally, Mucci says, secular thought can only conceive of the relationship between the hierarchy and the laity of the church in "juridical" terms, along the lines of the relationship between labor and management in the economic sphere.

Secularism, Mucci says, cannot understand a "sacramental" and "communitarian" view of the church, in which the hierarchy and the laity "are equally active, despite the diversity of their roles, in pursuit of common ends."

To be sure, Mucci avoids the question of whether actions by the hierarchy, either historically or of more recent vintage, have contributed to this impasse. His case instead seems to be that even when the hierarchy is on the side of the angels, it's got an uphill fight to be seen that way.

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