Benedict XVI and the Lefebvrists – week two

EDWARD KESSLER

Healing the rift

The Vatican’s statement ordering a Lefebvrist bishop to withdraw his remarks denying the Holocaust is a positive step towards repairing the damage inflicted on Jewish-Catholic relations. Here a Jewish academic explains what more needs to be done.

“...and that women should be barred from university. Perhaps not surprisingly, Shimon Samuels, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in California, concluded at the time that Williamson is “a clown, but a dangerous clown”.

Vatican officials should have known the bishop’s views before the excommunications were lifted. His opinions on the Holocaust and other outlandish statements could easily be found on the internet. Spokesmen for the Society of St Pius X and other traditionalists have stated that Williamson’s views are not theirs and the Vatican stressed lifting the excommunication was not an endorsement of those views. Yet the question of anti-Semitism remains.

On Wednesday, a statement from the Secretariat of State repeated remarks made by the Pope a week earlier at a general audience in which he expressed his “full and unquestionable solidarity with our brothers, receivers of the First Covenant”. The statement went on to address Williamson’s comments directly stating that he cannot serve in the Catholic Church if he does not unequivocally and publicly withdraw his denial of the Holocaust.

This goes some way towards repairing the damage but more needs to be done. As Israel’s Foreign Ministry said, the lifting of Williamson’s excommunication “humiliates the memory of all the victims of the...
Nazi genocide”. In a statement the Ministry goes on to say the Vatican’s admonishment of Williamson is the first step in the right direction and that more explicit and unequivocal decisions and statements on this issue are expected from the Vatican.

Benedict XVI’s statements generally depict Nazism as a pagan phenomenon for which the Church shares no complicity, ignoring the reality that, without Christian anti-Judaism and violence against Jews, Nazi ideology could not have taken hold nor could it have been carried out. Pope Benedict now needs to address the anti-Semitic comments of the Society of St Pius X in order to alleviate the profound disappointment and increasing perplexity among Jews at the direction he is leading the Catholic Church. It seems to some that this Pope is letting Vatican II be undermined.

In the 20 years that I have been engaged in Jewish-Christian relations, I never thought I would witness a time when, in the name of Christian unity, a German-born Pope would bring back into the fold a Holocaust denier. How and why did the Pope get into this situation? It is the Regensburg address all over again, but this time those offended are the Jewish people as well as millions of others, Catholic and non-Catholic. Cardinal Schönborn of Vienna takes far more seriously the dangers of Christian anti-Semitism and the lessons of the Holocaust. Last week, on the seventieth anniversary of the Anschluss (when German columns entered Austria), the cardinal stated that share in the blame was a “permanent task” for Austrian Christians in order to prevent “the power of hatred and inhumanity ever again gaining the upper hand”. How different from the general remarks of the Pope.

For Catholics no less than for Jews, the problem is puzzlement about the Pope and his leadership. Vatican II fostered a renewal of Catholic life and theology based on a newly found appreciation of the Hebrew Bible, of the Jewishness of Jesus and his ministry, and of Jewish approaches to God and to their covenant with God. Vatican II brought Catholicism into an age of modernity, without sacrificing its integrity. Are we to return to the medieval mindset?

The Pope can repair the public relations debacle by declaring unequivocally, like his predecessor, that the teachings of Vatican II are not optional; that they represent the true spirit of the Church, from which there is no return. He should unambiguously and personally condemn Williamson’s statements. They are shocking, particularly at a time when anti-Semitic remarks are being heard in Europe again. I welcome the fact that Bishop Williamson has been asked to recant his words. He should also be ordered to apologise to the world at large for the hurt he has caused.

Benedict’s extension of an olive branch to the four men to heal the schism in the Catholic Church would, I suspect, cause John Paul II to shake his head in disbelief. It has shaken Catholic-Jewish relations to the core.

Dr Edward Kessler is director of the Woolf Institute of Abrahamic Faiths in Cambridge.