

Rome's Reconciliation

Did the Pope heal, or deepen, the Lefebvrist schism?

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What do the Cardinal Richelieu and King Louis XVI, the Bastille and the Reign of Terror, the Bourbons and Robespierre, the revolutionary depredations in the Vendée, the Dreyfus Affair, the anti-clericalism of the French Third Republic, and the World War II Vichy regime have to do with the schismatic movement that the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre led out of the Roman Catholic Church in 1988—a movement that Pope Benedict XVI is now trying to move toward reconciliation by lifting the excommunications of its four illegally ordained bishops on Jan. 21?

In a word: everything.

There are, of course, many different kinds of people in the Lefebvrist movement; the great majority of them are men and women who find the older forms of Catholic piety—especially the Latin Mass celebrated in the Tridentine form—more spiritually beneficial than the reformed liturgy that followed the Vatican Council II (1962-1965). And it is also true that Archbishop Lefebvre, one of the leaders of the anti-reformist faction at Vatican Council II, was very unhappy with what was done to the Church's liturgy after the council.

But Lefebvre was also a man formed by the bitter hatreds that defined the battle lines in French society and culture from the French Revolution to the Vichy regime. Thus his deepest animosities at the council were reserved for another of Vatican Council II's reforms: the council's declaration that "the human person has a right to religious freedom," which implied that coercive state power ought not be put behind the truth-claims of the Catholic Church or any other religious body. This, to Lefebvre, bordered on heresy. For it cast into serious question (indeed, for all practical purposes it rejected) the altar-and-throne arrangements Lefebvre believed ought to prevail—as they had in France before being overthrown in 1789, with what Lefebvre regarded as disastrous consequences for both church and society.

Marcel Lefebvre's war, in other words, was not simply, or even primarily, against modern liturgy. It was against modernity, period. For modernity, in Lefebvre's mind, necessarily involved aggressive secularism, anti-clericalism, and the persecution of the church by godless men. That was the modernity he knew, or thought he knew (Lefebvre seems not to have read a fellow Frenchman's reflections on a very different kind of modernity, Alexis de Tocqueville's "Democracy in America"); it was certainly the modernity he loathed. And to treat with this modernity—by, for example, affirming the right of religious freedom and the institutional separation of church and state—was to treat with the devil.

The conviction that the Catholic Church had in fact entered into such a devil's bargain by preemptively surrendering to the modern world at Vatican Council II became the ideological keystone of Lefebvre's movement. And the result was dramatic: Lefebvrists came to understand themselves as the beleaguered repository of authentic Catholicism—or, as the movement is wont to put it, the Tradition (always with a capital "T"). For 10 years, Pope John Paul II tried to convince the recalcitrant Archbishop Lefebvre otherwise; he got nowhere. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger then tried to mediate. But at the end of the day, Marcel Lefebvre hated modernity more than he loved Rome. So in 1988, rejecting the personal pleas of John Paul II and Ratzinger (men who could hardly be accused, reasonably, of preemptive concessions to modernity), an aging Lefebvre ordained four bishops to carry on his work, without the requisite authorization from Rome. Those four bishops (whose orders, while illegally conferred under church law, are nonetheless valid sacraments in the church's eyes) automatically incurred excommunication by participating in a schismatic act—an act in conscious defiance of church authority that cuts one off from the full communion of the church. It is those excommunications that have now been lifted by Benedict XVI, in an effort to move the Lefebvrist movement toward reconciliation with Rome and toward the restoration of full communion.

That one of the Lefebvrist bishops, Richard Williamson, is a Holocaust denier and a promoter of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" has drawn considerable attention and commentary, particularly from Jewish scholars and religious leaders who have made large investments in Jewish-Catholic dialogue since Vatican Council II. Their concern is entirely understandable, although it has to be said that the lifting of Williamson's excommunication in no way constitutes a papal endorsement of Williamson's lunatic view of history, or a retraction of John Paul II's 1998 statement deploring the Holocaust, or a revocation of Vatican Council II's teaching on the sin of anti-Semitism. At the same time, it ought to be recognized that Williamson's Holocaust denial and his embrace of a crude anti-Semitic canard like the "Protocols" is not all that surprising, given that Lefebvrist political ideology grew out of the same French fever swamps that produced the anti-Dreyfusards. (Even as it ought to be recognized that the hypersecularists of the Third French Republic hated Catholics as much as some anti-Dreyfusards hated Jews.)

Williamson's inanities, while deplorable and disgusting, are something of a sideshow, however. For the highest stakes in this drama have into view when Bishop Bernard Fellay, the current head of the Lefebvrist movement, issued a Jan. 24 letter on the lifting of the excommunications to the movement's faithful. It is an astonishing document, declaring as it does that "Catholic Tradition is no longer excommunicated" and that the Lefebvrists constitute those "Catholics attached to Tradition throughout the world." The letter goes on to affirm "all the councils up to the

Second Vatican Council about which we express some reservations." And it implies that the talks that will now commence between the Vatican and the Lefebvrists, now that the excommunications have been lifted, will focus on those "reservations."

Responsible canon lawyers have raised questions about whether this arrogance on the part of Bishop Fellay does not cast into question his fulfillment of the canonical requirements for a lawful lifting of his excommunication. In any event, non-canonists will read his letter as Fellay's unilateral declaration of victory: the Lefebvrists have been right all along; the Holy See has finally recognized the error of its ways; the only things left to discuss are the terms of surrender. Ironically, but hardly coincidentally, the Catholic left (which has been clever enough to avoid formal schism while living in intellectual and psychological schism since Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical on family planning, *Humanae Vitae*) has welcomed Benedict XVI's canonical rescue of the Lefebvrist bishops, with numerous left-leaning Catholic dissidents now saying, in effect, "Where's *my* bailout?"

Benedict XVI undoubtedly intended this lifting of excommunications as a step toward healing a wound in the church. Bishop Fellay's letter, in response to the pope's gesture, suggests that the healing has not taken place. Moreover, Fellay's letter raises the stakes for everyone, and to the highest level. For what is at issue, now, is the integrity of the Church's self-understanding, which must include the authenticity of the teaching of Vatican Council II.

Father Federico Lombardi, SJ, the pope's spokesman, emphasized to reporters on Jan. 24 that the lifting of the excommunications did not mean that "full communion" had been restored with the Lefebvrists. The terms of such reconciliation are, presumably, the subject of the "talks" to which Bishop Fellay referred in his letter. Those talks should be interesting indeed. For it is not easy to see how the unity of the Catholic Church will be advanced if the Lefebvrist faction does not publicly and unambiguously affirm Vatican Council II's teaching on the nature of the church, on religious freedom, and on the sin of anti-Semitism. Absent such an affirmation, pick-and-choose cafeteria Catholicism will be reborn on the far fringes of the Catholic right, just when it was fading into insignificance on the dwindling Catholic left, its longtime home.

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