

Regensburg Diocese warns excommunication looms for Lefebvrist priests

OXFORD, England - Officials in the Diocese of Regensburg, Germany, have said plans by the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X to ordain new priests without Vatican consent at a local seminary will lead to their excommunication.

"This will be uncanonical, since they have no entitlement to conduct their own ordinations," said diocese spokesman Jakub Schotz.

"Our bishop is waiting for Rome to advise on how to respond. But it will almost certainly result in the excommunication of the priests and the bishop who ordains them," Schotz said.

The spokesman was reacting to an announcement by the society that it would ordain three priests and three deacons in its seminary at Zaitzkofen in Bavaria June 27, along with another 18 at its headquarters in Ecône, Switzerland, and at Winona, Minn.

In a statement, the Zaitzkofen seminary rector, Father Stefan Frey, said the society now had "provisional legal status" in the Catholic Church pending a "definitive canonical ruling" on its future, and had not been told to "put a stop to ordinations."

He added that the new priests would be ordained by Bishop Alfonso de Galarreta of Spain, "without direct church permission" because of the "grave state of emergency" facing the church. He denied that the move constituted an "affront against the pope."

However, the statement was rejected by Schotz, who told Catholic News Service June 5 the new ordinations would be viewed as "a provocation against the whole Catholic world."

"The society lives by itself in a closed circle, so it poses no danger as such to our

diocese's 630 parishes, which are full of Catholic vitality," said Schotz, whose diocese is one of three in Pope Benedict XVI's former Munich and Freising Archdiocese.

"But everything they say and do shows there's no goodwill to belong to the wider Catholic family," he said. "A Catholic group can only form part of the church by accepting the authority of the pope."

The announcement of the ordinations follows a January decision by Pope Benedict to lift excommunications of the society's four bishops, including Bishop de Galarreta and controversial British-born Bishop Richard Williamson.

In a June 1 Vatican Radio interview, Bishop Gerhard Muller of Regensburg said he had warned the Zaitzkofen seminary the ordinations would violate canon law and create a "dangerous situation," and had asked the Vatican to "prescribe how to proceed."

He added that society members, who are known as Lefebvrists, so-named after their founder, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, appeared unwilling to "face the consequences" of accepting papal authority.

"There can only be one seminary in this diocese," the bishop said. "If they wish to live in communion with the local bishop, as they claim, they must be bound by church discipline." "Although associations are possible within the church, there cannot be a fenced-off community, a church within a church."

In a letter to the world's bishops, made public March 12, the pope said the Society of St. Pius X did not yet have canonical status in the church or exercise a legitimate ministry.

A spokeswoman for the German bishops' conference said June 5 it would be the decision of local bishops to react to the society's actions.