

Traditionalist SSPX leader calls Jews 'enemies of the church'

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The Vatican reaffirmed its commitment to dialogue with Jews on Monday (Jan. 7) after the head of a traditionalist breakaway group called them "enemies of the Church."

The Vatican chief spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, said that it was "meaningless" and "unacceptable" to label Jews as "enemies" of the Catholic Church.

"Both Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessor John Paul II personally engaged in dialogue with Jews," he said. As a sign of their commitment, Lombardi noted the two popes' visits to Jerusalem's Western Wall, Judaism's most sacred site, and to synagogues in Rome and elsewhere.

The Vatican reassurance came after Bishop Bernard Fellay, head of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X (SSPX), said on Dec. 28 that "the enemies of the Church: the Jews, the Masons, the modernists" were opposing the group's reconciliation with the church.

Fellay assessed the status of relations between the SSPX and the Vatican in a long speech at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Academy in New Hamburg, Ontario. The audio of the speech was posted on YouTube on Dec. 30.

At Benedict's prompting, the Vatican in 2009 opened talks to repair the decades-long breach with the SSPX, focusing on the group's rejection of the modernizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which revolutionized the church's relations with Judaism.

Anti-Semitic strains within the SSPX have been a major headache for the Vatican; shortly after Benedict lifted the 1988 excommunications of four SSPX bishops, it emerged that one of the bishops, Richard Williamson, was a vocal denier of the Holocaust.

In a statement, the American branch of the SSPX dismissed the "false accusations of anti-Semitism or hate speech" made against the group.

It said the SSPX leader used the word "enemies" as a "religious concept," referring to "any group or religious sect which opposes the mission of the Catholic Church and her efforts to fulfill it: the salvation of souls."

"Fellay's comment was aimed at the leaders of Jewish organizations, and not the Jewish people, as is being implied by journalists," the group said.

On Monday, Lombardi stressed that he was not directly responding to Fellay's words but merely restating the church's official position on relations with Jews, which dates to the Second Vatican Council. He declined to comment on the potential impact of Fellay's words on the dialogue between the Vatican and the SSPX.

The dialogue is currently stalled as the Vatican awaits the SSPX's response to a reconciliation offer submitted last June. Leaked SSPX documents slammed the proposal as "clearly unacceptable," but the Vatican signaled in October that it is willing to give the traditionalists "additional time for reflection and study."