

The Lefebvrite case: What was the Vatican thinking?

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 30, 2009 All Things Catholic

On the lecture circuit, I'm sometimes asked for my opinion about the Vatican's communications strategy. My glib answer generally is, "As soon as they have one, I'll be glad to tell you what I think of it."

The line usually draws a few chuckles. However, this week's furor over the lifting of the excommunication of four traditionalist bishops, including one who's a Holocaust denier, offers a reminder that the lack of PR savvy in Rome is actually no laughing matter.

The story has followed a familiar arc, which one might call the "Regensburg syndrome." The pope says or does something obviously destined to set off fireworks; nonetheless, the Vatican purports to be surprised by the reaction; then, damage control follows.

The containment strategy this time featured [a Jan. 27 apology](#) [1] from Bishop Bernard Fellay, superior of the traditionalist Fraternity of St. Pius X, for the incendiary comments of Bishop Richard Williamson, who denied in an interview with Swedish television that the Nazis used gas chambers and asserted that no more than 300,000 Jews were killed in World War II. In a statement released by the Vatican, Fellay also said that Williamson has been barred from further comment on political or historical subjects.

The next day, Benedict XVI recalled the deaths of "millions of Jews" in the Nazi death camps, and expressed his "full and indisputable solidarity" with the Jews. He also said that lifting the excommunications was an act of "paternal mercy" which he hopes will lead the traditionalists to embrace full communion in the church, including acceptance of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

As welcome as those statements obviously are, they've come only in response to a crisis that clearly should have been anticipated. Claims that the Vatican was caught off-guard don't cut it; well before Williamson appeared on Swedish TV, he had a public record of Holocaust denial and antagonism toward Jews which a 30-second Google search would have unearthed.

At the outset, let's stipulate several important bits of nuance:

- First, Benedict XVI sees himself as a friend of the Jewish people, and has no sympathy whatsoever for anti-Semitism or attempts to deny or diminish the Holocaust.
- Second, Williamson's views don't represent the whole traditionalist movement. The vast majority of ordinary Catholics attracted to the Latin Mass, or who harbor reservations about doctrinal innovations in the church, are neither bigots nor crackpots.
- Third, the motive for lifting the excommunication is the noble end of fostering unity in the church, striving to heal the only formal schism in the wake of Vatican II.
- Fourth, lifting the excommunication does not mean the Lefebvrites have been "rehabilitated." Canonists say the four prelates remain suspended *a divinis*, which means they can't legitimately ordain anyone, establish parishes, and so on. The Fraternity of St. Pius X still has no juridical status. The bottom line, in the words of a Jan. 25 statement from French Cardinal Jean-Pierre Ricard, a member of the Vatican's "Ecclesia Dei" Commission, is that this marks "not the end, but the beginning of a process of dialogue."
- Fifth, part of Benedict's strength as a leader is that he's not shackled to the short-term considerations of tomorrow's headlines. No one should expect him to shrink from making a decision simply because some people might misconstrue his motives.

I want to put all this on the record, because I don't want to be accused of over-simplification or partisanship when I submit the following: The way this decision was communicated was a colossal blunder, and one that's frankly difficult to either understand or excuse.

To be clear, my point has nothing to do with whether the excommunications should have been lifted in the first place. There's legitimate debate on that front, and not just due to its implications for Catholic/Jewish relations. There's also intra-Catholic discussion about what it means for the interpretation of Vatican II, and for the broader direction of the church. Instead, my argument is that even granting that the aim of restoring unity in the church justifies this step, its presentation was stunningly inept.

I take at face value the assurances of Vatican officials that they were unaware of Williamson's interview, but they hardly needed Swedish television to alert them that something was amiss. In 1989, Williamson narrowly escaped prosecution in Canada for praising the writings of Ernst Zundel, a German-born Canadian immigrant whose works include *The Hitler We Loved and Why* and *Did Six Million Really Die?*, both mainstays of Holocaust denial literature. All this was documented in press coverage at the time. In 1991, Williamson published an open letter referring to "the false messianic vocation of Jewish world-dominion, to prepare the Anti-Christ's throne in Jerusalem." In 2000, Williamson went on record asserting that the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" are legitimate. His reputation was so well-known that in 2008, Shimon Samuels, director of international relations at the Simon Wiesenthal Center, told the Catholic Herald in England that Williamson is "the Borat of the schismatic Catholic far-right."

Further, it's not as if the Vatican can claim to have been surprised by Jewish reaction. In September 2006, Benedict set off a similar firestorm in the Muslim world with his lecture at Regensburg, in which he quoted a 14th century Byzantine emperor to the effect that Muhammad had "brought things only evil and inhuman." Regensburg should have brought home the lesson that when the pope does something likely to cause alarm in another religious community, you have to see the train wreck coming in order to avert it.

What might a more effective communications strategy have looked like?

Rather than dropping this decree on an unsuspecting world, the Vatican could have called a press conference to present it, with senior officials such as Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Cardinal Walter Kasper, head of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews -- so that the interpretation would be simultaneous, not after-the-fact. At that time, four key points could have been made:

- This move is not an endorsement of the personal views of these four bishops. In particular, in light of Williamson's past comments, the pope wishes to clearly repudiate any attempt to diminish or deny the horror of the Holocaust.
- Catholicism's commitment to fighting anti-Semitism, and to good relations with the Jewish people, is unchanged.
- Lifting the excommunication gets the traditionalists in the door, but it does not mean they have arrived. If they are to be fully reintegrated, they must accept official Catholic teaching, including religious freedom and respect for other religions.
- The pope feels he'll have more leverage to nudge traditionalists in this direction by opening a dialogue, rather than keeping them on the outside.

That might not have been enough to short-circuit all the negative reaction, but it surely would have softened the blow. All four points were implied in the Jan. 25 statement from Ricard, as well as the Jan. 28 comments by Benedict XVI, but coming only in the wake of negative public reaction they inevitably smack of spin.

In short, the Vatican under Benedict XVI still has not learned the lessons of Regensburg. The terrible irony of these meltdowns is that they're a boon for people hostile to the pope or the church, who can cluck about how "I told you so," while they fall hardest on those most inclined to be sympathetic.

Of course, if this cycle continues, there may not be many people left in that second category to worry about.

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As noted above, Williamson's views should not be used to discredit every Catholic who feels the tug of classical liturgical forms, or who takes a traditional doctrinal stance. Many of the people drawn to the Society of St. Pius X, or any of the various traditionalist groups already in communion with Rome, are simply Catholics hungry for a clear sense of spiritual identity in a rootless world.

On the other hand, it would be equally misleading to style Williamson as a "lone gunman," an isolated crank with no connection to broader currents of thought in the traditionalist world.

The folly of that view was illustrated on Thursday by [Fr. Floriano Abrahamowicz](#) [2], a well-known priest of the Society of St. Pius X in northeastern Italy, who gave an interview to an Italian paper in which he defended Williamson. Abrahamowicz said he wasn't sure that gas chambers had been used by the Nazis for anything other

than "disinfection," seemed to cast doubt on the number of six million Jews killed, complained that the Holocaust has been exalted by Jews at the expense of other acts of genocide, and called the Jews a "people of deicide," referring to the death of Christ.

The fact that Abrahamowicz would voice these sentiments even after Fellay had apologized, and after Fellay insisted that the Society of St. Pius X has no competence to speak on anything other than faith and morals, illustrates how deeply entrenched they are in some quarters of traditionalist Catholicism.

The Abrahamowicz interview prompted the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, to go on Vatican Radio to say that "whoever denies the fact of the Shoah knows nothing of the mystery of God, nor of the Cross of Christ." Holocaust denial is "even more serious," Lombardi said, when it "comes from the mouth of a priest or a bishop, meaning a Christian minister, whether or not he's in union with the Catholic church."

Meanwhile, Fr. Pierpaolo Petrucci, a prior within the Society of St. Pius X, told reporters on Thursday that traditionalists still believe that many aspects of Vatican II "contradict the teaching of previous popes." In particular, Petrucci said the Lefebvrites remain "scandalized" by Pope Benedict XVI's 2006 trip to Turkey, in which the pope paused for a moment of silent prayer in the Blue Mosque alongside the Grand Mufti of Istanbul. Petrucci said that popes before Vatican II had rejected inter-religious relations as a matter of principle, implying that Benedict XVI (like John Paul before him) is some sort of apostate.

In the wake of all this, the leadership of the Society of St. Pius X in Italy has canceled an upcoming national meeting, in order to avoid "further polemics and confusion." Translation: the leadership wasn't sure it could keep a lid on what might be said on the floor of the meeting, or around the edges.

What recent events make clear is that there are two camps in the small universe that rotates around the Society of St. Pius X. The first, represented by Fellay, is composed of traditionalists whose concerns are solely liturgical and doctrinal, and who see the future of their movement as a leaven within the formal structures of the church; the second, represented by Williamson and Abrahamowicz, includes people for whom theological traditionalism bleeds off into far-right politics, xenophobia, and conspiracy theories, and who are far more suspicious of any "deal" with the post-conciliar church.

Benedict XVI's calculation seems to be that the former represent the majority, and that the best way to isolate them from the latter is to open the door wide enough that only the real intransigents will refuse to walk through it. The risk, of course, is that the outside world won't see the pope trying to steer the traditionalists toward moderation; it will instead see the pope rolling out the red carpet for a group that includes Holocaust deniers and hate-mongers.

All the more reason that somebody in the Vatican must think now about how to present the next act in this saga, rather than waiting for misunderstanding and heartache to erupt before cranking into motion.

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