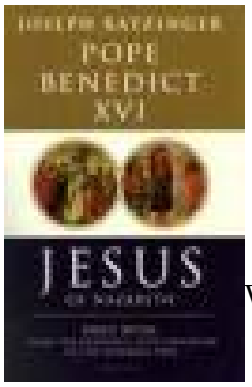
NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Church should not pursue conversion of Jews, pope says

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 10, 2011 NCR Today

After excerpts from the second volume of the pope?s book on Jesus made the rounds last week, featuring his rejection of the idea that ?the Jews? killed Christ, the full text adds another point with important implications for Christian/Jewish relations -- in effect, that Christianity ?must not concern herself with the conversion of the Jews.?

The comment comes in Benedict XVI?s book *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*, the full text of which was released today.



While the pope does not affirm a theory propounded by some theologians holding that the Jews will be saved independently of Christ, experts say, he does clearly suggest the church should not be targeting Jews for conversion efforts.

?Israel is in the hands of God, who will save it ?as a whole? at the proper time, when the number of Gentiles is full,? the pope writes. The historical duration of this ?proper time,? Benedict says, cannot be calculated.

In terms of the proper Christian attitude in the meantime, Benedict approvingly quotes Cistercian abbess and Biblical writer Hildegard Brem: ?The church must not concern herself with the conversion of the Jews, since she must wait for the time fixed for this by God.?

Although Benedict XVI stipulated in the first volume of his book that he writes as a private theologian rather than authoritatively as head of the Catholic church, his comments inevitably carry weight as indications of the way Benedict is likely to approach these questions as pope.

The question of conversion has long been among the most explosive in the arena of Catholic/Jewish relations. Still today, perceptions in the Jewish world that Christians are targeting them for missionary efforts produce sharply negative reactions.

Benedict XVI acknowledges that the question of ?Israel?s mission? in God?s plan has a painful past.

?We realize today with horror how many misunderstandings with grave consequences have weighed down our history,? he writes. Yet, the pope says, ?the beginnings of a correct understanding have always been there,

waiting to be rediscovered, however deep the shadows.?

The key to that correct understanding, Benedict writes, lies in the Biblical notion of the ?times of the Gentiles.?

The charge given by Jesus to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth, Benedict says, implies a sequence: first the ?full number? of the Gentiles comes to the faith, and only then the Jews. He quotes St. Bernard of Clairvaux?s advice to one of his predecessors, Pope Eugene III, that ?a determined time has been fixed? for the conversion of the Jews ?that cannot be anticipated.?

Benedict says that in the early church, the urgency of evangelization wasn?t based so much on the idea that every human being had to know Christ in order to be saved, but rather on a ?grand conception of history,? according to which the Gospel had to reach all the nations in order for the world to fulfill its destiny.

Until God?s plan comes to fruition, Benedict says, the ?particular task? of the disciples of Christ is to carry the faith to the Gentiles, not to the Jews.

The question of whether including Jews in the church?s missionary efforts is legitimate has long been a debated point in Catholic circles.

Almost ten years ago, the late Cardinal Avery Dulles was critical of a joint statement from the National Council of Synagogues and the Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the U.S. Bishops? Conference to the effect that ?targeting Jews for conversion to Christianity? is ?no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church.?

Dulles replied that the church cannot curtail the scope of the gospel without betraying itself: ?Once we grant that there are some persons for whom it is not important to acknowledge Christ, to be baptized and to receive the sacraments, we raise questions about our own religious life,? he wrote.

Subsequently, the U.S. bishops? Committee on Doctrine issued a clarification in 2009 that most experts regarded as largely upholding the position taken by Dulles. Its conclusion was, ?The fulfillment of the covenants, indeed, of all God?s promises to Israel, is found only in Jesus Christ.?

Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, executive director of the U.S. bishops? Secretariat for Doctrine, cautioned that Benedict XVI?s lines on Judaism in the new book do not endorse a ?two-covenant? theology, meaning that Christianity and Judaism represent two parallel paths to salvation, so that Jews are saved without any reference to Christ.

At the same time, Weinandy said, the pope?s words do clearly indicate that ?there?s no specific program that the Catholic church has to convert Jews, which is in God?s time.?

Rabbi Jacob Neusner, a Jewish scholar whose Biblical writings have been praised by Benedict XVI, said the pope?s conciliatory statements about Judaism in *Jesus of Nazareth* are all the more powerful because they?re grounded in scholarship rather than mere inter-faith diplomacy.

?He?s talking about truth, not about convenience,? Neusner said.

For more analysis of Pope Benedict's newest book, see John Allen's story: **New book confirms: Benedict XVI is his own best spokesperson** [1]

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