



“The Roots of Jews and Christians are the Same, Our Future lies in recognizing this”

Lisa Palmieri-Billig* | 01.04.2019

A personal interview with Dr. Etienne Vetö, the priest who directs the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies.

Dr. Etienne Vetö is the Director of the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies of the Pontifical Gregorian University. Since he first arrived in 2017, he has been serving his commitment with great verve and is devoting this academic year with full energy to commemorating an important anniversary: celebrating Cardinal Augustin Bea (after whom the Centre was named) on the 50th anniversary of his passing.

The events proposed by Father Vetö for this “Year of Cardinal Bea” are indeed rich and stimulating, as can be seen in the titles of topics being discussed every month by leading Jewish and Christian scholars. He opened the year in November with a provocative panel (the 18th Annual Brenninkmeijer-Werhahn lecture) held in November entitled “Rewriting Nostra Aetate”. It was followed in December by “The Bible from Three Points of View” (Catholic, Protestant and Jewish), then “Charism of Unity and Petrine Ministry” on Ecumenism; “The Jewish Annotated New Testament” March 28 and to crown the end of the series on April 10, “Reading Scripture Together”.

These subjects cover the fields of Augustin Bea’s most noteworthy contributions. In the 1960s, he was entrusted by Pope John XXIII to be the key voice in Vatican II for ecumenism and above all, for developing a “Document on the Jews” – which evolved into the groundbreaking “Nostra Aetate, 4”. “Today, people still do not realize that this immensely significant document began with the dedicated work of just a handful of people who deeply believed in its necessity” says, Prof. Vetö.

As part of the program, attention has also been drawn to the particular friendship born between Cardinal Bea and Rabbi Abraham Heschel, who served at the time as the American Jewish Committee’s envoy to the Vatican Council. In the very difficult task of drafting this document, strewn with obstacles and opposition of all sorts, Cardinal Bea often consulted with Rabbi Heschel, and a historic photo of the two from AJC’s archives decorates some of the posters of the conferences. With reference to their collaboration, Fr. Vetö comments, “This proves how much one person can change things, and testifies to the power of friendship.” The fruits of this work became a cornerstone of the ever evolving dialogue and today’s warm friendship and mutual esteem between Catholics and Jews.

Augustin Bea once confessed to Rabbi Elio Toaff, the former Chief Rabbi of Rome, the deep personal motives that drove him to persist undaunted in the difficult task of winning approval from the Council Fathers for the Nostra Aetate document. From a page in Elio Toaff’s diary we can read, “One day, monsignor Bea confided to me that as a native German he felt all the weight of the evil committed by his people against the Jews and wanted to do something to atone, even as a minimal gesture.”

A recent event, added to the 2019 schedule and organized in cooperation between the Centre and AJC explored the theme of “Jewish-Catholic Relations in the Francis Era: Achievements and Challenges”. Prof. Vetö moderated with skill and wit a very lively and memorable dialogue between rabbi David Rosen (AJC’s International Director for Interreligious Affairs) and Cardinal Kurt Koch (the current President of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews – a body that grew out of the former Secretariat for promoting Christian Unity, originally headed by Cardinal Bea.)

Prof. Vetö approaches his work with enthusiasm. He is flexible and open to new proposals for events and often manages to organize them in record time. Clearly he strongly feels the deep message of his calling, which naturally makes of him a perfect disciple of Cardinal Bea and a most appropriate leader of the Centre named after him.

I was anxious to learn more about his personal thoughts regarding the significance of Christian-Jewish relations, and requested a personal interview with him. Our free-wheeling conversation took place over a leisurely lunch at the “Stampa Esera” in Rome.

Father Etienne, how did you become the Director of the Cardinal Bea Center?

Two and a half years ago, the former rector of the “Greg” (the Pontifical Gregorian University) asked me how I envisioned my future. I told him about my feelings regarding the high significance of Jewish-Christian relations. At the time I was the Rector of the Ecole Normale Superior in Paris, the same in which I had studied. I belong to the ‘Chemin Neuf’ Community which expresses an ecumenical dimension of Christian unity between Catholics, Orthodox and protestants. This dimension naturally also extends towards a desire for unity with the Jewish People. To be clear, let me add that the concept of unity includes respect for and understanding of our separate identities.

So the day after my ordination in 1997 I went to Israel. I had expected to be impressed by the Christian sites, and I was. But what moved me the most was the Kotel (the Western Wall) and Temple Mount. There I felt the “Shekinah”, the Presence of God. The place was special, unique. Speaking to Jewish people about their expectations of the Messiah who would come through the Golden Gate, I felt it would be the same person for both us and them, for Jews and Christians. The city of Jerusalem is a special place where one feels the Lord’s presence as he revealed Himself to the Jewish People.

In short, I felt completely at home. Psalm 132:13 says, “For the LORD has chosen Zion (Jerusalem); he has desired it for his dwelling, saying, ‘This is my resting place for ever and ever....’ ” Our roots are here. Many of my Christian friends feel the same way. I sensed that the Lord did not want us to separate into two religions and that I must follow in this direction. Clearly, however, this does not call for conversions, just living together and believing that we can grow closer and closer until we become really One, through ways only God knows and can bring about.

Let me be clear: this means above all that we must remain faithful to our own beliefs, while also working for the reunification of the people of God. Only God knows what the final result of this path will be, but we must try to overcome the 2000 year gap. If we can do that we will come closer together. We must proceed step by step. We cannot predict what will happen the day the Messiah comes.

How do you do this?

As a Christian I felt something was missing in my faith and I needed to related to my Jewish roots in the present day and with the Jewish People. I wanted to help other people discover this. I wanted to have relations with Jews, go to synagogues and experience how Jewish People pray. In Rome I have been to both the Main Synagogue which is Orthodox, and also the young Progressive Jewish Community’s services. We must do things to bring us back together again, work on dialogue.

The Bea Center offers a great possibility. It also has privileged relations with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem’s Center for the Study of Christianity (made possible through the generous help of Hubert and Aldegonde Brenninkmeijer). We have moved forward a lot, but these relations still remain stuck in a corner of life, a “niche” activity. It should become an activity in which all Christians engage.

We are in a new stage of Christian-Jewish relations where we can make discoveries together, and they do not concern just one special area such as environment, or justice. Every Christian must learn to understand the uniqueness of our relationship. Jews were given Revelation in the past, but even in the present day, Jews still remain God's Chosen People.

Time past, I wanted to create a Jewish-Christian Foundation, so when I was offered this position it seemed a remarkable step in this direction.

One of the challenges to be met by the Cardinal Bea Center is, in fact, to pull Jewish-Christian relations out of its present corner or "niche", and into the light of day, in order to become part of the mainstream of the everyday life of Christians. I refer not only to the theological dimension but also as an aspect of a complete Christian life.

The Church considers the Jewish People special, a People chosen by God. Therefore we must develop a deeper understanding, and this is possible only if: 1) Christians have real knowledge of Judaism (John Paul II considered Jewish Christian relations not as "inter-religious" but as "intra-familial", because he considered Jews and Judaism to be an integral part of Christians and Christianity. They are a part of us. And: 2) We need to do our theology together, not just in the form of Jewish-Christian dialogue, but as Jewish-Christian Studies. We should study the Torah together.

At the Bea Center, in fact, at least one third of the faculty is Jewish. We often have two voices conducting classes. For example, Rav David Meyer, and Rav Joseph Levi, the former Chief Rabbi of Florence, often take part. The students feel we are learning from each other, not just "getting to know" one another.

Again, I must repeat, we are against syncretism. We do not need conversion. I'm becoming a better Catholic in the process, and Jews tell me they are becoming better Jews. Seeing the same roots reflected in the eyes of the other enriches a vision of our own roots. And, in this case, they happen to be the same.

Something about your life...

My father was a Hungarian refugee of the Revolution of 1956. He left Hungary and moved to France where he met a beautiful French woman.....my mother! My father was not brought up in a religious family, but after making Christian friends and reading the Church Fathers, he got to know God through these Christians. I was born November 28, 1964 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, lived near New Haven where my father taught Philosophy and my mother taught Comparative Literature at Yale University. In 1975 we moved to the Ivory Coast, and in 1979 to France. I have dual American and French citizenship. I also lived in the UK and Germany where I studied at the Protestant Faculty of the Humboldt University (Berlin). I entered the "Chemin Neuf" Community in 1987. I was studying Philosophy in the Ecole Normale Superior (Paris) and earned my "Agregation" (in Philosophy), an equivalent to the PhD in the French system, in 1989. I taught Philosophy for two years in Congo and then for a long time in Paris, at the "Centre Sèvres", the Jesuit Faculty. I had also studied Theology at the Gregorian and in Berlin and then earned a PhD in Theology in Paris in 2009. In the meanwhile I worked in the Vatican for two years - 1999 - 2001 for the Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. I have always been involved in ministry for Youth and ministry for married couples. I started teaching Theology at the Greg in 2014, specializing in Trinity, Theological Anthropology, Ecumenism, and now Jewish-Christian relations.

That's quite a rich compound of studies!

Yes, well I love to read. In the United States when I was a boy, I would go to the library every second Wednesday and take out 30 books at a time. I got up early every day to read. At one point my parents actually ruled that I had to wait until 6 am to start reading. I started this habit at the age of 7

or 8.

And your faith, when did your strong faith begin?

I prayed at home with my parents, my brother and my sister. Every evening as a child I said a short prayer from the scriptures. At the ripe age of 12 I decided I was “too mature” to pray with my family. I owned a small New Testament that I had bought with my allowance, and started reading on my own. I fantasized about Ghandi and other great spiritual leaders. But I felt Jesus was actually there with me when I read my New Testament, and he still remained there when I closed my book. I spoke to him and he has been present ever since.... I would be happy if the Messiah turned out to be Jewish.

Do you never feel doubts about your faith when confronted with all the evil occurring daily in the world?

I have no doubt that forces of Evil exist and I do believe in the existence of Satan. However, the power of Good in the world also exists, and it is huge. I am convinced that it is incomparably stronger than the forces of Evil. In this lies the importance of Free Will in the Jewish-Christian relationship and choosing to walk on this path. We are, together, also responsible for both Good and Evil.

Editorial remarks

*The author is AJC’s Representative in Italy and Liaison to the Holy See.

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