

"Theologians clash with German bishop over criticism of pope"

Regensburg, Germany - German Catholic theologians expressed shock Tuesday at a threat of discipline by a hardline bishop, in the aftermath of the row over Rome's readmission of Holocaust-denier Richard Williamson. The initial controversy was triggered by the decision last month of Pope Benedict XVI to end an internal Catholic schism with the ultra-traditionalist group, the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX).

The SSPX includes British-born Bishop Richard Williamson, who has denied the scale of the Holocaust.

Liberal Catholics in Germany and Austria have accused the pope, who is German, of mismanaging the subsequent political and inter-faith crisis.

In the latest twist in the row, Bishop Gerhard Ludwig Mueller of Regensburg - where the pope owns a private home - was infuriated when three theology professors at the University of Regensburg signed an online petition criticizing the pope.

In a letter made public Tuesday by his aides, Bishop Mueller demanded retractions and a personal apology by each to the pontiff.

Mueller said the petition implied that reconciling with SSPX meant the pope had permitted Catholics to challenge modern church teachings.

"This is not true," he wrote. "You have shown yourself that you are not qualified to teach Catholic theology." The letter threatened "further steps" but did not say if this meant revoking their licences to teach in the name of the church at the public university.

Sabine Demel, professor of canon law at the university, said she was appalled at the letter. Professor Burkard Porzelt, a religious-education scholar, said he was shocked "that there was no discussion beforehand."

The other professor, Heinz-Guenther Schoettler, who teaches pastoral theology, could not be contacted.

Mueller is an upholder of the authority of the pope and bishops. He is also hostile to the SSPX.

Williamson's remarks denying there were any Nazi gas chambers were made in Regensburg diocese in November. Williamson believes only 200,000 to 300,000 Jews were killed by the Nazis, rather than the 6 million accepted by historians.

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