

Papal Fallibility David Rosen

The Papal Audience for the US Conference of Presidents of US Jewish organizations, held on February 12th, was the first audience ever for that body. Under normal circumstances it would not have been particularly noteworthy. However, the events of the previous two weeks concerning the Society of Saint Pius X (founded by Archbishop Lefebvre, who broke away from the Catholic Church over the Second Vatican Council) and in particular one of its four bishops Richard Williamson - a public Holocaust denier gave this meeting special significance and extra media attention.

Accordingly Pope Benedict XVI, in his address to the Conference, was at pains to emphasize his unqualified repudiation of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial as sins which will not be tolerated by the Church. He stressed the importance of nurturing the memory of the Shoah as a message and warning for future generations. In addition the Pope reaffirmed his deep commitment to Catholic-Jewish relations and also announced his pending visit to Israel. It was clear that he was extremely eager to have the opportunity to publicly reiterate these points before a Jewish audience and to repair the damage and misrepresentation caused by this latest crisis in Catholic-Jewish relations.

This audience was in fact an important symbolic confirmation of the remarkable clarification that the Vatican issued a week beforehand.

The Vatican explained that contrary to popular misrepresentation, it had **not** embraced and welcomed back into the Church the members of the Society of Pius X (SSPX), including Williamson. All it had done was to lift the excommunication ban that Pope John Paul II had imposed when the Society started performing its own ordinations without Papal authorization. Lifting this excommunication ban opened the way for the Society and its leadership to return to the Church. However, they would have to first commit themselves to abiding by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, against which they had originally rebelled. These include an affirmation of the eternal Divine Covenant with the Jewish People and the condemnation of anti-Semitism. Accordingly the statement not only condemned Williamson's odious opinions, calling on him to recant and categorically publicly distance himself from them, but also indicated that if he did not do so there was no way he could be welcomed back into the Catholic Church. Yet arguably the most surprising sentence in the statement was the admission that Pope Benedict XVI had not known of Williamson's views when the excommunication ban was lifted, suggesting that had he known, he might not have proceeded as he did.

No less astounding was the admission by the man responsible for these contacts on behalf of the Vatican, Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos, who later in the day acknowledged that he also did not know about Williamson. A few days earlier the man responsible for Vatican relations with the Jewish people, Cardinal Walter Kasper, had complained that he was completely surprised by

the Vatican's action regarding the SSPX and he did not disguise his displeasure over this and the consequences. Such open internal criticism of the Vatican - and by implication, of its leadership – if not unparalleled, is very rare.

What has been revealed most dramatically by this episode is something that Vatican observers have been noting consistently during this papacy in contrast to the previous pontificate; namely, an amazing lack of preparation, if not disregard, for public perceptions and a profound lack of collegial consultation. The result is that time and again the Vatican has had to spend its energies in damage control and polishing up a tarnished image, when it could have prevented the distress to others and the harm to itself in the first place.

Despite the Pope and the Vatican's clarifications, there are still those who fear that this episode reflects some kind of backtracking of the Catholic church when it comes to good relations with the Jewish people; or that at least as a result of the Pope's deep desire to bring back the rebels into the fold, he is willing to downgrade Catholic-Jewish relations. However, this is far from the truth.

Of course there are many Jews who do not believe that the Catholic "leopard" ever "changed its spots" at all as far as its attitude towards the Jewish people is concerned. Such Jews are those who have not been able to lift themselves out of the traumas of our past that keep them there, and/or who are ignorant (sometimes willfully so) of the changes of the present. However the majority of Jews are aware of the remarkable historic changes that took place within the Catholic Church since Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, and most of those who did not become aware were significantly educated by the positive gestures and impact of Pope John Paul II's visit to Israel in the year 2000.

Moreover those who are informed are fully aware that then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, was the most trusted theological right hand of John Paul II. Accordingly there is no chance that he would want to turn the tide back on the stunning advances in Catholic –Jewish reconciliation and understanding that took place during John Paul II's papacy. At an unprecedented conference in Jerusalem at the beginning of 1994 of Christian and Jewish leadership from around the world that took place on the heels of the historic accord between Israel and the Holy See, establishing full relations between the two, Ratzinger was a keynote speaker who publicly expressed his great joy over the new full relationship between Israel and the Vatican. Moreover, since becoming Pope himself he has reiterated time and again his commitment to continuing the path of his predecessor concerning Catholic-Jewish relations and actually received the leadership of the Jewish representative body to the Vatican, the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, before receiving non-Catholic Christian representatives.

Accordingly those aware of all this could not accept the interpretation that the lifting of the excommunication of the SSPX, and Williamson in it midst, was an intentional snub towards the Jewish people that Benedict was willing to make for the sake of Christian unity.

However it is undoubtedly true that the question of repairing the schism and uniting the Church is one of great preoccupation for the Pope. In light (or rather in the shadow) of the above lack of transparency in this pontificate, we have seen how damage can be done when there is lack of advance consultation and consideration of the consequences of certain steps and statements. This was the case a year earlier when permission was given for wider use of the Latin liturgy, actually already permitted for limited cases by John Paul II, which included an Easter prayer for the conversion of the Jews. When Benedict realized that this permission for the wider use of the Latin liturgy had a negative bearing on Catholic-Jewish relations, he sought to repair the damage by improving the offensive text. However the improvement was still a disappointment for the Jewish community and for many Catholics. This style of making decisions too quickly without the necessary prior investigation, consultation, and preparation could have led the Vatican to move ahead with the rehabilitation of the SSPX without realizing all the implications and consequences. Richard Williamson's crude publicity seeking Holocaust denial and anti-Semitic rhetoric actually performed a great service in slowing down the SSPX's move back into the Catholic fold and may in fact have stopped it altogether. As mentioned, Williamson now has to publicly recant and the SSPX has to categorically accept the teachings of Vatican II before any such process can proceed.

Moreover this episode elicited remarkably widespread expressions of concern and alarm not only from Jewish quarters, but from major national Catholic Bishops' conferences as well as individual Catholic religious leaders and political figures, (including some fifty Catholic US congressmen and German Chancellor Angela Merkel) who called on the Vatican to clarify matters. All this, leading to the Vatican's eventual response and culminating in Pope Benedict's eloquent words at the papal audience on February 12th, have heightened the importance of Catholic-Jewish relations on the Church's contemporary agenda. In fact, we may say that this has been a classic example of turning a minus into a plus.

Undoubtedly there are significant struggles taking place within the Catholic Church today, which are reflected in different interpretation of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. However, what is so sweetly ironic from an historical Jewish perspective is that one of the few issues over which conservatives and liberals in the Church agree is the importance of good relations with the Jewish people and an unequivocal rejection of anti-Semitism.