

The Pope's Denial Problem  
By reconciling with extremist bishops,  
Benedict embraces the far-right fringe.  
Christopher Hitchens

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Ever since Pope John XXIII made history by the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, there have been believing Roman Catholics who regarded the whole thing as having been a ghastly mistake. The best known of these outside the church was probably Evelyn Waugh, who went to his death, after Easter service in 1966, convinced that Christendom had been betrayed by the capitulation of the Holy See to the fashionable heresies of modernism. The best known inside the church was the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, a highly traditional French cleric who took his differences with Rome into open schism and was excommunicated, along with the four men he dared to "ordain" as bishops, in the year of our lord 1970. The most notorious (which I choose to distinguish from being merely well-known) of the extremist Catholic dissenters are the Father-Son team—if I may annex such profane imagery—of Hutton Gibson and his son Mel, whose highly lurid version of the sacrifice of Jesus was brought to the multiplex as "The Passion of the Christ."

For decades, it has seemed that the schismatics would either end their days as lonely, cranky outsiders or else rejoin the fold. Instead, Pope Benedict XVI has now moved the Roman Catholic Church to the right in order to accommodate, and rehabilitate, those who defected. Among these is a Lefebvrist "bishop" named Richard Williamson, who doubts his own version of the facts of the Nazi Holocaust and who furthermore suspects the Bush administration of having orchestrated the events of September 11, 2001, in order to afford itself a pretext for war.

The pope's decision to apply the principle of inclusion to these decidedly eccentric elements, organized as they are under the banner of "the Society of St. Pius X," has upset many liberal Catholics as well as some quite conservative ones, among them George Weigel. But should we consider it as an internal affair of the Roman Catholic Church? Here is why we should not.

The crucial change brought about in the everyday life of Catholics by Vatican II was the dropping of the Tridentine or "Latin" Mass and its replacement by services in the vernacular. The crucial change brought about in the relationship of Catholics to non-Catholics by Vatican II was the abandonment by the church of the charge of "deicide" against the Jewish people as a whole: in other words, the dropping of the allegation that the Jews bore a historic and collective responsibility for the torture and murder of Jesus. The two changes, perhaps unfortunately, were and are related. The old Latin

form of the Mass included a specific Good Friday prayer for the conversion of the Jews, who were in some versions of the ritual described as "perfidious."

There may be some in the Society of St. Pius X who are merely nostalgic for the old days when the priest held up the host with his back to the congregation, and pronounced the sacred words in a Latin formula which was reassuringly the same in every church on the face of the earth. (The word "Catholic," after all, simply means "universal.") But it is not only Jewish critics who suspect that more may underlie the increasing restoration of the Latin service. To illustrate what underlies the misgiving itself, let me quote from Hutton Gibson's self-published 2003 book "The Enemy Is Still Here." Bitterly hostile to all the liturgical and doctrinal changes of the past half-century, Gibson is especially enraged by Rome's attempts to "reach out" to Jews. Rejecting an attempt by the present pope, when he was Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, to modify the charge that all Jews demanded the crucifixion of Jesus, Gibson writes: "On the contrary, Pontius Pilate refused responsibility for this Deicide, and all the Jews on hand publicly and vociferously assumed the guilt. 'His blood be upon us, and upon our children.' This crime certainly outranks Original Sin, and the Tower of Babel; the punishment for both sins of pride was also inflicted upon future generations. In accordance with history's record of massive disasters suffered by the Jews, the Church has always held this position. And why may not the 'holocaust' have been due to the same curse which they called down upon themselves?"

I pause to note the coarse and nasty manner in which Gibson senior tries to have it both ways, first by sneering at the inverted-comma-probably-didn't-happen "holocaust" and then by saying that the same nonevent was a divine retribution for the killing of Jesus! His next observation is almost as breathtakingly crude: replying to a sermon from Pope John Paul II to the effect that the Jewish religion is not so much "extrinsic" to Christianity as "intrinsic" to it, and that Jews are "our predilect brothers and, in a certain way, one could say our older brothers," Gibson snorts: "Abel had an older brother." May I recommend that you read those last four words with care? When Mel Gibson, who has funded a special Latin Mass church in Malibu, Calif., was arrested by a police officer upon whom he then up-ended a great potty of Jew-hating paranoid drivel, he tried to defend himself by saying that it was the drink talking. No, it wasn't the drink talking: it was his revered father talking and, through him, a strain of reactionary Catholic dogma that we hoped had been left behind.

Instead, the pope is—without any preconditions that I can discern—deciding that the breach with such people is a wound that requires "healing." (I freely admit that the Gibson faction and its "Alliance for Catholic Tradition" is even more extreme than the Society of St. Pius X, but the principle remains the same.) How on earth can this be? I am afraid that one probable explanation can give very little comfort to those who like to

think that religious differences can be settled by the papering-over of happy ecumenicism.

Ask yourself, first, why it was that the church took until 1965 to repudiate the charge of deicide against the Jews. After all, it is only in one verse of one Gospel (Matthew 27:24-25), and in the climactic scene of Mel Gibson's movie, that the Jewish Sanhedrin demands to be held responsible for the coming crucifixion for all time and through all generations. Then there is the question, even if the rabbis did make such a demand, of whether they could claim to speak for all Jews then, let alone all those who have been born since. So why did it take until 20 years after the Nuremberg trials for the church to admit the obvious?

Christian doctrine holds that all of us were implicated in the guilt of Calvary and were, in a mystic sense, present for it. Every time we sin or fall away, we increase the pain and misery of the awful scene. Thus the principle of collective responsibility applies to everybody and not just to Jews. Now, there were no Cornishmen or Tamils or Cherokees or Slovaks present at Golgotha. But, if the greatest story ever told has any truth to it at all, and even if it doesn't, there certainly were quite a good few Jewish people in the vicinity. Thus, if they are to be collectively excused, then it does become a bit harder to persuade others that their own sinful participation is ineffaceable. Hence the unease, ever since Vatican II, among conservative believers. Somehow, the strong heady wine of condemnation and redemption was being watered and diluted.

Jewish orthodoxy makes this difficulty no more soluble. In commenting on the Christian Bible, the greatest of the sages, Maimonides, affirmed that the rabbis of Jerusalem were to be showered with praise for their courageous rectitude in thus disposing of the foul impostor and heretic who dared claim to be the adored and long-looked-for (and still-awaited) Messiah. You can be sure that devout Catholics down the ages were as acutely aware of this awkward fact as most of today's secular Jewish liberals are blissfully unaware of it. The old-style Easter sermons, the "Passion Plays" at Oberammergau and elsewhere, and bestselling Catholic devotional books such as the visions of the German nun Anne Catherine Emmerich, are replete with revolted depictions of Jewish mobs reveling in the sufferings of the Nazarene.

When excesses are committed by the religious (something which does indeed seem to happen from time to time), you often hear it argued that these are only perversions of the "true" or "real" or authentic teachings. What makes the present case so alarming is that concessions are being made to Holocaust-deniers and anti-Semites, and that this is not a departure from "original intent" Catholicism but rather part of a return to traditional and old-established preachments. For decades, it has seemed to many incurious outsiders that the Roman Catholic Church had at the very least made a good-

faith attempt to acknowledge its historic responsibility for defaming the Jewish people. Suddenly, this achievement doesn't look so solid. The German representative of the Society of St. Pius X recently lectured German Catholic bishops on the doctrinal need to stress the general responsibility of Jews for deicide. Last month he was an outsider. Now, his faction is back in the papal bosom. "Unity" must mean a lot to Benedict if he is willing to pay this sort of price for it.

The Christian consensus is that Jesus went to Jerusalem on that Passover in the full knowledge that he was going to his death. Ought this not to mean that the Jews and Romans did humanity a favor, by obediently fulfilling prophecy and by spilling the blood that ransomed the world? Evidently not. As a nonbeliever, this is not my problem. But the indulgence of prejudice and paranoia under the cloak of faith is my problem as a citizen. As with Cardinal Bernard Law, the enabler of child-molestation, who is now sheltered by Rome and who was able to vote in the election of Ratzinger as pope, so with those who slander the Jews with innuendo and worse, and who spread the vile libels that blame the democratic United States for the theocratic terrorist attacks upon it. One might think a responsible church would be indignantly arraigning and expelling such people rather than piously seeking reconciliation with them. Apparently, one would be wrong.

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