



In Support of Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Reply to Edward Kessler

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Father Raniero Cantalamessa, a Franciscan Capuchin priest who is Preacher to the Papal Household, replies to the article by Edward Kessler, A Deafening Silence.

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And a short response by Edward Kessler

Father Raniero Cantalamessa

Last month Edward Kessler, the Cambridge academic, expressed his concern for the future of Jewish-Christian relations in the Catholic Church ("A Deafening Silence", *The Tablet*, 14 April). [See <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=2820>.] Dr Kessler based his assessment on "an address on the Passion delivered by the pontifical household preacher on Palm Sunday in the Pope's presence".

In that address, in which references were made to the responsibility of certain of the Jewish leaders for Christ's condemnation, Dr Kessler suggested that I, as the preacher he cites, had ignored the now widely accepted view that the Passion narratives exaggerate Jewish involvement in the death of Jesus, and he expressed concern that I had included the Pharisees as complicit in Jesus' death.

I need to make it clear, first of all, that the text in question is a written weekly comment on the Sunday's gospel, and therefore has nothing to do with my office as papal household preacher. On Palm Sunday, no homily in the presence of the Pope is given. Moreover, my comment was not "published in the official Vatican press", but rather by Zenit, a private agency that publishes news of the Vatican but has no official connection with it.

I consider it my duty to write this article to clarify the situation, because of the conclusions that have been drawn from my text regarding the position of the Pope himself and the Vatican. But my reason for this response is above all to reassure Dr Kessler and all who work for the Jewish-Christian dialogue that they have a friend, not an enemy, in the preacher to the papal household.

I should like to recall some of the statements that I made in a sermon delivered in St Peter's Basilica in the presence of Pope John Paul II and the whole Roman Curia. That homily was indeed published in the official Vatican press (*L'Osservatore Romano*, 12 April 1998) and has been available since then on my website (On Jewish-Christian relations, "Christ has broken down the dividing wall").

In it I said that, in the context of the Good Friday liturgy, a literary genre known as the *Improperia*, or the *Reproaches*, began to develop from as early as the time of Melito of Sardis in the latter half of the second century. Traces of this attitude could be found in art, folklore, and in the liturgy, all of which helped to spread negative, anti-Jewish stereotypes. As John Paul II once observed, all of

this made Christians of our century less vigilant when the Nazi fury was unleashed against the Jews. It eased the way, albeit indirectly, for the coming of the Shoah, the Holocaust.

Anti-Semitism, however, was not born out of fidelity to the Christian Scriptures, but out of infidelity to them. Jesus, the apostles, Stephen and Paul all spoke out against the Jewish leaders, and at times harshly, but in what spirit did they do this? Jesus wept when he foretold the destruction of Jerusalem and Paul was prepared to be "accursed and cut off from Christ" for the sake of his own people, his kindred according to the flesh (Romans 9:1-3). Moses and the Prophets had done it before, at times with even harsher words, without of course being accused of anti-Semitism.

What happened in the transition from the primitive Judaeo-Christian Church to the Church of the Gentiles? The Gentiles picked up from Jesus and the apostles the arguments levelled against Judaism, but none of their love for the Jews. The polemic was passed on, but the love was not. When, later on, the Fathers of the Church spoke of the accomplished destruction of Jerusalem, they did not shed tears as Jesus had done. On the contrary. Right up to the outbreak of the Shoah, we Christians were still whining about the Jews harbouring hatred for Christians and opposing the spread of the Gospel, but we failed to notice the plank in our heart. It is not enough to speak of the sin of some of the "children of the Church" in this regard; we must acknowledge the sin of the "Fathers of the Church" too, that is of popes, bishops and people in authority in general!

In that same Good Friday sermon, I shared my own change of heart towards Israel. When I speak of the wrongs committed against the Jewish people, I said, I have in mind not only the faults of others who belonged to generations before me, but my own as well. I will always remember the beginnings of my own conversion in this regard. I was on a plane, returning from my first pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I was reading the Bible, and my eye fell on a phrase in the Letter to the Ephesians: "No one ever hates his own body" (Ephesians 5:29). I realised that this applies also to the relationship of Jesus with his own people. And all my prejudice, if not hostility, towards the Jewish people that I had unconsciously absorbed in my theological training, appeared to me to be an offence against Jesus himself.

This Good Friday sermon was very positively received in some Jewish media and that year, 1998, a tree was planted in my honour in the land of Israel. So could I have perhaps changed my mind since then? I don't think so. The purpose of my observations in my written comment was not so much to fix the guilt for Christ's condemnation as to highlight the motive behind it. If it had been Pilate alone who decided that Christ should die, as sometimes affirmed, it would mean that the motive for his death would have been merely political, and not religious; and this, I believe, does not correspond with the historical truth.

None of the great authorities on the historical Jesus and on the death of Christ (for example Raymond Brown's *The Death of the Messiah* and James Dunn's *Christianity in the Making*) goes as far as to deny that the Jewish leaders (the Sadducees more so than the Pharisees, as I myself have noted elsewhere) had any part in Christ's condemnation. Paul, who wrote a long time before the subsequent anti-pharisaic polemics, puts forward basically the same version of the death of Christ as do the synoptic gospels (see 1 Thessalonians 2:15), and he, much better than we can today, would have known the realities of the situation having himself, as a Pharisee, shared in and defended the condemnation of the Nazarene.

As I said in that same homily published by Zenit, the greatest damage that can be done to a just cause is that of defending it by using the wrong arguments. The struggle against anti-Semitism must be founded on a more solid basis than a questionable historical reconstruction. The Second Vatican Council (*Nostra Aetate*, 4) put it as follows: "True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in his Passion cannot be charged against all the Jews then alive, without distinction, nor against the Jews of today."

The evidence that the Jewish people as such had nothing to do with Christ's death stands on a biblical grounding surprisingly forgotten for many centuries by Christians: "The person who sins shall die. A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child" (Ezekiel 18:20). The doctrine of the Church acknowledges only one sin bequeathed from father to son: original sin. If the future generations of Jews were to be held responsible for Christ's death, then the same should have been said of the future generations of Romans, since it is certain that, from a juridical stance, Christ's sentence and his execution are to be imputed, in the last analysis, to the Roman authorities.

I have made these last points in a recent series of meditations given at the Pontifical Household (see *Easter: Meditations on the Resurrection*, Liturgical Press, 2006). In submitting them again to the readers of *The Tablet*, my intention, I repeat, is not so much to defend my ministry or the Vatican, but to reassure those working for progress in the dialogue between Jews and Christians that I am wholeheartedly with them.

Response by Dr. Kessler to Article by Fr. Cantalamessa

as published in The Tablet (London), 26 May 2007

I welcome the remarks of Fr Cantalamessa written in response to my article ("A Deafening Silence") detailing concerns about the loss of momentum in Catholic-Jewish dialogue at the most senior levels and I especially welcome his desire to contribute personally to fostering greater understanding between the two faiths. His remark that antisemitism is born out of "infidelity" to the Christian Scriptures rings true. Fr Cantalamessa also honestly acknowledges his own "change of heart to the Jewish people", away from traditional anti-Jewish theological training. At a time of increasing antisemitism, his journey is perhaps not unlike that of the Roman Catholic Church itself, which has moved from being part of the problem of antisemitism to, I hope, being part of its solution.

Yet one must ask why it is that Christian interpretation of Scripture has been so open to false reading? As Papal Preacher he is deeply aware of the need to take great care in the reading and preaching of Scripture, particularly when accounting for the hostility shown towards Jews in the New Testament. All too often Christians have taken Jesus and his followers out of their Jewish context, which has historically led them, as Fr Cantalmessa implied, 'to hate their own body' (Eph 5:29)

Fr Cantalamessa asks both Catholics and Jews who are active in the dialogue to view him as working "wholeheartedly" with us. I welcome the hand of friendship and respectfully ask him to follow his words of support with deeds so that we can explore together ways to move our relationship forward. Let us, for example, discuss the preaching of Scripture, particularly handling difficult texts (some of which we both share) and work together so that our newfound respect does not revert back to ancient antipathy but progresses and deepens towards true friendship.

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