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Vatican, Israel lock horns over Gaza violence (again)

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 9, 2009 All Things Catholic

No crisis in the Middle East would be complete without a mini-drama involving alleged Vatican bias in its criticism of Israel, and as if on cue, just such a spat erupted this week. On Wednesday, an Israeli official complained that the Vatican has swallowed "Hamas propaganda," following comments from Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, comparing the Gaza Strip to a "huge concentration camp."

"Remarks that seem based on Hamas propaganda while ignoring its numerous crimes ... do not bring the people closer to truth and peace," Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor objected Wednesday afternoon.

To seasoned observers, it should come as no surprise that Martino is at the eye of the storm.

While most Vatican diplomats seem almost photophobic in their aversion to the spotlight, Martino has a genius for attracting attention to himself. Readers may recall, for example, that back in 2003 Martino accused U.S. troops of treating the captured Saddam Hussein "like a cow," and said that he felt "pity" and "compassion" for the former Iraqi leader -- comments that didn't sit well with some Americans, to say nothing of victims of Saddam's regime.

To be fair to Martino, the full text of his comments on Gaza comes across as more balanced than the sound-bite cited above. Here's what he said, in a Jan. 7 interview with the Italian Web site *Il Sussidiario* ("Subsidiarity"), in my translation: "The consequences of egoism are hatred, poverty and injustice. It's always the unarmed populations who pay. Look at the conditions in Gaza -- more and more, it resembles a huge concentration camp. ?What's needed is will on both sides, because both are guilty. Israelis and Palestinians are sons of the same land, and they have to be separated, like you'd do with two brothers. ? If they can't come to an agreement, someone else has to feel the duty to do it. The world can't stand by and do nothing."

Yet even given that context, Martino is no naïf, having spent 16 years as the Vatican's observer to the United Nations. He had to know that his reference to a "concentration camp" could not help but call to mind the crude imagery popular in Arab and Islamic extremist circles comparing Israel to Nazi Germany. Cartoons routinely show the Star of David twisted into a swastika, Israeli Defense Forces dressed up as SS storm troopers, and so on. The comment was, therefore, the diplomatic equivalent of a poke in the eye. (That's not to mention the dubious wisdom of a Vatican official invoking the memory of World War II-era concentration camps, since the question of Christian acquiescence in the Holocaust remains a tremendously sensitive point in Christian/Jewish relations.)

This, of course, is merely the latest instance in which Israel and its supporters have complained about prejudice in the Vatican's approach to what it calls the "Holy Land" -- a linguistic convention intended to express neutrality, but taken by many Israelis as a subtle refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the Jewish state.

Back in the spring of 2002, for example, Israeli forces converged on Bethlehem in the West Bank after Palestinian gunmen occupied the Basilica of the Nativity, regarded by Christian tradition as the birthplace of Jesus. Throughout the 40-day standoff, *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper, insisted upon condemning an Israeli "siege," even though the Israelis would never have been at the basilica in the first place if the Palestinians hadn't hijacked it at gunpoint. To make matters worse, *L'Osservatore* accused Israel of "aggression that is tantamount to extermination," and asserted that its military was "profaning the holy sites with iron and fire."

With regard to the current crisis in Gaza and the Vatican's approach to Israeli/Palestinian relations under Benedict XVI, four points should be made in the interests of keeping the record straight:

- First, the broad aim of Vatican diplomacy is to support a two-state solution that would provide stability and security for both Israelis and Palestinians. As a result, commentary from the Holy See has been critical of violence on both sides. In his Angelus address on January 1, for example, Pope Benedict XVI affirmed "the profound desire to live in peace that stirs in the hearts of the vast majority of both the Israeli and Palestinian populations, which has one again been placed at risk by the massive violence unleashed in the Gaza Strip in response to other violence." On Jan. 4, the pope implored "the authorities and those responsible on both sides, Israeli and Palestinian, to act immediately to put an end to this tragic situation."
- Second, in the past the most egregiously anti-Israeli line from the Vatican generally came from *L'Osservatore Romano* under its former editor, Italian layman Mario Agnes. A transition in leadership has meant that this time around, the tone from Vatican media has been more even-handed. A statement from Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, in late December on Vatican Radio offers a case in point: "Hamas is a prisoner of a logic of hatred," Lombardi said, "Israel of a logic of trusting in force as the best response to hatred."
- Third, Benedict XVI has been far more willing to openly challenge Muslim leaders to repudiate violence and terrorism than John Paul II, as well as to demand "reciprocity," meaning an acknowledgement of the right to religious freedom, from majority Islamic states.
- Fourth, despite Martino's rhetoric, not everyone perceives an anti-Israeli tilt to Vatican commentary. After Benedict XVI condemned the violence in Gaza on Jan. 6, a prominent Saudi commentator wrote: "The pope could and should have been much more explicit. He should have convened a synod for Gaza, as he did for Lebanon. But he preferred to kowtow to the Jews, whatever their crimes and sins."

Having said all that, here's what drives Israelis crazy: Generally, the Vatican gets cranked up to denounce violence in the Holy Land only when it's initiated by Israel. Yes, the statements are fairly even-handed, but inevitably they feed news cycles about international condemnations of Israeli aggression. As Italian Catholic writer Sandro Magister has pointed out, there was no similar high-profile commentary from the Holy See while Hamas tightened its grip on Gaza and rained down bombs into Israel.

To explain that, it's not necessary to invoke the vestiges of medieval anti-Semitism, or the Vatican's ambivalence about the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Aside from a genuine conviction that political and

social injustices suffered by the Palestinians are the root of the problem, two sociological forces are at work:

- First, Vatican diplomats, especially at the senior levels, tend to come from the same backgrounds as officials in European foreign ministries. All things being equal, they tend to share the same broadly pro-Palestinian outlook as their secular counterparts, and they're influenced by the fact that European media devote much more coverage to Israeli responses than to whatever aggression from the Palestinian side triggered it.
- Second, the Vatican is understandably influenced by the Christians who actually live in the Holy Land -- the vast majority of whom are Palestinians, and often ferociously critical of Israel.

Once again this time around, local Christian leaders have voiced outrage about Israeli policy. The Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Archbishop Fouad Twal, denounced what he describes as the "disproportionate" Israeli response. Fr. Raed Abushalia, a former spokesperson for the Patriarchate of Jerusalem and director of the only Catholic radio network in the Holy Land, went further: "Hamas is not a monster, but a movement of resistance against the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories," he said. "Now more than ever, it's essential to dialogue with it in order to put an end to the tragic Israeli-Palestinian conflict." Auxiliary Bishop Giacinto-Boulos Marcuzzo of Jerusalem echoed the call for Israel to negotiate with Hamas, agreeing with Abushalia that Hamas is "a legitimately and democratically elected" party. In a dramatic protest of the Israeli incursion into Gaza, the Franciscans who serve as custodians of the holy sites refused to turn on the Christmas lights in Bethlehem.

For outside observers, this apparent sympathy for Hamas can be tough to understand. Recent years have witnessed a steady Christian exodus out of the Holy Land, driven to a great extent by rising pressure from Islamic fundamentalists. Yet for most Palestinian Christians, it makes all the sense in the world. If Christianity is to have a future in an eventual Palestinian state, they believe, it has to share fully in the lot of the Palestinian people. (Under the same logic, Arab Christians have long been at the forefront of nationalist and pan-Arab causes; Michel Aflaq, for example, the ideological founder of the Ba'ath movement, was born into a Greek Orthodox family in Syria.)

At the end of the day, however, the Vatican has always prided itself on its distance from local passions, which theoretically allows it to be more balanced in its assessments. As long as even moderate Israelis sometimes strain to see that balance, it will be difficult for the Vatican to play its desired role as a neutral voice of conscience. At the level of inter-religious relations, Benedict XVI has steered Catholicism towards a more muscular posture in condemning religiously-inspired violence, which in practice has meant a more challenging line in Catholic/Muslim dialogue; to date, critics would say that this new tone has yet to be reflected in Vatican diplomacy.

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One question mark created by the crisis in Gaza is what impact it may have on Pope Benedict XVI's highly anticipated visit to the Holy Land in May. Though the Vatican has not officially confirmed the trip, local church officials have said that plans call for the pope to arrive in Jordan on May 8, and then to be in Israel May 11-15. Tentatively, Benedict is set to celebrate Masses in Jerusalem, Nazareth and Bethlehem, visit the Holocaust memorial at Yad Vashem, and hold talks with Israeli President Shimon Peres. (Officials say that Benedict will not meet representatives of Hamas.)

In light of the recent violence, however, Vatican officials have warned that the trip could be in jeopardy. Lombardi recently cautioned that the visit has not been confirmed, and Martino said that the crisis has complicated the necessary advance planning.

In general, local church officials remain optimistic that calm will have been restored by May and that the trip can proceed, but it's unlikely any official announcement will be issued ahead of a peace deal.

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In recent weeks, American Catholicism has lost two iconic figures. Cardinal Avery Dulles died on Dec. 12, and on Thursday of this week, Fr. Richard John Neuhaus lost a battle with cancer. His friend and longtime collaborator George Weigel wrote that Neuhaus, who was 72, passed away "strengthened spiritually by the graces of the sacrament of the sick, and surrounded by the love and prayers of family and friends."

Joseph Bottum, editor of *First Things*, the journal Neuhaus founded and animated with his column "The Public Square," wrote: "As a priest, as a writer, as a public leader in so many struggles, and as a friend, no one can take his place. The fabric of life has been torn by his death, and it will not be repaired, for those of us who knew him, until that time when everything is mended and all our tears are wiped away."

Though I was not among his close circle of friends, I certainly knew and admired Neuhaus. His incomparable voice will be sorely missed in Catholic conversation, even by those inclined to draw different conclusions on particular points.

My obituary of Neuhaus can be found here: **Fr. Richard John Neuhaus dead at age 72** [1]

I invite prayers for Neuhaus, his family and friends, and for the editorial team at *First Things*.

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