

Pope Benedict XVI and Catholic-Jewish Relations

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The ceremony of Pope Benedict XVI's ascension to the throne of St. Peter in 2005 coincided with the Jewish festival of Passover, making it difficult for many religious Jewish leaders (and impossible for some) to accept the invitations they had received to be present. Ironically the situation was somewhat similar with the Pope's visit to the U.S. in 2008 coinciding with the eve of Passover.

However, the very fact that invitations to the Pope's coronation were extended to rabbis was itself a precedent and a powerful indication of Pope Benedict XVI's special commitment to the relationship between Catholicism and Judaism.

Little more than a month later he 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 almost immediately into his pontificate, before he had even received delegations from representative bodies of other branches of Christianity, let alone other religions.

In his words 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 towards 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 aforementioned meeting, stating that: "Today I wish to reaffirm that I intend to continue with great vigor on the path towards improved relations and friendship with the Jewish people, following the decisive lead given by Pope John Paul II."

On both occasions he continued to outline his thoughts 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 towards 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 posed 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 December 2000, in an article entitled "The Heritage of Abraham: the Gift of Christmas," published in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 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 the sight of those peoples who, lacking knowledge of the One God 'dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death' (Luke 1:79)."

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 description of the ultimate goal of Nazi ideology was already anticipated by the American Jewish writer Maurice Samuel in his book *The Great Hatred*, published just before World War II. However, it is quite a different matter when the highest authority in the Catholic Church presents it as such.

This idea was arguably the most important element of Pope Benedict XVI's reflections while visiting extermination sites in Auschwitz-Birkenau during 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...."

It appears to me that there can be no greater condemnation and repudiation of anti-Semitism than that expressed in these words. It is one thing to condemn anti-Semitism or evil, and it is remarkable to condemn it as "a sin against God and man", as did Pope John Paul II. However, to describe anti-Semitism as an assault against the very roots of Christianity is of enormous pedagogical significance in emphasizing how intolerable any hostile sentiment toward Jews must be for a true Christian.

Indeed we may say that the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people, the danger and warning of anti-Semitism that reached its zenith during the Shoah, and the joint responsibility for humankind born above all out of that 'shared patrimony' and out of the lessons of history are central themes in the theological worldview of Pope Benedict XVI.

We must also not overlook his profound understanding of the significance of the State of Israel for the Jewish people. As Cardinal Ratzinger, he took part in the Special Committee of the Holy See, which reviewed and authorized the establishment of full relations between Israel and the Holy See. Among his close friends in Israel of many years standing, previously including the late mayor of Jerusalem Teddy Kollek, is Professor Zwi Werblowsky, one of the Jewish Israeli pioneers of interfaith dialogue. 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.

This establishment of relations is not insignificant. 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 understand it and he fully realizes that the relationship between the Holy See and the State of Israel is inextricably bound up with the relationship between the Jewish People and the Church.

Of course this is not without its complications both in terms of the interests of the local Church in the Holy Land and the Holy See's interests within and in relation to the Arab world and Muslim society as a whole. The ability to reconcile all these often conflicting interests depends overwhelmingly upon a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself. Accordingly, a prayer for peace in the Holy Land frequently appears in the Pope's homilies and addresses, through which he indicates that such peace would be a source of blessing to the world. 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 message last year on the occasion of the "Day of Judaism" held by the Italian Bishops' Conference (and by a number of other Bishops' Conferences), the Pope stated: "I invite you all to address an ardent prayer to the Lord, that Jews and Christians may respect and esteem one another and collaborate for justice and peace in the world."

In the words of the Hebrew liturgy, "May it be our Father in Heaven's will that this prayer be fulfilled soon in our times."

Rabbi David Rosen, former Chief Rabbi of Ireland, heads the American Jewish Committee's Department of Interreligious Affairs. Based in Jerusalem, he is also the Chairman of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations. He was a member of the Bilateral Committee that negotiated the establishment of full relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel. In October 2005 Pope Benedict XVI made him a Papal Knight Commander of the Order of St. Gregory the Great – the first Israeli and the only Orthodox rabbi to have received such distinction.