NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Health in Jewish-Catholic relations

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 18, 2009 All Things Catholic

On Jan. 17, Pope Benedict XVI will hop across the Tiber River to visit the Great Synagogue in Rome, only the second such occasion after John Paul II?s groundbreaking visit in 1986. (That was the first time a modern pope set foot inside a Jewish place of worship, although John XXIII once stopped his car outside to bless the Jews as they exited.) Benedict already has two synagogue visits under his belt: Cologne in 2005 during World Youth Day, and the Park East Synagogue in New York in April 2008.

Benedict?s cross-town journey may not make much of a media splash, which in itself tells us something important: In the span of a quarter-century, a pope visiting a synagogue has gone from being a sensation to essentially routine.

Naturally enough, there?s a temptation to gauge the state of Jewish-Catholic relations primarily on the basis of events involving the pope. When he reaches out, things are presumed to be improving; when he does something that stirs controversy, such as his decision earlier this year to lift the excommunication of four traditionalist bishops, including one who?s a Holocaust denier, talk of crisis fills the air.

What such a focus ignores is that inter-faith relations, like politics, are often local. At the grass roots, there are signs of basic health in the relationship between Jews and Catholics, quite apart from whatever the pope does or doesn?t do.

Last week in New York, I was on hand to witness one such sign: A visit by Archbishop Timothy Dolan to the renowned Temple Emanu-El in order to light the first candle of Hanukkah.

One could make the argument that New York?s Fifth Avenue is among the most evocative pieces of Jewish-Catholic real estate on the planet, home both to Temple Emanu-El and to St. Patrick?s Cathedral. Built on the site of the former John Jacob Astor mansion, Temple Emanu-El is billed as the largest Jewish place of worship in the world, with a total capacity of 2,500. Guide books actually claim that the temple is slightly larger than St. Patrick?s, but suffice it to say that both are imposing, and historic, structures.

Among other notables, New York?s Mayor Michael Bloomberg is a member of the congregation at Temple Emanu-El, which is a Reform synagogue founded in 1845.

The Dec. 11 visit was a last-minute addition to Dolan?s schedule, who was asked to come for the Hanukkah service by the synagogue?s senior rabbi, David M. Posner. The invitation wasn?t a complete surprise, since Dolan said that he gets almost as many requests from synagogues as he does Catholic parishes. (Last October, Dolan was named the new Moderator of Jewish Affairs for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, replacing Baltimore?s retired Cardinal William Keeler.)

The occasion obviously meant a lot to the folks at Temple Emanu-El. While greeting the congregation, Posner called this a ?truly historic Hanukkah celebration? because of the archbishop?s presence, and in his sermon Posner said this was ?the first time in Jewish history that an archbishop of New York, or anywhere, has kindled

the tapers of Hanukkah.?

(Strictly speaking, that claim was a little overblown, as other archbishops in other places have done this before. San Antonio, for example, has a tradition going back to 2001 in which Catholics and Jews come together to light the Hanukkah candles. The archbishop typically participates, and this year, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Houston was also on hand. In any event, the practical translation of what Posner said probably ought to be, ?This is a big deal.?)

The congregation pulled out all the stops, including something that you definitely don?t see every day: At the end of the service, the choir performed a toe-tapping, doo-wop version of the classic holiday number ?I Have a Little Dreidel,? which could easily be the anchor track on a ?Hanukkah goes Motown? album.

After the service, Dolan was mobbed by people wanting to thank him for coming, to get their picture taken with him, and to shove pieces of Hanukkah cake into his hands, all of which felt like an affirmation of the bonds between Jews and Catholics. Such scenes play out wherever Jews and Catholics find themselves cheek by jowl, even if they rarely have the same media resonance as debates over Pius XII or Vatican/Israeli relations.

The moral of the story is that sometimes you have to be in these situations to appreciate how much ordinary people on both sides want the relationship to work -- not necessarily out of any complex theological or political logic, but a simple human desire for friendship.

A synagogue trustee who showed visitors around before the service explained things best: ?We want this to be a normal neighborly thing,? he said. ?You live just down the street from us, so why shouldn?t we get together??

Of course, one warm-and-fuzzy photo op in a synagogue hardly cancels out the very real tensions in Jewish-Catholic relations. Last year, for example, the U.S. bishops deleted a reference in their catechism to the eternal validity of God?s covenant with the Jews, a move that still confuses some Jewish leaders. Simply showing up to light a candle on Hanukkah can?t make those questions disappear.

On the other hand, anybody who was at Temple Emanu-El on Dec. 11 could be forgiven for finding talk of a crisis a bit overblown: At least that night, the foundations of the relationship looked pretty strong.

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For anyone who?s ever been curious as to what an archbishop and a senior rabbi might talk about when they have a few minutes to kill, I can supply at least a partial answer: Money.

As Posner and Dolan stood together on the *bima* (the elevated platform at the front of the synagogue) waiting for the service to begin, they weren?t talking the fine points of theology, but rather comparing notes about approaches to tapping their congregation?s wallets. Posner explained that as opposed to the Catholic custom of passing the collection plate every week, most synagogues send out bills for dues to registered members once a year. Posner lamented the costs of operating such a cavernous building on Fifth Avenue, a frustration he knew Dolan could appreciate.

I quipped that maybe this is the real future of inter-religious dialogue, but Dolan later said the idea isn?t entirely a joke. Given that Catholics and Jews often face some of the same practical problems -- clustering smaller congregations, for example, or the rise of Jewish analogs of what Christians call ?mega-churches? -- he believes they can share experiences and support one another on those fronts.

That may not be exactly what Benedict XVI has in mind when he talks about a shift from inter-religious to inter-cultural dialogue, but it at least suggests that theological differences don?t have to be the death of conversation.

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A footnote on Benedict?s visit to the Rome synagogue: Jan. 17 is a special day for Roman Jews. It?s celebrated as ?Mo?ed di Piombo,? commemorating what local tradition recalls as a miraculous rain that doused a fire set during a pogrom in Rome?s Jewish ghetto in 1793.

In recent years, Jan. 17 has also become an important occasion for Jewish-Christian dialogue, including an annual event organized by Italy?s Catholic bishops. In the past, one way Italian rabbis have signaled displeasure with the Vatican, or the Catholic church, is by pulling out of that Jan. 17 event.

The fact that the pope is coming to the synagogue on Jan. 17 therefore takes on special significance. (Not to mention, of course, that the visit comes almost exactly one year to the day after the cause célèbre involving the Holocaust-denying bishop.) The event will be closely watched for hints of any new direction in which either side wants to take the relationship.

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I don?t usually respond in public to criticism of my work, in part because writing about somebody else writing about me seems like the dictionary definition of ?self-involved.? Recently, however, some important voices in Catholic affairs have lodged an objection, in terms serious enough that I owe them and my readers a reply.

A bit of background is in order.

On Dec. 4, I posted an item on the ?NCR Today? blog about an exchange between Terrence Tilley, past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and the new Avery Dulles professor of theology at Fordham, and Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, executive director of the Secretariat for Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Though I don?t have space to get into the substantive issues, Weinandy objected to an address Tilley gave last June about impasses in theology, which among other things touched upon the doctrine of the Incarnation.

To be sure, the exchange itself is imminently newsworthy. These two figures help shape Catholic conversation in America, and their disagreements illustrate some of today?s defining tensions in Catholic theology.

Yet in my report, I pushed too hard on Weinandy?s role as the doctrinal advisor to the U.S. bishops. (The lead compared Weinandy to then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as the Vatican?s doctrinal czar.) This was despite the fact that Weinandy?s essay indicated that he was not writing in an official capacity, and despite the fact that sources told me on background that the U.S. bishops have no plans to get involved. As a result, some readers actually suspected the whole point of my piece was to get Tilley into trouble.

In response, Margaret O?Brien Steinfels, the veteran editor and columnist for Commonweal who co-directs Fordham?s Center for Religion and Culture, called what I had written ?weasel journalism.? The three top officers of the CTSA released a letter saying that I had engaged in ?speculation, punditry, maybe even gossip -- but not journalism.?

I respect those folks, and take their criticism seriously. I probably did ?sex up? the story in a misguided effort to attract eyeballs, and for that, I owe everyone involved -- Tilley, Weinandy, the CTSA and the USCCB -- an apology.

Here?s the point I was trying to get across: Scholarly disputes can be early warning signs of new storm fronts gathering in the church. When the top doctrinal advisor to the U.S. bishops invokes phrases such as ?doctrinal

ambiguities and errors? with respect to a well-known American theologian, it would be a children?s fantasy to believe that the theologian, and the views he or she represents, face no risk at all. That?s not speculation or gossip, it?s the voice of experience. I should have expressed that point more responsibly, but the piece would have been incomplete without it.

Regular readers know I sometimes pontificate about not stoking partisan divides in the church. I?ll try to take my own advice ... without, of course, failing to tell the whole story.

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