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U.S. bishops blast Holocaust-denying bishop

Dennis Coday | Feb. 4, 2009

WASHINGTON -- The nation's top Catholic archbishop on Tuesday (Feb. 2) condemned the remarks of a Holocaust-denying English bishop as "deeply offensive and utterly false," and sought to reaffirm the church's bonds with the Jewish community.

"No Catholic, whether layperson, priest or bishop, can ever negate the memory of the Shoah," said Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, using the Hebrew word for the Holocaust, "just as no Catholic should ever tolerate expressions of anti-Semitism and religious bigotry.'"

George, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said, "We Catholic bishops in the United States are as committed as ever to building bonds of trust and mutual understanding with our elder brothers and sisters, the Jewish people."

The statement is the American church's first collective response to the widening controversy that erupted when Pope Benedict XVI readmitted four schismatic bishops from a group with a long history of anti-Semitic writings.

The controversy has damaged the pope's image and Vatican interfaith relations worldwide. Clergy, political leaders and top representatives from the Jewish community have all questioned the wisdom of Benedict?s move.

In January, Benedict lifted the excommunication of four bishops who belong to the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX). One of the four, British-born Richard Williamson, said recently that the death count of the Holocaust was exaggerated and that the Nazis did not use gas chambers to kill Jews. Another, Bernard Tissier de Mallerais, in 1997 called Jews "the most active artisans for the coming of the Antichrist."

George said Williamson's comments "have evoked understandable outrage from within the Jewish community and also from our own Catholic people.?? Late last month, Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston apologized to the Jewish community and called Williamson's comments "outrageous."

"It certainly raises questions as to the caliber of the leadership that the Society has," O'Malley wrote Jan. 30 on his blog.

George, who is close with Benedict, also defended the pope?s decision to welcome back the bishops as "an act of mercy and personal concern for the ordained and lay members of this society."

George said the Vatican has only taken the "first step?? toward receiving the four SSPX bishops into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. In order to "exercise their ministry" as bishops, the four men must assent to Roman Catholic teachings, including those of the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s.

One Vatican II document, "Nostra Aetate," explicitly rejects anti-Semitism, and says Jews should not be blamed for the death of Christ. "The Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God," the 1965 declaration says.

The SSPX broke ties with the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II, viewing its reforms as heretical. Bishop Bernard Fellay, superior general of the society, condemned anti-Semitism on Sunday, but anti-Semitic writings were still posted on SSPX's Web site on Tuesday.

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