

Vatican advisers blamed for Pope's woes

Benedict's inner circle of sycophants rarely asked to contribute opinions, insiders say

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ROME – Call it trouble in paradise.

With the recent Vatican mishandling of the status of a bishop who denies the Holocaust, many observers say leaders of the Catholic Church are seeming out of touch with today's world and dangerously ignorant about public relations.

The latest trouble began when Pope Benedict XVI lifted the excommunications of British-born Bishop Richard Williamson and three others belonging to the Society of Saint Pius X, an openly anti-Semitic Catholic sect.

They were banished in 1988 after their leader, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, ordained them as bishops without papal approval. In a move to bridge the schism, Pope Benedict lifted their excommunications without fully rehabilitating the men into the church.

Only following international outrage did the Vatican publicly condemn the bishop's anti-Semitic views. The statement, however, was not released until Feb. 6, a full two weeks after the Pope had reinstated Williamson.

Vatican expert Robert Mickens says the slow response reveals the disturbing incompetence of advisers close to the Pope.

"Williamson has been known for years to be a Holocaust denier. So to say the Pope didn't know, I'm afraid will strike people as disingenuous."

It's not the first time the Vatican has seemed naive on hot-button issues. In 2006, the Pope quoted an inflammatory remark about Islam that set off violent protests in the Muslim world. It took months of diplomatic effort to quell tensions.

In July 2007, a Vatican declaration on the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church said Protestant denominations are not even churches "in the proper sense," reopening old wounds.

Vatican insiders say the Pope has chosen to surround himself with sycophants who are rarely asked to contribute opinions.

"You have to ask who's in the room when decisions are made?" asks U.S. priest and academic Thomas Reese. "The Pope is surrounded by loyalists ... To lead effectively, you need advisers as smart as you are."

Much of the problem, says author and Vaticanist Francis X. Rocca, lies with a woefully outdated notion of public relations, noting the Pope, unlike his predecessor, does not have a full-time press officer.

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