

Schismatic bishop faces trial over Holocaust denial

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BERLIN (RNS) The case of an outspoken schismatic bishop headed back to court on Monday (July 4), with lawyers for British Bishop Richard Williamson saying he shouldn't be punished for downplaying the severity of the Holocaust.

Williamson, 71, was convicted last year after he told a Swedish broadcast team in 2008 that "no more than 300,000 Jews perished in Nazi concentration camps ... not one of them by gassing in a gas chamber."

Denying the full scope of the Holocaust is a crime under German law, and although the interview was with a Swedish news outlet, Williamson made the statements in Germany, where it eventually became viewable online.

A Regensburg court fined Williamson 10,000 euros (\$14,500) in the case last year. A decision on his appeal is expected by Monday (July 11).

Williamson became an overnight celebrity -- and a deep embarrassment for the Vatican -- for his Holocaust denials after Pope Benedict XVI lifted the 1988 excommunication of Williamson and three other SSPX bishops.

The Vatican later said the pope did not know about Williamson's views on the Holocaust at the time, but conceded that "closely following the news available on the Internet" would have flagged his troublesome statements.

Williamson, who did not appear at the appeals court, claimed through his attorneys that he should not be liable for the breach of German law,

since he gave the interview to a Swedish film crew with the understanding that the segment would only be aired in Sweden.

"Our client did not put it on the (Internet)," said his attorneys, as quoted by the German Press Agency dpa.

Fellow members of his schismatic Society of St. Pius X (SSPX), meanwhile, seemed determined to distance themselves from Williamson and his remarks.

According to the daily Sueddeutsche Zeitung, associates of SSPX -- which generally rejects the modernizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s -- said Williamson had a long history of being out of touch with reality. Maximilian Krah, legal representative of the group, said Williamson was eccentric and had problems with reality.

The issue continues to reverberate in German society, especially since SSPX again made headlines just before the appeal trial's start with the ordination of some 20 priests without the Vatican's permission.

Benedict lifted the excommunications in a bid to restore relations with the traditionalist groups, but has insisted SSPX accept all reforms from Vatican II if they want to have normalized relations with Rome.