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Rome and St Pius X: the stages of an agreement that was always rejected

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The announcement of the episcopal consecrations of the Priestly Fraternity of St Pius X has once again sparked excitement online. Several articles on the *Daily Compass* have already attempted to explain why these consecrations would constitute an act of

schism, a judgement previously given by the Holy See in 1988 with regard to the upcoming consecrations. Perhaps readers can gain a better understanding of the 'Lefebvrian phenomenon' by retracing the history of the relationship between the Society and the Holy See, learning about the current FSSPX leadership, and becoming aware of some of its highly problematic positions. If these are accepted 'as is', they would cause further confusion and division in the Church. Three themes, three articles.

Let us begin with the years leading up to the first break in 1988. Exasperated by the scandal of the interreligious meeting in Assisi in 1986 and disappointed by the Holy See's cold and sparse response to his dubia concerning religious freedom in 1987, Archbishop Lefebvre decided to publicly announce his intention to consecrate bishops in his homily on 29 June 1987: 'Faced with this darkness in Rome, faced with this refusal to return to truth and tradition, it seems to us that the good Lord is asking the Church to continue. For this reason, it is likely that I will have to ordain bishops before giving an account of my life to the good Lord'.

In response to this announcement, Cardinal Ratzinger invited Archbishop Lefebvre to a meeting at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. During this meeting, Cardinal Ratzinger proposed a juridical structure for the Society that would protect its rightful autonomy, allow it to continue using the 1962 Missal and appoint auxiliary bishops, and enable it to maintain its own seminaries. They also agreed on the forthcoming appointment of a cardinal visitor, who would later turn out to be Cardinal Édouard Gagnon. The cardinal was very open and helpful, and he had a positive impression of the priestly formation offered to seminarians. The apostolic visit had just ended on 8 December 1987 when, on 4 February 1988, Archbishop Lefebvre made the surprising announcement to *Le Figaro* that he still intended to ordain three bishops, with or without the approval of John Paul II.

Archbishop Lefebvre's distrust of 'Rome' was not without reason, given the harsh treatment he had suffered since the legal suppression of the FSSPX. However, it is equally true that Lefebvre was not at all 'soft' in his statements. In his famous Declaration of 21 November 1974, he drew an unbridgeable line in the sand with regard to liturgical reform: 'This reform, having come out of liberalism and modernism, is entirely and completely poisoned; it is born of heresy and ends in heresy, even if not all of its acts are formally heretical. It is therefore impossible for any conscious and faithful Catholic to adopt this reform and submit to it in any way.'

Despite the setback of the *Le Figaro* interview, the Holy See decided to continue negotiations, which culminated in the Protocol of 4 May 1988. The FSSPX was recognised

as a Society of Apostolic Life and granted a commission to oversee its relations with the Apostolic See and other bishops. The problematic points of the Council could also be discussed with the Apostolic See, and the FSSPX was permitted to elect its own bishop. On 5 May, the protocol was signed by both parties. However, the following day, Archbishop Lefebvre sent Cardinal Ratzinger a retraction demanding that the promised bishop be ordained by 30 June of that year. In this way, the French bishop was asking for a sign of the Holy See's sincerity towards the FSSPX.

During a new meeting with Cardinal Ratzinger on 24 May, Archbishop Lefebvre raised the stakes further, demanding not one, but three bishops and a response from the Holy See within a week. On 30 May, Ratzinger informed Lefebvre that the Pope was willing to expedite the normal procedure for the appointment of bishops to allow for the ordination of a bishop by 15 August. Once again, Lefebvre chose not to respond directly to Ratzinger, but instead to present the Holy See with a *fait accompli*: he organised a press conference for 15 June to announce that he would consecrate four bishops on 30 June. Two days later, the Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops, Cardinal Gantin, sent a *monitum* to Archbishop Lefebvre, informing him of the consequences of his actions. On the same day, the Holy See asked all members of the FSSPX to reconsider their position and assured them that measures would be taken to guarantee the Fraternity's preservation of its identity while remaining in communion with the Church.

However, Lefebvre decided to continue on his own path and consecrated four bishops on 30 June 1988. In response, John Paul II issued the *motu proprio Ecclesia Dei adflicta* on 2 July, declaring that 'such disobedience' constituted 'a practical rejection of the Roman Primacy' and was therefore 'a schismatic act'.

Fifteen priests and seminarians, including Abbé Josef Bisig, assistant to the Superior General of the Fraternity, who had previously provided Lefebvre with a study on the impossibility of proceeding with episcopal consecrations against the will of the Pope ([downloadable here](#)), left the Fraternity to return to communion with the Church and establish the Priestly Fraternity of St Peter as a clerical society of apostolic life. Other societies that were also erected include the Fraternity of Saint Vincent Ferrer, founded by Abbé de Blignières; the Opus Mariæ (later the Canons Regular of the Mother of God), founded by Father Wladimir de Saint-Jean; and the Institute of Christ the King Sovereign Priest, founded by Monsignor Gilles Wach and Abbé Philippe Mora. The Benedictine monastery of Le Barroux, founded by Dom Gérard Calvet, was regularised too.

In 1991, three bishops consecrated by Lefebvre and subsequently excommunicated by the Holy See

— Monsignor Tissier de Mallerais, assisted by Monsignors de Galarreta and Williamson — consecrated Licínio Rangel as a bishop. This was done again without the Pope's mandate for the Priestly Union of St John Mary Vianney of Campos in Brazil. Following talks with Cardinal Castrillon Hoyos in 2001, the Holy See established the Union as an Apostolic Administration directly dependent on Rome, with the assurance of episcopal succession.

Relations with the Fraternity were re-established during the pontificate of Benedict XVI, who received Bishop Fellay, then Superior General, in audience just four months after his election. During the meeting, Fellay asked the new pope for clear indications of his openness towards the FSSPX, such as the lifting of excommunications, full freedom for the ancient Roman rite and a canonical structure to accommodate traditionalist Catholics. Subsequent events showed that Benedict XVI granted all three requests. On 7 July 2007, he promulgated the *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum*, and on 21 January 2009 he issued the decree of remission of excommunications. He also opened doctrinal talks with the Society with the aim of reaching an agreement that would give it a canonical structure and re-establish its full communion with the Church. He clarified that until that moment the bishops were not exercising a lawful ministry. Despite facing considerable resistance, Benedict XVI granted everything the FSSPX had requested.

The doctrinal talks began on 27 October 2009 and ended on 11 April 2011. On 14 September 2011, Cardinal Levada submitted a Doctrinal Preamble (which remained officially confidential) and a proposal for an international personal prelate to Bishop Fellay. On 7 October, at the priory in Albano Laziale, Fellay convened the leaders of the Fraternity to present the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's proposals, which were rejected by a majority vote. Instead of signing the Doctrinal Preamble, they asked to sign the Profession of Faith of the Council of Trent with the addition that all the texts of the Second Vatican Council must be accepted in accordance with the anti-modernist oath.

On 16 March 2012, the Holy See asked the FSSPX to sign the Doctrinal Preamble within a month. Meanwhile, on 7 April 2012, the other three bishops of the FSSPX sent a letter to Bishop Fellay, warning the Superior General against accepting any practical agreement. We will discuss this letter in the next article, but mention it here to help the reader understand how the perception of being close to an agreement caused internal opposition within the SSPX to grow, eventually taking control of the Society a few years later.

A series of exchanges took place between the SSPX and the Holy See in an attempt to modify the Preamble Doctrinal. This included the sending of a Doctrinal Declaration by Bishop Fellay, to which the Holy See responded by requesting further modifications. On 30 June, Benedict XVI intervened directly by writing to Fellay and setting out the three essential points for accepting the Fraternity into full communion: 1. Acceptance of the Magisterium as the authentic interpreter of Tradition; 2. Vatican II as part of this Tradition without prejudice to the possibility of discussing the formulation of particular points in its documents; 3. The validity and lawfulness of the *Novus Ordo*.

Opposition to an agreement within the Society was significant, and Fellay was forced to back down to avoid painful divisions within the Society, which nevertheless occurred with the departure of Bishop Williamson and several priests who followed him to form the 'Resistance'. On 14 July, the General Chapter sent a communication to Rome clarifying that any canonical regularisation of the SSPX would require the approval of an extraordinary chapter. Bishop Fellay then blew the final whistle: on 28 August, he met with Bishop Di Noia, then vice-president of *Ecclesia Dei*, to inform him of the withdrawal of the Doctrinal Declaration that Fellay himself had sent to the Holy See.

Part 2 to follow