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Pope welcomed to Rome synagogue despite tensions

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 18, 2010

Pope addresses gathering in Rome synagogue

Heading into Pope Benedict XVI?s much-anticipated Jan. 17 visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome, one towering question loomed. What impact would the recent move towards sainthood for Pope Pius XII, the wartime pontiff whose alleged ?silence? on the Holocaust has long fueled controversy, have on the broader Jewish-Catholic relationship?

In the wake of the visit on Sunday, two answers seem equally clear:

- One, fraternal relations between Jews and Catholic will survive the latest round of tensions over Pius XII, with the enthusiastic welcome given to Benedict XVI as proof of the point.
- Two, those tensions also aren?t about to disappear.

This was only the second papal trip to the Rome synagogue, after John Paul II?s groundbreaking visit in April 1986. Benedict was greeted warmly, including an emotional reunion with the former Chief Rabbi of Rome, Elio Toaf, who hosted John Paul twenty-four years ago.

The crowd featured a cross-section of Jewish, Catholic, Muslim and civil dignitaries, including a handful of Holocaust survivors in blue-and-white scarves, the colors of the Israeli flag. The small but growing Jewish community in Rome seemed visibly grateful for Benedict?s presence, giving him two standing ovations and interrupting his speech with applause nine times.

Benedict said his visit was meant to express ?the esteem and affection which the Bishop and the Church of Rome, as well as the entire Catholic church, have towards this community and all Jewish communities around the world.?

The pope likewise affirmed the ?irrevocable commitment? of Catholicism to dialogue with Judaism, condemned ?the scourge of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism,? and underscored the indelible memory of ?the singular and deeply disturbing drama of the Shoah,? the Hebrew term for the Holocaust.

Yet there were also clear reminders of divisions over Pius XII. Pope Benedict recently approved a decree of heroic virtue for Pius XII, which permits him to be referred to as ?venerable? and leaves only the documentation

of one miracle for beatification and another for canonization.

?The silence of Pius XII on the Holocaust is still painful,? said Riccardo Pacifici, head of the Jewish Community of Rome, in his remarks to Benedict XVI.

?Perhaps he could not have stopped the trains of death, but he could have transmitted a signal, a final word of comfort, for our brothers on their way to the camps of Auschwitz,? Pacifici said.

Pacifici also called upon the Vatican to open its archives from the era of Pius XII. While the Vatican has already published multiple volumes of material which it asserts contain everything relevant to the pope?s conduct during the war years, other material has not yet been unsealed.

Rome?s Chief Rabbi, Riccardo Di Segni, was more indirect, but no less clear in his reference to Pius XII.

?The silence of God about the evils of the world, or our inability to hear his voice, is an inscrutable mystery,? Di Segni said. ?But the silence of man is a different matter. It confronts us, it challenges us, and it does not escape judgment.?

tIn his speech, Benedict XVI issued what amounted to a veiled defense of his controversial predecessor.

tBenedict noted that the Nazi campaign to exterminate Jews reached as far as Rome, and conceded that ?unfortunately, many remained indifferent.?

t?But many, including Italian Catholics, sustained by their faith and by Christian teaching, reacted with courage, often at risk of their lives, opening their arms to assist the Jewish fugitives who were being hunted down, and earning perennial gratitude,? the pope said.

tBenedict then added: ?The Apostolic See itself provided assistance, often in a hidden and discreet way.?

tIt has long been a central contention among defenders of Pius XII that he was compelled to act behind the scenes to assist the victims of the Nazis, because public proclamations would have done more harm than good, triggering even more ferocious crackdowns.

A small number of Holocaust survivors from Italy's Jewish community were on hand wearing blue-and-white scarves. They presented the pope with a letter, which alludes to "the silence of those who could have done something" -- widely understood in the Italian media as a reference to Pope Pius XII, whose cause for sainthood was recently advanced by Benedict XVI.

This link takes you to an NCR translation of the survivors' letter, which was published in the Jan. 18 edition of *Corriere della Sera*, the main Italian daily: Holocaust survivors: 'Silence has marked our lives' [1]

tWhatever Roman Jews make of Pius XII, their gratitude for numerous Catholics who came to their aid during the Holocaust is still palpable. Pacifici, for example, whose grandfather was the Chief Rabbi of Genoa and who died at Auschwitz, said that he is alive today because other relatives were sheltered in a convent of the Sisters of Martha in Florence.

t?This is not a unique story in Italy,? Pacifici said. ?Numerous monasteries and convents risked their lives to save Jews.?

tThe polarizing nature of disputes over Pius XII was reflected not only inside the synagogue, but also in those who weren?t there. Rabbi Giuseppe Laras, President of the Italian Rabbinical Assembly, boycotted Sunday's visit in protest over the move towards sainthood for Pope Pius, which he charged is part a broader deterioration

in Jewish-Catholic relations under Benedict XVI.

?During the current pontificate, the fraternal relationship (between Jews and Catholics) has become steadily weaker,? Laras told reporters in the run-up to the event.

Only the church ?will draw any advantage? from the pope?s visit, Laras said, ?above all its most backward circles,? while it ?will not have a positive effect on Jewish-Catholic dialogue.?

Predictably, reaction to the synagogue visit was somewhat mixed.

Fr. John Pawlikowski, a veteran of Jewish-Catholic dialogue at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, said on Sunday that Benedict?s visit was ?a positive step forward that has the potential to erase the negative developments during this papacy and restart a constructive discussion.?

At the same time, Pawlikowski also said that Benedict?s speech left several important matters hanging, including difficult theological questions such as the on-going validity of the Jewish covenant and the legitimacy of missionary efforts directed at Jews.

On Pius XII, Pawlikowski called for ?fast-tracking the release of the relevant Vatican archival materials as well as a hold on any future movement on Pius? canonization.?

German Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Vatican?s top official for relations with Jews, offered a largely sunny reading of the dispute.

?On Pius XII, we can have different opinions, and I?m sure we will have them,? Kasper said. ?We?re two different communities, and it?s inevitable that there will be disagreements. There will always be some problem. But we also have many, many things in common. This visit should underline our common heritage and our common commitment to dialogue and peace.?

?In this world,? Kasper said, ?we already have enough conflicts.?

Before arriving at the synagogue, Benedict XVI briefly paused at two memorials. One recalls the deportation of Roman Jews in October 1943, the other a terrorist attack on the synagogue in October 1982 in which 37 people were injured and one two-year-old boy was shot to death. The pope greeted members of the boy?s family.

While the move towards sainthood for Pius XII is the most recent sticking point in Catholic/Jewish relations, it?s hardly the only one.

Another is formed by the long-running negotiations between the Vatican and Israel over implementation of the 1993 Fundamental Agreement, which involves a cluster of thorny matters such as the tax and legal status of church properties, entrance visas for church personnel, and the capacity of chaplains in the military, prisons and hospitals to minister freely.

On that front, the Vatican drew support from a prominent Jewish source on Sunday. Rabbi David Rosen, a longtime veteran of Catholic/Jewish dialogue, told the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* that Israel?s behavior towards the Vatican has been ?outrageous.?

?Any [other] country would have threatened to withdraw its ambassador long ago over Israel?s failure to honor agreements,? Rosen said.

Rosen also rejected suggestions that Catholic/Jewish relations have taken a step backward under Benedict XVI in comparison to his predecessor, John Paul II.

?Most people don?t know that almost every current problem in Vatican-Jewish relations began not with Pope Benedict, but with his predecessor Pope John Paul II, who is now seen as a saint by Jews,? Rosen said.

Benedict made the roughly ten-minute trip to the synagogue, which lies just across the Tiber River from the Vatican, on an evocative date. Roman Jews recall Jan. 17 as *Mo'ed di Piombo*, marking a day in 1793 when a massive rain, which tradition regards as miraculous, saved the Jewish community from a pogrom. A Roman mob at the time blamed the city's Jews for supporting the French Revolution.

Read more of John Allen's reporting here: **A sampling of reaction to the pope's synagogue visit** [2]

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