

Chain of command: Miscues highlight need for curial consultation

VATICAN CITY - A pair of recent miscues at the Vatican has prompted questions about how papal decisions are made and criticism of the apparent lack of consultation inside the Roman Curia.

In late January, Pope Benedict XVI lifted the excommunication of four ultratraditionalist bishops, including Bishop Richard Williamson, who has said the Holocaust was exaggerated and that no Jews died in the Nazi gas chambers.

Then the pope chose as an auxiliary bishop of Linz, Austria, Father Gerhard Wagner, who once linked the destruction of Hurricane Katrina to the “spiritual pollution” of New Orleans. Two weeks later, after an embarrassing no-confidence vote by senior clergy in the Linz Diocese, Bishop-designate Wagner asked the pope to withdraw his nomination.

An overwhelmingly negative reaction greeted both of these papal decisions, and many wondered why the Vatican failed to see it coming. The concern voiced by some of the church’s own officials was that the episodes illustrated a dysfunctional system of internal communications at the Vatican.

“We hope inadequate channels of communication in the Vatican can be improved so the pope’s service to humanity is not impaired,” Austrian bishops said after meeting to discuss the situation of Bishop-designate Wagner Feb. 16.

In the case of Bishop Williamson, Vatican officials themselves were among the

critics. Cardinal Walter Kasper, who coordinates Vatican dialogue with the Jews, told Vatican Radio that the controversy was the result of “management errors in the Curia” and might have been avoided by wider consultation. His office had not been consulted, he said.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, made clear that Pope Benedict had not known in advance about Bishop Williamson’s views on the Holocaust.

“If someone should have known, it was Cardinal (Dario) Castrillon Hoyos,” Father Lombardi said. The implication was that Cardinal Castrillon, head of the commission in charge of reconciliation with the traditionalists, should have also made sure the pope was informed.

Traditionally, the Vatican’s Secretariat of State has acted as the coordinating agency for some of the important decisions that involve more than one Roman Curia agency or have global implications. The plain fact, however, is that the Vatican has no central communications clearinghouse, and no “chain of command” responsible for raising red flags on potentially explosive moves.

The Vatican’s communications agencies, including its press office, are generally not involved in the gestation stage of important decisions. Their task is to deliver the end product - and sometimes to help clean up the mess.

That doesn’t mean internal consultation never occurs; many important papal documents, for example, undergo revisions based on critical in-house commentary. But it’s inconsistent, and so is the way such documents are released. Some papal decisions are rolled out with a press conference and endless explanation, while others drop from the sky unannounced.

Vatican officials say that under Pope Benedict, the decision-making process in

general has been streamlined and consultation is more on a need-to-know basis.

On the issue of lifting the excommunications of four bishops of the Society of St. Pius X, the pope appears to have conferred primarily with Cardinal Castrillon's Pontifical Commission "Ecclesia Dei," which has conducted talks with the society, and with the Congregation for Bishops.

It's interesting to recall that before making an earlier gesture to the traditionalist society - a decree that widened the use of the Tridentine Mass - the pope consulted at length with the world's cardinals and bishops and received some negative feedback. Some at the Vatican felt that only slowed down the pope's ultimate decision.

Nothing excites reporters more than a "storm of controversy," especially when it allows the journalistic commentariat to preach to the Vatican about how to improve its public relations operation. The fact that a simple Google search might have helped avoid these missteps was, in the eyes of many, a sign of how hopelessly out of touch the Vatican really is.

Yet amid all the outcry, has anyone noticed that Pope Benedict has shown himself responsive to the reaction and willing to change course?

In the case of Austrian Bishop-designate Wagner, it is rare for a bishop to step aside so quickly after nomination, and the assumption is that Pope Benedict either made it happen or happily agreed. He could have defended the principle that a pope must be free to name bishops, but appears to have chosen the more conciliatory route of dialogue with Austrian church leaders. (A spokesman for the Linz Diocese said Feb. 19 that the Vatican had accepted Bishop-designate Wagner's withdrawal, although the Vatican had not officially announced that.)

As for Bishop Williamson, the Vatican began by saying the removal of his

excommunication was a totally separate issue from his personal opinions on the Holocaust. But two weeks later, the Vatican said Bishop Williamson could not function as a bishop until he disavowed his previous opinions.

That statement, issued by the Secretariat of State, raised some eyebrows inside the Vatican. Some felt it subjected the episcopal mission to a litmus test that was more political than doctrinal.

In addition, the Vatican initially said nothing about the need for Bishop Williamson and the rest of his society to agree to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. But when the bishop's statements appeared to call into question Vatican II teachings on the Jews, the Vatican declared bluntly that full communion would require acceptance of the council.

The pope has responded creatively in the past to public relations crises. In 2006, he recovered from a communications disaster provoked by his remarks about Islam in Regensburg, Germany, by reaching out to Muslims and praying next to an imam in a mosque in Turkey.

Some believe the recent controversy over Bishop Williamson's remarks sets the stage for a similar recovery in Catholic-Jewish relations when Pope Benedict visits Israel in May. Already, it has led the pope and countless other church leaders to emphasize that negating the Holocaust goes against Catholic teaching.