

Bishop's remarks on Holocaust strain US Jewish-Catholic relations

WASHINGTON - Strained Jewish-Catholic relations are being felt beyond the Vatican and Israel as U.S. rabbis express their displeasure with Pope Benedict XVI's decision to lift the excommunication of a traditionalist bishop who has minimized the severity and extent of the Holocaust.

"It has been very hurtful to our Jewish partners," said Father James Massa, executive director of U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. "They've been calling us for answers for what this means. The mood is very tense."

The Chief Rabbinate of Israel Jan. 27 postponed indefinitely a March meeting with the Vatican in protest over the pope lifting the excommunication of British-born Bishop Richard Williamson, who has claimed that reports about the Holocaust were exaggerated and that no Jews died in Nazi gas chambers

He was one of four bishops of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X whose excommunication was lifted by the pope Jan. 21.

The pope Jan. 28 renewed his "full and unquestionable solidarity" with the Jews and condemned all ignorance, denial and downplaying of the brutal slaughter of millions of Jewish people during the Holocaust.

According to a letter posted on his blog Jan. 30, Bishop Williamson apologized to Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos for "having caused to yourself and to the Holy Father so much unnecessary distress and problems." Cardinal Castrillon heads the "Ecclesia Dei" commission, which oversees the reconciliation of Lefebvrite Catholics with the church.

"Bishop Williamson's disgraceful remarks ... indicate his contempt for those who oppose his advocacy of Holocaust denial," said Rabbi Gary Greenebaum, the American Jewish Committee's U.S. director of interreligious affairs.

“While we appreciate that Pope Benedict has again declared his support for the Jewish people and his rejection of Holocaust denial,” he continued, “we fear that the Vatican’s decision to invite (Bishop) Williamson back into the Catholic Church will give legitimacy to these outrageous lies and suggest toleration of those who perpetuate them.

“Doubtless, this will contribute to the deterioration of the excellent relations between Jews and the Catholic Church,” the rabbi said in a statement.

The entire ordeal has created a lot of confusion, Father Massa told Catholic News Service Jan. 29.

There is a difference between the lifting of excommunication and being in full communion with the Catholic Church, he said.

“Removing excommunication doesn’t mean they are fully reconciled as priests and bishops of the Catholic Church,” Father Massa said. “Like any other Catholic, they can go to Mass and receive holy Communion, but they cannot perform the sacrament themselves as fully recognized ministers of the church.”

The pope said he lifted the excommunication of the four traditionalist bishops with the hope they would take further steps toward unity, including the recognition of the authority of the pope and of the Second Vatican Council.

In 1988 French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre – the founder of the Swiss-based Society of St. Pius X – and the bishops he ordained incurred automatic excommunication for defying papal orders against their ordination.

“In no way am I excusing (Bishop) Williamson,” Rabbi Bradley Hirschfield, president of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, said in a Jan. 26 blog.

“But I am willing to entertain that however much pain his reinstatement might cause relative to this issue,” he said, “it may not be the only basis upon which the pope should make his decision, nor should it govern the future of church-Jewish relations, as some have already suggested/threatened it will.”

Though Jewish-Catholic relations in the U.S. may be strained at the moment,

Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory of Atlanta, chairman of the USCCB's Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, said the foundation is solid and he is confident they will forge ahead with friendships intact.

"We (Catholics) are embarrassed during this episode, like when a family member has said a shameful thing," Archbishop Gregory told CNS Jan. 30.

"We'll have to take those steps necessary to let them know we value those (Catholic-Jewish) relationships, as well as our bond, love and unity with our Jewish counterparts," he said, "and that we don't in any way indent to step aside from our great tradition of friendship in this country."

The archbishop noted he was to speak at an upcoming Jewish event in his city that he already had on his calendar, and he planned to take that opportunity to assure the Jewish community he will do whatever he can to reinforce Catholic-Jewish relations.

"That is what many bishops in America will have to do - to take that opportunity to let them know of our esteem, and strengthen our relations," he said. "The vehicles are there. We need to use them. We need to show our Jewish friends our desire to continue to move forward."

It is important now for the Catholic hierarchy to explain theological and canonical distinctions to their Jewish partners, and assure them of the church's commitment to Jewish-Catholic dialogue based on Vatican II, Father Massa said.

"We are expressing our profound dissatisfaction with the egregiously offensive comments of Bishop Williamson," he said. "It is unacceptable for a bishop who seeks to be in communion with the Catholic Church to deny the historical fact of the Shoah."