



Bishops meeting Rabbis

31/03/2010 | Hubert Frankemoelle

Since 2006 representatives of the Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Protestant Church of Germany have met annually with representatives of the two Rabbinical Conferences of Germany. These discussions have proved useful and have helped to continue the dialogue between Jews and Christians, despite some irritations in recent years. Soon the representatives will meet in Augsburg for a fifth round of talks.

Is it possible yet to speak of "tradition," when representatives of the Catholic and Protestant bishops' conferences in Germany (DBK and EKD) soon meet again – since 2006 for the fifth time – with representatives of the General Conference of Rabbis (ARK) and the Orthodox Rabbinical Conference, Germany (ORD)? In any case, in the past years a good foundation has been laid on which further solid building can take shape, even though the dialogue still remains fragile.

The impetus for initiating the dialogue arose from an irritation that happened on August 19, 2005, at the synagogue in Cologne on the occasion of the 20th World Youth Day during the remarkable visit of Pope Benedict XVI, who had newly been elected in April 2005. The problems were not caused by the fact that it was the first visit of the Pope from Germany, and not through the well-chosen speeches, rather by the protocol decision to introduce the Pope at the end of his visit to deserving members of the Jewish community of Cologne, to the chairman of the Central Council of Jews, the political organ of German Jewry, Paul Spiegel, and to Israel's Ambassador in Germany, Shimon Stein. The chairmen of the two Rabbinical Conferences did not receive this respectful attention. And yet, they are as theologians the proper interlocutors of the Pope. Or was the Pope here perceived as head of the Vatican State? That it is possible to see him in this function was shown by the German Chancellor's criticism of the Pope, when he, in February 2009, lifted the excommunication of Bishop Williamson, a Holocaust denier, and some others. Many Catholics misunderstood this admonition of the Chancellor as presumptuous criticism of the Pope as head of all Catholics but, as the text shows, in this case a head of state was criticizing another head of state. In Cologne it was unlikely that the Pope visited in his role as head of state, especially since there was no such indication given in the speeches. Clearly, here theologians had been talking with each other. The protocol decision did not corresponded to this fact. The spontaneous idea of a meeting of rabbis and bishops as equals had been born; however, to be realized it still needed certain conditions.

Conditions for the meetings

The general condition was the Christian churches' renewed relationship with the Jewish people. In 2005 the theological "turn-around" text of the Second Vatican Council of 1965 that speaks of the Roman Catholic Church's relationship to non-Christian religions, especially to Judaism was remembered. The epoch-making text of the Evangelical Church of the Rhineland of 1980 "On the Renewal of the Relationship between Christians and Jews" was remembered as well.

For 2005 several meetings were planned under the topic "40 Years Nostra Aetate – 25 Years Rhineland Resolution. On the State of Christian-Jewish dialogue." The German Coordinating Council of the 83 Associations for Christian-Jewish Cooperation (DKR) also planned an event with high-level representatives, but the newly elected president of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Cardinal Walter Kasper, had to decline the invitation. Since 2004 he had

been acting like the mouthpiece of the already seriously ill Pope John Paul II, given path-breaking presentations to rabbis and bishops among others in New York and London about the new Israel theology of the church. People engaged in the Christian-Jewish dialogue internationally were not sure if the Vatican and whoever would become the next Pope would follow the direction given by the Second Vatican Council. Throughout the past 40 years the text of the Council had been strengthened through numerous publications and gestures. (One has to remember the confession of guilt on the first Sunday of Lent 2000 in St. Peter's in Rome and the subsequent trip of the Pope to Israel). It was quite natural then for the DKR to invite Cardinal Kasper to Germany to give a presentation to the rabbis. In the beginning of 2005 Rome had welcomed such a meeting.

On the Jewish side the conditions were favorable as well. In the fall of 2004 the General (more liberal) Rabbinical Conference and the Orthodox Rabbinical Conference had constituted themselves as two independent and fully equal wings of Judaism. Each organized their own rabbinical courts. Thus, they reflected the main currents of Judaism in Germany, which had formed since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. On March 31, 2005, both conferences closed ranks and formed the Rabbinical Committee Germany –with three elected representatives, at a time, from both conferences. It is headed by one chairman, so as to be able to speak with one voice – the first time since the Second World War. Alternating annually, the chairman comes either from the ranks of the board of the ARK or the ORD. (The ultra-orthodox Lubavitcher Jews of a more Hasidic character with some 30 rabbis and congregations in Germany did not participate, they are opposed to any dialogue with Christians. They understand themselves even as a missionary movement within Judaism.) The president of the ARK, Dr. Henry G. Brandt, a rabbi of Augsburg and also the long-time Jewish Chairman of the DKR, was elected as the first chairman of the Rabbinical Committee Germany. In Germany and also among the bishops he is a well-known interlocutor in the area of Christian-Jewish dialogue. Since 2005 Rabbi Teitelbaum, Cologne, of the ORD, is the chairman. Since then, no new elections have been held. This is probably due to the debated question of who is a Jew and also to the presence of female rabbis in the ARK.

Thus the conditions on the Christian and the Jewish sides were favorable for a meeting in the years 2004/05. Despite many doubts, it was realized in March 2006. The meeting was initiated, prepared, and organized by the DKR as a non-church organization. (On its board Jewish, Protestant and Catholic members always work together as equals). Only in this setting was it possible to exclude from the outset any diplomatic sensitivities (like: who invites? Who can speak?).

The first meeting March 9, 2006, in Berlin

The media as well as the welcome speeches often referred to this meeting as "historic" and as an important "first step" in the dialogue at the highest level between Jews and Christians in Germany. After all, it was the first such meeting after the Nazi era and the Shoah, and probably even in the centuries-long history of enmity and "non-meeting" of Jews and Christians in Germany. The list of participants confirms the meeting's exceptional degree of importance. After the first internal meeting to get acquainted, the public meetings saw among the participants the Apostolic Nuncio in Germany, Archbishop Ender; the local bishop Cardinal Sterzinsky; the chairman of the ORD, Rabbi Teitelbaum of Cologne; the chairman of the ARK, Rabbi Brandt of Augsburg; 22 other rabbis; the chairwoman of the Central Council of Jews, Mrs. Knobloch; the president of the Central Council of Catholics (ZdK), Prof. Meyer. The president of the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD), Bishop Huber, as well as the chairman of the German Bishop's Conference (BTB), Cardinal Karl Lehmann, spoke guiding words of welcome. They were accompanied by fellow bishops, high-ranking leaders and members of ecumenical bodies.

The basic lecture was given by Cardinal Kasper on "Nostra Aetate and the future of the Jewish-Catholic dialogue." It was answered just as frankly by the chairman of the Rabbinical Committee Germany, Rabbi Brandt, with the "Replica: Bridges over the Abyss." Rabbi Brandt was especially

grateful that the bishops "had finally perceived the rabbis as present and having equal competence." Sincere dialogue emphasizes the areas of consensus but does not conceal the differences of faith. Cardinal Kasper pointed out clearly the "permanent validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people," and immediately connected this to the basic Christian conviction. He concluded, "If we adhere to the universal salvific significance of Jesus Christ, it raises immediately the extremely sensitive issue of mission to the Jews." Quite realistically, he stated, "We are still far away from a generally satisfying answer." As we know, the struggle continues into the present time, as demonstrated by the critical reactions to the declaration of the dialogue group "Jews and Christians" at the ZdK of March 9, 2009, "No to Mission to the Jews --- Yes to Dialogue between Jews and Christians". The reactions to it came from the Vatican and also from German bishops and conservative Catholics. Seldom, it seems, has the German media discussed a theological issue so controversial. What is it about? The press release by the German bishops states an important reason, "The statement is likely to encourage a misconception, as if the Dialogue Group had the authority to discuss a theological issue and commit the church in a matter which the church reserves for clarification by its office." The text itself and the signatures of 13 Jewish members in this Dialogue Group demonstrate that such a reading is not appropriate. Jews only want to know the extent to which Christians also theologically validate the talk of God's non-revoked covenant with the Jews. This question is still awaiting an official response from the Catholic Church. The statement of the dialogue group at the ZdK wants to be understood only as an attempt at clarification. For the churches' self-understanding and their relationship to the first part of their Bible which they have in common with the Jews, called Old Testament, this is still an open and controversial question. The answer to it is for Jews the litmus test of the dialogue.

The German Coordinating Council of the Associations for Christian-Jewish Cooperation is owed appreciation for providing the documentation of welcome messages and presentations of the 2006 meeting and all that followed with photos and press reviews. They can be viewed and ordered on the DKR website.

Looking back at the Berlin meeting and the many public approvals it was resolved that in future, such meetings should have their appropriate place during the annual DKR "Brotherhood Week" in early March. It was further resolved that internal discussions in camera and lectures for a larger public should structure the meetings. This has occurred to this day.

The meeting March 2007 in Mannheim

The fact that the achievements in the dialogue are never secure, much rather always endangered, is demonstrated by further meetings, even though the irritations were of various kinds. From February 26 to March 4, 2007 the German Catholic bishops made a pilgrimage to Israel. Reckless statements by some bishops at Yad Vashem that compared the wall and the security fence between Israel and Palestine with the Nazi ghettos and the Berlin Wall sparked a storm of outrage both in Israel and also in Jewish circles in Germany. All the careful preparations for the March 12 meeting between the rabbis and the bishops seemed to have been in vain. Rabbi Soussan, the contact person of the ORD to the Christian churches, spoke at the welcome meeting, saying frankly that "many representatives of the Jewish side had seriously considered not attending today's meeting." It has to be appreciated that Cardinal Lehmann, then the chairman of the German Bishops Conference, was able in the days before the meeting to persuade the rabbis with clear and empathetic words, already in Israel and after returning to Germany, to continue the conversation. He said in Mannheim, "I would again like to apologize for the injuries that have occurred." It is quite obvious: The dialogue is not a matter of course, it is happening on a swaying bridge.

The agreed-upon structure proved itself valid (even after the change in chairmanship of the Rabbinical Committee in June 2006). For the internal two-hour meeting the Orthodox rabbis suggested a topic which was approved by the other participants, "Testimony and Accountability,"

where "Mission to the Jews," as practiced by evangelical circles for years, was to be discussed. Three statements introduced the subject from the Jewish, Protestant and Catholic perspective. The lively exchange of views was objective and trustful. For the Jewish participants, the clear rejection of Mission to the Jews was essential for the future Christian-Jewish dialogue; any "proselytizing" had to be avoided.

The public lectures focused on "The Stranger in the Jewish Tradition" and "Strangeness and Intimacy. Concepts and Conflicts during the New Testament Period." Alternating with 2006, this time the speakers were from the ORD (Rabbi Soussan of Düsseldorf) and the EKD (Bishop Dr. Kähler of Eisenach, vice-chairman of the Council of the EKD). The meeting was topped off by a reception with good food, where people obviously came closer to each other as they engaged in many intense discussions.

The meeting March 2008 in Dusseldorf

For "Brotherhood Week" as well as for the meeting between rabbis and bishops this time the pressures and irritations came from the Vatican. The actual catalyst was the recasting of the Good Friday Prayer "For the Jews" for the extraordinary rite, hand-written by Pope Benedict XVI, published on February 4. Already in July 2007 he had again accepted the Latin rite of the mass of 1570 as an extraordinary form of the liturgy. Subsequently international criticism arose among Jews and Christians, Catholics not excepted, which turned into indignation in February/March. One had the impression that, according to the form of this text, Jews could find salvation only through Jesus Christ. In any case, Jews found it difficult to interpret the intercession differently, even if it was read in an eschatological context, that is, pointing to the time at the end of the world.

Since the delegates of the Protestant Church were not directly affected by this conflict, they agreed with the proposal that, in order to clarify the confusion, an advance separate meeting of representatives of the rabbinical conferences and only the DBK was appropriate. It was a sign of the growing mutual trust that this meeting took place, although only in September 2007, and that the annoying stumbling block did not demonstrably burden the meeting in Dusseldorf. The dialogue took place in an open and friendly atmosphere.

The internal conversation turned around the topic "Passing on the Faith" – again introduced in three brief presentations by the president of the Council of the EKD, Bischof Huber, the vice-chairman of the DBK, Bishop Mussinghoff and the chairman of the ARK, Rabbi Brandt. The overall result: the didactic and catechetical issues are quite similar. In the public part Rabbi Dr. Wolff (ARK) and Bishop Dr. Mussinghoff (DBK) spoke on "Sabbath and Sunday" from the Jewish and Christian perspective.

With regard to future meetings, a structural change was made, based on a resolution of the Contact Dialogue Group of the BTB and EKD (to the astonishment of the rabbis who had not been consulted). It was decided that this dialogue should be connected to the Christian churches at the highest level (including preparation and invitation) with the intention and commitment to continue these meetings every two years. In the interim year, there will be only a conversation with the rabbis on issues of current and mutual interest – with a subsequent press release. This concept was first realized in Hamburg.

The meeting March 2, 2009, in Hamburg

This meeting was overshadowed on Monday of "Brotherhood Week" by the removal of the excommunication of the four bishops of the SSPX, among them an open Holocaust denier. This decision by Pope Benedict on January 21, 2009, irritated and caused consternation even among many Catholics, since not even the limitations or the scope of a "waiver of excommunication" had been medially clarified. It was not made clear that this was only about the law applicable to the

reception of the sacraments, not about the right to administer them. Neither was it made clear that this decision did not express the recognition of the bishops of the brotherhood of Pius X, the SSPX. If Christians were already irritated and annoyed, so much more the Jews around the world who, in many initial reactions, declared this to be the end of the dialogue. It was probably due to the clear critical opinions of Catholics, especially some bishops, including the chairman of the German Bishops Conference, Archbishop Zollitsch and his predecessor, Cardinal Lehmann, the chairman of the sub-commission on Religious Relations with Judaism, Bishop Mussinghoff, that the conference took place at all. This confirms that at the diverse meetings between Christians and Jews on (Protestant) 'Church Days' and 'Catholic Days,' and at the days of common Christian-Jewish celebrations each year during "Brotherhood Week" a degree of personal closeness has been reached that can withstand the conflicts. So it was in early 2009. It is stated very clearly in the press release on the meeting, "In regard to the discussions in recent weeks about the Roman Catholic Church's handling of the SSPX it is jointly stated that the events and irritations have admittedly challenged the growing relationship of trust established between Christians and Jews in Germany, but could not lastingly disturb it. The critical points have been addressed in great candor and with high authenticity, so that new confidence towards each other has been won for the way into the future to be created cooperatively."

This ability to deal openly with each other was also the basis for putting the upcoming topic in concrete terms, "Passing on the Faith" in the school and the society, both politically and socially in shared commitment to religious education in the school and in the fight against anti-Judaism, antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Among the senior members of the German Bishops' Conference (DBK), the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) and the numerous representatives of the General and Orthodox Rabbinical Conferences there was unanimous agreement with the principle, "Transmit faith through credible behavior."

Before the fifth meeting March 8, 2010 in Augsburg

Under the new structure the German Bishops' Conference (DBK), the Council of Protestant Churches in Germany (EKD), the General Rabbinical Conference (ARK) and the Orthodox Rabbinical Conference Germany (ORD) in collaboration with the German Coordinating Council (DKR) of the 83 Associations for Christian-Jewish Cooperation are inviting to the fifth meeting of Jewish-Christian dialogue. It will be held in Augsburg on Monday of "Brotherhood Week." The internal meeting will discuss the topic, "The Beginning and Integrity of Life. Current bioethical issues in the field of stem cell research and organ donation." Public lectures will be held under the topic, "Lost Standards. The Challenges of the economic crisis." Speakers will be Präses Nicholas Schneider, vice-chairman of the Council of the EKD, and Rabbi Jaron Engelmayer, board member of the ORD.

It is hoped that the now almost customary "nightly frosts" not damage the still delicate flower of Christian-Jewish dialogue in Germany again at the beginning of 2010. If the recognition of the "heroic virtues" of Pius XII, stated in a decree of Pope Benedict XVI on December 19, 2009, is followed by a solemnly proclaimed canonization (only a miracle, wrought through his direct intercession, is still missing) it would re-open barely healed wounds. Then the delicate relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Jews, their "elder brothers" would be heavily burdened again. How much more can the "Vatican" expect survivors of the Shoah to endure? Why does the Church not have the courage to open the Vatican archives of the World War II era and reappraise the conduct of Pius XII? For the future of Christian-Jewish dialogue, this is a non-negotiable prerequisite.

Source: Herderkorrespondenz 64 (2010), No. 2, 94-98.

Translated from the [German](#) by Fritz Voll