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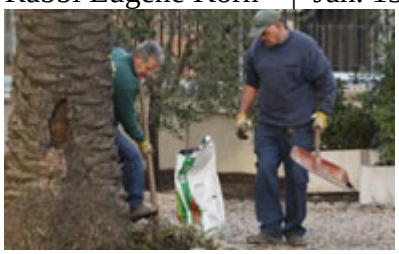
A time to act for Catholic-Jewish reconciliation

Rabbi Eugene Korn | Jan. 15, 2010



Workers prepare the grounds outside Rome's main synagogue Jan. 14 in advance of Pope Benedict's visit. (CNS)

Editor's note: Pope Benedict XVI is scheduled to visit the Great Synagogue of Rome Jan. 17. It will be only the second such occasion after the groundbreaking visit by Pope John Paul II in 1986. The visit coincides with the Italian Catholic church's celebration each Jan. 17 of a day for Catholic-Jewish dialogue. The visit is being watched especially close after a year of tension relations between Catholics and Jews.

The recent decree by Pope Benedict XVI advancing the sainthood of Pope Pius XII is another serious blow to Catholic-Jewish relations. Pius? record during the *Shoah* remains a legitimate historical question and is, as well, the subject of a long-time emotional disagreement between some in the Vatican and Jewish leaders.

Consideration of Pius? sainthood would be better served after the complete Vatican archives of the Holocaust period are released and historians can objectively evaluate Pius? efforts to save Europe?s Jews from Nazi extermination. Any rush to judgment before the record is clarified will give a larger forum to Pius? critics, undermine Vatican credibility in the eyes of the world and inflict deep pain on Jews whose loved ones were murdered in the *Shoah*.

The Vatican has internal reasons for accelerating Pius? canonization, but it has external consequences. It is the fourth recent troubling development in Catholic-Jewish relations, coming on the heels of the Vatican authorizing wider use of the Tridentine Mass with its Good Friday prayer for the conversion of the Jews in July 2007, its January 2009 lifting of excommunication of the Holocaust-denying Richard Williamson and three other bishops of the Society of Pope Pius X (whose Web site still features repugnant anti-Semitic canards), and the June 2009 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops statement (later retracted) that Catholics in interfaith dialogue should evangelize to Jews and extend to them an implicit invitation to the Church. These developments have left Jews and Catholics alike to doubt the future of Catholic-Jewish relations. Indeed, some professionals in the dialogue now question whether the salutary achievements of the Second Vatican Council

toward reconciliation are still operative Catholic teaching.

For 50 years after Vatican II, Catholics and Jews well informed about Nostra Aetate and official Catholic post-conciliar documents regarding Catholic-Jewish relations have been enormously impressed by the spiritual strength that the Church has summoned to heal its relationship with its elder brothers. It took unprecedented courage for the Church to revise its theology about Judaism and rid itself permanently of traditional replacement theology with its concomitant Adversus Judeaos teachings. Buoyed by the leadership of Popes John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II, Jews and Catholic were convinced of the Church?s sincerity to reconcile with the Jewish people and their living faith.

If this is now being questioned, the uncertainty can be easily laid to rest. The Vatican can reassert loudly and clearly that *Nostra Aetate* and the post-conciliar documents are still the guiding principles for the Church, and that the warm friendship shown to the Jewish people by the saintly Pope John Paul II still is the animating value in the policies of Pope Benedict XVI and the Vatican?

This would be achieved most powerfully in deed. Would not now be the perfect time for the Vatican to take positive steps, such as rigorously implementing the existing mandate to teach *Nostra Aetate* to all Catholic worshippers and seminarians, promoting the study of Pope John Paul II?s teachings about the Jewish people and Judaism, and instituting a non-conversionary prayer for today?s Jewish people and Israel on the Feast of St. James, the patron saint of Jerusalem?

As *Nostra Aetate* teaches, Jews and Catholics share a common spiritual patrimony. Catholic-Jewish reconciliation is one of God?s great blessings, one that inspires all people around the world, for if the Church and the Jewish people can make peace with each other after nearly 2,000 of enmity, then peace is possible between any two peoples anywhere.

The historic recognition that Catholics and Jews are spiritual siblings deeply bound by their belief in the One Creator of Heaven and Earth Who revealed Himself to the people Israel is one of the miracles of the last century -- and it is too important for Jews, Catholics and the world to allow to lapse. People of good will pray that both the Church and the Jewish people continue their work for reconciliation based on mutual understanding, respect and equality.

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