

Holocaust denial: Vatican shifts into damage control

The Vatican is trying to clarify efforts to reconcile with a sharply right-wing set of bishops excommunicated in 1988.

By **Robert Marquand** | Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*
from the February 6, 2009 edition

Munich, Germany - After unprecedented outcry in Pope Benedict XVI's home country of Germany by Roman Catholic and Jewish leaders worldwide, the Vatican this week clarified efforts to reconcile with an ultra-right-wing set of bishops excommunicated in 1988, one of whom denies that the Holocaust, or the Shoah, took the lives of 6 million Jews during Nazi rule here in World War II.

Bishop Richard Williamson of the hard-right St. Pius X Society "must absolutely, unequivocally and publicly distance himself" from statements denying the Shoah, stated the Holy See.

The Vatican has been in serious damage control for at least a week. German Chancellor Angela Merkel asked the Vatican Monday to clarify its position – amid some of the most open dissent and dismay by Catholic bishops in Europe under Pope Benedict, formerly Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

The crisis underscores the difficulties the pope faces in his project of reestablishing traditional Christianity in Europe and rolling back the liberal influences of Vatican II inside Catholicism – in a world more diverse and secular, a religious landscape more ecumenical, a church divided over doctrine and approach, and papal authority seemingly more subject to outside opinion, as in this week's virtual censure of the pope by Ms. Merkel.

Seeing revival in traditionalism

"Benedict wants the restoration of European Christianity, that's at the heart of this," says Catholic theologian Frank Flinn, of Washington University in St. Louis. "He wishes to nullify the left, the liberation theologians. The Vatican seems to buy the theory that right-wing churches attract members, along the growth model of Evangelicals. A church making demands with stricter rules – the call of traditionalism – is seen as reviving the church in Europe."

Germans in particular – having spent decades confronting the Holocaust, fighting to end its legacy, making Holocaust-denial a crime – were unable to ignore a German-born pope who, in trying to promote church unity, nonetheless opened the door to misunderstandings about a central emotional project of postwar Germany. This week, the Bishop of Mainz, the Archbishop of Berlin, the leading theologian Hans Kung, and a host of German newspapers strongly and openly disagreed with the pope's decision to start restoring the St. Pius group.

The Bavarian-born pope has been especially popular in Munich, a heartland of German Catholicism. But the shine has been wearing off. "I am a Protestant and my wife is a Catholic, and we were both very proud to have a German pope," says Friedemann Losch, a retired professor. "But now we are unhappy with the mistakes Benedict is making. The church is split between modern Catholics and traditionalists, and Benedict is making it worse. We don't understand why."

Pope Benedict is known for a theological brilliance rooted in a traditional conception of Catholicism as the true church. As Cardinal Ratzinger, he held the highly influential post of "Head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith" and was known informally among liberals as "the Pope's Rottweiler" for his purges of Vatican II advocates. The Archbishop of Vienna, Christoph Cardinal Schonborn, helped Ratzinger rise to the papacy, saying it was his destiny to restore the church, particularly in a Europe viewed as in spiritual decline and increasingly pagan. Benedict's project is to bring back some of the more devout faithful, such as the Pius X group – whose vision harks back to a medieval period of stability, certainty, authority, and papal infallibility.

Yet Benedict's efforts are perceived, rightly or wrongly, as reversing the ecumenical focus of his predecessor, the popular John Paul II – and setting up "clashes" between faiths. The current outcry in the Jewish world comes in a context of other moves by the Vatican to step up to controversial religious lines: In 2006, at a speech in his academic hometown of Regensburg, the pope angered the Muslim world by quoting a 14th-century Byzantine emperor who said that Islam and the prophet Muhammad had brought only "evil and inhuman things." In 2007, he irritated Protestants by pronouncing their churches illegitimate and in need of reconciliation with Rome, in order to live fully in Christ. Even

early efforts by Benedict to harmonize with the Eastern Orthodox world have run into criticism by Russian and other orthodox prelates for a lack of follow up and for aggressive missionizing in their lands.

Wilton Wynn, a long-time Vatican observer and writer who was close to Pope John Paul II, said in a phone interview from Rome that Benedict had been emerging as a strong proponent of "right-wing Catholicism, almost reactionary," when he was still Cardinal Ratzinger, but that when Ratzinger became Pope Benedict, "there was almost no discussion about this. Now we are beginning to see the differences.

"I think the papacy is moving to the right more and more. He [Benedict] may even rather have a small dedicated following than a broad, less dedicated community."

Last week, Benedict angered the German Catholic hierarchy by appointing – without traditional consultation – a bishop in Linz, Austria, who had said that hurricane Katrina was divine retribution for sin, and a cleansing of nightclubs and abortion clinics.

This week, amid the furor, Benedict made a series of affirmative statements about St. Paul, Martin Luther, and the Catholic church's need to learn the lessons of the Protestant reformation.

Yet on Thursday, the Financial Times Deutschland quoted Georg Brunnhuber, a lawmaker from Merkel's Christian Democratic Party, who spoke to the pope this week and said the Vatican "is horrified by the discussion in Germany.... The impression there is that all of the anti-Catholic resentments hiding under the surface in Germany are now coming to the surface."

The St. Pius X group is also known as the Lefebvrist sect after its founder, French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who led attempts in the 1970s to renounce Vatican II. Vatican II brought new efforts to modernize and open the church, to shift away from the use of Latin in services. It corresponded with a rise in liberation theology that stressed in poor nations that individuals had a right to challenge repressive regimes. The group was finally excommunicated under John Paul II.

The Latin mass

The Lefebvrists favor the old Latin mass, which contains a statement in its texts regarding the "perfidious Jew" – though current St. Pius X leader Bernard Fellay affirmed in an interview last week the importance of good Catholic-Jewish relations.

The Vatican stated that Benedict had been unaware of the Holocaust denial of Mr. Williamson, who said in an interview this month on Swedish television that historical evidence was "hugely against 6 million having been deliberately gassed in gas chambers.... I believe there were no gas chambers."

Yet given the long history of relations between the Pius group and Ratzinger, such an explanation is not entirely satisfying.

Mr. Fellay congratulated the Vatican for elevating Ratzinger to the papacy, calling it a "gleam of hope" in a letter written to the Vatican at the time. He wrote that "His Excellency Bishop Fellay implores Our Lord Jesus Christ, Head of the Mystical Body, that the two-thousand-year-old Tradition of the Church, forgotten and mistreated during the last forty years, may regain its place during this Pontificate, and that the Traditional Holy mass may be reestablished in all its rights, without restrictions."

In 2007, Benedict made headlines by restoring the Latin Mass in churches wishing to use it.

Crisis of confidence?

In France, Jérôme Anciberro, writing in Christian Testimony, a progressive Catholic review, echoed German dismay, describing a crisis of confidence: "It's as if something has been broken since the lifting of the excommunication of the four bishops.... The reactions, commentaries, petitions, protests are multiplying in the Catholic world. Bishops, left in the dark during several days, do not hesitate to dismiss the announcements of the Vatican, even the Curia as a whole."

The Holocaust discourse is weighted more heavily in recent years in Catholic and European circles after a biography of Pope Pius XII, titled "Hitler's Pope," by Roman Catholic scholar John Cornwell – charging a deeply anti-Semitic sentiment and complicit policy with Berlin before the war. The book has spawned many counterbiographies and views.

While the current crisis may bring the Vatican to examine its communication to the outside world, observers like Mr. Wynn say the inner workings of the church do not easily conform to pressure.

"The pope seems to say all the right things to put the fires out ... but I am not sure if this will be a crisis in the Vatican. [Pope] John Paul once told me that you can't try to apply American democratic politics to the faith."