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Opening of the Doctrinal Discussions Between Rome and the Society of Saint Pius X

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On Monday, October 26, from 9:30 am until 12:30pm, at the Palace of the Holy Office, the first doctrinal meeting between the Holy See and the Society of St. Pius X took place. Late in the morning, the Vatican Press Office gave a press release, and a little later a correction about the bimestrial rhythm of the next meetings and not bi-monthly as it was erroneously announced previously (see integral text in our Documents section). In the press release, we can note that the list of "the questions of a doctrinal character which must be dealt with and discussed" omits none of the theological problems which raise

difficulties: "the notion of Tradition, the Paul VI missal, the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council in continuity with the Catholic doctrinal Tradition, the themes of the unity of the Church and of the Catholic principles of ecumenism, the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions, and religious liberty."

One point of agreement has already been reached, the observation of full discretion regarding these works which could not be done in the hustle so dear to the media. Actually, at the end of the meeting, the participants went to lunch without making any declaration to the some ten journalists waiting for them outside. The only exclusive "revelation" reported by Vatican observer for *Il Giornale*, Andrea Tornielli was that the theologians were henceforth to "work actively, using the Internet to exchange their viewpoints" until the next meeting scheduled after the Christmas season. Likewise, *La Repubblica* thought it was making a scoop by revealing that during this first meeting the criticism which has been raised by the Society of St. Pius about religious liberty and the relations of the Church with non-Christian religions for more than 40 years came under discussion.

When he met with journalists in the middle of the day Fr. Federico Lombardi, head of the Holy See Press Office, declared: "At last competent and authorized persons discussed doctrinal questions." In his opinion, this first meeting and the next are guided by a "spirit of trust." (DICI n° 204 – 13/11/09 – Sources: vatican.va//Giornale/La Repubblica//media/private sources)

In the Press

For lack of direct information, journalists are reduced to conjecture, surmise, or even to imagine... Some are noticeable for their interesting creativity.

The ex-journalist of *Le Monde*, Henri Tincq, already sees the dusk setting in for traditionalists: "No one is unaware of the crumbling state of integrist Catholic circles today. (...) As years went by, integrist dissidence became a pitiful prey to the deviations customary to any sectarian small group." (Slate.fr, October 25, 2009) He only forgets that he wrote the contrary last year: "The 'Tradis' are still there. Mainly French at the beginning — because of the nationality of Archbishop Lefebvre and the tensions about the modern liturgy in the Hexagon — the phenomenon became worldwide. (...) The seminaries of the Society of St. Pius X, the hard core of the schism, have spread to Germany, Australia, the United States (MN) and Latin America. The generations of priests (some 500) which were trained in them, and the faithful (600,000 according to Vatican sources) are being renewed. They are settled in more than 30 countries. The typically European model of an authoritarian Church, unyielding, anti-ecumenical and anti-modern, dominated by the figure of the holy priest in charge of all that is sacred, became an exported product." (*Le Monde*, July 2, 2008)

Swiss agency Apic spoke of doctrinal discussions which might last for years or even for a century: "Confirming a widely spread impression within the Roman Curia, the Superior of the Society of St. Pius X Bishop Bernard Fellay recently said that, in his opinion, these discussions might be long and might even last 'perhaps a century.' (Apic, October 15, repeated in the October 23 issue under the header: "Years or even a century of discussions?"). This quotation, taken out of its context is to be found in the interview granted by Bishop Fellay in South Africa, on this past September 15: "We have to be realistic. The return, the restoration of the Church will take time. The crisis which is hitting the Church has touched every aspect of the Christian life. To get out of this situation will take more than one generation of constant effort in the right direction. Maybe a century." It is not a matter here of the theological discussions, but of the solution of the crisis which is shaking the Church, and about which, shortly before his election, Cardinal Ratzinger acknowledged that it was like a boat taking in water from every side." — Concerning the length of the discussions themselves, in the same interview Bishop Fellay merely answered: "I have simply no idea about the length of the discussions. It certainly will depend also on the expectations of Rome. They may last quite a while. Because the topics are vast." (See integral text of the interview in DICI n° 203)

Better informed, the journalist in charge of religious matters in *Le Figaro*, Jean-Marie Guénois, recalled the points that the Society wants to be brought up during the discussions and indicated the principles which would guide the Roman experts: "Concretely, what are they going to talk about? Three weeks ago, in South Africa, Bishop Fellay on a visit to the Society houses there summed up the issues causing 'difficulty': 'Religious liberty, ecumenism, collegiality' and 'the influence of modern philosophy, the liturgical novelties, the spirit of the world and its influence upon the modern thinking holding sway in the Church.' A vast program which does not frighten the Roman negotiators. On their part, they rather rejoice that 'at long last' — there has been no such official dealings since 1988 — they will be able to know "the official" position of the Society of St. Pius X concerning all these questions which arose from the Second Vatican Council. They will no longer have it second hand through the many viewpoints given by so and so.

"From very reliable sources, it is added that three principles will guide the talks. The first deals with 'the hermeneutic of continuity' and not of 'rupture' with tradition desired by Benedict XVI for the interpretation of Vatican II. And here there is 'a point of convergence' regarding this will of the Church's reconciliation with her own past. The second principle is more problematic: Rome considers the deposit of the faith 'as a whole.' It does not accept 'a pick and chose' attitude among the teachings of the last council. The third principle will certainly be decisive: it is a matter of 'turning back to the letter of the Second Vatican Council and not to its vulgate.' Plainly speaking, it means working on the original texts and not on their interpretations or simplifications... Consequently, it will be a kind of rereading of the council, during which the experts would clarify the 'meaning of the terms' or the 'ambiguities' so often denounced by the Lefebvrites." (*Le Figaro*, October 20, 2009)

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