



# Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI

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Apostolic Palace

00120 Vatican City

*Heppenheim, 29 January 2009*

### **Your Holiness,**

The Executive Board of the ICCJ wishes to express its profound dismay at recent developments in relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish community. The Catholic Church has led the way for many decades in seeking to reverse centuries of dismissive theologies and hostile attitudes toward Jews, promoting honest and open conversation based on mutual respect and equality as co-heirs in covenant.

Ironically, the most recent disturbing event has occurred near the fiftieth anniversary of the summoning of the Second Vatican Council by Blessed Pope John XXIII. We refer to last week's lifting of the 1988 excommunications of four bishops illicitly consecrated by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre.

We recognize that this is an internal matter of Catholic jurisprudence. We also recognize that the immediate cause of the excommunication was the illicit ordination of four individuals as bishops, in violation of the wishes of Pope John Paul II. It was not, as some have supposed, because these people were leaders in the Society of Saint Pius X, which explicitly rejects many of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, including the groundbreaking *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.

Nevertheless, the televised interview on 21 January 2009 of one of the formerly excommunicated bishops - denying that six million Jews were slaughtered in the Nazi Holocaust, and denying the use of gas chambers - is upsetting to many Christians and Jews, particular against the background of other SSPX-related assertions that propagate the antisemitism of such writings as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Statements issued in the last few days by the SSPX do not suggest any

intention on their part to renounce such views.

To its credit, the SSPX has distanced itself from Bishop William's denial of the Holocaust and forbidden him to speak publicly on historical matters. However, its website purveys several ideas in tension with or contradicting the authoritative teaching of the Catholic Church expressed in *Nostra Aetate*. The Society should publicly and explicitly endorse that conciliar declaration.

The sense of scandal being felt by many is not alleviated by claims that the private historical beliefs of the parties involved are irrelevant to a Church that has deplored, "the hatred, persecutions and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and by anyone" (*Nostra Aetate*, 4; forcefully reiterated by Pope John Paul II at the Synagogue of Rome, 13 April 1986).

Although it might be argued that reconciliation with Catholics who have been disenchanted for decades is a higher internal priority than continuing rapprochement with the Jewish people whose traditions have been delegitimized for centuries, it remains difficult to understand the lack of private, open communication between Catholic and Jewish leaders in advance of this decision. Commitment to "genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant" (Pope John Paul II's prayer at the Mass of Pardon, 12 March 2000 and at the Western Wall, 26 March 2000) would seem to require the courtesy of prior conversation about a subject that so deeply touches Jewish lives. Conducting interreligious discussion through the media is a perilous venture.

The Executive Board of the ICCJ urges that the injury inflicted on Jewish-Christian relations by this internal Catholic action be publicly remedied as soon as possible by unambiguous clarifying statements from the highest levels of the Catholic Church reasserting all aspects of *Nostra Aetate* and that priority be given by both Jewish rabbinical and advocacy groups and Catholic officials in the Holy See and national bishops conferences to reviving frank and direct channels of communication between Catholic and Jewish leaders.

On behalf of the Executive Board of the ICCJ I remain respectfully yours,

**Dr Deborah Weissman**

*President*

c.c.:

Walter Cardinal Kasper

Tarcisio Cardinal Bertone, S.D.B

Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Jean-Claude Perisset

Translations: Polish