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Jews move to halt spitting at Christians in Jerusalem

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 5, 2010 NCR Today

tGlobally speaking, the most serious new tension dividing Jews and Catholics is Pope Benedict XVI?s decision just before Christmas to advance the sainthood cause of Pius XII, the wartime pontiff whose alleged ?silence? on the Holocaust has long been a subject of polarizing historical debate.

tOn the ground in Jerusalem, however, Jewish/Christian animus has a much more prosaic cause: Spitting.

tRecently, the *Jerusalem Post* carried a piece quoting Rabbi David Rosen, a veteran of Catholic/Jewish dialogue, acknowledging that incidents of ultra-Orthodox Jews spitting at priests, nuns and other Christian clergy is ?a part of life? in Jerusalem. Such incidents have been occurring for the last twenty years and are now on the rise, according to the story, although they appear to be limited to Jerusalem.

tThe piece quoted a Texas-born Franciscan, Fr. Athanasius Macora, who heads the Christian Information Center inside the Jaffa Gate, who said that he?s been spat upon by ultra-Orthodox Jews as much as fifteen times in the last six months ? not only in the Old City, but also outside his Franciscan friary.

tThe Rev. Samuel Aghoyan, an Armenian Orthodox cleric, said he?s been spat upon fifteen to twenty times, most recently in November.

?I was walking back from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and I saw this boy in a yarmulke and ritual fringes coming back from the Kotel, and he spat at me two or three times,? Aghoyan said.

?Every [Christian cleric in the Old City] who?s been here for awhile, who dresses in robes in public, has a story to tell about being spat at,? Macora said. ?The more you get around, the more it happens.?

Israeli authorities have taken these reports seriously enough that the Foreign Ministry convened a meeting with municipal officials in Jerusalem and representatives of the ultra- Orthodox Haredi Community. In a sign that the Israelis are worried about possible international repercussions, that meeting was announced in a press release issued this morning by the Israeli Embassy to the Holy See in Rome.

The press release contained a letter denouncing the harassment of Christian clergy from the Beth Din Tzedek, the tribunal of the Orthodox Jewish Community and the highest instance of the Jewish ultra orthodox community in Jerusalem.

The text of that letter appears below.

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Dangerous Provocation

?Recently, repeated complaints have been made by gentiles regarding recurring harassment and insults directed at them by irresponsible youths in various places in the city, especially in the vicinity of Shivtei Yisrael Street and adjacent to the grave of Shimon the Just.

?Besides desecrating the Holy Name, which in itself represents a very grave sin, provoking gentiles, according to our sages ? blessed be their holy and righteous memory ? is forbidden and is liable to bring tragic consequences upon our own community, may God have mercy.

?We hereby call upon anyone who has the power to end these shameful incidents through persuasion, to take action as soon as possible to remove these hazards, so that our community may live in peace.

?May the Holy One, blessed be He, spread the tabernacle of a merciful life and peace upon us and on the House of Israel and Jerusalem, as we look forward to the coming of the righteous Messiah speedily and in our time, Amen.

?Signed this day, the 13th of Tevet 5770 (30/12/2009) by the Haredi Community Tribunal of Justice, in the Holy City of Jerusalem.

"The words of the tribunal are clear and simple, and all who hear them and can prevent these deeds will hopefully do so."

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