



A letter to Pope Benedict XVI regarding the Good Friday prayer in the Tridentine liturgy

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Holy Thursday 2008

To His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI

Most Holy Father,

I am writing this letter to you as the Chairperson of the Young Leadership Council of the International Council of Christians and Jews and as a young Catholic who is training to be a theologian. I am also writing as part of an ongoing dialogue between Jews, Muslims and Christians.

It is with great concern that those of us involved in such dialogue view the proposed prayer for the Jews to be used in the Tridentine liturgy with its call for Jewish conversion to faith in Jesus. Such a prayer on this particularly emotive day in the Christian calendar does not, sadly, occur in a neutral historical context. Indeed, over the centuries Good Friday has been the occasion of much suffering for the Jewish people who have undergone degrading and violent abuse at the hands of Christian mobs. This, along with the anti-Judaism which has been present in Christianity over the centuries and the recent memory of the complicity of some Christians in the Shoah as well as failure to speak out on the part of many others places the prayer in a context which renders it deeply hurtful and even offensive to our Jewish sisters and brothers. As a Catholic I find it also makes me deeply uncomfortable, and I too find myself feeling the sting and the bitterness of history as, along with the rest of the Church, I prepare to celebrate the Lord's death and Resurrection in the Holy Triduum.

The prayer itself, whilst avoiding the phrases present in the traditional version of the liturgy, asks God to illuminate Jewish hearts. This can only mean that such hearts are currently in darkness, a concept which comes close to the older formulae which were removed by Pope John XXIII. Equally the eschatological symbolism used by Jesus which refers to the coming of the Kingdom of God is here interpreted in a narrower sense to refer to all nations entering the Church, embodying an exclusivism which seems alien to the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels. In contrast, the 1970 prayer recognises the dignity of the Jewish people and echoes St Paul's affirmation of the continuing election of Israel. As *Nostra Aetate* states: "He (God) does not repent of the gifts He makes or of

the calls He issues ? such is the witness of the Apostle.? If this is so, and the promises that God made to the people of Israel still stand, then surely it can be affirmed that the Jewish people will be saved precisely as Jews and not by the people of Israel ceasing to exist. Indeed the Church?s catechism seems to allude to such a view when it states: ?The Jewish faith, unlike other non-Christian religions, is already a response to God?s revelation in the Old Covenant.?

In terms of dialogue, the prayer constitutes a very real obstacle ? what sort of dialogue can be present if one of the parties comes seeking a move which would effectively dispossess the other of their spiritual identity? Equally, it seems very difficult to avoid the impression that the institution of this prayer whilst the 1970 prayer is being prayed in the context of the usual liturgy constitutes an ambiguity, if not a contradiction in the Church?s attitude to the Jews. As a Catholic one of the things that has been a source of pride to me has been the efforts made by the Church since the Council to heal some of the historical wounds that have been inflicted on Jews by Christians. This prayer sadly is reopening some of those wounds after a time of healing that has been so short when set beside the centuries of persecution and suffering that the Jewish people have undergone. In the light of all of this, Holy Father, I appeal to you to use only the 1970 prayer in the Tridentine liturgy; I appeal to you on behalf of my Jewish brothers and sisters and on behalf of those of us who are involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue, but I also appeal to you on behalf of those of us who, as Catholics, find this development deeply disturbing and an obstacle to us as we enter into the celebration of the paschal mystery.

Yours sincerely,

John Robinson