

The Latin Mass and the Jews

By Rabbi David Rosen

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"Just because Jews are paranoid, it does not mean that we are not in danger" goes the witticism. However, the truism in that adage does not mean that every time Jews cry "gewalt," there necessarily is justification for it.

The reaction over the announcement from the Vatican that Pope Benedict XVI had authorized the wider use of the traditional Catholic Latin (Tridentine) Mass was a case in point.

Certain Jewish groups across the widest spectrum, from right to left, declared that this was proof of the Pope's evil intent toward the Jews.

While as I will elaborate below, the use of the Latin liturgy is not without its problematic aspect as far as Jewish interests are concerned, the fact is that the papal permit was not motivated in the slightest by anything to do with Catholic-Jewish relations, but rather by what has been called a "renascent traditionalism" within the Vatican. Moreover, Pope Benedict was not introducing anything new in itself.

Permission for renewing the use of the old Latin liturgy had already been given in limited cases by Pope John Paul II. What this new authorization did was to widen the scope of the possible use of the Latin liturgy.

However, as far as Catholic-Jewish relations are concerned, there are few issues that unite the Church across internal ideological divides today as much as a positive attitude towards this relationship. The Catholic Church has rejected proselytism and since the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council in the sixties, and has abandoned any institutional "mission to the Jews." My own organization, the American Jewish Committee, was involved in pioneering this bilateral relationship and has been in the forefront of its development ever since.

For more than 30 years the Vatican has had a formal relationship with Jewry as a whole through the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) --- which I currently chair and with which it has a conference every other year --- as well as a framework for raising issues of mutual concern.

In keeping with the historic declaration of the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, John Paul II declared anti-Semitism to be "a sin against man and God"; he declared Jews to be "the elder brother of the Church", "the People of the original Divine Covenant never abrogated and never to be abrogated"; and in his liturgy of repentance at St. Peter's conducted in the year 2000, he asked forgiveness for all the harm done by Christians towards Jews down the centuries.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was at Pope John Paul II's side during these developments, promoting and articulating their theological underpinnings as the man in charge of Doctrine and Faith in the Vatican.

As one who was privileged to negotiate the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the State of Israel and the Holy See, I can personally testify to Cardinal Ratzinger's own joy when full relations were established between Israel and the Vatican. As Pope Benedict XVI, he has reiterated time and again his commitment to close, respectful relations with Judaism and the Jewish people, which he has reemphasized as unique for the church, as Judaism and the Jewish people are its very foundations. He has already received numerous Jewish leadership groups and began to do so even before receiving Protestant groups, let alone delegations from other religions.

All this ought to have made it clear to anyone who knew anything about the man, that he has no intention of turning back the clock in Catholic-Jewish relations --- on the contrary.

Undeniably there is a problem in the use of the old Latin liturgy during the Triduum, at Easter time, as it contains a sentence praying for the conversion of the Jews. After the Second Vatican Council, this text was changed and the common liturgy no longer contains a prayer for Jewish conversion. However, those Catholics who have received permission to recite the Latin Mass since the eighties have been able to recite the old prayer.

Undoubtedly most Jews were ignorant of this fact, just as apparently were most Jewish organizations (perhaps evidenced by the intensity of some of the reactions). In fact, we probably should have raised concerns over this matter with the Vatican already more than 20 years ago and since. But the public announcement of the extension of this permission, and above all the public discussion among Catholics as to the merits or otherwise of allowing this wider use of the Latin Mass, alerted Jewish circles to the problem.

Yet as mentioned, some of the Jewish reactions were out of all proportion.

Suggestions were made --- and even echoed uncritically in the media --- that there was some kind of new Catholic initiative for the conversion of Jews, and that Jewish-Catholic relations had been dealt a serious setback, almost completely disregarding the changes and achievements mentioned above.

Fortunately there were wiser heads in close contact with the Vatican who urged the Holy See to clarify and qualify the permission regarding the Latin liturgy, so that in its use during the Easter Triduum, the old prayer for the Jews is replaced by the new one. Indeed less than a week later, after consultation with Pope Benedict XVI, the Holy See's Secretary of State (who is actually the Vatican Prime Minister), Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, expressed precisely such intention.

As the dust settles and people begin to realize that there is no threat here to Catholic-Jewish relations and never was, some people are asking what right Jews have to tell the Catholics what kind of prayers they should or should not recite anyway. Of course the Church's liturgy is the church's business. However, if the Church declares, as it does, that it wishes to live in a respectful relationship with the Jewish people, then it is right and proper for it to be pointed out that a prayer for Jews to accept the Christian faith --- which we see as a betrayal of our own --- is hardly an expression of mutual respect.

But the uproar that turned into a whimper also revealed the naivete of some Jews, often in prominent positions, who seem to think that if there are some (or even many) faithful Christians who do not believe that Jews are in need of conversion to Christianity in order for their souls to be "saved," that all Christians share this view.

Even if proselytism and a "mission to the Jews" have been rejected as inappropriate, it does not mean that all Christians no longer wish for Jews to share their beliefs. Yet to know that our Christian interlocutors may harbor that hope, does not mean there is nothing to be gained through developing cooperative relationships with them. It does not mean there is no room for collaboration in the pursuit of shared values and interests, especially in the face of common threats --- on the contrary. There is, in fact, much to be gained in many ways from close bilateral relations with the Christian world in general, and the Catholic world in particular.

Stalin is reputed to have belittled the Catholic Church, declaring, "How many divisions does the pope have?" The answer was given by Mikhail Gorbachev. After declaring glasnost, the first place he traveled to was Rome. He went to St. Peter's, demonstrating that the pope does not have to have divisions or munitions in order to have real influence in the world of realpolitik.

As mentioned above, the Catholic Church considers anti-Semitism to be a sin against God and man. In its 1993 concordat with the State of Israel, the Vatican pledges itself to work with the State of Israel to combat anti-Semitism in the world. In his speech at Birkenau last year, Pope Benedict XVI described anti-Semitism as an attack on the very roots of Christianity. In

other words, if you are an anti-Semite, you cannot be a true Christian! Next year's Synod of Bishops in Rome will focus on the way Scripture should be taught and preached in order to avoid any anti-Semitic or anti-Judaic prejudices.

These are just some illustrations of the enormous strides we have made in these bilateral relations. Moreover, Cardinal Bertone's response to our requests for clarification concerning the "Motu Proprio" (the papal permit) demonstrates the remarkable sensitivity in the Church towards Jewish sensibilities on this matter.

Does this mean Catholics no longer believe that Jews have to share their beliefs in order to be "saved"? It would be nice to think so. Yet even when this is not the case, we still have a lot at stake and much to gain from this relationship. We would accordingly do well to exercise a substantial degree of realism, and even humility, in how we publicly address this relationship and how we express our concerns, expectations and even our disappointments.

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