

Mix realism with humility

David Rosen, THE JERUSALEM POST

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The directive issued this week by Pope Benedict XVI concerning the use of the traditional Catholic Latin (Tridentine) Mass has led to some extreme reactions. As a result there have been suggestions, echoed uncritically in the media, that there is some kind of new Catholic initiative for the conversion of Jews, and that Jewish-Catholic relations are regressing.

This is completely incorrect.

To begin with, the pope has reiterated time and again his commitment to close, respectful relations with Judaism and the Jewish people, which he has reemphasized as unique for the church, as Judaism and the Jewish people are its very foundations. He has already received numerous Jewish leadership groups, and began to do so even before receiving Protestant groups, let alone delegations from other religions.

The Catholic Church has rejected proselytism and since the second Vatican Ecumenical Council in the sixties has abandoned any institutional "mission to the Jews."

The church has not changed its position on these matters.

WHAT THEN has caused some Jews to react so strongly? Before answering this question we might note that the most vociferous objections against extending the use of the Latin Mass have actually come from liberal Catholic quarters, where there is a fear that this directive may be part of a process of turning back the tide on liturgical and other freedoms.

However the "Jewish concern" was that the use of the Latin Mass might also allow the use of the old Good Friday prayer asking that Jews come to accept the affirmation of the Catholic Faith.

It should be mentioned, however - as the statement from the Vatican on the matter indicates - that the dispensation to recite the Latin Mass since Vatican II is not new. The previous permission was given by Pope John Paul II in the 1980s, albeit to a more limited extent. Perhaps, in fact, Jewish organizations should have raised the issue then, and maybe we were remiss in not have done so. Nevertheless, it was necessary and appropriate for us to raise our concerns now, as the intention of the pope to widen the use of the Latin Mass became known - and we did so.

We received reassurances in the course of the past months from the Vatican, and in the Pope's guidelines there is in fact a restriction on the use of the Latin Mass during the days preceding Easter, which is when the prayer for the conversion of the Jews was recited. Yet it is not clear how extensive this limitation is, and we have accordingly asked the Vatican to issue a clarification that we hope will confirm that there is no official warrant whatsoever for reciting that text.

THERE ARE those who ask what right Jews have to tell the Catholics what kind of prayers they should or not recite. Of course the church's liturgy is the church's business. However, if the church declares, as it does, that it wishes to live in a respectful relationship with the Jewish people, then it is right and proper for it to be pointed out that a prayer for us to accept the Christian faith - which we see as a betrayal of our own - is hardly an expression of mutual respect.

However, it is more than a little naive of Jews to think that even if there are liberal Christians who do not believe that Jews are in need of conversion to Christianity in order for their souls to be "saved," that all Christians share this view.

Even if proselytism and a "mission to the Jews" have been rejected as inappropriate, it does not mean that all Christians no longer think that if the Jews shared their beliefs, they would have a much better chance of getting to Paradise, or getting a "better deal" there.

Yet to know that our Christian interlocutors may harbor that hope does not mean there is nothing to be gained through developing cooperative relationships with them. It does not mean there is no room for collaboration in the pursuit of shared values and interests, especially in the face of common threats - on the contrary.

There is, in fact, much to be gained in many ways from close bilateral relations with the Christian world in general, and the Catholic world in particular.

Stalin is reputed to have belittled the Catholic Church, declaring "How many divisions does the pope have?" The answer was given by Mikhail Gorbachev. After declaring glasnost, the first place he traveled to was Rome. He went to St. Peter's, demonstrating that the pope does not have to have divisions or munitions in order to have real influence in the world of realpolitik.

THE CATHOLIC Church has a commission to promote relations with World Jewry. Its primary partner is the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, which I chair. It also has a Bilateral Commission with the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, which meets regularly and has further strengthened ties between Israel and the Vatican. Next year's Synod of Bishops will focus on the way Scripture should be taught and preached in order to avoid any anti-Semitic or anti-Judaic prejudices.

All this shows that we have made enormous strides in these bilateral relations.

Does this mean Catholics no longer hope that Jews will share their belief? It would be nice to think so, and I sincerely hope the Vatican will respond to our request for

clarification in deciding that any prayer for the conversion of the Jews is inappropriate.

Notwithstanding this, however, we have a lot at stake and much to gain from this relationship. We would accordingly do well to exercise a substantial degree of realism, and even humility, in how we publicly address this relationship and how we express our expectations and even our disappointments.

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