



## Praying for the Jews: Reflections on the continuing controversy

01.03.2008 | John Pawlikowski

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### Praying for the Jews: Reflections on the continuing controversy

The controversy over the question of appropriate prayer for the Jewish people in Catholic liturgy has been with us since the time of Pope John XXIII. Prior to the II Vatican Council John XXIII removed the term "perfidious" from the Good Friday prayer. In 1965 Pope Paul VI, just before Vatican II's Declaration on the Church and the Jewish People, eliminated the negative language about the Jews (e.g., their "blindness") from the Good Friday liturgy but left the prayer's basic conversionist tone intact.

The 1970 Missal, the definitive response to the liturgical changes mandated by Vatican II, further revised the 1965 prayer, acknowledging in a positive way the Jewish People's faithfulness to God and leaving open-ended what might be the eschatological resolution of the apparent conflict between notions of Christ's universal salvific action and ongoing Jewish covenantal commitment. This prayer is clearly in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* which totally rejected the almost two millennia of Christian theological perspectives on the Jews without offering a definitive replacement. That task it left to subsequent generations of theologians and biblical scholars, something that in fact has been taking place since the end of the Council. The continuing "Christ and the Jewish People" Consultation jointly sponsored by Boston College, the Pontifical Gregorian University, the Catholic Theological Union and the Catholic University of Leuven with the encouragement of Cardinal Kasper and the multi-year study project on Paul and Judaism at the Catholic University of Leuven are but two such ongoing efforts.

In an official international Vatican-Jewish dialogue in Venice in 1978 Professor Tomaso Federici, a lay scholar highly respected in Vatican circles, proposed that in light of *Nostra Aetate* Catholicism should formally renounce any proselytizing of the Jews. The official published version of his paper which only appeared several years later was altered to call for a rejection of "undue" proselytizing.

A few years ago Cardinal Walter Kasper argued in his writings that there is no need to proselytize Jews because they have authentic revelation and in virtue of the perspective of Vatican II remain in the covenant. But he did add that Catholicism must retain a notion of Christ's universal salvific work. Unfortunately he never pursued further how these two theological affirmations might be authentically integrated.

The controversial statement "Reflections on Covenant and Mission" issued as a study document

from the ongoing dialogue between the USCCB's Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the National Council of Synagogues which has drawn praise from Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy, Cardinal Kasper's predecessor, and the statement from the ecumenical scholars' group on Christian-Jewish Relations "A Sacred Obligation" both called for a cessation of missionizing towards Jews. Cardinal Avery Dulles wrote a strong critique of the former.

The discussion about the Prayer for the Jews in the context of Pope Benedict's *Motu Proprio* on the Latin liturgy began in the Summer of 2007 when word began to emerge that the document was on the horizon. Groups long associated with efforts at Christian-Jewish understanding after Vatican II such as the Committee of German Catholics and Jews, the International Council of Christians and Jews, the Austrian Coordinating Committee on Christian-Jewish Relations, and the North American Council of Centers on Christian-Jewish Relations, among others, sent messages to the Vatican urging that the Latin version of the 1970 prayer be inserted into the 1962 Missal for Good Friday. Important church leaders such as Cardinal Karl Lehmann of Germany as well as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops weighed in as well along with several Jewish groups including the Vatican's official Jewish dialogue partner, the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) and the Chief Rabbis of Israel. The concern over the prayer was shared equally by Christians and Jews and was not a one-sided Jewish protest as the popular press has frequently presented the situation.

In late August the Papal Secretary of State Cardinal Bertone acknowledged the concerns in public and suggested that making the 1970 prayer the common text for both missals might be the best solution. But something happened to push this proposal off the table with the announcement that the Pope would compose a new prayer.

The new papal prayer has engendered much controversy. Protests have come from many countries and the Italian rabbinical association has decided to suspend any Catholic-Jewish dialogue. While the papal prayer removes the most offensive language from the 1962 Missal it remains clearly conversionist in outlook.

In reflecting on the current controversy several points need to be raised.

(1) Dialogue is very much an encounter of people, not merely an academic theological exercise. In the spirit of the Vatican's own 1974 Guidelines on Catholic-Jewish Relations it is vital for Catholics to come to understand why the issue of "conversion" strikes such a raw nerve within the Jewish community in light of the long history of Christian antisemitism and the Holocaust. In fairness, Jews will also need to appreciate that "mission" stands at the core of Christian identity and hence cannot be easily reinterpreted. In the end authentic dialogue involves mutual learning. This new prayer has no sense of this.

(2) Jews need reassurance that use of this papal prayer will not generate a new concrete program

aimed at proselytizing Jews. In recent days Cardinal Kasper and others have attempted to set this prayer in a totally eschatological context. Cardinal Kasper has argued this perspective on an eschatological understanding of Romans 11 on which the new papal prayer is based. Whether such a reading will have legs is an open question. There is little hope of changing the prayer at this point. But it is possible to leave it strictly a prayer devoid of any practical missionizing programming.

(3) A prayer on Good Friday, especially given what this day often entailed historically in terms of Jewish suffering, should not become the occasion for the proclamation of a definitive new theology of the Church and the Jewish people. The new papal prayer could have been written prior to Vatican II. The 1970 prayer is superior because it affirms Jewish faithfulness without settling the question of how this impacts Christian notions of ultimate salvation. That is a task for theologians not for the faithful at prayer on Good Friday. The theology behind this not so new prayer takes no account of what Gregory Baum, one of the drafters of *Nostra Aetate*, has termed this document's radical transformation of ordinary Catholic teaching on the Jewish question which he regards as the most striking turnabout to emerge from Vatican II.

(4) We need to recommit to the Christian-Jewish encounter at this critical moment. Silence will get us nowhere. Various Christian and Jewish groups, including the USCCB, have spoken out for such continuation despite the pain that the papal prayer has produced. Two special opportunities present themselves in the near-term. The October Synod of Bishops in Rome will focus on the Bible and has placed the issue of Jewish-Christian relations on its preliminary agenda. And the jubilee celebration of St. Paul offers the possibility of bringing to popular attention the emerging view of Paul as a person quite positive on Judaism rather than merely an opponent of "the law." Both these opportunities need to be pursued in earnest as a countermeasure to the negative impact of the new prayer. The situation regarding the prayer for the Jews in the 1962 missal has been badly handled from start to finish. But the controversy may still open the possibility of new learning and renewed commitment to Catholic-Jewish reconciliation.