

Jewish groups dismayed over papal decision on 'Holocaust denier'

Vatican restores Society of Saint Pius X: Vatican restores Society of Saint Pius X

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American and British Jewish groups say they are shocked by a decision of Pope Benedict XVI to overturn the excommunication of a British bishop who has said the number of Jews killed during the Holocaust has been exaggerated.

The move is “a serious blow for Jewish-Vatican relations and a slap in the face of the late Pope John Paul II, who made such remarkable efforts to eradicate and combat anti-Semitism,” said Rabbi David Rosen, the international director of interreligious affairs for the New York-based American Jewish Committee.

After the international outcry, Benedict asserted at his daily audience at the Vatican on January 28 that “no one can deny” the Holocaust.

Stating his “full and unquestionable solidarity with our Jewish brothers,” the pope said he hoped the memory of the Holocaust “will induce humanity to reflect on the unpredictable power of hate when it conquers the heart of man.”

The decision by the Vatican involves lifting an excommunication ban on the Society of Saint Pius X, a traditionalist group founded in 1970 by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, a French cleric who died in 1991.

Lefebvre and his followers opposed various reforms of the Second Vatican Council—including ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, believing them heretical—and favored maintaining the use of Latin as at pre-Vatican II masses.

One of the group's four bishops whose excommunication was overturned in the papal decision announced January 21 is Bishop Richard Williamson. Williamson has been quoted as saying that he does not believe that gas chambers were utilized by the Nazis and that perhaps only 300,000 Jews were exterminated in Nazi concentration camps.

"I believe that the historical evidence is hugely against 6 million having been deliberately gassed in gas chambers as a deliberate policy of Adolf Hitler," Williamson said in comments broadcast by Swedish Television, reported the Reuters news agency.

According to historians, some 6 million Jews perished in the Holocaust. Rosen said on January 24 that while the Vatican's reconciliation with the Society of Saint Pius X is an internal matter for the Catholic Church, "embracing an open Holocaust denier is shameful."

Added Rosen: "By welcoming an open Holocaust denier into the Catholic Church without any recantation on his part, the Vatican has made a mockery of John Paul II's moving and impressive repudiation and condemnation of anti-Semitism."

Ed Kessler of the Centre for the Study of Jewish Christian Relations at the Woolf Institute in Cambridge, England, was quoted by the *Times* of London on January 26 as saying: "In the 20-odd years that I have been teaching Jewish-Christian relations I never thought I would witness a time when in the name of Christian unity a German-bred Pope would bring back into the fold a Holocaust-denier. It is absolutely astonishing." -*Ecumenical News International*