

Vatican official to attend Holocaust memorial rededication in Boston

BRAINTREE, Mass. – The Vatican's top official on Catholic-Jewish relations will attend a March 25 rededication of a Holocaust memorial menorah that symbolizes the close relationship between the Catholic and Jewish communities in Boston.

Boston Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley invited Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations With the Jews, to the March event a day after the U.S. prelate met with local Jewish leaders and Holocaust survivors Feb. 23.

Cardinal O'Malley met with them to address their concerns generated by the pope's decision in January to lift the excommunication of Bishop Richard Williamson, a traditionalist bishop who has denied the Holocaust.

The cardinal described the encounter as "a very good meeting that demonstrated the appreciation of the wonderful and close relationship that the Catholic and the Jewish communities have had in Boston since the time of Cardinal Cushing."

Cardinal Richard J. Cushing was archbishop of Boston from 1944 to 1970.

"It was a very important opportunity for us to assure the Jewish community that the Catholic Church repudiates the Holocaust denial," Cardinal O'Malley said.

Regarding the upcoming rededication of the Holocaust memorial, he said Cardinal Kasper's attendance will be significant because "he is the spokesperson for the Holy Father, for the Holy See, in matters pertaining to Catholic-Jewish relations."

"He is a man who is very versed in these issues and very committed to safeguarding the special relations the Catholic Church has with the Jewish community," he added in a Feb. 25 interview with The Pilot, Boston's archdiocesan newspaper.

The Yom Hashoah Menorah, which honors the victims of the Holocaust, was presented to the archdiocese by Jewish leaders as a symbol of the warm relationship

between the two faiths in September 2002. It was on the grounds of the former chancery in Brighton, dedicated by Cardinal Bernard F. Law, who was Boston's archbishop from 1984 until December 2002.

It depicts six men and women holding torches, a holy man clutching a prayer book in front of the statue and a cracked Star of David, inscribed with the years 1933-45. The first words of the kaddish, a Jewish prayer exulting God's great name, are at its base.

The Holocaust memorial will be rededicated after it is moved to the archdiocese's pastoral center in Braintree.

Accompanying Cardinal O'Malley to the meeting with the Jewish group was Father David Michael, archdiocesan liaison for interreligious relations.

He said that as soon as news of Bishop Williamson's remarks about the Holocaust came to light, the cardinal offered to visit with representatives of the Jewish community to convey the church's condemnation of those remarks.

He also said the cardinal wanted to assure them that the advances made after the Second Vatican Council in Catholic-Jewish relations were not in jeopardy.

Father Michael described the meeting as respectful and as an opportunity for the Jewish leaders to voice their concerns.

"We were in listening mode, and they were in sharing mode" Father Michael said.

Several Jewish leaders and Holocaust survivors spoke at the meeting, relating their experiences and expressing their anguish at the denial of the Holocaust by someone whom they perceive to be a "high-ranking Catholic official, a bishop," Father Michael said.

Father Michael said the cardinal contextualized those remarks by pointing out that Bishop Williamson is a "renegade Catholic."

The excommunication of Bishop Williamson and three other traditionalist bishops was lifted but they are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church. The

bishops were ordained against papal orders in 1988 by the late French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, founder of the Society of St. Pius X.

The Vatican later published a statement saying that Bishop Williamson would not be welcomed into full communion unless he disavowed his remarks about the Holocaust and publicly apologized.

Rob Leikind, director of the Boston chapter of the American Jewish Committee, who was present at the Boston meeting with Cardinal O'Malley called it "very valuable."

"It was clear there was an appreciation about why people were concerned," he said.

Since his excommunication, Bishop Williamson has issued two statements saying he regrets the remarks he made denying the extent of the Holocaust.