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CITYFRONT

The rabbi, the pope, and the cardinal

Rabbi David Rosen is the first Israel and the first Orthodox Jew ever to receive papal knighthood

by Rena Rossner

Rabbi David Rosen has had a busy week. On October 28, he was one of only three keynote speakers at a Vatican celebration marking the 40th anniversary of the publication of the Nostra Aetate, the landmark papal document that opened up relations between Christians and Jews. He returned to Jerusalem to take part in a three-day conference at the Hebrew University, also marking the Nostra Aetate anniversary. His week culminated on Thursday, November 3, when he received the Dormition Abbey's Mount Zion Award for Interreligious Understanding, and was knighted by Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry.

Rosen, the American Jewish Committee's International Director of Interreligious Affairs and President of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, is the first person to receive a papal knighthood from the newly ordained Pope Benedict XVI, as well as the first Israeli and the first Orthodox Jew ever to be knighted by a Pope.

He seems to take all these honors in his stride and even with a bit of self-deprecating humor.

"All that papal knighthood gives me is the grand privilege to ride a horse in Vatican city and bear arms. I don't actually get paraded around the city, like Mordechai (from the Book of Esther) and the elaborate costume costs \$6,000. I would have preferred a red Ferrari."

Instead, Rosen chooses to emphasize the significance of the two awards he was given this week.

"The significance of the fact that I am the first person to be knighted by Pope Benedict is a sign of change within the Catholic world and that this gesture is a symbol of goodwill on behalf of Pope Benedict to the Jewish people and to the State of Israel."

Rosen is one of eight Jews who have been awarded the knighthood of St. Gregory award since its inception in 1831. The knighthood awards service to the Church and society, regardless of religious allegiance. Most of the Jewish recipients of the award have received it for the work they have done for Catholic-Jewish reconciliation.

The Mount Zion Award is presented at the Dormition Abbey, named such because it was built over the site on Mount Zion where the Virgin Mary is said to have fallen asleep for the last time (Dormitio). The presentation is made by the German Benedictine Monks who reside there. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, these monks have made it their mission to promote interreligious dialogue and peace.

The award, which was founded in 1986 by Wilhelm Salberg, a Catholic priest from Essen, Germany, who died in 1996, is normally given every two years to people "who have made an outstanding contribution to the dialogue between Christians, Jews and Muslims."

While most of the previous awards were given for work done to promote understanding between Jews and Muslims, Rosen's award is different, since this year it was decided to give the award to only one person. In recognition of the 40th anniversary of the Nostra Aetate, the award this year specifically relates to Christian-Jewish relations.

The Nostra Aetate ("In Our Time") document was issued on October 28, 1965 by the Second Vatican Council. In it, the Catholic Church condemned anti-Semitism, repudiated the charge that blamed the Jews for Christ's death and recognized the Jewish people's right to return to the land of Israel and live there as a sovereign nation. The document recognized the Jewish roots of Christianity and ended the "teaching of contempt", which had long been the approach of Christianity to the Jews. This teaching stated that because the Jews had not recognized the Christian Messiah, and were responsible for the death of Jesus, the Temple was destroyed and the Jews were expelled from their land.

At the Vatican ceremony held last week to commemorate the Nostra Aetate, Cardinal Kasper spoke, as did Rosen, and Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, the former Archbishop of Paris. Notably absent from the Vatican ceremony was Rabbi Riccardo Di Segni, Chief Rabbi of Rome, who refused to attend in protest against the fact that Cardinal Lustiger, a Jewish convert to Catholicism, was also asked to speak. Di Segni felt that the choice of Cardinal Lustiger contradicts the fact that any dialogue necessarily demands respect for the beliefs of others and a repudiation of attempts to convert them.

Rosen, who spoke with Di Segni before the event, agreed with his decision to a certain degree. "I thought it was a mistake of Cardinal Kasper's to invite Lustiger, but Kasper spoke at the ceremony too, so it wasn't as if Lustiger was the sole Catholic voice."

At the same time, Rosen himself chose to attend the ceremony because "Kasper, who chose Lustiger as a speaker, has been most vociferous in his insistence that it is not appropriate for Catholics to seek to convert Jews to their faith. He is one of our greatest champions and defenders and shouldn't be punished for his choice. I felt that not to attend would be more of a desecration of God's name than a sanctification."

Nonetheless, Rosen admits that this issue is one that needs to be resolved within the church as part of the continuation of the legacy of the Nostra Aetate document.

"There is an ambiguity in the church about this issue. On the one hand, Kasper, and paradoxically Lustiger as well, say that it is wrong to encourage Jews to convert. On the other hand, there are many in the church who believe that even if the covenant between God and the Jews is extant, the Catholic church needs to offer Jews the opportunity to become complete by converting. This tension must be resolved."

Rosen nonetheless sees significance in the fact that the knighthood was awarded in Jerusalem, not in Rome, and the fact that he stands out on the list of previous recipients of the Mount Zion Award, not just as an Orthodox rabbi, but because most of the other beneficiaries were recognized for work related to Muslim-Jewish relations.

Rosen explains, "The Nostra Aetate means that it is possible for Christians and Jews both to live together and appreciate one another. Jerusalem is the geographical heart of the Jewish people, but it's also holy to three faiths.

It should be possible to feel that Jerusalem is totally part of one's tradition but respect the fact that it is central to others too. I hope that these two awards are a message for Jerusalem that it is possible to live in this city together and respect each other, and we can get there if there is enough effort on both sides."