Behind the Scenes: Vatican Meetings on the Theology of Jewish-Christian Relations

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It has often been noted by those engaged in the Catholic-Jewish dialogue that the most precious outcome of the conciliation process begun after the promulgation in 1965 of the Vatican II document, Nostra Aetate, 4 has been the enduring personal friendships between members and representatives of the two faiths and the consequent increase in mutual understanding and breakdown of historically determined preconceptions. In other words, the building of mutual trust and familiarity with the other's beliefs and traditions, is greatly boosted by the personal encounter.

This past summer, personalities who are not in the mainstream of today's news and are not (or as in the case of Joseph Ratzinger-Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, are no longer) spokespersons for the recognized contemporary theological positions governing the Jewish-Catholic dialogue, but are nevertheless considered significant representatives, have conducted an active dialogue that has led to a recent event worthy of note.

Earlier this month there was a quiet, behind-the-scenes visit to the Vatican's Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews by a group of five German speaking rabbis led by Vienna's Chief Rabbi Arie Folger, which culminated in a personal meeting and talk with Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. Although the official partner for the Church's religious dialogue with Jews is "IJCIC" – the umbrella organization for the most representative bodies of world Judaism - and Benedict is now retired, the venture was the result of the Pope Emeritus' provocative personal reflections on Catholic-Jewish relations published by the German Catholic review "Communio" last June.[1]

The essay was prefaced by an Introduction, written by Cardinal Koch, who presently serves as President of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews. The Cardinal explained that although Joseph Ratzinger had not intended his reflections to be published, he – Cardinal Koch - had persuaded the Pope Emeritus to do so because he considered them to be of significance to the dialogue.

Circling mostly among the German speaking world of Jews and Christians engaged in these interreligious relations, the essay and its Introduction were immediately deemed by some as problematic, and defined as a possible theological setback to the advances made in the past decade. The publication produced ripples on both sides of the Atlantic and induced a declaration of concern by the German rabbinate (*see my Vatican Insider articles in English 06/08 and 12/09 2018 and in Italian 19/08 e 18/09 2018). Rabbi Folger's reflection on the issue, published by the Jüdische Allgemeine, was followed by an exchange of letters between Benedict XVI and Rabbi Folger. Simultaneously, Folger joined with the Conference of German Orthodox Rabbis (ORD) in writing an open Letter to Cardinal Koch.

The points under discussion seemed to require further clarification and so a personal encounter was arranged at the Pontifical Commission for Rabbi Folger and 4 other rabbis from Germany. The 48 hour visit included a 40 minute private conversation between Benedict (in his Vatican retirement home), Cardinal Koch and Rabbi Rabbi Folger, accompanied by Rabbis Zsolt Balla (of Leipzig)

and Josh Ahrens (of Darmstadt). The other rabbis present in the discussions led by Cardinal Koch at the Pontifical Commission accompanied by Father Norbert Hofmann (Secretary of the Commission), were Yehuda Pushkin (of Saxony), Avraham Radbil (of Osnabrück --- all members and/or advisors to the Board of ORD.

“There were words of both gratitude and friendship”, said Rabbi Folger of both meetings, “as well as profound discussions and even some disagreements, but most importantly a commitment was made to continue talking to and with one another, especially when we disagree.”

Cardinal Koch, said Folger, stressed that there had clearly been no intention of creating a setback in Christian-Jewish relations. Folger explained that he understood that each faith community had “its own understanding of the proper path to salvation, and just as we cannot be expected to confirm Christian theology, so too we cannot expect the church to confirm Jewish theology. However, while our interlocutors deny the legitimacy of “Supersessionism” or “Replacement Theology” (which posits that Christianity is the New Israel and that the Covenant with Jews has been abrogated because of Jewish refusal to recognize Christ), and dispute the existence of such theology in mainstream Catholic teaching, they fail to emphasize that it has long been and still is prevalent among many of the faithful of Catholicism and Protestantism, and that it has produced hatred, contempt, and been at the cause of real suffering, including very bloody massacres throughout nineteen hundred years of enmity. We hold that the Lord’s covenant with the Jewish people has not only never been abrogated by Him, nor “superseded”, but as a Divine Covenant, cannot be abrogated by man, either.

“Benedict posits that Substitution Theology is ‘bad theology’ from a Catholic perspective, and has also explicitly confirmed that Catholics are not called to missionize Jews, for which we are grateful. In our conversations, they also explicitly recognized that Supersessionism - despite being a wrong theology - was once widespread among Catholics. What we respectfully requested of our interlocutors was that they publish and underline this last point”.

Both the Pope Emeritus and Cardinal Koch expressed a desire for further theological dialogue specifying that the aim is better mutual understanding, not persuasion. The German rabbis replied that while there was more willingness to engage in theological dialogue today than in the past, it is nonetheless limited. Orthodox Jews see no reason to engage in Christological discussion, “specifically proscribed by our revered Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik.”

Among the new issues that might be considered for discussion, according to Rabbi Folger, “there is now a readiness on both sides to meet and hold a theological discussion regarding the ’Return to Zion’ and the establishment of the State of Israel, while obviously maintaining safeguards against the meddling of one faith community into another faith community’s beliefs. We meet as brothers, i.e. as equals, respecting our unbridgeable differences while highlighting our commonalities.”

“The Church already acknowledges that the State of Israel has religious significance for Jews and that Jews have a right to self determination. However, in response to some statements made by the Pope Emeritus in his essay, we stressed that it is not reasonable to seek a theological interpretation for the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem and the subsequent dispersion of the Jewish people which created the Diaspora, while simultaneously maintaining that the Return to Zion and the establishment of the State of Israel is a purely secular matter.”

The five German rabbis also met with Rome’s Chief Rabbi Riccardo Di Segni for consultation before the Vatican meetings, but he did not join them since they were conducted exclusively in the German language (“making for easier communication”, as Rabbi Folger has noted).

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[1] An official English translation of Benedict's article is now available for download here: "Grace and Vocation without Remorse: Comments on the Treatise De Iudaeis" (pdf). For further interest see also the compilation of inofficially translated papers that appeared originally in German language about Benedict's article: Dialogika.

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