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New rows deepen old ruts in Catholic-Jewish relations

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 23, 2009

Pope Benedict XVI prays at the tomb of Pope Pius XII in the grotto of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Oct. 9, the 50th anniversary of Pope Pius' death. (CNS photo)

Rip Van Winkle famously went to sleep for twenty years and missed the American Revolution. Had he been a modern expert in Catholic-Jewish relations, however, Van Winkle could have awoken from two decades of slumber this week and felt right at home, as long-standing tensions over both Pope Pius XII and the conversion of Jews once again roiled the inter-faith waters.

Taken together, these episodes suggest that for all the progress in Catholic-Jewish ties over the last half-century, the relationship is nonetheless stuck in a couple of ruts that just seem to get deeper over time.

Current events also illustrate another point: Sometimes matters that look like divisions between Jews and Catholics are fueled at least as much by intramural Catholic tensions, with Jews sometimes caught in the crossfire.

Pius XII

The contretemps over Pius XII, the wartime pope whose alleged "silence" on the Holocaust has long been a source of controversy, began with a mid-June conference in Rome sponsored by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (better known by its old Latin name, "Propaganda Fidei"). During that event, Fr. Peter Gumpel, a German Jesuit and longtime postulator for the sainthood cause of Pius XII, asserted that Pope Benedict XVI has gone slow in declaring Pius a saint because "representatives of Jewish organizations" have warned him that "relations between the Catholic church and the Jewish would be definitively and permanently compromised."

Though Gumpel did not elaborate, he may have had in mind a meeting last October between Benedict XVI and the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, as well as an audience the pope held with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in February. In both cases, Jewish leaders told reporters they had pressed the pope to open up the Vatican archives from the era of Pius XII in order to resolve unanswered historical questions.

Gumpel's suggestion that Jewish concern is to blame brought a swift rebuke from the Vatican. Italian Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the papal spokesperson, said Benedict should be left "completely free" to make his own decision, without "unjustified and inopportune" commentary.

"If the pope thinks that the study and the reflection on the cause of Pius XII should be prolonged further, his position should be respected without interference," Lombardi said.

Several Jewish leaders rejected the implication that the hold-up is their fault, saying it's not just Jews who have raised doubts. Rome's chief rabbi, Riccardo De Segni, said that debate over Pius XII "is first of all an internal problem of the church. It is clearly a complex matter that divides the church itself."

The Congregation for the Causes of Saints, the Vatican body charged with overseeing the sainthood process, voted in favor of a "decree of heroic virtue" for Pius XII on May 8, 2007. That decree would mark the first formal step toward sainthood, permitting the late pontiff to be referred to as "Venerable Pius XII." The decree, however, is not official until signed by the pope, which Benedict XVI has not yet done.

To some extent, observers say, Benedict XVI may be caught between a rock and a hard place on Pius XII.

He's publicly come to the defense of his predecessor, arguing last September that the wartime pontiff had "spared no effort" to save Jewish lives. Yet Benedict XVI has also expressed a desire for improved Catholic-Jewish ties, most recently during his mid-May trip to Israel, and is particularly aware of Jewish sensitivities in the wake of the controversy surrounding his rehabilitation of a Holocaust-denying traditionalist bishop. As a result, most observers say it's hard to say when, or if, Benedict might decide the time is ripe to restart the process.

Conversion and covenants

While the Pius XII controversy was simmering in Rome, the conversion issue surfaced on the other side of the Atlantic, in the form of a new statement from the U.S. bishops asserting that the Jewish covenant is fulfilled in Christ, and that no one, Jews included, is exempt from the invitation to conversion, baptism, and membership in the church.

The bishops made those statements in a joint June 18 note from the Committee on Doctrine and the Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, styled as a clarification of a 2002 text called "Covenant and Mission."

While no one believes the June 18 note signals a coordinated campaign to convert Jews on the part of the U.S. bishops, some critics say that it could green-light informal and ad hoc missionary efforts. Critics also say that the note's language about the Jewish covenant could stoke the idea that Christianity has "superseded" Judaism, which many blame for playing a role in the history of anti-Semitism in Europe that paved the way for the Holocaust.

When it was put together in 2002, "Covenant and Mission" collected the thinking of some leading American experts in Christian-Jewish dialogue, and thus had no authoritative standing for either faith. Yet after it was inadvertently published on the U.S. bishops' web site as an official conference text, it sparked wide Catholic debate, particularly among those who felt it betrayed traditional doctrine on Christ and salvation. (For example, Fr. John Echert, a commentator on the EWTN web site, wrote that if the document were to gain official approval, he would consider it "one of the signs of the end times, namely, apostasy.")

More influentially, the late Cardinal Avery Dulles penned a widely read critique faulting "Covenant and Mission" for appearing to suggest that there are "two independent covenants," one for Jews and the other for

Christians, "running on parallel tracks to the end of history." Until his death in 2008, Dulles continued to press for an official reply to "Covenant and Mission."

Sources told *NCR* that the Vatican also quietly signaled to the U.S. bishops that they ought to say something publicly about "Covenant and Mission."

The June 18 note states that "Covenant and Mission" was "insufficiently precise and potentially misleading" on several important points. The note states:

- While the Jewish covenant with God is "enduring," that covenant is nonetheless fulfilled in Jesus Christ, "both in history and at the end of time";
- Inter-religious dialogue is not an alternative to the proclamation of Jesus, because even in such dialogue a Christian gives "witness to the following of Christ";
- It's a mistake to believe that Jews are somehow duty-bound not to become Christian, or that the church has an obligation not to baptize Jews.

Fr. James Massa, the top staffer for the U.S. bishops on inter-religious affairs, told *NCR* that the June 18 note is not intended to shut down "a very fluid area of theological investigation," and that it "absolutely" does not mean the Catholic church intends to target Jews for new missionary efforts. Instead, he said, the note is largely directed at "Catholic educators, scholars, and theologians," and is intended to defend core articles of the faith about Christ and salvation.

Some Catholic experts, however, charged that the June 18 note appears to contradict earlier church statements on the Jewish covenant and missionary efforts.

Fr. John Pawlikowski of the Catholic Theological Union, a veteran leader in Catholic-Jewish relations, said he believes the note is inconsistent with statements from Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Vatican's top official for relations with Jews, that hopes for the Jews to one day accept Christ represent a "a strictly eschatological prayer, with no concrete implications for efforts at Jewish conversion" in the here and now ? a position, Pawlikowski argued, that Pope Benedict XVI has also seemed to accept.

Pawlikowski said that the bishops' note effectively ratifies the more conservative views of Dulles and Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria, who has argued that the offer of faith in Christ should be made to Jews, albeit in a "unique" and "most sensitive" way. He predicted that the note will cause "confusion" among Jews about what exactly the Catholic church is trying to say.

From the Jewish side, the Anti-Defamation League issued a June 22 statement objecting to the bishops' note, saying it could be read to imply that inter-faith dialogue is an occasion for inviting Jews to conversion. The ADL charged that such a stance "would foster mistrust between Jews and Catholics and undermine years of work building a positive relationship based on mutual trust and respect of our differences in faith."

Other Jewish leaders, however, suggested that the real tension may not be so much between Jews and Catholics, but among Catholics themselves.

Rabbi Yehiel E. Poupko, Judaic Scholar at the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, told *NCR* that in his view, the June 18 note is part of "a great debate within the church itself" ? a debate that doesn't directly concern Jews because, Poupko said, "No faith community should turn to another and tell them what to believe."

Poupko said Jews are often less concerned with how Catholics articulate their theology than with what they do, and he sees no evidence of new missionary efforts from the church directed at Jews.

At the same time, Poupko said, "given the history of the church's treatment of the Jews over two millennia," he would ask all parties to this intra-Catholic argument to make it clear that no matter who prevails, "it will cause no harm to the Jewish people, to Judaism, or to the State of Israel."

The key, Poupko said, is for all sides to exercise "humility and caution."

[John Allen is NCR senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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