

In Letter to Bishops, Pope Admits 'Mistakes'

March 12, 2009

By RACHEL DONADIO

MADRID — Pope Benedict XVI has written an unusually personal letter to bishops worldwide explaining why he revoked the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying bishop and admitting mistakes in how the Vatican handled the case.

The letter, which the Vatican will release Thursday, is a further attempt to calm the waters after Benedict pardoned four schismatic bishops, including Richard Williamson, who in a television interview broadcast in January said that there had been no Nazi gas chambers.

The revocation provoked worldwide outrage and caused Catholics and Jews alike to question Benedict's commitment to ecumenism and the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

In passages of the letter that appeared on Wednesday in the Italian newspaper *Il Foglio*, the Vatican admitted "mistakes" in handling the case, and said that in the future it would pay more attention to how news spreads over the Internet.

A YouTube video of Bishop Williamson's television interview, in which he denies the Holocaust, was widely viewed online in the days before the pope lifted the excommunications in late January.

The four belong to the ultra-conservative Society of St. Pius X. They had been excommunicated by Pope John Paul II after being consecrated without a papal mandate, causing the only formal schism in the church.

In passages from the pope's letter posted Wednesday on the blog of a veteran Vatican reporter, Andrea Tornielli, Benedict said he considered revoking the excommunication "a modest act of mercy" toward the bishops, whose ordinations were "valid but illicit."

"Instead," Mr. Tornielli quotes the letter saying, "it suddenly appeared something completely different: as the denial of reconciliation between Christians and Jews."

The blog posting said the pope wrote that he had been "saddened" that "even Catholics, who should have been better able to understand things," instead seemed poised with "a hostility ready for the attack." He added that he thanked "the Jewish friends who quickly helped remove the misunderstandings and to re-establish the atmosphere of friendship and trust."

The Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, said he had no comment on the letter before its official publication.

In May, Benedict will make his first papal visit to the Holy Land, with stops expected in Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories.

In news accounts this week, Archbishop Antonio Franco, the apostolic nuncio to the Holy Land, said Benedict would not enter the Holocaust museum at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem because it had a contentious plaque criticizing Pope Pius XII for not doing enough to help save Jews during the Holocaust.

The legacy of Pius is a main sticking point in Vatican-Jewish relations. Benedict, like other popes, has said Pius worked "secretly and silently" to save Jews.

Father Lombardi said that the pope would visit the Holocaust memorial at Yad Vashem, as John Paul II did on his historic visit to Israel in 2000, but that a museum visit had never been considered.

The pope is also expected to visit Al Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem, Father Lombardi said.

On Thursday, Benedict is expected to meet a delegation from the chief rabbinate of Israel at the Vatican.

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/world/europe/12pope.html?_r=1&em=&pagewanted=print