

Vatican: Bishop's Holocaust statements 'strongly rejected' by pope

VATICAN CITY - The Vatican said a traditionalist bishop who has minimized the full extent of the Holocaust must disavow his positions before he will be accepted into full communion with the church.

A Vatican statement Feb. 4 said Pope Benedict XVI did not know about the controversial statements by British-born Bishop Richard Williamson when he lifted the excommunication of him and three other traditionalist bishops ordained illicitly in 1988.

"The positions of Bishop Williamson on the Holocaust are absolutely unacceptable and are strongly rejected by the Holy Father," the statement said.

In order to function as a bishop, Bishop Williamson must distance himself from his previous statements in "an absolutely unequivocal and public manner," the Vatican said.

In a statement meant to deflect the increasing public outcry over the papal decree lifting the excommunication, the Vatican said the decree did not change the juridical status of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, which still has no canonical recognition in the Catholic Church.

The society was founded by French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who also incurred automatic excommunication when he ordained the four bishops against papal orders. The society has not accepted the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council and its concepts of religious freedom and ecumenism.

The statement from the Secretariat of State said the society would have to recognize the teachings of Vatican II and of post-conciliar popes to be in full communion.

It said the four bishops at present do not have a canonical function in the church and

“do not licitly exercise a ministry in the church.”

The Vatican has emphasized that even after the removal of the excommunications remaining problems need to be resolved before full communion can be established with the society’s leadership and members.

The Secretariat of State statement – like a statement the previous day from the Vatican press spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi – reiterated the German-born pope’s remarks at his Jan. 28 audience, in which he recalled the suffering of Jews during World War II and said the Holocaust should stand as a “warning to everyone against forgetting, denying or minimizing” evil.

Father Lombardi said the pope’s words at the general audience were “unequivocal.”

The spokesman said the pope had spoken about the horror of the Holocaust in his 2005 visit to a German synagogue and in his 2006 visit to the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz. He said the papal statement at the Jan. 28 audience “could not have been clearer, and from the context it is apparent that it referred to the positions of Bishop Williamson and to all similar positions.”

“On the same occasion, the pope also clearly expressed the reason for removing the excommunication, which has nothing to do with legitimizing positions denying the Holocaust – positions which were clearly condemned by the pope,” the spokesman said.

Father Lombardi’s statement was released by the Vatican press office late the same day that German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the pope and the Vatican needed to make clear there could be no denial of the Holocaust.

At a news conference in Berlin Feb. 3, Merkel said she normally did not comment on church matters “but we are talking about fundamental questions.”

“This is not just a matter, in my opinion, for the Christian, Catholic and Jewish communities in Germany, but the pope and the Vatican should clarify unambiguously that there can be no denial” of the Holocaust, she said.

On Jan. 21, the same day the pope lifted the excommunication, a Swedish television

station aired a November interview with Bishop Williamson in which he repeated his position that the Holocaust had been exaggerated.

The papal decree lifting the excommunication was made public Jan. 24 and Jewish groups - especially in Germany, the U.S. and Israel -expressed shock that the Vatican would lift the excommunication against Bishop Williamson even after his comments had been televised.

German Cardinal Walter Kasper, who coordinates the Vatican's dialogue with the Jews, said the controversy was fueled in part by a lack of communication within the Vatican and by "management errors in the Curia."

Cardinal Kasper said he has been following the unfolding controversy "with great concern."

He said the pope "wanted to open the discussion because he wanted unity inside and outside" the church. But the cardinal said he "would have also liked to see more communication in advance."