



Presentation of the Ladislaus Laszt Ecumenical and Social Concern Award to Cardinal Kurt Koch

Cardinal Kurt Koch | 01.12.2017

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many thanks for your words of greeting and your warm welcome at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. I am here for the first time in my life, but having been a professor in Switzerland I feel very comfortable in academic circles. I wish to extend my gratitude for your kind invitation and, of course, especially for bestowing upon me the Ladislaus Laszt Ecumenical and Social Concern Award. I am deeply honored and delighted to have been chosen as somebody who is committed to ecumenical and Jewish-Catholic dialogue. In expressing my gratitude for this great honor I would like to refer briefly to the theological foundations of the Jewish-Catholic dialogue.

The Uniqueness of Jewish-Christian Relations

For Christians Judaism is not just one religion among many, as the relationship between Christianity and Judaism involves an individual and unique connection. The history of this relationship has undoubtedly been very complex, oscillating between proximity and distance, between familiarity and alienation, between love and hate – and it has been so from the very beginning. On the one hand Jesus cannot be understood without Judaism; in fact, the early Christian congregation quite naturally participated in the Jewish liturgy in the temple. On the other hand, the schism between synagogue and church formed the first split in the history of the church, which the Catholic theologian Erich Przywara defined as the “primal rift”.^[1] Even though contemporary research tends to accept that the process of estrangement and dissociation between Judaism and Christianity extended over a longer period than previously assumed and surely only gradually took shape during the first centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD, there is nevertheless no question that this process of alienation was set in place at the very beginning of Jewish-Christian relations, and the relationship between Jews and Christians was marked by conflict already at an early stage. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger outlined that conflict in these words: “The church was regarded by her mother as an unnatural daughter, while the Christians regarded the mother as blind and obstinate.”^[2] While this image reminds us that the conflicts between Jews and Christians were still like family quarrels, the relationship between Jews and Christians deteriorated progressively as the awareness of belonging to the same family was gradually lost. It has therefore in the course of history been exposed to great strain and hostility, which has in many cases unfortunately led to anti-Jewish attitudes involving outbreaks of violence and pogroms against the Jews.

The distinctive uniqueness of Jewish-Christian relations in its negative aspect is permanently connected with its history in the past century. The mass murder of European Jews, planned and executed with industrial perfection by the National Socialists, had a unique impact on the Jewish-Christian relationship. The Shoah must be judged as the lowest possible nadir of that primitive racist anti-Semitism of Nazi ideology which had developed already in the 19th century. This thoroughly racist anti-Semitism is of course fundamentally alien to Christianity, and was repeatedly sharply condemned by Popes Pius XI and Pius XII above all. The Shoah can and should not, however, be attributed to Christianity as such: it was in fact led by a godless, anti-Christian and neo-pagan ideology. If the Shoah must be judged as the horrific nadir of a neo-pagan worldview which intended to annihilate not only Judaism but also the Jewish heritage in Christianity, one can also understand

that Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to the extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau wished to give expression to this fatal connection: “By destroying Israel they ultimately wanted to tear up the taproot of the Christian faith and to replace it with a faith of their own invention: faith in the rule of man, the rule of the powerful.”^[3] In these words one should recognise the conviction that Christianity is most profoundly rooted in Judaism, and that Christianity could not exist without these vital Jewish roots.^[4] Yet we Christians cannot dismiss our complicity in the horrific developments, and above all to confess that Christian resistance to the boundless inhuman brutality of the ideologically and racially based National Socialism did not display that vigour and clarity which one should by rights have expected. Resistance by Christians may well have also been so inadequate because a theological Christian anti-Judaism had been in effect for centuries, fostering a widespread anti-Semitic apathy against the Jews. Thus an ancient anti-Jewish legacy was embedded in the furrows of the souls of not a few Christians. We Christians must therefore sincerely regret that only the unparalleled crime of the Shoah was able to bring about a genuine re-thinking in our relationship with Judaism.

A New Beginning in the Relationship between Jews and Christians

In this regard the fourth chapter of the Second Vatican Council declaration “Nostra aetate”, which the German Cardinal Augustin Bea was commissioned to prepare and which was promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1965 after controversial discussions during the last session of the Council, enabled a fundamental new beginning in the relationship between Jews and Christians.^[5] With this declaration the Second Vatican Council not only repudiated and condemned all outbreaks of hatred, persecutions, slanders and manifestations of force directed against the Jews on the part of so-called Christians. In a positive sense the Council also affirmed the shared patrimony of Jews and Christians, and pointed to the Jewish roots of Christianity. Finally the Council expressed the ardent desire that the reciprocal understanding and the resulting mutual respect of Jews and Christians be fostered. This demands above all that the unique and distinctive individual relationship between Christianity and Judaism must be recalled into Christian consciousness and remain present there, as it was expressed by Pope John Paul II in the vivid and impressive words: “The Jewish religion is not something ‘extrinsic’ to us but in a certain way is ‘intrinsic’ to our own religion. With Judaism we therefore have a relationship we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and in a certain way it could be said, our elder brothers.”^[6] These instructions contained in “Nostra aetate” (no.4) have been reaffirmed and reinforced on a number of occasions by the popes in the period since the Council, not least through the visits to the Great Synagogue in Rome by Pope John Paul II on 13 April 1986, by Pope Benedict XVI on 17 January 2010 and by Pope Francis on 17 January 2016. This declaration remains the crucial compass of all endeavours towards Jewish-Catholic dialogue, and after more than fifty years we can claim with gratitude that this theological re-definition of the relationship with Judaism has directly brought forth rich fruits throughout its reception history. It seems that as far as content is concerned the Council Fathers at that time took into consideration almost everything which has since proved to be significant in the history of the dialogue. On the Jewish side it has been particularly positively emphasised that the Conciliar Declaration took up an unambiguous position against every form of anti-Semitism. It is not least on that basis that Jews are and remain borne up by the hope that they can rest assured that in the Catholic Church they have a reliable ally in the struggle against anti-Semitism.

With regard to the reception history of Conciliar documents, one can without doubt dare to assert that “Nostra aetate” (no.4) is to be reckoned among those Council texts which have in a convincing manner been able to effect a fundamental re-orientation of the Catholic Church following the Council. This of course only becomes clear to us when we consider that previously there was in part a great reluctance regarding contacts between Jews and Catholics, arising in part from the history of Christianity with its discrimination against Jews extending even to forced conversions. The fundamental principle of respect for Judaism expressed in “Nostra aetate” (no.4) has over the course of recent decades made it possible for groups which initially confronted one another with scepticism to step by step become reliable partners and even good friends, capable of coping with crises

together and overcoming conflicts positively.

Israel and the Church, the Old and the New Testament

The discourse of Jewish roots is indeed to be understood in a strictly theological sense, as already demonstrated by the expressive image of Saint Paul, who spoke of the root of Israel into which the wild branches of the Gentiles have been grafted (cf. Rom 11:16–20). This image represents for Paul the key to thinking of the relationship between Israel and the church in the light of faith: “Nothing but a single olive tree. God’s whole history with humanity is like an olive tree with sacred roots and branches cut out and grafted in and artificially ennobled in this way. All God’s dealings are like his way of dealing with this tree.”^[7] With this image Paul gives expression to a duality with regard to the unity and divergence of Israel and the church: on the one hand the image is to be taken seriously in the sense that the grafted wild branches have not grown out of the root itself and or sprung from it but represent a new reality and a new work of salvation by God, so that the Christian church cannot merely be understood as a branch or a fruit of Israel. On the other hand, the image is also to be taken seriously in the sense that the church is only able to survive when it draws nourishment and strength from the root of Israel, and that the grafted branches would wither or even die if they were cut off from the root of Israel. Speaking literally rather than metaphorically, this means that Israel and the church are related to and interdependent on one another, precisely because they exist in a state not only of unity but also of difference. Israel and the church thus remain to that extent bound up with one another, and indeed both unmixed yet undivided.

Unity and difference between Judaism and Christianity come to the fore in the first instance with the testimonies of divine revelation. Because Israel is the beloved people of God’s covenant which has never been revoked or repudiated, Israel’s book of the covenant, the Old Testament, is part of the lasting heritage of the Christian church. With the existence of the Old Testament as an integral part of the one Christian bible, there is a deeply rooted sense of the intrinsic inseparability and kinship between Judaism and Christianity. The roots of Christianity lie in the Old Testament, and Christianity constantly draws nourishment from this Old Testament root. On the other hand the existence of the New Testament also brings with it a fundamental tension into the relationship of the two faith communities insofar as Christians read the Old Testament in the light of the New, in the conviction expressed by Augustine in the indelible formula: “In the Old Testament the New is concealed and in the New the Old is revealed”.^[8] The New Testament sees itself as the fulfilment of what is promised in the Old, but fulfilment cannot mean substitution. This crucial distinction is evident already from the historical fact that Judaism too found itself compelled to adopt a new reading of the Old Testament after the catastrophe of the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70. Since only the Pharisees survived the catastrophe of the destruction of the temple, they developed their particular mode of reading and interpreting the Old Testament in a period during which there was no temple, taking the Torah as its centre. Since the Christian church and post-biblical rabbinical and Talmudic Judaism developed in parallel and since both modes each involved a new interpretation of the Old Testament, the crucial new question must be precisely how these two modes are related to one another. Regarding the different interpretations of the Holy Scriptures the Pontifical Biblical Commission formulated in its 2001 document: “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible”, that Christians can and must admit “that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish scriptures of the Second Temple period, analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion”; it then draws the conclusion: “Both readings are bound up with the vision of their respective faiths, of which the readings are the result and expression. Consequently, both are irreducible.”^[9]

God’s covenant with Israel never revoked

A promising future for Jewish–Christian dialogue must take into account the fact that God concluded with Abraham a covenant which is of fundamental significance for Jewish–Christian dialogue. For Abraham is not only the father of Israel but also the father of the faith of Christians. In this covenant

community it must be evident for Christians that the covenant that God concluded with Israel has never been revoked but remains valid on the basis of God's unfailing faithfulness to his people, and consequently the New Covenant which Christians believe in can only be understood as the surpassing affirmation and fulfilment of the Old, and never as a replacement. Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium" confirms this theological statement: "We hold the Jewish people in special regard because their covenant with God has never been revoked, for 'the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable' (Rom 11:29). The Church, which shares with Jews an important part of the sacred Scriptures, looks upon the people of the covenant and their faith as one of the sacred roots of her own Christian identity (cf. Rom 11:16-18)" (n. 247).

We as Christians are also convinced that through the new covenant the Abrahamic covenant has obtained that universality for all peoples which was originally intended. Israel and the church remain bound up with one another according to the covenant and interdependent on one another, by accepting one another in a profound internal reconciliation drawn from the depths of their respective faiths, thus becoming a sign and instrument of reconciliation to the world.

In this conviction, I renew my gratitude for the conferral of the Ladislaus Laszt Ecumenical and Social Concern Award, and I extend to the Ben Gurion University of the Negev my best wishes for further fruitful scholarly work and the blessing of the Almighty.

Footnotes

- [1] "The rift between the Eastern and the Western church, the rift between the Roman church and the pluriversum of the Reformation (the countless churches and sects) form part of the primal rift between Judaism (the non-Christian Jews) and Christianity (the 'Gentiles' in the language of the Pauline letters)." Cf. E. Przywara, Römische Katholizität - All-christliche Ökumenizität, in: J. B. Metz u.a. (Hrsg.), Gott in Welt. Festgabe für K. Rahner. Band 2 (Freiburg i. Br. 1964) 524-528, zit. 526.
- [2] J. Cardinal Ratzinger, Das Erbe Abrahams, in: Ders., Weggemeinschaft des Glaubens. Kirche als Communio (Augsburg 2002) 235-238, zit. 237.
- [3] Benedict XVI, "I could not fail to come here". Auschwitz-Birkenau: Visit to the Auschwitz Camp on 28 May 2006.
- [4] Cf. C. Sedmak, Europa und eine Ethik des Gedächtnisses: Papst Benedikt und der Holocaust, in: Ders. / St. O. Horn (Hrsg.), Die Seele Europas. Papst Benedikt XVI. und die europäische Identität (Regensburg 2011) 155-183.
- [5] Cf. A. Cardinal Bea, Die Kirche und das jüdische Volk (Freiburg i. Br. 1966), esp. 21-25: Hinweise zur Geschichte und Entwicklung des Konzilsdokuments.
- [6] John Paul II, Ringraziamo il Signore per la ritrovata fratellanza e per la profonda intesa tra la Chiesa e l'Ebraismo. Allocuzione nella Sinagoga durante l'incontro con la Comunità Ebraica della Città di Roma il 13 aprile 1986, in: Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II IX, 1 1986 (Città del Vaticano 1986) 1024-1031, cit. 1027.
- [7] Cf. K. Berger, Gottes einziger Ölbaum. Betrachtungen zum Römerbrief (Stuttgart 1990) 229.
- [8] Augustinus, Quaestiones in Heptateuchum 2, 73.
- [9] II. A. 7.22.

Editorial remarks

Source: [Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations](#).