

Pope's Silence Fuels Holocaust Controversy

Failure to Explain Excommunication Reversal Draws Ire

By Francis X. Rocca
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Ever since Pope Benedict XVI allowed schismatic bishops back into the Catholic fold a week ago, his decision has been met with abundant expressions of outrage and dismay from inside and outside the church.

Yet the controversy isn't fueled by the bishops' thoughts on the church or the papacy or liturgy but rather one bishop's denial of the Holocaust.

Jewish groups are especially incensed that one of the bishops from the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX), Richard Williamson, told Swedish television that "historical evidence is hugely against 6 million Jews having been deliberately gassed in gas chambers as a deliberate policy of Adolf Hitler."

Which has left people the world over asking: What was the pope thinking?

One explanation offered by those who know the pope intimately was that he simply was not aware of Williamson's statements.

"Otherwise, I think he would have made it clear at the beginning that he was not endorsing them," said the Rev. Joseph D. Fessio, a former student of Benedict's who is the English-language publisher of most of the pope's books.

Vatican spokesmen have stressed that the pope's reversal of Williamson's 1988 excommunication implies no endorsement of his statements on the Holocaust, but rather a desire to reconcile with disaffected traditionalists.

Even so, many who accept this explanation wonder why Benedict himself didn't offer it at the start. "The Pope should have said more to explain his thinking," wrote British Catholic journalist Damian Thompson, generally a strong supporter of the pontiff. "And he could also have expressed his repugnance at [Williamson's] views."

The omission is especially surprising because Benedict, who as a boy in his native Germany was drafted into the Hitler Youth and deplored the rise of Nazism, has long sought to improve relations between Catholics and Jews. One of the highlights of his visit to the United States last year, for instance, was a visit to a New York synagogue.

Even if Benedict was familiar with Williamson's long track record of inflammatory declarations on the Holocaust and other topics, he may have judged it more prudent not to draw attention to them. Williamson was hardly a household name -- he was not even the best-known of the four rehabilitated SSPX bishops -- until Swedish television broadcast the now-infamous interview last week.

Still, informed observers say the great misunderstanding at the heart of the current controversy is utterly in character for the pope. It reflects not only his temperament and background, they say, but his ideals of church leadership.

"He's a theologian and an academic; he deals in principles and arguments and intellectual back-and-forth," said David Gibson, a former Vatican Radio reporter and author of "The Rule of Benedict." "He doesn't come from the pastoral side of the church. He doesn't think in terms of diplomatic fallout."

A readiness to take unpopular action also reflects Benedict's philosophy of church leadership, Gibson says, noting a 1996 statement by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger that a "bishop whose only concern is not to have any problems and to gloss over as many conflicts as possible is an image I find repulsive."

For John Allen Jr., the Vatican correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter and a papal biographer, Benedict "is a pope stubbornly indifferent to the canons of political correctness, in part because he's not thinking about tomorrow's headlines but the situation of the church a century, or several centuries, down the road."

"That gives him great strength as a leader," Allen said, "but the other side of it is that he sometimes takes actions that seem almost deliberately calculated to offend people he cares about. . . . Sometimes he is, quite frankly, tone-deaf."

As a prime example of such tone-deafness, Allen points to Benedict's 2006 speech in Regensburg, Germany, in which he quoted a medieval

Christian emperor describing the teachings of Islam's Prophet Muhammad as "evil and inhuman" and "spread by the sword."

After violent protests against the speech broke out in several Muslim countries, Benedict expressed his "regrets" and held a special meeting with representatives of Muslim nations. Last November, he hosted an international group of Muslim scholars and clerics at the Vatican for a conference that grew out of responses to the Regensburg lecture.

Allen assumes that the "Vatican will engage in the same sort of damage control" over the coming weeks and months.

"But the real question is why they didn't learn from Regensburg," Allen said. "The only answer I can give is that Benedict is who he is."

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