

Rome rabbi says pope committed to dialogue

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Jan. 12, 2010

ROME -- Rome's chief rabbi said the planned visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the city's main synagogue and community center is a sign that Catholics and Jews are committed to respectful dialogue, even when their relationship hits stumbling blocks.

Rabbi Riccardo Di Segni, the chief rabbi, told Catholic News Service there is "a solid basis" for positive relations, but "with a storm every now and then."

The rabbi spoke in his office Jan. 12, just five days before Pope Benedict's first visit to the synagogue.

Rabbi Di Segni said Pope Benedict's visit is important first of all as "a symbolic continuation of the gesture made by (Pope) John Paul II, who was the first pope to set foot in a synagogue in 19 centuries. There is precedence, though," because St. Peter obviously had been in synagogues, he added.

Visiting the synagogue 23 years after Pope John Paul did "is important because it is saying that the journey undertaken has not been interrupted, but will move forward," he said.

"Times have changed," the rabbi said. "Many things have been achieved; other things still need to be done. The path, the Jewish-Catholic encounter, is terribly complicated. It is not a smooth road leading onward, but it is one continually filled with stumbling blocks. The visit of a pope to the synagogue should demonstrate that beyond the stumbling blocks there is a substantial desire to communicate with each other and resolve problems."

While the Jewish community has expressed concern over several of Pope Benedict's decisions, including his decision a year ago to lift the excommunication of a traditionalist bishop who denied the extent of the Holocaust, the rabbi said the key problem is what Jews see as mixed signals from the pope about the Catholic Church's position on the religious significance of Judaism itself.

"From a strictly religious point of view, the question is the significance of Judaism. Has its role ended? Must we all convert?" he said.

While affirming that salvation comes through Jesus Christ, some Catholic theologians and some of the writings of Pope Benedict have recognized the ongoing value of the Jewish people's covenant with God.

In a book-length interview in 2000, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said the Jews have a mission to fulfill in the world until the Messiah comes again.

But, Rabbi Di Segni said, the pope is also the person who, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in 2000 published the document "Dominus Iesus," which insisted faith in Christ was necessary for salvation.

Another point of tension, the rabbi said, is Pope Benedict's decision in December to move forward the sainthood

cause of Pope Pius XII, whom many Jews believe did not do enough to denounce the Holocaust.

"It is a historical question, a problem that is still very much open," the rabbi said.

For the Jewish community, especially in Rome, the question of Pope Pius is "a dramatic one, it's a raw nerve that involves the behavior not only of that one personality, but also regards the anti-Judaism of the church and the interpretation of the Shoah," the Holocaust, he said.

The rabbi said that such a sensitive issue should be handled "much more slowly and with much deeper study."

Still, Rabbi Di Segni said, Pope Benedict's visit and other "grand gestures" made by the popes and leaders of the Jewish community have a great impact on helping faithful Catholics and Jews see one another as neighbors to be respected.

"We experience this each day, even though there may be scattered pockets of resistance or fundamentalist attitudes or even hostility" toward one another, he said.

While Rome's Jewish community has only about 10,000 registered members, he said, "our community has a huge symbolic importance because we are the community next door to the Vatican. It is here that the first Christian Jews came -- there were already Jews here for two centuries and they never left, so there was always a relationship with the Vatican."

As is often the case, he said, "it's hardest to establish good relations with the person closest to you."

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