

# A THEOLOGIAN'S QUESTIONS

by John R.T. Lamont

In a communiqué of March 16th 2012, the Holy See has announced that Bishop Bernard Fellay, Superior-General of the Society of St. Pius X, FSSPX, has been informed that the Society's response to the Doctrinal Preamble presented to them by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has been judged to be "not sufficient to overcome the doctrinal problems that are at the basis of the rift between the Holy See and the aforesaid Society" (in the original French of the press release, "n'est pas suffisante pour surmonter les problèmes doctrinaux qui sont à la base de la fracture entre le Saint-Siège et ladite Fraternité.") The press release does not make clear whether this judgment is made on the part of the CDF and approved by the Pope, or is the judgment of the Pope himself. The judgement is the latest step in a process of discussion on doctrinal issues between the CDF and the FSSPX. The nature and seriousness of this judgment raises important questions for a Catholic theologian; the purpose of this article is to ask these questions.

The secrecy of the doctrinal talks in question makes comment on the judgment difficult. The reason for this secrecy is hard to grasp, because the topics of discussion do not concern practical details of a canonical settlement—which would clearly have benefited from confidentiality—but matters of faith and doctrine, that concern not only the parties involved but all believing Catholics. However, enough has been publicly stated about the position of the FSSPX to permit an evaluation of the situation. There are two things that need to be considered here: the rift between the Holy See and the FSSPX that has been produced by the doctrinal problems in question, and the nature of the doctrinal problems themselves.

In a response to a study of the doctrinal authority of the Second Vatican Council by Bp. Fernando Ocáriz, Fr. Jean-Michel Gleize FSSPX has listed the elements of that council that the FSSPX find unacceptable.

"On at least four points, the teachings of the Second Vatican Council are obviously in logical contradiction to the pronouncements of the previous traditional Magisterium, so that it is impossible to interpret them in keeping with the other teachings already contained in the earlier documents of the Church's Magisterium. Vatican II has thus broken the unity of the Magisterium, to the same extent to which it has broken the unity of its object.

"These four points are as follows.

"The doctrine on religious liberty, as it is expressed in no. 2 of the Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, contradicts the teachings of Gregory XVI in *Mirari vos* and of Pius IX in *Quanta cura* as well as those of Pope Leo XIII in *Immortale Dei* and those of Pope Pius XI in *Quas primas*.

"The doctrine on the Church, as it is expressed in no. 8 of the Constitution *Lumen gentium*, contradicts the teachings of Pope Pius XII in *Mystici corporis* and *Humani generis*.

"The doctrine on ecumenism, as it is expressed in no. 8 of *Lumen gentium* and no. 3 of the Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, contradicts the teachings of Pope Pius IX in propositions 16 and 17 of the *Syllabus*, those of Leo XIII in *Satis cognitum*, and those of Pope Pius XI in *Mortalium animos*.

"The doctrine on collegiality, as it is expressed in no. 22 of the Constitution *Lumen gentium*, including no. 3 of the *Nota praevia* [Explanatory Note], contradicts the teachings of the First Vatican Council on the uniqueness of the subject of supreme power in the Church, in the Constitution *Pastor aeternus*."

Fr. Gleize participated in the doctrinal discussions between the FSSPX and the Roman authorities, as did Bp. Ocariz himself. We may reasonably take his statement as a description of the doctrinal points upon which the FSSPX will not compromise, and that are taken by the Holy See to inevitably give rise to a rift.

*Vatican II as the reason for the rift?*

The first question that occurs to a theologian concerning the FSSPX position concerns the issue of the authority of the Second Vatican Council. The article by Bp. Ocariz discussed by Fr. Gleize, which was published in the December 2nd 2011 issue of *L'Osservatore Romano*, seems to claim that a rejection of the authority of Vatican II is the basis for the rift referred to by the Holy See. But for anyone familiar with both the theological position of the FSSPX and the climate of theological opinion in the Catholic Church, this claim is hard to understand. The points mentioned by Fr. Gleize are only four of the voluminous teachings of Vatican II. The FSSPX does not reject Vatican II in its entirety: on the contrary, Bishop Fellay has stated that the society accepts 95% of its teachings. This means that the FSSPX is more loyal to the teachings of Vatican II than much of the clergy and hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

Consider the following assertions of that council:

*Dei Verbum* 11:

"Holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (see John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-20, 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted."

*Dei Verbum* 19:

"The four Gospels just named, whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and

taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up into heaven (see Acts 1:1)."

*Lumen gentium* 3:

"As often as the sacrifice of the cross in which Christ our Passover was sacrificed, is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried on."

*Lumen gentium* 8:

"But, the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element."

*Lumen gentium* 10:

"Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, teaches and rules the priestly people; acting in the person of Christ, he makes present the Eucharistic sacrifice, and offers it to God in the name of all the people. But the faithful, in virtue of their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist. They likewise exercise that priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity."

*Lumen gentium* 14:

"Basing itself upon Sacred Scripture and Tradition, it teaches that the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation. Christ, present to us in His Body, which is the Church, is the one Mediator and the unique way of salvation. In explicit terms He Himself affirmed the necessity of faith and baptism and thereby affirmed also the necessity of the Church, for through baptism as through a door men enter the Church."

*Gaudium et spes* 48:

"By their very nature, the institution of matrimony itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children, and find in them their ultimate crown."

*Gaudium et spes* 51:

"Therefore from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes."

The vast majority of theologians in Catholic institutions in Europe, North America, and Australasia would reject most or all of these teachings. These theologians are followed by the majority of religious orders and a substantial part of the bishops in these areas. It would be difficult, for example, to find a Jesuit teaching theology in any Jesuit institution who would accept a single one of them. The texts above are

only a selection from the teachings of Vatican II that are rejected by these groups; they could be extended to many times the number.

Such teachings however form part of the 95% of Vatican II that the FSSPX accepts. Unlike the 5% of that council rejected by the FSSPX, however, the teachings given above are central to Catholic faith and morals, and include some of the fundamental teachings of Christ himself.

The first question that the communiqué of the Holy See raises for a theologian is thus: why does the rejection by the FSSPX of a small part of the teachings of Vatican II give rise to a rift between that Society and the Holy See, while the rejection of more numerous and important teachings of Vatican II by other groups in the Church leave these groups in good standing and possessed of full canonical status? Rejection of the authority of Vatican II by the FSSPX cannot be the answer to this question; the FSSPX in fact shows more respect for the authority of Vatican II than most of the religious orders in the Church.

It is relevant that the texts of Vatican II that are rejected by the FSSPX are accepted by the groups within the Church that reject other teachings of that council. One might then suppose that it is these specific texts—on religious liberty, the Church, ecumenism, and collegiality—that are the problem. The rift between the Holy See and the FSSPX arises because the Society rejects these particular elements of Vatican II, not because of an intention on the part of the Holy See to defend Vatican II as a whole. The rift does not arise with the groups outside the Society that reject far more of Vatican II, because these groups accept these particular elements. But if this is the case, the first question simply reoccurs with greater force.

#### *Problems with Catholic doctrine?*

If the rift between the Holy See and the FSSPX does not arise from rejection of the authority of the Second Vatican Council by the Society, it could be the case that the rift arises from the doctrinal position of the FSSPX in itself. There are after all two sides to the position of the FSSPX on Vatican II. One side is the claim that certain statements of Vatican II are false and should not be accepted; this is the side that refuses the authority of the council. The other side is the positive description of the doctrines that should be accepted in the place of these supposedly false statements. This latter side is the more important aspect of the debate between the FSSPX and the Roman authorities. After all, the purpose for the existence of magisterial teachings is to communicate true doctrines to Catholics, and their authority over Catholics stems from this purpose. This side of the FSSPX's position consists in positions on the doctrines that Catholics should believe, positions that do not in themselves make claims about the content or authority of Vatican II. We must consider whether these positions can give rise to a rift between the Holy See and the FSSPX.

In judging the doctrinal position of the FSSPX, it must be remembered that there is an essential difference between the position of the FSSPX on Vatican II and the position of those elements within the Church who reject the teachings from *Dei Verbum*, *Lumen gentium*, and *Gaudium et spes* listed above. The latter group simply

holds that certain doctrines of the Catholic Church are not true. They reject Catholic teaching, full stop. The FSSPX, on the other hand, does not claim that the teaching of the Catholic Church is false. Instead, it claims that some of the assertions of Vatican II contradict other magisterial teachings that have greater authority, and hence that accepting the doctrines of the Catholic Church requires accepting these more authoritative teachings and rejecting the small proportion of errors in Vatican II. It asserts that the actual teaching of the Catholic Church is to be found in the earlier and more authoritative statements.

The positive doctrinal position of the FSSPX, then, consists in upholding the teachings of part magisterial pronouncements. The most important of the pronouncements in question are listed by Fr. Gleize: Gregory XVI's encyclical *Mirari vos*, Pius IX's encyclical *Quanta cura* and his *Syllabus*, Leo XIII's encyclicals *Immortale Dei* and *Satis cognitum*, Pius XI's encyclicals *Quas primas* and *Mortalium animos*, Pius XII's encyclicals *Mystici corporis* and *Humani generis*, and the First Vatican Council's Constitution *Pastor aeternus*. These are all magisterial pronouncements of great authority, and in some cases they include infallible dogmatic definitions—which is not the case with the Second Vatican Council itself.

This raises the second question concerning the position of the Holy See on the FSSPX that suggests itself to a theologian: how can there be any objection to the FSSPX upholding the truth of magisterial pronouncements of great authority?

This question really answers itself. There can be no such objection. If the position of the FSSPX on doctrine itself is to be judged objectionable, it must be claimed that this position is not what these magisterial pronouncements actually teach, and hence that the FSSPX falsifies the meaning of these pronouncements. This claim is not easy to sustain, because when these earlier pronouncements were promulgated, they gave rise to a very substantial body of theological work that aimed at their interpretation. The meaning that the FSSPX ascribes to them is derived from this body of work, and corresponds to how these pronouncements were understood at the time they were made.

This fact gives more point and urgency to the third question that occurs to a theologian: what do these pronouncements actually teach, if it is not what the FSSPX say that they teach?

The answer that many will offer is that the real meanings of these pronouncements are given by, or are at least in harmony with, the texts of the Second Vatican Council that the FSSPX rejects. We can accept this answer as true, but that will not help in answering the question. The texts of Vatican II do not offer much explanation of the meaning of these previous pronouncements. For example, *Dignitatis humanae* simply states that its teaching "leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ." This offers no explanation of the content of this doctrine.

The inadequacy of this answer leads to the fourth question, which is: what is the authoritative teaching of the Catholic Church on the points that are in dispute between the FSSPX and the Holy See?

No doubt the doctrinal discussions between these two parties involved an examination of this question, but the confidentiality of these discussions leaves the rest of the Church in the dark on this subject. Without an answer to this fourth question, there is no prospect of an answer to the fifth question, which is: why do the doctrinal positions of the FSSPX give rise to a rift between the Society and the Holy See?

But this fifth question, significant as it is, does not have the importance of the fourth question. The nature of the teaching of the Catholic Church on religious freedom, ecumenism, the Church, and collegiality, is of great importance to all Catholics. The questions raised by the discussions between the Holy See and the FSSPX thus concern the whole Church, not merely the parties to the discussion.

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