

Vatican demands Lefebvrite bishop recant

Dennis Coday | Feb. 4, 2009

The Vatican Secretariat of State issued a statement today that in effect demands that the Lefebvrite Bishop Richard Williamson recant statements questioning the Holocaust.

The statement says that in order to function as a bishop, Bishop Williamson must distance himself from his previous statements in "absolutely unequivocal and public fashion."

The statement also re-emphasizes that the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, to which Williamson belongs, would have to recognize the teachings of Vatican II and of post-conciliar popes to be in full communion with the church.

NCR's translation of the statement follows the analysis by John Allen.

Analysis: Vatican statement on Williamson not an about-face, but comes far too late

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

In many quarters, the tendency will be to see today's Vatican statement demanding that traditionalist Bishop Richard Williamson recant his views on the Holocaust "in absolutely unequivocal and public fashion" as an about-face, a hasty reversal in the wake of overwhelmingly negative public reaction to news that the pope had lifted the excommunication of a Holocaust denier.

In one sense, of course, that's absolutely correct: Without the backlash, it's unlikely the Secretariat of State would have felt the need to issue a public statement.

Yet the tragedy is that, in effect, today's statement simply spells out what the Vatican had in mind all along — raising the perfectly legitimate question of why it wasn't issued before this whole mess erupted.

Among Vatican-watchers, there has long been speculation that a pope might someday lift the excommunications of the four bishops of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, which resulted from their 1988 ordination by rebel Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. It has always been understood that when and if that happened, it would mark the beginning of a process of reconciliation — the endgame of which would involve, among other things, full acceptance of official church teaching by the Lefebvrites, including the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on respect for Judaism.

One can of course debate the pastoral wisdom of rescinding the excommunications, or what it betokens about the broader direction of Catholicism, but insiders always understood that it would clearly not signal a "seal of approval" for absolutely everything various Lefebvrites currently think or say.

Naturally, it's unreasonable to expect the outside world to instinctively grasp all of that, which is why the logic and the subsequent steps in this process of reconciliation have to be carefully laid out in advance. The real story, therefore, is the Vatican's failure to do so — a point that's being made these days far and wide, and not just by

the usual in-house critics.

Consider, for example, the reaction of Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria: "Obviously a mistake has been made here. Someone who denies the Holocaust, Shoah deniers, cannot be restored to an office in the church. Here there must be also a certain criticism of the Vatican's staff practice, which obviously did not examine the matter carefully or did not examine sufficiently the case in the information that they had."

Schönborn was essentially Benedict XVI's "campaign manager" during the conclave of 2005, telling his fellow cardinals it was God's will that Joseph Ratzinger be elected to the papacy. Schönborn is a longtime papal protégé, having done post-doctoral work under Ratzinger at the University of Regensburg in the 1970s. You can take to the bank, therefore, that his criticism is not motivated by office politics or anti-papal animus.

Today's note from the Secretariat of State once again asserts that the pope did not know Williamson's views on the Holocaust prior to Jan. 21, when the decree lifting his excommunication was dated. That, however, doesn't do the trick; his track record was abundantly clear to anyone who wished to look, and in any event, the Vatican certainly knew that members of the Society of St. Pius X hold views on other matters that are also difficult to reconcile with official doctrine.

Had the note from the Secretariat of State been issued along with the decree on Jan. 21, much of the present crisis could have been averted. The bottom line is that we're not dealing with an about-face, but an honest clarification – however, one that comes far too late in the game.

NOTE OF THE SECRETARIAT OF STATE, February 4, 2009

Following the reactions generated by the recent Decree of the Congregation for Bishops, with which the excommunications of four prelates of the Society of St. Pius X were rescinded, and in relation to the declarations denying or minimizing the Shoah on the part of Bishop Williamson of this same society, it is regarded as opportune to clarify certain aspects of this affair.

1. Remission of the Excommunication

As has already been published, the Decree of the Congregation for Bishops, dated January 21, 2009, was an act with which the Holy Father kindly responded to repeated requests on the part of the Superior General of the Society of St. Pius X.

His Holiness wished to remove an impediment that prevented the opening of a door to dialogue. Now he is waiting for equal openness to be expressed by the four bishops, in total adhesion to the doctrine and discipline of the church.

The extremely grave penalty of excommunication *latae sententiae*, which these bishops incurred on June 30, 1988, which was then formally declared on July 1 of the same year, was a consequence of their ordination by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre.

The lifting of the excommunication has freed the four bishops from a most grave canonical penalty, but in no way has it changed the juridical situation of the Society of St. Pius X, which, in this moment, does not enjoy any canonical recognition in the Catholic church. Also the four bishops, despite removal of the excommunication, do not have any canonical function in the church and do not licitly exercise any ministry in it.

2. Tradition, doctrine and the Second Vatican Council

For any future recognition of the Society of St. Pius X, a full recognition of the Second Vatican Council and the magisterium of Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II and Benedict XVI himself is an indispensable condition.

As was already affirmed in the Decree of January 21, 2009, the Holy See will not fail, in ways judged opportune, to pursue the questions which are still open with the interested parties, thus to be able to reach a full and satisfying solution to the problems that gave rise to this painful fracture.

3. Declarations on the Shoah

The positions of Bishop Williamson on the Shoah are absolutely unacceptable and firmly rejected by the Holy Father, as he himself remarked this past January 28, when, referring to that brutal genocide, he reconfirmed his full and indisputable solidarity with our brothers who received the First Covenant, and affirmed that the memory of that terrible genocide must lead ?humanity to reflect on the unpredictable power of evil when it conquers the human heart,? adding that the Shoah remains ?a warning for all against hate, against denial or reductionism, because violence against even a single human being is violence against all.?

Bishop Williamson, in order to claim admission to episcopal functions in the church, must distance himself in absolutely unequivocal and public fashion from his positions regarding the Shoah, which were not known by the Holy Father when the excommunication was lifted.

The Holy Father asks accompaniment in prayer from all the faithful, that the Lord may illuminate the path of the church. May the commitment of the pastors and all the faithful grow to sustain the delicate and weighty mission of the Successor of the Apostle Peter, who is the ?custodian of the unity? of the church.

From the Vatican, February 4, 2009

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