

Letter from the Superior General to SSPX Members
("Cor Unum", March 2012)

Dear Members of the Society of Saint Pius X,

As you all know, last autumn was marked by the question of our relations with Rome, in particular by two astonishing events.

The first was the absence of any evaluation by Rome of the doctrinal discussions that had been conducted for two years by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The only thing that was communicated to us was an indirect and unofficial remark to the effect that these discussions had shown that the Society was not attacking any dogma. Officially: nothing. Not one positive word, not one negative word. As if these discussion had not taken place, and even though we had been invited to see Cardinal Levada for the purpose [of an evaluation]. Indeed, the Preliminary Note to the Preamble proposed on September 14 simply mentioned that the discussions have achieved their aim, which was to set forth and to clarify our positions. This amounts, at best, to the establishment of a status quaestionis [state of the question], nothing more. The same Preliminary Note mentions some demands and concerns of the Society with respect to maintaining the integrity of the faith. One might possibly consider that as a hint in our favour. And that is all.

The discussions ended, it is true, somewhat abruptly, the stumbling block being the question of the present-day Magisterium, its relation with Tradition, with the teaching of the Church in past eras, and the development of Tradition. Therefore everything seems to indicate, as far as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is concerned, that these discussions are effectively over.

The second result is the proposal made by that same Congregation: to recognize the Society by granting it a canonical status of personal prelature, provided that we sign an ambiguous document, which we spoke about in the last issue of *Cor unum*. This is surprising, inasmuch as the discussions manifested a profound disagreement on almost all the points that were addressed.

For our part, our experts clearly showed the opposition that exists between the teaching of the Church before the Council, on the one hand, and on the other hand the teaching of Vatican Council II and its aftermath.

For Rome's part, their experts strove to say that we are mistaken, that we unfairly attribute the abuses and errors (which they acknowledge) to the Council, whereas they were due to other causes, since the Church can do no wrong and cannot teach error. We even found ourselves accused of Protestantism, since they say that we set our own reason and judgment above the present-day Magisterium; that we pick and chose what we like in the past so as to set it in opposition to the current Magisterium, whereas it has the responsibility of making present this teaching from the past, for it too is the proximate norm of the faith.

Our experts replied that the deposit of faith that has been entrusted to the Church does not undergo any new enlargement, but only a homogeneous development “in eodem sensu” [“in the same meaning”]. That deposit was completed at the death of the Apostles. We can, however, find a certain progress when an implicit truth is made more explicit, or expressed by a more precise formula. Subjective progress, in other words progress made by believers, certainly exists also, but it is more difficult to define: in principle an adult person should know his faith better than a child. These two forms of progress have been recognized for a long time, since Saint Vincent of Lérins already spoke about them in his *Commonitorium*. And their limits were also set as of that moment. The First Vatican Council did the same. Vatican II, for its part, mixes these two forms of progress and uses extremely imprecise language that can be understood either in the traditional way or in the modern way. The progressives have made ample use of it and have misused it as well.

Thus we have received a proposal that tried to make us enter into the scheme of the hermeneutic of continuity. This asserts that the Council is and must be in perfect harmony with the teaching of the Church throughout the centuries: Vatican II! A traditional Council?

We replied that indeed the Council, and the whole Church, should be in complete harmony with the past teaching, with Tradition. This is a fundamental principle of the Church. Nevertheless, the factual reality contradicts the possibility of any such continuity.

“*Contra factum non fit argumentum.*” [“There is no arguing with a fact.”] How is such a thing possible? It is a mystery! In effect, doesn’t that contradict the promise of divine assistance made by Our Lord for His Church? To all appearances, yes, and this is the great mystery, and we are trying to explain how it could happen by means of distinctions and definitions, while recognizing that the very reality of the crisis it [sic!] itself a great mystery permitted by the good Lord.

For the first time on December 1, and a second time on January 12, we communicated to Rome the fact that it is impossible for us to sign a document that contains such ambiguities. So as not to burn all our bridges, we proposed an alternative, following a line of thought that Archbishop Lefebvre addressed to Cardinal Gagnon in 1987: we agree to be recognized AS WE ARE. It is important not to end all relations and to keep a door open, even though nothing suggests that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith would agree to consider, even remotely, such a perspective.

We just received from that Congregation on March 16 of this year a response to our proposal. It consists of a letter couched in harsh terms in the form of an ultimatum and, of course, a rejection of our document. If we continue to hold our position, in one month we will be declared schismatic because we would de facto be rejecting the current Magisterium. Nevertheless the discussion that followed the delivery of the letter helped us to get a clearer insight into these demands by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

In order to understand clearly the course that we are charting in this new situation, it seems to us advisable to provide you with a few considerations and observations:

1. Our principled position: the faith first and foremost: we intend to remain Catholic and, to that end, to preserve the Catholic faith first of all.
2. The situation in the Church may oblige us to perform acts of prudence relative and corresponding to the concrete situation. The Chapter in 2006 set forth a very clear line of conduct in matters concerning our situation with respect to Rome. We give priority to the faith, without seeking for our part a practical solution BEFORE the doctrinal question is resolved.

This is not a principle, but a line of conduct that should regulate our concrete action. Here we are faced with a syllogism, the major premise of which is the affirmation of the principle of the primacy of the faith so as to remain Catholic. The minor premise is an historical observation concerning the present situation of the Church, and the PRACTICAL conclusion is inspired by the virtue of prudence that regulates human action: no seeking agreement at the expense of the faith. In 2006, heresies continued to spread, the authorities themselves were propagating the modern and Modernist spirit of Vatican II and were imposing it on everyone like a bulldozer (this is the minor premise). It would be impossible to arrive at a practical agreement until they were converted; we would be crushed, torn to pieces, destroyed or subjected to pressures so strong that we could not resist (that is the conclusion).

If the minor premise were to change, in other words, if there was a change in the situation of the Church with respect to Tradition, then that might necessitate a corresponding modification of the conclusion, without any change whatsoever in our principles! Since Divine Providence is expressed through the reality of events, in order to know His will we must attentively watch the reality of the Church, and observe and investigate what is happening within it.

Now there is no doubt that since 2006 we have witnessed a development in the Church, an important and extremely interesting development, although it is not very visible. Nevertheless this development, assisted by measures undertaken by the Supreme Pontiff, albeit timid ones, with regard to the internal life of the Church, is at the same time thwarted by a large majority of the hierarchy, which wants to hear nothing of it. Moreover this attempt at internal renewal is placed under the bushel basket of a constant affirmation of the importance of the Second Vatican Council and of its reforms, in particular those that affect the life of the Church ad extra: her relations with the world, with other religions and with States.

Thus we are witnessing two opposed, unequal movements:

The hierarchy, consisting of persons who made the Council (a generation which today has almost disappeared) and of those who applied the Council, who made the transition from the pre-conciliar Church – which was traditional but already partially characterized by an appetite for novelties – to the conciliar or post-conciliar Church, with its infatuation for novelty and the subsequent catastrophe. For the most part they do not want to go back; perhaps some of them will concede that there have been abuses, etc., or even a crisis, but the cause of them could never be the Council.

On the other hand, the subsequent generations look at these facts in a different light. They do not have that visceral emotion bond with a Council that they themselves did not experience. They know even less about the pre-conciliar period. Some members of those generations, more than you might think, do not even know that there used to be another rite. What they see is an extremely sad decadence and very little reason for enthusiasm, while they experience frustration and profound disillusionment: convents are closing, the lack of vocations has its consequences everywhere, and the churches are empty. Not having received correct, sound doctrine, they do not know what they have lost, but when they discover something of it through contact with Tradition, then they are filled with great bitterness, they feel betrayed and deprived of this immense treasure. This movement is manifestly growing almost everywhere in the world, especially among young priests and seminarians. It eludes the hierarchy – in part – which tries somehow or other to nip in the bud this desire for and trend toward a restoration of the Church.

The few steps taken by Benedict XVI in this direction, official acts ad intra that affect the liturgy, discipline and morality, are therefore important, even though their application leaves something to be desired.

We find some elements of this movement, however, even among young bishops, some of whom clearly but discreetly express to us their sympathy or even their fundamental agreement: “Hold fast, keep going, remain as you are, you are our hope....” These are no longer rare words on the lips of bishops that we meet.

It may be in Rome that these things are more manifest! We now have friendly contacts in the most important dicasteries, and also in the Pope’s entourage!

As we see this situation, we think that the efforts of the aging hierarchy will not succeed in stopping this movement that has begun – a movement that desires and hopes for the restoration of the Church, although still in a rather muddled way. Even though the return of a “Julian the apostate” cannot be ruled out, I do not think that the movement can be stopped.

If this is true, and I am convinced of it, this requires that we take up a new position with respect to the official Church. Quite obviously we must support this movement with all our strength, and possibly to guide and enlighten it. This is precisely what many people expect of the Society.

This is the context in which it is advisable to ask the question about some form of recognition of the Society by the official Church. This is not a question of our applying for an identity card that we already have! Nor is it a matter of a false complex or feeling that we are consigned to a “ghetto”. It is a question of a supernatural view of the Church and the fact that she remains in the hands of Our Lord Jesus Christ, although she is disfigured by her enemies. Our new friends in Rome declare that the impact of such recognition would be extremely powerful on the whole Church, as a confirmation of the importance of Tradition for the Church. However, such a concrete realization requires two absolutely necessary points in order to assure our survival:

The first is that no concessions affecting the faith and what follows from it (liturgy, sacraments, morality, discipline) may be demanded of the Society.

The second is that a real liberty and autonomy of action should be granted to the Society, and that these freedoms should allow it to live and to develop in concrete circumstances.

Humanly speaking, we doubt that the current hierarchy is disposed to accept these stipulations. But a number of very serious indications oblige us to think that nevertheless Pope Benedict XVI may be ready to do so.

The Church today is so debilitated, the hierarchy so divided, that we do not think that the bulldozer approach is still possible. On the contrary, we are gaining ground every day, even in our present situation, although many still denounce it as being schismatic.

Let it be understood that we have ruled the possibility of our embarking on an alliance that would consist of swallowing the conciliar poison and compromising our positions. That is absolutely not what we are talking about.

Nevertheless, considering the lessons of Church history, we see that the saints, with much moral courage and a strong faith, brought back souls that had gone astray in terrible situations of crisis, with much mercy (and firmness), without falling into a reprehensible excess of rigidity, as was the case with the Donatists, for example, or with Tertullian. Notwithstanding the difficulties, the saints did not refuse to work with and in the Church, in spite of the Arian occupation (for example) and the numerous Arian bishops still in office.

Let us learn the lessons of this History, by considering the admirable equilibrium of our venerated founder, Archbishop Lefebvre, a balance of strength, faith and charity, of missionary zeal and love for the Church.

Concrete circumstances are what will show when the time has arrived to “take the step” towards the official Church. Today, despite the Roman overture of September 14, and because of the conditions that have been set, this still seems impossible. When the good Lord wills it, that time will come. Nor can we rule out the possibility that a swift resolution will be reached, because the pope seems to be throwing all his weight into this matter. As for us, let us remain very faithful and anxious to please God alone. That is enough; He will guide our steps safely, as He has done since the foundation of the Society.

We entrust and consecrate again our dear Society to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, who is terrible as an army set in battle array. As a good Mother, she deigns to protect us, to guide us in the midst of so many dangers, until the victory: her triumph on earth and our salvation in heaven!

Wishing you an end of Lent and an Easter season filled with graces, I give you my blessing.

+Bernard Fellay

Laetare Sunday, March 18, 2012