

## Jews tell Vatican: Holocaust denial is a crime

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World Jewish leaders told Vatican officials that denying the Holocaust was "not an opinion but a crime" when they met on Monday to discuss a bishop they accuse of being anti-Semitic.

The meetings, the first since the controversy over Bishop Richard Williamson, who denies the extent of the Holocaust, began last month, took place three days before Pope Benedict is due to address a group of American Jewish leaders.

Williamson told Swedish television in an interview broadcast in January: "I believe there were no gas chambers." He said no more than 300,000 Jews perished in Nazi concentration camps, rather than the 6 million accepted by most historians.

"Today we strongly reaffirmed that the denial of the Shoah is not an opinion, but a crime," said Richard Prasquier, president of the French Jewish umbrella organization CRIF, using the Hebrew word for Holocaust.

Prasquier and Maram Stern, deputy secretary of the World Jewish Congress (WJC), held talks with Cardinal Walter Kasper, head of the Vatican office that handles religious relations with Jews.

"We want the Vatican to realize that by accommodating anti-Semites like Williamson, the achievements of four decades of Catholic-Jewish dialogue ... will be put into doubt," WJC President Ronald Lauder said in a statement.

"We now believe that our message has been understood. The controversial debate of the past three weeks has had a positive impact," said Lauder, who did not attend the meetings.

Catholic-Jewish relations have been extremely tense since January 24, when Benedict lifted excommunications of four renegade traditionalist bishops, including Williamson, in an attempt to heal a schism that began in 1988 when they were ordained without Vatican permission.

Among those who have condemned Williamson and the pope's decision are Holocaust survivors, progressive Catholics, U.S. legislators, Israeli leaders, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and Jewish writer and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel.

A Church source said Israel's Chief Rabbinate, which had pulled out of dialogue, has

decided to resume talks and will come to the Vatican either in late February or mid-March.

The Vatican has ordered Williamson to publicly recant his position. Over the weekend, traditionalist leaders said he had been removed as head of a seminary in Argentina.

Germany's Spiegel magazine on Saturday quoted Williamson as saying he first had to review historical evidence on the Holocaust before considering an apology to Jews.

"I ask everyone to believe me that I did not deliberately say something false. I was, on the basis of my research in the 1980s, convinced of the accuracy of my comments. Now I must examine everything again and look at the evidence," he said.

Williamson is part of the ultra-traditionalist Society of St Pius X (SSPX), which does not accept all the teachings of the 1962-1965 Second Vatican Council. It repudiated the concept of collective Jewish guilt for Christ's death and urged dialogue with other religions.

The Vatican has said the SSPX must accept all Council teachings before they can be fully re-admitted into the Church.

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