

Pope lifts excommunications of Lefebvrite bishops

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI has lifted the excommunication of four bishops ordained against papal orders in 1988 by the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. The move was considered a major concession to the archbishop's traditionalist followers.

The Vatican said the decree removing the excommunication, signed Jan. 21 and made public three days later, marked an important step toward full communion with the Society of St. Pius X, founded by Archbishop Lefebvre in 1970.

It said some questions remain unresolved with the society, including its future status and that of its priests, and that these issues would be the subject of further talks.

"The Holy Father was motivated in this decision by the hope that complete reconciliation and full communion may be reached as soon as possible," a Vatican statement said.

The head of the society, Bishop Bernard Fellay, had requested the annulment of the excommunication in a letter Dec. 15. Bishop Fellay wrote that he and the three other bishops illicitly ordained in 1988 were determined to remain Catholic, and accepted the teachings of Pope Benedict "with filial spirit."

The Vatican said the pope had responded positively to the request in order to promote "the unity in charity of the universal church and succeed in removing the scandal of division."

The decree removing the excommunications, issued by the Congregation for Bishops, underlined the hope that this step would be followed by full communion,

and that all members of the Society of St. Pius X would demonstrate “true fidelity and true acknowledgment of the Magisterium and the authority of the pope.”

The move came after one of the illicitly ordained bishops, British-born Bishop Richard Williamson, provoked Jewish protests with assertions that the Holocaust was exaggerated and that no Jews died in Nazi gas chambers. He spoke in a TV interview recorded last November but aired in mid-January.

The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, said emphatically that the Vatican did not share Bishop Williamson’s views, but that it was a completely separate issue from the lifting of the excommunication.

“Saying a person is not excommunicated is not the same as saying one shares all his ideas or statements,” Father Lombardi said.

The removal of the excommunication was a key condition of the Society of St. Pius X in its on-again, off-again talks with the Vatican over reconciliation. The pope in 2007 granted another of the society’s requests, widening the possibility for use of the Tridentine rite, the form of Mass used before the Second Vatican Council.

Archbishop Lefebvre rejected several important teachings of the Second Vatican Council, including those related to religious liberty, ecumenism and liturgy. The Vatican statements did not mention the council’s teachings, and Father Lombardi had no comment on whether the society was asked to adhere to them.

The Vatican action came the day before the 50th anniversary of Pope John XXIII’s announcement of the Second Vatican Council. Father Lombardi said it would be wrong to see the lifting of the excommunication as a rejection of Vatican II.

“On the contrary, I think it is a beautiful thing that the council is no longer considered an element of division, but as an element in which every member of the

church can meet," he said.

In addition to Bishops Fellay and Williamson, the decree removed the excommunication for French Bishop Bernard Tissier de Mallerais and Argentine Bishop Alphonso de Galarreta. The Vatican said in 1988 that Archbishop Lefebvre and the bishops he ordained had incurred automatic excommunication for defying papal orders against the ordination.