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Hebrew-speaking Catholics 'rooted in Israeli society'

Donald Snyder | Apr. 17, 2009

JERUSALEM

Four Catholic priests wearing white robes and green stoles stood at the altar in the Church of Simeon and Anna at 10 Rabbi Kook Street in Jerusalem. They were reciting traditional Hebrew blessings for bread and wine, the Motzi and the Kiddush.

The room was striking in its simplicity. There was just one small cross in brown wood.

The congregants were praying in Hebrew, using words familiar in Jewish ritual. But this was not a Jewish service.

The Hebrew blessings were part of the evening Mass attended by members of the Hebrew-speaking Catholic community of Israel. Unlike blessings over the bread and wine that are served at a festive Jewish meal, these blessings were offered as part of the ritual that transforms the bread and the wine into the body and blood of Jesus, to be consumed by the congregants during the Communion service.

Church members exchanged the kiss of peace in Hebrew just before taking Communion. "Shalom ha Mashiach," they said to one another, "Peace of Christ."

The Hebrew-speaking Catholic Vicariate, known also as the Association of St. James, has been active in four Israeli cities since 1955. It was founded mainly to serve Catholic Europeans who had immigrated to the new Jewish state shortly after its founding in 1948.

Most of the immigrants came from mixed Catholic-Jewish marriages where the wife was a practicing Catholic and the husband a non-observant Jew. Children of these mixed marriages have often been raised as Catholics. Some of the original members were Jews who had been baptized in order to survive the Holocaust and wanted to remain Catholic after settling in Israel.

One Jewish-born member of the Hebrew-speaking Catholic community is Fr. Gregorcz Pawlowski from Poland, who was raised in an observant Jewish family. (See related story [2].) He became a priest after surviving the Holocaust. He ministers to a Polish Catholic community in Jaffa, Israel.

A primary objective of the Hebrew-speaking Catholic community is to sharpen the church's awareness of its Jewish origins and the Jewish identity of Jesus and his apostles.

"We see ourselves rooted in Israeli society with a real respect for Jews as they see themselves and we follow the Jewish liturgical calendar and observe many of their holidays like Sukkot and Hanukkah," explained Fr. David Mark Neuhaus, vicar for the Hebrew-speaking community in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Neuhaus, a 47-year-old Jesuit priest, was raised a Jew in South Africa and became a Catholic while studying in Jerusalem.

"I attend a Reform synagogue regularly," said Neuhaus, who speaks with the clarity of a seasoned lecturer. "I go to the synagogue as an expression of who I am historically, socially and, to a certain extent, spiritually. The melodies of the synagogue are much closer to my heart than the chants in a Benedictine monastery because I grew up with those melodies. Many of our members attend synagogue as an act of solidarity."

Neuhaus points out that Israel is the only society where Jews constitute a majority and the Jewish religion, history and culture establish the rhythm of life for the Catholic community.

"For us, the universal Catholic reflection on the Jewish identity of Jesus and the Jewish roots of our faith is not just one element in our renewal after the Second Vatican Council," Neuhaus once said in an interview. "It is also part of our daily existence.

"One of the key goals of the Hebrew-speaking Catholic community in Israel is to work within the church for stronger bonds with Judaism." They don't try to convert Jews.

In our interview at the Pontifical Bible Institute in Jerusalem, Neuhaus told me that some members of the Hebrew-speaking Catholic community helped to formulate the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), which repudiated charges of deicide, denounced anti-Semitism and stated that Mass may be offered in the vernacular.

These reforms were contained in the founding charter of the Hebrew-speaking Catholic community 10 years before the convening of the council, said Neuhaus. This community led the way for Catholics to see the Jews as brothers, not as evil people determined to subvert Christianity.

"You are our dear brothers or, we might say, our elder brothers," Pope John Paul II said when he visited a synagogue in Rome April 13, 1983.

Those who worship at the Church of Simeon and Anna share this belief.

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