

Pope Benedict is taking a huge risk in lifting the SSPX excommunications

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What does the removal of the excommunication of the four Lefebvrist bishops - one of whom is a Holocaust denier - mean for the papacy of Benedict XVI?

I am not going to jump to conclusions. The Pope is *not* endorsing the vile opinions of Bishop Richard Williamson. Nor, so far as I can tell, has he lifted the suspension of these bishops from their ministry.

Clearly, Pope Benedict has come to the conclusion that if the SSPX is to rejoin the mainstream of the Church – still quite a distant prospect - all the bishops consecrated by the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre in 1988 must first be readmitted to communion with Peter.

This is going to be a very hard sell for the Vatican PR machine, not one of the world's best. How does it persuade the Jewish community that this olive branch to Bishops Bernard Fellay, Bernard Tissier de Mallerais, Richard Williamson and Alfonso de Galarreta is not an insult to them?

Williamson is increasingly a loner inside the SSPX, but his fellow bishops have never publicly attacked him for denying the existence of Nazi gas chambers or for affirming the authenticity of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

Yet, on the other hand, I've been surprised by how many Catholics who are not fans of the SSPX believe that this is the right step to take. They do not believe that Richard Williamson will ever exercise ministry as a Roman Catholic bishop: they think he is likely to storm off at some stage in the complicated negotiations that lie ahead.

The Pope is walking a tightrope. He has chosen to do so. He believes that, at the other end, lies the full absorption of the Lefebvrists into the Catholic Church, under Roman discipline. For that to happen, the SSPX will have to make huge concessions - recognising, for example, the validity of the Second Vatican Council (without necessarily endorsing its decisions). Goodness knows how the arrangements will work out in practice. Will the wound be healed or deepened? Most French liberal bishops would refuse to be in the same room as their Lefebvrist counterparts.

This is the biggest risk Pope Benedict has taken in his pontificate so far. He knows that he will provoke a loud outcry from Jewish groups and many Catholics, who will be horrified at any concession to the barking mad Bishop Williamson and his fan club.

Pope Benedict is in some ways an isolated figure, even in the Vatican. Many of his own cardinals do not show him the loyalty he deserves. This decree, signed by Cardinal Re, Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, could increase that isolation. But of one thing we can be sure: Joseph Ratzinger has already factored the hostile reaction into the equation.

Let's wait and see. Tens of thousands of Catholics now appear to be heading back into full communion with the Church. But at what price?

http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/damian_thompson/blog/2009/01/24/pope_benedict_is_taking_a_huge_risk_in_lifting_the_ssp_x_excommunications