



A Deafening Silence

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Some observations on recent developments in Catholic-Jewish relations by Edward Kessler, Director of the Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations, Cambridge, England, and a member of the Editorial Staff of jcrelations.net.

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[Edward Kessler](#)

In Catholic-Jewish relations, all is not well. The momentum generated during the pontificate of John Paul II, following the ground-breaking publication of *Nostra Aetate* at Vatican II in 1965, has ground to a halt and many of us who have devoted years to improving relations and interreligious understanding are concerned.

On Palm Sunday, the pontifical household preacher, Fr Raniero Cantalamessa, delivered an address on the Passion in the presence of the Pope, which focused on Jewish complicity in the death of Jesus. His homily ignored the view, widely accepted among scholars and in official Catholic teaching, that the Passion narratives tend to exaggerate Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus and to downplay Roman responsibility. Homilies on the Passion narratives have been both problematic and harmful through the centuries in Jewish-Christian relations. Of particular concern was his inclusion of the Pharisees as complicit in Jesus' death, which explicitly contradicts the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, as well as the clear witness of the Synoptic gospels.

"The four gospels attest ... [to] a growing religious difference between Jesus and an influential group of Jews (Pharisees, doctors of the law, scribes) over the observance of the Sabbath, the attitude toward sinners and tax collectors, and the clean and unclean," Fr Cantalamessa said. "Once the existence of this contrast is demonstrated, how can one think that it had no role to play in the end and that the Jewish leaders decided to denounce Jesus to Pilate - almost against their will - solely out of fear of a Roman military intervention?" But Catholic teaching is clear: the final text of the gospels was edited long after the events described and the authors were concerned with vindicating the Romans, whose goodwill they were seeking. The Vatican's 1985 "Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Catechesis and Preaching of the Roman Catholic Church" state:

It cannot be ruled out that some references hostile or less than favourable to the Jews have their historical context in conflicts between the nascent Church and the Jewish community. Certain controversies reflect Christian-Jewish relations long after the time of Jesus. To establish this is of capital importance if we wish to bring out the meaning of certain Gospel texts for the Christians of today.

In the New Testament, the Pharisees are prominent as the main rivals of Jesus but are notable by their absence from the Passion narratives. The harsh criticism of the Pharisees is recognised as having as much to do with rivalry between the communities in which the texts were written (especially the Matthean community) as with anything that happened during the lifetime of Jesus. Indeed, the level of overlap and coherence between the teachings of Jesus and the Pharisees

probably outweighs the areas of difference of opinion. This is because, as the Vatican's Notes state, Jesus was closer to the Pharisees than any other Jewish group, something of which Fr Cantalamessa seems totally unaware. The Notes were published to provide a corrective to the traditional negative picture of the Pharisees.

What makes Fr Cantalamessa's homily of more concern is that it generated no contradictory response, even though it was published in the official Vatican press. One might also have expected someone to point out that it went against the broader spirit of caring and sensitivity that was more typical of the public pronouncement during Holy Week during the pontificate of John Paul II. Silence seems to be the order of the day.

Are Jewish-Catholic relations at a crossroads? In the last few years of John Paul II's pontificate there was a noticeable slow-down in Vatican-led initiatives, and none during the present one. Without institutional nourishment, Catholic-Jewish relations will eventually deteriorate. The Pope takes seriously the encounter with Judaism and acknowledges the value of Christian-Jewish dialogue. As he wrote (as Cardinal Ratzinger) in *L'Osservatore Romano* in December 2000, "a new vision of the relationship between the Church and Israel has been born: a sincere willingness to overcome every kind of anti-Judaism, and to initiate a constructive dialogue based on knowledge of each other, and on reconciliation. If such a dialogue is to be fruitful, it must begin with a prayer to our God, first of all that he might grant to us Christians a greater esteem and love for that people, the people of Israel, to whom belong 'the adoption as sons, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; theirs are the patriarchs, and from them comes Christ according to the flesh, he who is over all, God, blessed forever. Amen' (Romans 9:4-5)".

Why then are silence and inertia the order of the day? Some suggest that they are born out of a struggle between increasingly confident and outspoken traditionalists, some of whom wish to turn the clock back to a time before 1965 (when *Nostra Aetate* opened the way to a transformation of Catholic-Jewish relations) and increasingly marginalised liberal elements within the Church. Neo-conservatives within the Curia, it is suggested, are undertaking a determined attack on Vatican II, including Catholic-Jewish relations.

I first noticed this trend in 2002 when a vociferous reaction followed a document published by Catholics and Jews in North America entitled "Reflections on Covenant and Mission". At first welcomed, it was quickly shelved when it came under fierce criticism from conservatives. The document consisted of separate Catholic and Jewish reflections on the covenant and its missiological implications. Catholic participants proposed that "campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church".

Following the lead of the American theologian Cardinal Avery Dulles, critics emphasised that all non-Catholics must be subjected in principle to evangelisation efforts. Although these critics failed to mention any of the Vatican's statements on Christian-Jewish relations, no senior Catholic leader responded. Admittedly, the previous president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, publicly welcomed the document, but the current President, Cardinal Walter Kasper, was more noticeable by his silence.

Are there other reasons for pessimism? The increasingly tense situation in the Middle East and the precarious situation of local Christian communities, combined with threats against Israel and rising anti-Semitism have made both Christians and Jews more aware of their vulnerabilities. Rather than acknowledging and tackling shared difficulties, the common reaction is silence or the utterance of platitudes after infrequent meetings of senior institutional figures.

The silence is more noticeable when compared to recent initiatives undertaken by other Churches. For example, Lambeth Palace and the Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations in

Cambridge are co-sponsoring a series of discussions between senior Anglicans and Jews, which will result in some important publications before the 2008 diennial meeting of the Anglican Communion.

Yet, outside the institutional leadership, there are reasons for optimism in Catholic-Jewish relations. Centres for the study and teaching of Jewish-Christian relations are flourishing in a number of Catholic environments in North America and Europe. It seems that universities and specialist centres are our best hope at the moment.

Until recently, it was widely held that the Catholic Church led the way for Christians in dialogue with Judaism. *Nostra Aetate* ushered in a new era and a new language of discourse. Important statements were published by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews in 1975, 1985 and 1998. Since then the commission has been silent and there are no plans to produce a new statement.

Just over 40 years ago, the Catholic Church renounced the teaching of the divine rejection of the Jewish people since the time of Jesus. In other words, the divine covenant with the Jewish people is now no longer viewed as having been annulled. According to *Nostra Aetate*, "the Jews remain most dear to God". John Paul II spelled it out in the early years of his pontificate that God's covenant with the Jewish people had never been broken and retains eternal validity.

The future does not look rosy when some try to take us back to a day before *Nostra Aetate* and others do not effectively respond. This leaves those of us involved in the dialogue, perhaps even those at a senior level, vulnerable to attack from traditionalists and marginalised. Perhaps most troubling, found in the writings of Cardinal Dulles and others, is the question as to whether the Old Covenant was still valid. Such comments fly in the face of the Second Vatican Council. If this view is allowed to stand, we will face the potential of a challenge to all that has been achieved in Catholic-Jewish relations over the past 40 years which, when all is said and done, has been rooted in the new Catholic theology of continuing Jewish covenantal inclusion. This presents a far more severe challenge than insensitive sermons in the Vatican. Silence is no longer an option.

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