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When Fellay looked to Rome and feared schism

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Let us start with the letter sent by Msgrs. Alfonso de Galarreta, Tissier de Mallerai and Williamson to Msgr. Bernard Fellay, the then Superior General of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Pius X, and his assistants on 7 April 2012. Although it is a personal letter, it was circulated and posted online on 10 May (here is the [translation](#) in Italian). It was sent at a time when the possibility of an agreement with the Holy See for the regularisation of the

Society seemed very close and concrete.

The three bishops wanted to make their unanimous formal opposition to any such agreement known, i.e. an agreement that did not involve Rome's 'doctrinal conversion' from the deviations of the Council. 'The reality that dominates everything and to which all these sincere desires must yield is that, since Vatican II, the official authorities of the Church have detached themselves from Catholic truth, and today they demonstrate [...] their desire to remain faithful to conciliar doctrine and practice.' To support their position, the bishops cited a conference given by Archbishop Lefebvre in Ecône a few months before his death. In this conference, the prelate argued that [...] "The more one analyses the documents of Vatican II and their interpretation by the Church authorities, the more one realises that these are not just a few errors, but a total perversion of the spirit — a whole new philosophy based on subjectivism! A total perversion!"

Any agreement would have caused the Society to slip 'into a framework of relativistic and dialectical pluralism', which would have silenced its voice of criticism against 'universal apostasy' sooner or later. Once again, Lefebvre's confidence in the four future bishops was called upon when many were pushing for acceptance of the 1988 agreement proposed by the Holy See. This agreement would certainly have given 'ample space for the apostolate, but it would have led to ambiguity and followed two opposite directions at the same time, which would have rotted us from within'.

Based on Lefebvre's position, the three bishops warned the Superior and the Council against 'putting ourselves in the hands of modernists and liberals whose obstinacy we have just witnessed', which would lead the Fraternity 'to a point from which it will no longer be able to change course, to a profound division from which there is no return, and if you conclude such an agreement, it will be subject to powerful destructive influences that it will not be able to withstand'.

These three bishops truly represented the soul of the FSSPX. As we shall see, this soul asserted itself and took back the reins with the election of Fr Davide Pagliarani. Their position was that any agreement must be avoided until 'Rome' converts by condemning the errors of the Council and abandoning all the reforms that followed it, because it would put the Society 'in the hands of the modernists'. A week later, Bishop Fellay **responded**, first highlighting the lack of a supernatural sense and a vision of the Church that is 'too human and even fatalistic'. 'Reading your words, one seriously wonders whether you still believe that this visible Church, whose seat is in Rome, is truly the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ,' he wrote. Fellay admitted that an exaggerated view

of the errors of the Council — considered 'super-heresies' — was gaining ground in the FSSPX, just as the modernists considered it a 'super-dogma', 'the absolute evil, worse than anything else'. 'This is serious,' he added, 'because this caricature is out of touch with reality and will logically lead to a real schism in the future. This fact is one of the reasons that prompted me to respond to Rome's requests without delay.'

The General Council was therefore well aware of the serious problems within the SSPX, namely a misunderstanding of the Church and an exaggerated assessment of the crisis. This would soon lead the Society towards schism, a drift that was perceived as very real. Indeed, Bishop Fellay admitted that responding positively to the Holy See was urgent in order to avoid this drift. On 8 June of the same year, in an [interview](#), Fellay returned once again to the problem: 'What has been happening recently clearly shows some of our weaknesses in the face of the dangers created by the situation in which we find ourselves. One of the greatest dangers is inventing an idealised concept of the Church that has no basis in its real history. Some claim that, in order to work 'safely' within the Church, it must first be cleansed of all error. This is what is meant when it is said that, before any agreement can be reached, Rome must convert; or that, in order to work, errors must first be eliminated.'

However, the General Council acknowledged that this opposition to any practical agreement represented the majority view. In fact, Fellay resigned himself to going to Rome and withdrawing any proposal for an agreement. Bishop Williamson gathered the support of around forty priests from the FSSPX and other religious figures from allied communities to establish the 'Resistance', which currently comprises six bishops, over a hundred priests, several religious communities and thousands of followers worldwide.

Nonetheless, Bishop Williamson was not the biggest problem. With his departure from the Fraternity — not because he opposed the agreement, but because he was acting independently and endangering the internal unity of the FSSPX — it was de Galarreta who became the point of reference for the schismatic line. The Spanish bishop was working to promote the candidacy of his 'heir apparent', Fr Davide Pagliarani. At the meeting of major superiors in 2016, Fr Pagliarani clearly stated the Fraternity's road map for relations with the Holy See. 'Perhaps the time has come to consider the canonical situation of the Fraternity (i.e. its canonical "irregularity") not as an anomaly or an injustice, but as a legal expression consistent with reality: it is simply the impossibility of identifying with the universe and dynamics produced by the Council'. This situation is now understood as 'the state in which Providence itself has placed us'. For 15 years, we

have suffered too much because of the cyclical prospect of 'regularisation' that proves premature each time. This is becoming increasingly clear. Providence seems not to want it.'

The future Superior General went on to illustrate the Fraternity's new strategy, which is characterised by a 'cordial' rejection of any proposal originating from the Apostolic See: 'cordial passivity' towards Roman advances. We must not seek canonical regularisation now, nor push the Pope into a unilateral act [...] In this context, our ultimate goal must be to avoid signing anything doctrinal, including an anti-modernist oath. This may seem exaggerated, but in the current pragmatic context, a signature takes on political significance. It is a step, a sign of returning to the fold, a sign of obedience and a sign of rejecting schism. The objective content of the text is of little importance.' However, to mask the clearly schismatic attitude, it will be necessary to act in such a way as to give the impression of wanting to maintain an open line of communication with Rome. In this respect, theologians from the Fraternity who are sufficiently flexible and able to keep discussions open could be designated (even if they are essentially useless). Discussions are not necessary in order to reach a conclusion: this is the lesson of 2011–12.

At the General Chapter in July 2018, Fr Davide Pagliarani was elected. A few months after his election, the new Superior effectively inaugurated a new course of action, bringing an end to relations with the Holy See that were intended to regularise the Fraternity.

On 22 November, he communicated the reasons for this decision to all the priests, confirming his pre-Chapter position. 'During these seven years, a long process has been undertaken to draft a doctrinal declaration that the Fraternity could sign to demonstrate [...] that it is "truly Catholic". Paradoxically, instead of showing the world that the Fraternity is Catholic, the various versions of this doctrinal declaration would have prevented it from bearing witness to its Catholic faith, particularly due to the requirement to accept the Council and the legitimacy of the *Novus Ordo Missae*. However, even if the Holy See were to propose a solution in the future that was 'acceptable in principle', how could we be sure that it would still be sufficient for our interlocutors the next day?'

The new Superior therefore led the FSSPX towards rejecting any proposals for an agreement, instead opting for a 'theological discussion', aware that 'the Lord does not necessarily ask us to convince our interlocutors, but first and foremost to bear witness to the Church's unconditional faith'. (This text and parts of previous texts are

taken from a document by a former FSSPX priest, Fr Angelo Citati, available here.) In reality, this 'testimony' is a theological beat around the bush with the sole purpose of keeping discussions open and rejecting any offer of regularisation a priori, even if it is acceptable. The 'future schism' feared by Fellay had become a reality.

It is therefore understandable why Fr Pagliarani was annoyed by the Holy See's silence regarding his January 2019 proposals to resume talks, and why he was irritated by Cardinal Müller's conditions for reaching an effective conclusion on 26 June 2017: the Fraternity does not want an agreement, but needs to 'keep discussions open' to continue repeating the refrain: 'We recognise the Pope; we maintain relations with Rome; therefore, we are not schismatic'. As the saying goes, *excusatio non petita, accusatio manifesta*.