

International Interreligious Affairs, February highlights
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The saga of the latest Catholic-Jewish crisis continued into February and reached its essential resolution with the statement from the Secretariat of State on Wednesday February 4th and the Papal audience for the Conference of Presidents of major Jewish organizations on February 12th .
(<http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=ijITI2PHKoG&b=849241&ct=6763085>)

The former served as the official explanation that contrary to popular misrepresentation, the Church had not accepted back into the Church the members of the Catholic breakaway Society of Pius X (SSPX) including its Holocaust denying bishop Richard Williamson. Although it had prepared the way for this by revoking the excommunication ban that Pope John Paul II had imposed when the society started performing its own ordinations without Papal authorization, they would have to accept all the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (against which they had originally rebelled) including the affirmation of the eternal Divine Covenant with the Jewish People and the condemnation of anti-Semitism, before they would be admitted back into the Church

The statement not only condemned Williamson's odious opinions, but called on him to recant and categorically publicly distance himself from them.

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.)

The papal audience on Thursday, February 12, with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations was the first ever for that organization. Under normal circumstances, it would have been just another photo opportunity for a Jewish group with the pope. However, the events of the previous two weeks gave this meeting special significance and attracted widespread media attention. Accordingly, I traveled to Rome to represent AJC at this event.

The Pope's address to us was a powerful repudiation of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial as sins that will not be tolerated by the Church; and emphasized the importance of nurturing the memory of the *Shoah* as a message and warning for future generations. Benedict also read out the famous prayer of John Paul II asking Divine forgiveness for the sins committed by Christians against Jews down the ages and added "I make this prayer my own". He furthermore reaffirmed his deep commitment to Catholic-Jewish relations and also announced his forthcoming visit to Israel.

It was clear that he was extremely eager to have the opportunity to reiterate these points publicly 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 abovementioned clarification that the Vatican had issued a week beforehand.

In addition as a further testimony of the close relations between the Vatican and the Jewish people, a small delegation of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel (which I advise on

interfaith matters) will meet with Pope Benedict XVI and other leading Vatican officials on March 12th and I have been asked to be part of this delegation.

Also this month, one of the largest lay Catholic movements in the world, the Focolare movement, held its third Catholic-Jewish symposium – for the first time in Israel, in Jerusalem. In addition to myself, Emily Soloff the Director of the AJC Chicago Chapter and Lisa Palmieri Billig, our liason to the Vatican and representative in Italy, also attended. I spoke on the first day together with Professor Joseph Sievers of the Cardinal Bea Institute for Catholic-Jewish Studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University, on the past and present state of Catholic-Jewish relations .