The Pope and the Rabbi

02.10.2018 | Lisa Palmieri-Billig*

Often, direct person-to-person communication will achieve better results than all formal utterances "about" an issue. This seems to have been the case with a personal exchange of letters in their common language of German, between Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI Joseph Ratzinger and the Chief Rabbi of Vienna Arie Folger.

The contentious subject was an essay by the Pope Emeritus himself published by "Communio", a German international Catholic periodical co-founded by Ratzinger. It is entitled "Grace and Calling without Remorse: Notes on the treatise 'De Judaeis' " concerning "the theological dispute between Jews and Christians about the correct understanding of God's promises to Israel" (as defined by the illustrious author.)

The past summer saw a lively, alarmed, and impassioned confrontation within the German speaking world of Catholic and Jewish theologians and experts engaged in the Catholic-Jewish dialogue. Now it seems that this personal correspondence between the Pope Emeritus Ratzinger and Vienna's Chief Rabbi is sprinkling water on the fire and leading to greater mutual understanding, perhaps new closeness and a search for common goals. A definitive verdict, however, is yet to come from the official channels of Jewish-Catholic relations: the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (ILC) composed of representatives of the Vatican and the world's major Jewish secular and rabbinic organizations – as well as from the academic circles that are increasingly involved with the substance of this interreligious dialogue .

The letters have not yet been translated or made public, but since they are not meant for personal use alone and have by now reached their destinations, we may review their highlights.

As Ratzinger's Communio article raised seemingly controversial questions regarding points that had already been carefully worked out in the past by the Pontifical Commission for Religious relations with Jews with support from members of the ILC, generally reaching a consensus from both partners in the dialogue and periodically producing important educational documents, both Cardinal Koch, who is President of the Pontifical Commission and wrote the Introduction to Ratzinger's article, and now the Pope Emeritus himself deemed it wise to respond with letters bearing further "clarifications."

In his Introduction, Cardinal Koch attributes an "inner Christian" intent to Ratzinger's essay, (and therefore not directed to Jewish readers). This was perceived in the public arena as rather problematic. While defining it as "a document for internal Catholic reflection only", Koch simultaneously suggested that Ratzinger's "theological reflections should be incorporated into the future dialogue between the Church and Israel" as an "enrichment."

In apparent response to the confusion, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI Joseph Ratzinger, seized the opportunity of the publication of Chief Rabbi Arie Folger's article on "Danger for the Dialogue" which appeared in the"Juedische Algemeine to smooth some edges of his expressed thoughts by way of a warm personal letter to Folger, knowing of course that it would reach the public domain.

Ratzinger's letter starts out with a birds eye view of the origins of the historical "theological dispute" between the Jewish followers of Jesus and the majority of the Jewish community, which

did not accept Jesus as the awaited Scriptural Messiah, and did not accept the belief that the Hebrew Bible as a whole was about Jesus and now needed to be interpreted anew by him – as contended by Jesus' followers.

Ratzinger admits that the dispute over the two different interpretations was "almost always not conducted with due respect for the other side by Christians " and that "the sad history of Christian anti-Judaism led to the anti-Christian anti-Judaism of the Nazis" which "stands before us with Auschwitz as its sad apex" (repeating what was already stated in his "Communio" essay.)

Illuding, but not specifically referring to concerns that his attempts at "clarification" were somehow aimed in a recondite manner to a return to missionizing the Jews, he concedes that "in the forseeable future the two sides will never agree to the same interpretation - this is a matter for God at the end of time." Meanwhile," he says, "it is important that the dialogue between the two communities regarding a correct interpretation be continued" and suggests that the text of "The Jewish People and their Holy Scriptures in the Christian Bible" published 2002 by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (when Ratzinger still served as Cardinal, Prefect of the Pontifical Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) could supply a methodological basis.

Ratzinger's message to Rabbi Folger concentrates on what he considers the three most important points of his published essay, which offer more detailed explanations for some of those that had caused the greatest concern: 1. the Messianic expectation "…will always remain controversial" although "progress can be made in mutual understanding" 2. Regarding "The Promised Land: ...the state of Israel cannot be seen to theologically represent fulfillment of the Land promise, but rather as a secular state which of course has religious foundations". He goes on however, to make the significant statement that "It is not difficult, I believe, to see in the creation of the State of Israel the fidelity of God to Israel revealed in a mysterious way". 3. Morality and worship: "I believe we can now see a much greater unity betweeñ Israel and the Church than ever before."

Arie Folger, in his reply to Joseph Ratzinger, makes the important concession that the Pope Emeritus' thoughts "contain theses that could effectively become a signpost for the Jewish Christian dialogue, more so than the 'Communio' article" which, "as stressed by us both, is an inner Christian document."

Folger concords fully on the third point. "Jews and Catholics in our times in particular are called together to safeguard moral standards in the West. Together we can be much stronger than singly." He refers to the common values of both religions as being derived from the Hebrew Bible "even if we interpret certain sections differently, we here share common ground."

Regarding point 2 of Benedict's letter referring to the necessarily secular character of the State of Israel (and despite the religious Zionistic aspect of a return to the Land by Jews from all over the world not being mentioned by Ratzinger), Folger expresses appreciation for the Pope Emeritus seeing a "revelation" of "the fidelity of God to Israel" even if it cannot be recognized by Christians as "the Promised Land". This, says Folger, "has shortened the distance between our respective positions".

Another noteworthy comment in this regard comes from Rabbi David Rosen, AJC's Director of International Interreligious Affairs. He says, "Benedict's distinction between seeing Divine Providence in the return of the Jewish People to its ancestral homeland (with the reestablishment of independent Jewish national sovereignty) testifying to Divine fidelity and love towards the Jewish people, versus an event of Messianic significance parallels a debate within Religious Zionism itself whether or not the establishment of the State of Israel should be viewed in Messianic religious terms or not."

Further discussion on this topic, says Rabbi Folger, has been proposed to a group of 5 German

language rabbis engaged in interfaith matters. They would “gladly accept” such a meeting, says Folger, as confirmed in a letter just sent to the Cardinal, adding that he would highly welcome the opportunity, should it arise, to be able to continue the discussion with the Pope Emeritus himself.

Regarding Benedict’s first point (the different Messianic expectations) Folger says that although he himself had been a student of rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik who shunned theological dialogue in favor of joint moral and social action, he found Ratzinger’s proposal “more modest and thereby more influential --, to undertake a dialogue not to convince but to understand one another,…to build understanding and friendship but not missionize or discuss theological issues.”

Yet Folger does not shirk from wrestling with other troublesome issues contained in Ratzinger’s "Communio" article but not discussed in his letter. He takes Benedict to task on his dissection of the comprehensive meaning of “the Unbroken Covenant”. Rabbi Folger stresses that faith in an everlasting Covenant is vital to the struggle against antisemitism. Referring to the centuries of repeated outbreaks of violence and persecutions caused by the Church’s denial of the eternal nature of the Covenant and the erroneous preaching of its having been replaced by the Covenant with Jesus, Folger states that although he would not expect Christianity to change its doctrines, “however, because of the suffering of Jews caused by Christians on this account in the past, I must make an exception and plead that the Church continue to uphold and strengthen the thesis of the Unbroken Covenant, which also in your estimation must not be otherwise.”

It might be appropriate here to recall that in 2015 on occasion of the 50th anniversary of “Nostra Aetate”, Cardinal Koch and the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews presented a document called “The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable”. The title quotes a famous statement attributed in the New Testament to Paul (Rom II – 29), whose application to the coexistence of both the Jewish and Christian Covenants has been widely accepted as “a sacred mystery.”

Finally, Folger also challenges Ratzinger’s flat declaration, in “Communio”, that for the Church, quite simply, the “Replacement theory never existed.”

“As the highest representative of the Catholic Church you have the right to assert this”, says Folger. However “…the crimes of the past, even if regarded as unfaithful to the Christian Magisterium, were nevertheless committed by Christians in the name of Christianity and cannot be forgotten… It would be most meaningful to us Jews if we could read, together with your thesis that the Church never embraced a Substitution of the Jewish People, that in certain periods, many Christians upheld a Substitution Theory – against the true teaching of the Church – and thus caused immeasurable pain.”

Folger ends his message to the Pope Emeritus expressing hopes that this correspondence, which includes his colleagues, will help strengthen and deepen the dialogue and lead to building a better society adding, “We are currently celebrating Rosh Hashanah, which we also consider as the anniversary of the creation of Adam, thus the universal birth of mankind. For this I wish you a Shana Tova Umtuka, a good and sweet Year, for Jews, Christians and all people.”

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See also: Transforming “Divine Mystery” into “faith and reason” and Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI

on Supersessionism and Covenant (both JCR, September 2018).

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