

Pope condemns Holocaust denial, reaffirms solidarity with Jews

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI renewed his “full and unquestionable solidarity” with the world’s Jews and condemned all ignorance, denial and downplaying of the brutal slaughter of millions of Jewish people during the Holocaust.

The pope’s comments Jan. 28 came a day after the Chief Rabbinate of Israel postponed indefinitely a March meeting with the Vatican in protest over the pope lifting the excommunication of a traditionalist bishop who has minimized the severity and extent of the Holocaust.

Speaking the day after International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Pope Benedict said he hoped “the memory of the Holocaust will persuade humanity to reflect on the unpredictable power of evil when it conquers the heart of man.”

The Jews were “innocent victims of a blind racist and religious hatred,” he said at the end of his general audience in the Paul VI hall.

The pope recalled his many visits to Auschwitz, calling it “one of the concentration camps in which millions of Jews were brutally slaughtered” by the Nazis.

“May the Holocaust be a warning to everyone against forgetting, denying or minimizing” what happened to millions of Jews “because violence waged against just one human being is violence against everyone,” he said.

“May violence never again humiliate the dignity of mankind,” he said.

The Holocaust should be an important lesson for old and new generations, teaching them that “only the arduous path of listening and dialogue, love and forgiveness leads the world’s peoples, cultures and religions to the hoped-for goal of fraternity and peace in truth,” said the pope.

British-born Bishop Richard Williamson of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X has claimed that reports about the Holocaust were exaggerated and that no Jews died in

Nazi gas chambers.

He repeated his position in a Swedish television interview recorded last November but aired Jan. 21 - the same day Pope Benedict lifted the excommunication against him and three other bishops who had been ordained against papal orders in 1988 by the late French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. The Vatican made the decree public Jan. 24.

Jewish groups expressed shock that after Bishop Williamson's comments were televised the Vatican would still lift the excommunication against him. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel postponed a March 2-4 meeting in Rome with the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations With the Jews.

Rabbi David Rosen, a member of the delegation of the Chief Rabbinate, said on Israeli television's IBA News that the meeting with the Vatican had been postponed indefinitely "until a response comes from the Vatican that's satisfactory to enable us to resume our relationship as before."

The director general of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, Oded Wiener, told Catholic News Service the pope's Jan. 28 statement condemning the denial of the Holocaust was "extremely important ... for all humanity" and that it was a "great step forward" in resolving the current embroilment between the Vatican and the rabbinate.

He said a letter he sent Jan. 27 to the pontifical commission's chairman, Cardinal Walter Kasper, in the name of the Chief Rabbinate was not intended to sever the ties, which were created in 2000, but simply to express deep disappointment at the reinstatement of Bishop Williamson. The letter asked for a public apology from the bishop and for a postponement of the joint commission's planned meeting in March until the matter was clarified.

He told CNS he was certain that members of the rabbinate's commission would be meeting for further discussion by early February in light of the pope's statement.

Wiener emphasized that, concerning Bishop Williamson's remarks, "We don't for one second believe this is the position of the pope."

The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, told reporters Jan. 28 that

Vatican officials hoped the rabbinate would resume dialogue with the pontifical commission so that its concerns could be addressed with “further and deeper reflection.”

Father Lombardi said Pope Benedict’s remarks condemning the Holocaust Jan. 28 and on previous occasions “should be more than enough of a response to the expectation of those who have expressed doubt concerning the pope and the Catholic Church’s position” on the Holocaust.

The spokesman said only with continued dialogue could relations between the Jewish world and the Catholic Church “successfully and serenely continue.”

Cardinal Kasper said the traditionalist bishop’s remarks were unacceptable, “foolish” and in no way reflect the position of the Catholic Church.

“Such gibberish is unacceptable,” the German cardinal said in an interview with the Italian daily La Repubblica Jan. 26.

“To deny the Holocaust is unacceptable and is absolutely not the position of the Catholic Church,” he said.

The Vatican released a statement Jan. 27 from the head of the Swiss-based Society of St. Pius X, Bishop Bernard Fellay, who apologized for the damage caused by Bishop Williamson’s remarks and said they in no way reflect the positions of the Society of St. Pius X.

“We ask forgiveness of the pontiff and of all people of good will for the dramatic consequences of this act,” Bishop Fellay wrote. He said he had prohibited Bishop Williamson from speaking publicly on political or historical questions “until further orders.”

“While we recognize that these remarks were inopportune, we cannot help but note with sadness that they have directly struck our society, discrediting its mission,” he said.