

Remembering the Holocaust: A scientific fact, a religious obligation

VATICAN CITY - Acknowledging and remembering the Holocaust is not only a matter of historical honesty; it is a religious obligation, especially for bishops, several Vatican officials said.

When Pope Benedict XVI publicly distanced himself from the Holocaust-denying views of traditionalist Bishop Richard Williamson and the Vatican Secretariat of State called on the bishop Feb. 4 to publicly disavow his views, they were not simply responding to a public uproar.

“Denial of the Holocaust by a person who should know better is indistinguishable from an anti-Semitic prejudice,” said Bishop Brian Farrell, vice president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations With the Jews.

“Anti-Semitism has been condemned by the Second Vatican Council in the clearest terms,” he said.

Bishop Williamson is one of the four bishops whose excommunications were lifted in late January by Pope Benedict. The bishops had been excommunicated in 1988 after being ordained against papal orders by the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre.

Just a few days before the Vatican made public the fact that the pope had lifted the excommunications, a television interview with Bishop Williamson aired; in the interview he claimed that the Holocaust was exaggerated and that no Jews died in Nazi gas chambers.

At his weekly general audience Jan. 28, Pope Benedict affirmed the obligation to remember the Holocaust as a concrete example of “the unpredictable power of evil when it conquers the heart of man.”

“May the Shoah be a warning for all against forgetfulness, denial or reductionism because violence committed against one single human being is violence against all,” the pope said.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the papal spokesman, said that to deny the Holocaust is to deny “the most obvious manifestation” of the presence of evil in the world.

“A religious person, a Christian must face the challenge to faith represented by this fact, by evil in the world,” he told Catholic News Service Feb. 5.

Unless a person recognizes the reality and enormity of evil in the world, he or she cannot understand why Jesus had to die in order to ransom humanity, Father Lombardi said.

Denying the Holocaust is a sign of not understanding the reality of evil and, “therefore, of not living the faith,” he said. “For this reason, it seems right to me that a bishop who denies the Shoah is better off growing potatoes or doing anything else, but not being a bishop.”

Father Lombardi said denying the Holocaust “is an obvious error,” but whether or not it is a sin depends on whether the person is conscious that it is erroneous and affirms it anyway.

“In that case, it is a serious sin of lying mixed, in addition, with components of racism and anti-Semitism,” the papal spokesman said.

Bishop Farrell told CNS Feb. 5 that there are several reasons why “the Shoah is a religious concern.”

First, he said, “every destruction of human dignity, every murder of a human being is an evil that goes against God’s plan. In that sense, it is an issue for religion.”

“There is a second reason that is much more specific to the Shoah and it is that the Shoah took place in the heart of what was supposedly the Christian continent, Europe,” he said.

Rabbi David Rosen, co-chairman of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, said there is a well-documented connection between centuries of Christian teaching of contempt for the Jews - blaming them for the death of Christ - and the atmosphere that allowed the Nazis’ attempts to destroy European Jewry to

nearly succeed.

“When the church declares anti-Semitism a sin against God and man, it is demonstrating a fundamental sea change in prevailing Catholic attitudes toward Jews,” the rabbi told CNS. “Arguably nothing raises a question mark over that change as much as expressing or tolerating Holocaust denial.”

In an article for the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Italian historian Anna Foa wrote that Holocaust denial is a lie cloaked in scientific jargon “to cover its true origins, its true motive: anti-Semitism.”

Bishop Farrell said the testimony of the survivors of the Nazi death camps, the remains of the camps themselves and the meticulous documentation kept by the Nazis prove that the Holocaust and the death of 6 million Jews is a historical fact that can be denied “only through ignorance or prejudice.”

“That is why it becomes an issue when a bishop, who should be a teacher of truth and of goodness, denies the Holocaust,” he said.

“The fact that the pope asked the bishop to reject these opinions and to apologize for them results from the fact that a denial of the Holocaust by a person who should know better is indistinguishable from an anti-Semitic prejudice,” Bishop Farrell said.

After visiting a Nazi death camp in Poland in 2006, Pope Benedict said, “May contemporary humanity never forget Auschwitz or the other ‘death factories’ where the Nazi regime attempted to eliminate God in order to replace him. May it not succumb to the temptation of racial hatred, which is at the root of the worst forms of anti-Semitism. May people recognize once again that God is the Father of all and calls us all, in Christ, to build a world of justice, truth and peace together.”