Let Us Make the Paths of History Straight for the Lord

30.06.2006 | Reder, Violetta

Violetta Reder, Assistant for Christian-Jewish Relations at the Pontifical Academy of Theology, Kraków, Poland, reflects on the Holy See's commemoration of the 40th anniversary of Nostra Aetate. Includes links to the message of Pope Benedict XVI and remarks by Cardinals Walter Kasper and Jean-Marie Lustiger and Rabbi David Rosen.

Let Us Make the Paths of History Straight for the Lord

Violetta Reder

Concerning the commemorative meeting organized by the Holy See on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, Rome, October 27, 2005

1. The Healing Upheaval in the History of Christian-Jewish Relations

In their pilgrimage through the history toward the One who is coming with the resurrection and judgement, the People of God walk the paths of the human condition: passion and insight, sin and conversion. On October 28th, 1965, the Second Vatican Council promulgated a document of dogmatic importance, which, even if formally the shortest and of lowest rank among other conciliar documents, became one of the most visible revolutionary and influential signs of the conversion of the church – i.e., the *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.*[1]

(left to right) Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, Cardinal Walter Kasper, Rabbi David Rosen

Originally, the declaration was planned by Blessed Pope John XXIII as one concerning only the attitude of the church toward Jews. Putting things in order was demanded by mature and responsible Catholics who were aware that before six million European Jews were annihilated in the Shoah by Hitler's pagan Nazism, contempt and hatred had been taught in the church for two thousand years. This was done even in liturgy and in the writings of the Doctors of the Church, motivated by the pseudotheological argument of deicide and the rejection of the Jews by God. Twenty years after

the Shoah, those Catholics, sometimes stirred by members of the Jewish community like Jules Isaac, could not forget that the Christian anti-Judaism, which developed on “religious” grounds in medieval and modern Europe, made the People of the Bible into a scapegoat, a channel for social fears and a protagonist of plot theories – victim of mass murders, envy, robbery, blackmail, religious compulsion, demonisation, segregation, humiliation, stigmatisation, right-restriction.

In No 4 of the text, which had the longest and the most turbulent editorial history of all the conciliar documents, Vatican II reminds the faithful of the organic bond of the church and the Jewish people (the wild olive branches and the good olive into which they got implanted, to follow Paul’s metaphor), of the Jewishness of Christ, his Mother and the Apostles. Nostra Aetate speaks of the irrevocable faithfulness of God to the Jewish people as his people, the Elected People of the Sinaitic Covenant. It recommends mutual understanding and respect, brotherly dialogues, biblical and theological studies. It points out the absurdity of blaming all Jews for the killing of Jesus, and speaks of the universal reasons of his salvific death. It forbids presenting Jews as cursed by God. It repudiates all persecutions, and deplores all the hatred and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews.

Fathoming her identity, facing her past, on the one hand, and human rights, on the other – the church at the Council took up the problem of her relations with others. Putting her tragic relations with the People of the First Election into order also brought fruit in the form of those parts of the Declaration which were devoted to the relations of the church with other world religions, and also unbelievers.

2. “The Vatican’s Flat ‘No’ to Anti-Semitism and Outright ‘Yes’ to the Jewish Roots of Christianity”

On the 40th anniversary of this historical event, numerous interreligious meetings, lectures and reflections took place at many points of the globe. At the invitation of Cardinal Walter Kasper, Christians and Jews involved in the Christian-Jewish dialogue in the whole world took part in one such event, which was organized by the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews in Rome, on October 27th, 2005. The meeting in the splendid fresco-decorated hall of the Renaissance Pallazzo della Cancelleria started with an introduction by the president of the Commission, Cardinal Walter Kasper, who first read out the letter addressed to him on this occasion by Pope Benedict XVI. Evaluation of the Catholic-Jewish relations from the Catholic viewpoint was presented by the Bishop Emeritus of Paris, Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, and from the Jewish viewpoint by Rabbi David Rosen, president of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, which remains in systematic dialogue and cooperation with the Vatican Commission.

In his message paying tribute to the forty years’ pilgrimage of the church on the new path in her relations with Jews, Pope Benedict XVI recalled the significance of *Nostra Aetate* for the overcoming of past prejudices, of the language of contempt and hostility, and for laying the foundations for a sincere theological dialogue. The Pope expressed gratitude to God for the courage, witness and work of those who contributed to this turn, and he called the church to renew her commitment to the work that remains to be done. For the second time after his visit in the

Cologne synagogue, Benedict XVI expressed his deep determination to follow his predecessor John Paul II on this way. In his conclusion, the Pope emphasized strongly that “preaching and catechesis must be committed to ensuring that our mutual relations are presented in the light of the principles set forth by the Council”. He also expressed his hope that Christians and Jews will “offer an ever more compelling shared witness to God and his commandments, the sanctity of life, promotion of human dignity, the rights of the family and the need to build a world of justice, reconciliation and peace”.

Continuing his introduction, Cardinal Kasper was frank with the audience that the way of reconciliation with Jews abounds with difficulties and obstacles, that it requires continuous conversion, and that the *Nostra Aetate* upheaval has met with considerable opposition from outside and inside. That we are just “at the beginning of the beginning” of the way – still far from the “promised land” after forty years of the pilgrimage. We do not have a systematic theology of Judaism in the church yet, but only fragments of it. Hence Cardinal Kasper’s encouragement for it, and possibly for a Jewish theology of Christianity, to be developed.

The Cardinal mentioned persons most merited for the making of the turning point, such as Cardinal Johannes Oesterreicher, Jules Isaac, Pope John XXIII, Cardinal Augustin Bea, Cardinal Johannes Willebrands – and most of all, Pope John Paul II, who propagated the ideas of *Nostra Aetate*, supporting his teaching with unforgettable gestures. To those belong: his historical visit to the Rome synagogue (1986), his tribute paid to the six million victims of the Shoah at the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem, and his penitent prayer on behalf of the Church with a kvitel stuck into the surviving Western Wall of the Jerusalem Temple (March 2000).

In an interview given to the Vatican Radio, Cardinal Kasper also said that the church was determined to follow the way indicated by *Nostra Aetate*. This “most revolutionary document of the Vaticanum II” means a “flat ‘no’ to anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism and an outright ‘yes’ to the Jewish roots of Christianity”.

3. The Common Heritage and the Common Responsibility

Cardinal Lustiger responded to Pope Benedict XVI’s encouragement in the Cologne synagogue to have a closer look at the tasks that Jews and Christians had in common – a shared witness and practical cooperation, among others. These tasks result from their common heritage of the biblical revelation and their common responsibility for civilization and humanity – for social justice reflecting the holy will of God revealed on the Sinai, for affirmation of human dignity and defense of human rights, which are founded on it. Obedient to the revelation, Jews perform 613 commandments which for them express God’s will; they comprise all realms of their life, which finds some analogy in the rigors of the Christian monastic life, although it is lived in secular conditions of family life. A fruitful encounter of Jews and Christians, who from among the 613 commandments have emphasized especially the Decalogue, may remind Christians that the main commandment, which commands them to love God, does not make them free from fulfilling God’s will defined in other commandments, and it may remind Jews that the commandment of love, contained in the main part of the Shema, is the spirit inspiring all other commandments.

Christian universalism made it possible to all peoples of the world to know, sometimes in a secularized form, what was given to Israel on the Sinai. Israel and the Church should safeguard the good of all humanity. Mindful of the promise given to Abraham – that through him all peoples in the world would be blessed, and of Isaiah’s prophecy – that all peoples would come to the temple of God of Jacob, Jews and Christians in their mutual encounter may gain a better understanding of God’s original call to unity for all people.

Judaism and Christianity are joined by their common roots, and divided by the conflict vis-à-vis the

message of Jesus. This conflict, however, becomes inscribed in the hope that human history proceeds with the will of God. The common future of Jews and Christians does not only mean mutual understanding in peace, or solidarity in the service of humanity, but also common work on what is common and what divides. This is possible owing to our certainty that Gods desires our friendship, and that our differences and tensions will give way to our enthusiasm for an ever more attentive and obedient fathoming of the mystery of history of which both Jews and Christians were made successors

4. New Challenge for Christology and Ecclesiology

It was passionately and with erudition that Rabbi David Rosen presented a survey of achievements and problems of the Christian-Jewish dialogue following the publication of *Nostra Aetate*. Being the only conciliar document that is entirely based on the biblical sources, it is the first systematic, bold and committed statement of the church on Jews and Judaism issued by the supreme church authority; its implications were successively taught in the Vatican documents issued after the Council[2].

What remains the most burning and controversial issue is the theological and practical consequences of the coexistence of two valid covenants, which *Nostra Aetate* and John Paul II deduce from St Paul's words on the election of Jews and God's love for them: "God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice" (cf Romans 11:29). John Paul II spoke about the "people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God" (Mainz, 1980). The controversy in the church consists in whether it has a mission of preaching the Gospel to Jews or not. The Apostolic See is not involved in such a mission institutionally, but their theological attitude requires clarification. This constitutes a new challenge for Christology and ecclesiology.

Nostra Aetate resulted in Christian-Jewish cooperation in the field of scholarship, didactics and school education, mainly in the USA, where there are active centres of both Catholic and Jewish life. It is in the USA that Christian-Jewish research groups, common publications and Centres for Christian and Jewish Studies at Catholic universities came into existence (in accordance with the indications of the documents of the Holy See); it is also in America that they introduced a Catholic-Jewish programme broadening education at Catholic and Jewish schools. However, there are still countries where *Nostra Aetate* is not even known to the shepherds of the church, to say nothing of the faithful. One of the most important achievements of the Apostolic See in recent years is defining of the bishop's duties in the directory for the pastoral ministry of bishops published in 2004. The following are among them: "promoting respect for our 'elder brothers' among Christians so that the threat of anti-Semitism can be overcome, and seeing to it that those who perform the holy ministries receive proper formation as regards Judaism and its relation to Christianity" (No 19). But, at the same time, it may be observed that *Nostra Aetate* is not even a required element of the clerical formation.

5. Jews Can Hear When They Can See

Nostra Aetate made it possible for Vatican and Israel to establish diplomatic relations (1993), and, at the same time, it made possible the papal visit and the historical gestures of John Paul II in 2000. The Pope's witness made the Jewish community in Israel and in the whole world open to the Church and it spread the knowledge of the reforms in the Catholic Church or strengthened the Israelis' conviction about those changes.

Rabbi Rosen explained why it was gestures, and not words, that made Jews open so much to the church as their partner: "Jews had their ears boxed so often in the course of history that their eardrums are damaged to the extent that they are often unable to distinguish between evil sounds and beautiful music". But their sight remains in good health, this is why they can hear the new

reality only when they can see it.

What is more, the meeting of John Paul II with the Chief Rabbis of Israel stimulated a new range of Jewish cooperation with the Apostolic See. Besides the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Relations, also the Chief Rabbinate of Israel started their cooperation with the Vatican Commission: their representatives formed a bilateral commission together with the representatives of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. Practically, this means that Reform Judaism was officially joined by Orthodox Judaism in the Jewish-Christian dialogue for the first time. What is more, this is Orthodox Judaism in Israel, whose rabbis have the lead in the world's Orthodox Judaism. For Jewish Orthodoxy this means an encouragement for an opening to the dialogue with the church, sometimes even a change of red light into green. The bilateral Israeli-Vatican Commission proposed introducing educational materials in Israel which will present the new face of Christianity, not only knowledge of its new relations with the Jewish people.

At the same time, the papal visit in Israel gave rise to contacts and cooperation of the Chief Rabbinate and local Christian communities, and to the Chief Rabbis' mediation with the Israeli political authorities concerning problems of Christians in Israel. Also a Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land started its activity.

The International Jewish-Catholic Liaison Committee supports charity initiatives in the whole world. However, a theology of Christian-Jewish partnership is very much needed so that their common activity should not be just one more fruit of a pluralistic world outlook and of values shared by them with many other religious communities, but a manifestation of a unique bond, unique not only in historical sense. "As children of Abraham, we, Christians and Jews, are called to be a blessing to the world. In order to be such, we must be first a blessing to one another". Rabbi David Rosen recalled these words of John Paul II at the end of his speech, blessing God according to the Jewish tradition.

With its solemn festive character, the meeting was remindful of liturgy – it was a word-and-table diptych with the voices shared in the "liturgy of the word", with a pastoral letter and a masterpiece of preaching which, absolutely, was the rabbis share if you apply the measure of enthusiasm. Discussion was not included in the schedule – it rather belongs to the workday form of the dialogue – but the words abundantly granted by the speakers invited dispute and, maybe, even roused the blood pressure in many. Around the standing party later, it became dense with skull-caps, with the veterans' murmur of voices and hugs after not seeing each other for long. No doubt, some discussions took place in the morning, at the meeting of bishop-presidents of local episcopal commissions for the dialogue with Judaism from the whole world – but these we shall know only by their fruit. "The rest is silence" – for the media, at least.

Today, it is already possible to believe that the healing of the history of salvation (the latter being "from the Jews"; John 4:22) that was undertaken by the Vatican Council II forty years ago, will be continued and spread in the Catholic Church. It always starts with purification of the Christian memory and filling in the gaps in Christian history with knowledge of Jewish history. This leads us to a greater sensitivity to our Elder Brothers in faith as our partners in salvation. It leads Christians through a moral shock to healing of their inner senses, and, further, it leads Jews to healing of their hearing, destroyed by the Christians. The way takes us through history to theology, the need of which was emphasized by the highest representatives of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue at the meeting in Rome. Through penance - to God. Through purification - to vision.

"God has imprisoned all men in their own disobedience only to show mercy to all mankind. How rich are the depths of God – how deep is his wisdom and knowledge!" (Romans 11: 32-33). The history of salvation continues, pregnant with the biblical prophecies, proceeding – more often just shuffling along – toward the encounter with the Messiah in his ultimate coming.

Copyright JCRelations

Notes

1. Cf. Bernard Sesboüé, S.J., Christoph Theobald, S.J., S?owo zbawienia /*The Word of the Salvation*, vol. 4 in the series *Historia dogmatów/History of Dogmas*, B. Sesboüé (ed.), Kraków 2003, pp. 494-511.
2. Cf. Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* No 4” (1974), “Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaizm in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church” (1985).

Full text of documents cited:

Message of Pope Benedict XVI

Remarks by Cardinal Kasper

Remarks by Cardinal Lustiger

Remarks by Rabbi Rosen