

Vatican finger-pointing in Holocaust controversy: Richard Williamson and the Society of St. Pius X

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After two weeks of international outcry over the pope's decision to readmit a Holocaust-denying bishop, the Vatican's top leaders were still engaged in an extraordinarily severe—and rare—round of public criticism.

Jewish groups were outraged when Pope Benedict XVI lifted the 1988 excommunications of Bishop Richard Williamson and three other bishops in the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X (SSPX) on January 21.

Williamson had recently told Swedish television that at most 300,000 Jews “perished in Nazi concentration camps . . . not one of them by gassing in a gas chamber.”

Yet it took a full week after Williamson's remarks became public for Benedict to publicly condemn the Nazi genocide of “millions of Jews” and express his “full and indisputable solidarity” with the Jewish people. Still another week passed before the Vatican demanded that Williamson recant “in an absolute and unequivocal way” his statements on the Holocaust—a demand to which the bishop responded with a letter to the Vatican apologizing for the “distress and problems” he has caused. However, he did not recant, saying only that he would reconsider the evidence about the Holocaust.

On February 5, none other than the pope's chief spokesperson declared that the Vatican had mishandled the matter.

If the Vatican had condemned Williamson's views at the same time it lifted his excommunication, “we would have saved ourselves many days of passion,” Federico Lombardi told the French newspaper *La Croix*. “We never had control of that message,” he said.

Lombardi concluded that the Vatican's errors in handling the controversy reflect a systemic defect. "I think that a culture of communication still remains to be created in the Curia," he said, referring to the church's international government at the Vatican.

As if to prove his point, a high Vatican official on the same day departed from the solemn approach that church leaders from Benedict on down have taken to the crisis. Williamson's Holocaust denials amount to a "silly remark" that needs to be "put in proportion," said Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán, head of the Vatican health care office.

"To make a silly remark is a sin, but not all sins entail excommunication, only the gravest sins," such as abortion, the cardinal told the Argentinean newspaper *La Nación*.

According to Thomas J. Reese, author of *Inside the Vatican*, Lozano Barragán's remarks reflect a characteristic failure of church leaders to stay "on message." Unlike the White House or an American political campaign, the Vatican does not even try to orchestrate its senior officials' statements to the press, Reese said. "They just don't think that way."

Fault-finding in the Williamson case has extended beyond the public relations debacle to the decision-making process itself: How could the pope not know about Williamson's remarks, much less the furor they would create?

"There were misunderstandings and management errors in the Curia," Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Vatican's top ecumenical official, told Vatican Radio February 2.

A February 4 statement from the office of Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who as secretary of state is the Vatican's No. 2 official, noted that Benedict had not known of Williamson's inflammatory remarks before he readmitted him to the church. The clear implication was that someone had neglected to do the proper vetting.

Others have been more precise in assigning blame. Cardinal Karl Lehmann of Mainz, Germany, placed the blame with Cardinal Darío Castrillón Hoyos, who runs the Vatican office in charge of dealing with the SSPX and other disaffected traditionalist groups, and demanded "consequences for those who are responsible" for what he called a "catastrophic" decision.

Vatican spokesperson Lombardi said pointedly February 5 that “if someone should have known” about Williamson’s record, “it was Cardinal Castrillón.”

Reese, former editor of the Jesuit-run magazine *America*, said he could recall no other case of a Vatican spokesperson criticizing a cardinal by name in such a way. Yet however blame ought to be assigned, Reese said, Benedict is ultimately responsible for the mistakes of underlings he himself chose.

“Popes need people who will argue with them,” he said. “Benedict is a very smart man surrounded by people who are not as smart as he is, and who are therefore afraid to challenge his ideas and inclinations.”

In later developments, Williamson was dismissed as head of the Argentinean seminary of his SSPX religious order, and his views prompted German chancellor Angela Merkel to express her concern to Pope Benedict.

The seminary said Williamson “in no way [reflects its] position,” adding that “a Catholic bishop cannot speak with ecclesiastical authority except on matters concerning faith and morality.”

A joint statement from Merkel and the Vatican on February 8 described the conversation as “cordial and constructive, marked by a common and deep awareness of the always-valid warning of the Shoah for humanity.” (*Shoah* is the Hebrew term for the Holocaust.) She had publicly said earlier that she felt the pope had not been sufficiently clear in rejecting Holocaust denial. –*Religion News Service*