



Reviving the Dialogue: The Church can do more to Promote Catholic-Jewish Relations

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For one thing, there was the tepid response by Catholic bishops and the Vatican to Mel Gibson's reintroduction of classic antisemitic stereotypes in his 2004 film "The Passion of the Christ."

Earlier, Cardinal Avery Dulles and certain Vatican officials attacked the 2002 document "Reflections on Covenant and Mission" which had emerged from the ongoing dialogue between the National Council of Synagogues and the U.S. Bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. Such a statement had been explicitly encouraged by Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and its Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, and it received affirmation from the council's former President Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy.

However, Kasper has been relatively silent of late on theological issues though he has given some quiet support to the ongoing "Christ and the Jewish People" theological consultation co-sponsored internationally by several leading European and American Catholic educational institutions, including personal participation in the consultation's session at Ariccia, Italy, in October 2006. Kasper had offered some groundbreaking theological kernels in terms of the Christian-Jewish relationship early on in his Presidency at the Pontifical Council but little in the past several years. And he was unable to produce a new Vatican statement in celebration of Nostra Aetate's 40th Anniversary in 2005.

The key question before us is whether the reflections Kasper has offered thus far or the insights emerging from the Christ and the Jewish People Consultation can enter the mainstream of Catholic theological thinking. The theology of the Christian-Jewish relationship, as theologians such as Gregory Baum and Johannes Metz have stressed, stands at the nerve center of Christian identity. Certainly Cardinal Kasper could be a conduit for mainstreaming new theological understanding that emerges from the dialogue given his position as the Vatican's chief spokesperson both for inter-Christian and Catholic-Jewish relations. But during Holy Week in 2006 Kasper lent his personal support to a concert, co-sponsored by the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church, that was based on the Passion account of St. Matthew, including texts imbued with the classic patristic anti-Judaic theology still so prevalent in Orthodox theological circles, such as "Thou (Christ) hast freed us from the curse of the law."

If Christian-Jewish relations are to advance Christian leadership must be willing to speak up against continuing manifestations of classical theological anti-Judaism. Only if the new theology of the church's relationship with the Jewish People is brought to the fore in such situations can we truly say that this theology has captured the Christian soul. One test of the church's attitude will come with regard to the document now in process on basic ecclesial identity within the Faith & Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in which the Vatican also holds membership. The International Council of Christians and Jews ICCJ co-sponsored a consultation on this document with the WCC's Faith & Order Commission in Boldern, Switzerland in December 2006. The Faith & Order leadership present at this consultation offered some hope that this document would be adjusted to reflect the new theological thinking that has been generated by the Christian-Jewish dialogue.

The present Pope in the latter days of his tenure at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith wrote a few potentially positive pieces on the theology of the Catholic-Jewish relationship, including his preface to the Pontifical Biblical Commission's important lengthy monograph on the Jews and their Scriptures in the New Testament. But so far we have seen little evidence of this perspective in any of his papal statements. On the contrary, some of his reflections, such as his 2007 Holy Thursday homily, appear to draw in part upon the anti-Judaic perspectives of John Chrysostom.

There is also concern that a 2005 Washington lecture by Cardinal Dulles has received no public response from Catholic leaders. The lecture, eventually published in the magazine *First Things*, tore at the heart of *Nostra Aetate* and the clear teaching of John Paul II by claiming that Vatican II did not solve the issue of Jewish covenantal inclusion which is a reference to an idea in classical Christian theology that Jews were excluded from the covenant with God for having rejected Jesus. In that line of thinking, since discredited, Jews were replaced in the covenant by followers of Christ. There have been only private assurances by Cardinal Kasper and some other bishops that Dulles' view was a strictly personal one and does not represent official Catholic thinking. But I have been in the presence of bishops who have endorsed Dulles' perspective.

Furthermore, Pope Benedict has seemed to withdraw from recognizing major Catholic complicity in the Holocaust. Here the present Pope seems to be stepping back from John Paul II's acknowledgment of Catholic involvement, even if that too was somewhat inadequate. Benedict has certainly condemned Nazi ideology and expressed opposition to continuing manifestations of

antisemitism. But in his addresses in the Cologne, Germany, synagogue in 2005 and during his 2006 visit to the Birkenau death camp, he interpreted Nazism as a neo-pagan phenomenon, playing down the central role of classical church teachings on Jews and Judaism as a seedbed for the cultivation of grassroots support for its ideology. Both in Cologne and at Birkenau, Pope Benedict never mentioned the 1998 Vatican document on the Shoah, *We Remember*, nor the even stronger statements on Catholic complicity found in the German (1995) and French (1997) bishops' statements on the need for Catholic repentance.

The recent *Motu Proprio* of Benedict XVI allowing for wider use of the Latin Mass has also raised serious questions because it seems at the moment to sanction the virtual elimination of readings from the Hebrew Scriptures and reaffirmation of the 1962 Missal's prayer for the conversion of the Jews that speaks of Jews as "blind" and as having "a veil over their eyes." A number of Catholic bishops' conferences (e.g. Germany and the United States) have called on the Pope to make the post-Vatican version of the prayer for the Jews mandatory for all liturgical celebrations on Good Friday. Organizations such as the International Council of Christians & Jews, the German Committee of Catholics and Jews and the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations have done the same. Protests have also come from Austria and France and the chief rabbis of Israel have also written to the Pope in this regard. This matter could be resolved overnight by a simple papal decree as was Pope John XXIII's elimination of the term "perfidious" from the Good Friday prayers. More and more the issue seems to be embroiled in a discussion about the 1970 Missal as such rather than the initial aim of trying to bring back some Catholic dissidents. The matter of the *Motu Proprio* is one of fundamental Catholic integrity. Media have frequently spoken about Jewish concerns about the document. Jews have every reason to be concerned. But ultimately the question remains a fundamentally Catholic problem. Can the Vatican sanction as official both the far more positive prayer for Jews in the post-Vatican II liturgy and the demeaning prayer in the 1962 missal? Can Catholics speak from two sides of their mouths on the relations with Jews and be taken seriously? If Pope Benedict fails to respond to these concerns, he certainly will have a blackmark on his papacy in terms of Catholic-Jewish relations.

Over the past four decades, the church has failed to extend its examination of Catholic textbooks to the area of liturgy (including hymns) and to Bible study programs. "God's Mercy Endures Forever," a 1988 document along these lines issued by the U.S. Bishops Committee on the Liturgy, received no promotional effort and remains largely unknown in liturgical and homiletic circles.

Can the dialogue become unstuck? I hope it can. The recent document for the coming synod on the Bible, with a major emphasis on the church's ties to the Jewish People in its preliminary document has that potential if the synod (planned for Oct. 5-26, 2008) embraces it and handles the issue in a way reflective of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document on the Jews and their Scriptures. But this will require a concerted effort on the part of Jewish-Christian groups to insure that key bishops at the Synod lift up this issue from the preliminary document. If they do, it will certainly provide a genuine test of Pope Benedict's personal commitment to Catholic-Jewish reconciliation since he must approve the final communiqué from the synod. Jews, too, will need to become more serious about the dialogue, including its theological dimensions. Some Jewish groups, perhaps out of a belief that nothing much will come from the current papacy in terms of Catholic-Jewish relations, have settled into a "don't rock the boat mentality" in hopes of solidifying the gains made since Vatican II. Such a defeatist attitude ultimately undercuts the work of committed Catholics in the dialogue. Some of the Jewish responses to the *Motu Proprio* were weak

and seem to reflect an inferiority mindset in terms of dealing with the Vatican. Jews will also need to take seriously increasing concerns within the Vatican about its relations with the State of Israel.

If Christians demonstrate willingness to reignite the theological discussion and move it into the mainstream of discussion in the churches and to pursue further examination of their basic educational and liturgical materials, they could put the dialogue back on a positive course. I still have hope in that regard but the stagnation cannot continue for much longer without permanent deterioration.