

Pope Benedict XVI and the Jews

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The recent controversy over the lifting of the excommunication ban on Richard Williamson and his fellow bishops of the Society of Saint Pius X generated the impression that there might be some backtracking in the Vatican concerning the latter's commitment to Catholic-Jewish relations, and in particular to combating anti-Semitism. The statements from the Vatican Secretariat of State and then by the pope himself, most recently when he received the delegation of the bilateral committee of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See's Commission for Religious Dialogue with Jewry, have clarified that nothing could be further from the truth.

The Vatican and the pope have made it clear that the lifting of the excommunication ban is not a reinstatement of these bishops, who will not be accepted back into the church until they affirm the teachings of the Second Vatican Council which include the positive teachings on Jews and Judaism. But above all the pope has not only reaffirmed the Church's unqualified repudiation of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, he has reiterated the importance of Holocaust education and his own profound commitment to continuing the path of his predecessor in advancing Catholic-Jewish relations.

Those who are familiar with Pope Benedict XVI's record will not at all be surprised by this.

He was the first pope to invite Jewish leaders both to the funeral of Pope John Paul II and, above all, to the celebration of his own ascension to the throne of St. Peter in 2005.

Little more than a month after his ascension, Pope Benedict XVI received a delegation of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations. This roof body, embracing the principle Jewish advocacy organizations as well as the major streams of contemporary Judaism, is the official partner of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry. Notably, he received this Jewish delegation before he had even received delegations from representative bodies of other branches of Christianity, let alone other religions.

At this meeting he declared, "In the years following the [Second Vatican Ecumenical] Council, my predecessors Pope Paul VI and in a special way, Pope John Paul II, took significant steps toward improving relations with the Jewish people. It is my intention to continue on this path." Moreover, the first place of divine worship of another religious community visited by Pope Benedict XVI was the synagogue in Cologne, which he visited in August 2005 during his journey to Germany for the World Youth Day.

On that occasion, he referred to the above mentioned meeting, stating that "today I wish to reaffirm that I intend to continue with great vigor on the path toward improved relations and friendship with the Jewish people, following the decisive lead given by Pope John Paul II."

On both occasions he outlined more of his thinking on the nature and purpose of this relationship. While acknowledging the tragic past and deploring resurgent anti-Semitism, he asserted that "the 'spiritual patrimony' treasured by Christians and Jews is itself the source of the wisdom and inspiration capable of guiding us toward a future of hope in accordance with the divine plan. At the same time, remembrance of the past remains for both communities a moral imperative and a source of purification in our efforts to pray and work for reconciliation, justice, respect and human dignity, and for that peace which is ultimately a gift from the Lord Himself. Of its very nature, this importance must include a continued reflection on the profound historical moral and theological questions posited by the experience of the Shoah."

Still in the first year of his pontificate, Pope Benedict continued to meet with an array of Jewish organizations and leaders including the chief rabbis of Israel and the chief rabbi of Rome. In receiving the latter he declared, "The Catholic Church is close and is a friend to you. Yes we love you and we cannot but love you, because of the Fathers: through them you are very dear and beloved brothers to us."

The pope also expressed his gratitude for the divine protection of the Jewish people that has guaranteed its survival over the course of history: "The people of Israel have been delivered from the hands of enemies on frequent occasions and in the centuries of anti-Semitism and during the tragic moments of the Shoah, the hand of the Almighty sustained and guided them."

These ideas have been recurrent in the writings of Joseph Ratzinger. In an article published in L'Osservatore Romano in December 2000, entitled 'The Heritage of Abraham: The Gift of Christmas', he wrote: "Abraham, father of the people of Israel, father of faith, has become the source of blessing, for in him 'all the families of the earth shall call themselves blessed.' The task of the Chosen People is therefore to make a gift of their God - the one true God - to every other people. In reality, as Christians we are the inheritors of their faith in the one God. Our gratitude therefore must be extended to our Jewish brothers and sisters who, despite the hardships of their own history, have held on to faith in this God right up to the present and who witness to it..."

In this same article, then Cardinal Ratzinger addressed the question of anti-Semitism and the degree to which it has been associated with Christianity. He stated: "Down through the history of Christianity, already strained relations deteriorated further, even giving birth in many cases to anti-Jewish attitudes which throughout history have led to deplorable acts of violence. Even if the most recent loathsome experience of the Shoah was perpetuated in the name of an anti-Christian ideology which tried to strike the Christian faith at its Abrahamic roots in the people of Israel, it cannot be denied that a certain insufficient resistance to this atrocity on the part of Christians can be explained by an inherited anti-Judaism present in the hearts of not a few Christians."

This condemnation of anti-Semitism included a description of Nazism that not everyone would share. The pope repeated this idea when he visited the site of the extermination camps in Auschwitz-Birkenau in May 2006.

In describing the intentions of Nazism, he declared: "Deep down, those vicious criminals, by wiping out this people, wanted to kill the God who called Abraham, who spoke on Sinai and laid down the principles to serve as a guide for mankind, principles that are eternally valid. If this people, by its very existence, was a witness to the God who spoke to humanity and took us to Himself, then that God finally had to die and power had to belong to man alone - to the men who thought that by force they had made themselves masters of the world. By destroying Israel, by the Shoah, they ultimately wanted to tear out the taproot of the Christian faith and to replace it with a faith of their own invention...."

While many would argue with Pope Benedict XVI's analysis, there surely can be no more powerful an argument for Christians to avoid all anti-Semitic prejudice than the one he provides in these statements.

It is significant to condemn anti-Semitism as evil and it is remarkable to condemn it as "a sin against God and man" as did Pope John Paul II (words that have been reiterated by Pope Benedict XVI himself). However, to describe anti-Semitism as an assault against the very roots of Christianity means that for a Christian to harbor such sentiment is to attack and betray his or her own faith - a message of enormous pedagogical importance in the struggle against hatred directed toward Jews and Judaism.

As already indicated, Benedict XVI sees the Church as having a special - indeed unique - relationship with the Jewish people. This inevitably must take into account the central affirmations of the Jewish faith and of contemporary Jewish identity. In this regard the pope has a profound understanding of the significance of the State of Israel for the Jewish people. As Cardinal Ratzinger, he was on the Special Committee of the Holy See that reviewed and authorized the establishment of full relations between Israel and the Vatican.

Among his long-standing close friends in Israel, previously including the late mayor of Jerusalem Teddy Kollek, is Prof. Zvi Werblowsky, one of the Jewish Israeli pioneers of interfaith dialogue. When the decision was made to establish full relations between the Vatican and the State of Israel, Cardinal Ratzinger phoned Werblowsky in Jerusalem to express his joy over this development, describing it as the fruit of the work of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.

Not everyone in the Church has appreciated the central role that Israel plays in contemporary as well as historic Jewish identity. Pope Benedict XVI does, and he fully realizes that the relationship between the Vatican and the State of Israel is inextricably bound up with the relationship between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church.

Of course this is not without its complications, both in terms of the interests of the local Church in Israel and the Palestinian territories, and the Holy See's interests within and in relation to the Arab world and Muslim society as a whole. These often conflicting interests are obviously substantially affected by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Accordingly, the theme of prayer for peace in the Holy Land has been a recurrent one in the pope's homilies and addresses, indicating that such peace would be a source of blessing not only to the peoples and faiths in this land, but to the world as a whole. Indeed Benedict XVI has frequently referred to the need for Jews and Christians to pray and to work together for the goal of peace in the world at large. In his meeting with the aforementioned delegation of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, led by Chief Rabbi She'ar Yashuv Cohen, the pope expressed the hope that his forthcoming visit to Israel would advance Catholic-Jewish relations and also advance peace in the land and beyond. While all people of goodwill share the latter hope, the present situation on the ground makes many skeptical as to its current feasibility. However there is little doubt that the visit of Pope Benedict XVI will significantly contribute to the historic transformation of relations between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people in our times.

The writer, former chief rabbi of Ireland, heads the American Jewish Committee's Department of Interreligious Affairs and is also the chairman of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations.