More than mere satchel bearers

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The recently revised Tridentine Rite prayer for the Good Friday liturgy is on the cusp of threatening four decades of progress in Catholic-Jewish relations, as it calls for Jews to recognise Jesus Christ as saviour of mankind.

Italian rabbis are among those who are now calling for "a pause" in official Jewish-Catholic meetings. Pope Benedict XVI, who personally drafted the prayer, and Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, were advised by the French and German bishops, as well as others, against using such language and they seem surprised by the reaction among Catholics as well as Jews.

Cardinal Kasper, in an interview given to the Corriere della Sera, stated: "We think that reasonably this prayer cannot be an obstacle to dialogue because it reflects the faith of the Church."

It seems unlikely that an exclusive theological claim would be the cause of difficulty, because Judaism, as well as Christianity, has certain truth claims. Jews, like Christians, believe that everyone will recognise their own truth at the End Time, and the Jewish liturgy expresses the hope that eventually non-Jews will forsake their current beliefs before turning to the God of Israel.

Actually, the main reason that the prayer has touched a raw nerve in Jewish-Christian relations is because it deals with the themes of mission and conversion. For Jews, Christian missionary activity conjures up images of centuries of Christian persecution. There are numerous examples through two millennia (but especially in the centuries after the First Crusade in 1096), when Jews were offered the choice between conversion or death. Many chose death, and most of those who did convert later recanted.

The Holocaust was perhaps the most significant catalyst for change in Christian-Jewish relations, when the Church began to acknowledge that centuries of anti-Jewish teaching and brutal missionising had laid the foundations for secular anti-Semitism in Europe. It is no exaggeration to acknowledge that fear of Christian missionising and conversionism underlies mistrust of Christians to this day. Indeed, some Jews even view Christian conversionary activity as having the same goal as Hitler's policies; implementing spiritually what Hitler had sought to do physically - to eliminate Jews and Judaism.

Yet, from the very beginning of Christianity, mission and conversion have been central to its teaching. Initially, the Christian message was preached by Jews to Jews (cf. Acts 2:14ff.) until Paul

raised the issue of preaching to the Gentles. The Gospels themselves reflect early controversies over the inclusion of Gentiles in Christianity's missionary activity.

Mark 7:27 says in this context: "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Similarly in Matthew 10:6 the instruction to "go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the House of Israel" is ascribed to Jesus.

Both of these verses express the view that the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah should be expressed to Jews alone. However, the conclusion of the early Church contradicts this, demonstrated by Acts 28:28 that the "Good News" should also be transmitted to Gentiles: "Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles." Indeed, unlike Jews, the author argues that the Gentiles "will listen".

Paul urgently desired that Jews accept Jesus as the Messiah and it remained a mystery to him that most did not. But even after expressing that view, he repeated that their election remained unchanged for "as touching the Gospel they are the enemies for Your sake but as touching the election they are beloved for the Father's sake. For the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance" - note the use of the present tense.

In Romans 9-11 Paul is arguing against Christians who believed that God had rejected his People and had cast off the Jews. Paul's answer was unequivocal over 1,900 years ago and remains clear today. "Did God cast off his people? God forbid!" Consequently, while the universal significance of the Christian mission was taken for granted, its application to Judaism was less clear.

Paul expected the end of this world and the return of Christ in the very near future when "all Israel will be saved". But the world did not end as expected and the Church became established. Consequently, discussions over the place of mission shifted from being an internal Jewish debate (and a mission to Jews) to a mission to the Gentiles. This is mirrored by the shift from an almost wholly inner-Jewish argument in the New Testament to a later hostile external (Gentile) polemic against Jews in the writings of the Church Fathers.

The fact that the first Christians were Jews was forgotten, primarily because the Church was no longer composed of Jews and Gentiles but consisted almost exclusively of Gentiles. The Church did not accept the unbroken validity of Israel's election by God and the covenant made between God and Israel. It was this thinking that led to a rejection of Judaism and 1,800 years of a negative theological critique - Paul's comments in Romans 9-11, forgotten for countless generations, were intended as a riposte to such Christian thinking.

Interestingly, until the last couple of years, the Roman Catholic Church has examined aspects of its relationship with the Jewish people other than mission, partly because it categorised its relationship with other religions in different terms than those used for Judaism. The revised prayer therefore opens a new and difficult conversation between Catholics and Jews on the meaning of Christian mission.

Indeed, mission is in many ways far more difficult for the Church to tackle than, for example, anti-Semitism, because it is relatively easy for Christians to condemn anti-Semitism as a perversion of Christian teaching. In contrast, mission (in the sense of making converts) has been and still is central to the Christian faith - the legacy of the command found in Matthew 28:19 to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations".

Historically, the Church's mission to Jews has been combined with anti-Jewish polemic, primarily because Jews failed to convert to Christianity. When the Emperor Constantine converted in 312, missionary activity became bound up with anti-Jewish legislation, which meant that those who did

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not convert experienced brutality.

There were occasions when anti-Jewish policies were challenged by some church leaders such as Pope Gregory the Great, but the failure of large numbers of Jews to embrace Jesus has always been a problem for the Church. This precipitated the development of various myths of Jewish depravity and stubbornness, which underpinned the traditional Latin rite, which talked of "lifting the veil" from "Jewish blindness".

Not since the second century have Catholic theologians paid much attention to this subject. The Church Fathers responded to the Jewish rejection of Christianity not by initiating a vigorous missionary campaign but rather by developing a "teaching of contempt". Thus they interpreted the inter-Jewish polemic of the New Testament in terms of an exclusive criticism of Jews, which laid the foundations for anti-Jewish teaching. This is not to imply that the conversion of Jews was not desired; rather, their lowly position in society was sufficient to prove the efficacy of the Christian message. The missionary ideal remained but the emphasis was on the ignoble Jews witnessing the truth and grandeur of Christianity.

The most common criticisms concerned the failure of Jews to interpret Scripture correctly. The fifth-century Church Father Cyril of Alexandria, for example, asked when will Jews "withdraw your mind from the shadow of the Law". For Augustine, Jews were simply "satchel bearers", carrying the revelation in their holy books until Christ. This criticism is based on the accusation that Jews could not understand the meaning of the Old Testament because they did not interpret the biblical text christologically. Thus, at the heart of the patristic tradition was the election of the Gentiles and an inheritance of the election of the rejected Jews. This was no longer the grafting of the Gentiles into Israel, but a Gentile substitution of the Jewish People

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