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# Vatican engages a Jewish critic, new home for ex-Anglicans

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 5, 2011 All Things Catholic

*L?Osservatore Romano* normally isn?t the place to seek Vatican criticism, in the same way that no one watches Fox News for satires of the Tea Party, or reads the *New York Times* for send-ups of snobbish secular liberalism. Whatever their business model, media outlets usually aren?t in the habit of biting the hand that feeds them.

Yet, *mirabile dictu*, the July 29 edition of *L?Osservatore* offered one of the most pointed brief critiques of a Vatican statement you?ll ever see. It came from Italian Rabbi Riccardo Di Segni, in reply to a July 7 essay by Swiss Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Vatican?s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, about the ?Interreligious Meeting for Prayer for Peace? convened by Pope Benedict XVI and set for Oct. 27, 2011, in Assisi.

Di Segni, 62, is the Chief Rabbi of Rome. (He?s also a medical doctor and head of the radiology department at Rome?s San Giovanni hospital.) Di Segni is well known in the Vatican; in the past, he?s contested the legacy of Pope Pius XII, refused to attend Vatican events featuring Jewish converts for fear of sanctioning proselytism, and rejected attempts to compare criticism of the church on sex abuse to anti-Semitism.

Thus *L?Osservatore* knew perfectly well who it was publishing: A dialogue partner, yes, but hardly a lapdog.

Below, I?ll summarize the exchange between Koch and Di Segni. Then I?ll offer three observations about its implications -- for *L?Osservatore Romano*, for Jewish/Catholic relations, and for the October interreligious summit in Assisi.

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Koch, 61, took over from German Cardinal Walter Kasper as the Vatican?s top official for ecumenism and relations with Judaism last year. He?s a less exuberant figure than Kasper, but very much a *uomo di fiducia*, or man of trust, with Benedict XVI.

On July 7, Koch published an essay laying out the theological and spiritual basis for October?s interreligious summit. He argued that that in a violent world, religions must be agents of peace, and that migration and globalization make interreligious harmony more critical than ever. Perhaps reflecting muscle memory of how Catholic traditionalists blasted the ?86 version of Assisi for promoting relativism, Koch also stressed that dialogue must not come at the expense of truth.

?Naturally,? he wrote, Assisi ?should not be misunderstood as a syncretistic act.?
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Toward the end, Koch sketched a brief Christian theology of prayer for peace. For Christians, he wrote, the Cross of Jesus ?cancels every desire for vendetta and calls all to reconciliation.?

In an arresting image, Koch said the Cross rises above us as ?the permanent and universal Yom Kippur,? referring to the Jewish Day of Atonement.

?The Cross of Jesus is not an obstacle to interreligious dialogue,? Koch wrote. ?Rather, it indicates the decisive path which, above all, Jews and Christians, but also Muslims and followers of other religions, should welcome, thereby becoming ferment for peace and justice.?

It was that last bit which brought an objection from Di Segni.

Despite Koch?s ?fraternity and good will,? Di Segni wrote, his words ?reveal the limits of a certain way of doing dialogue on the part of Christians.?

There?s nothing wrong, Di Segni said, with Koch affirming the significance of the Cross for Christians: ?One certainly cannot ask, in the context of dialogue, that one of the two interlocutors renounce, or hide, or avoid giving witness to his faith, on the basis of a misunderstood sense of respect for the other. Dialogue presupposes difference.?

Di Segni also welcomed Koch?s effort to convince Christians that dialogue is rooted in their faith, because ?there may be a minority of Catholics who do not share these ideas.?

Yet, Di Segni wrote, it?s an entirely different matter when Koch says that the Cross of Christ is ?the decisive path? for dialogue. Such a formula, he charged, suggests to Jews that Christian symbolism is being presented as a ?substitution? for their own rites and symbols.

?Christian believers certainly can think that the Cross fulfills the day of Yom Kippur,? Di Segni wrote. ?But if they want to dialogue sincerely and respectfully with Jews, for whom Yom Kippur remains equally valid in a permanent and universal sense, Christian beliefs must not be proposed to Jews as tests of the ?decisive path.??

?At that point, the risk truly becomes returning to the theology of substitution, and the Cross becomes an obstacle,? Di Segni wrote.

The notion of substitution is always a risk in Jewish/Christian relations, Di Segni wrote, because Christians believe God?s promises to the Jews were realized in Christ. But that conviction, he said, ?cannot be proposed as the model to follow,? calling it a passage from a ?both/and? approach to ?either/or.?

?The language of dialogue has to be common, and the project must be shared,? he wrote. ?If the terms of the conversation point Jews toward the path of the Cross, they won?t understand the logic of the dialogue or the logic of Assisi.?

In the same issue, *L?Osservatore* gave Koch a chance to reply.

It?s understandable, Koch wrote, that Di Segni reacted with sensitivity to the notion of substitution, which ?not only has heavy connotations from a historical point of view, but which still today constitutes a difficult question in Jewish-Catholic dialogue.?

Koch makes three key points.

First, he said, his essay was directed at Christians. The aim was to underscore the duty of Christians to seek reconciliation, including with Judaism, ?which derives from the very essence of their faith.? He invoked the Cross, Koch wrote, because it?s long been seen as an obstacle to dialogue, but in fact, for Christians, it?s the basis for all reconciliation.

If followers of other religions don?t see the Cross that way, Koch said, it?s not up to him to pass judgment; it falls within the ?freedom of religious convictions? that everyone enjoys.

Second, Koch said, ?I absolutely do not hold that Jews must see the Cross as we Christians do in order to journey together toward Assisi.? Anything that undercuts mutual respect, Koch wrote, ?would contradict the spirit in which Pope Benedict XVI has extended his invitation to participate.?

Third, Koch wrote that it was not his intent ?to substitute the Cross of Christ for the Jewish Yom Kippur.?

Given the importance of the point, it?s worth quoting Koch at length:

> Here we touch the fundamental point, which is very delicate, of Jewish-Catholic dialogue, or rather the question of how one can reconcile the conviction -- binding also for Christians -- that God?s covenant with the people of Israel has permanent validity, with Christian faith in the universal redemption in Jesus Christ. On the one hand, Jews should not have the impression that Christians see their religion as obsolete; on the other, Christians must not renounce any aspect of their faith. Without doubt, that fundamental question will occupy Jewish-Christian dialogue for a long time. Here, it can be mentioned only briefly. In any event, this is certainly not an obstacle to the fact that Christians and Jews, with mutual respect for their respective religious convictions, commit themselves to promote peace and reconciliation and thus to journey together towards Assisi.

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I?m not in a position to evaluate the theological merits of either Di Segni?s objection or Koch?s reply -- that?s for the experts to hash out. What I can do, however, is offer three journalistic observations about the significance of the exchange.

**1. For *L?Osservatore Romano***

I?ve written before about the revolution at *L?Osservatore* under editor Gian Maria Vian. The paper now offers a terrific synthesis of international news, timely interviews, and provocative essays on theology and history. Even its features have become, for lack of a better word, more ?hip.? The Pravda days are over: Under Vian, reading the paper?s lines has become just as worthwhile as reading between them.

The back-and-forth between Di Segni and Koch forms part of this picture, and it couldn?t come at a better time.

The sexual abuse crisis has ripped the lid off accumulated anti-Vatican resentments in various parts of the world, prompting a natural, but basically unhelpful, instinct to circle the wagons. The Di Segni and Koch exchange illustrates that there?s a different way to engage critics -- without lending aid and comfort to enemies of the church (which Di Segni is not), but also without coming off as defensive in the face of legitimate concerns.

In addition, there?s a therapeutic value to the intervention by *L?Osservatore*. Without it, Jewish resentment over Koch?s essay might have festered, with potentially damaging consequences for the Assisi summit. In effect, that boil now has been lanced.

Perhaps the Di Segni/Koch feature will not be the beginning of a regular element in L?Osservatore, which could have a positive effect on Vatican psychology: Constructive engagement with serious criticism, wherever it originates.

**2. For Jewish/Catholic Relations**

All by itself, the fact that *L?Osservatore* published Di Segni?s essay is testimony to how seriously the Vatican takes Jewish sensitivities. After all, the Vatican is involved in dialogue with the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, whose leadership has voiced plenty of objections to the Assisi gathering, but none of that has shown up in the

Vatican newspaper.

Fundamentally, the exchange can be interpreted as a sign of health in Jewish/Catholic relations, for this reason: The right people are talking to each other.

Here?s why. Catholic/Jewish relations have experienced a boom since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), as have the church?s ties with other faiths. Yet with the very best of intentions, these dialogues sometimes have been entrusted to experts in the various traditions who, over the decades, have developed a shared language, rituals and worldview. The net effect is that professional dialoguers sometimes have more in common with one another than with the mainstream of the faiths they purportedly represent.

To put that point in crude political terms, formal interreligious dialogue is often dominated by the liberal wings of the various faiths. In a time when the momentum in Catholicism seems squarely with the ?evangelicals,? however, outsiders may fairly wonder if liberals can really commit the institutional church. (A similar question could be asked about other traditions, with the well-known skepticism surrounding ?moderate Islam? as the most obvious example.)

The point about Koch and Di Segni is that they are not part of an interreligious avant-garde. Instead, they embody the thinking of the leadership of their faiths. For his part, Koch is a convinced Ratzingerian who moves comfortably in the intellectual circles around the pope.

In that sense, they may struggle a bit more to find common ground, but when they do, you can take it to the bank.

**3. For the Assisi Summit**

Finally, the *L?Osservatore* exchange illustrates just how much the Vatican wants Assisi to go well.

Movers and shakers in Rome are well aware that John Paul II?s 1986 interreligious summit was among the iconic moments of his papacy. It helped make the pope a global point of reference, it enhanced the effectiveness of Vatican diplomacy, and it boosted the moral authority of the church.

Today, the Vatican could use another win like that in the court of public opinion. In the West, it faces a hostile political and legal environment, with Ireland even threatening to breach the sanctity of the confessional. In other parts of the world, it needs the good will of governments and leaders of other faiths to protect Christians under fire. Tuesday?s car bomb attack against a Syro-Catholic church in Kirkuk, Iraq, offers tragic proof of the point.

A high-profile public event such as Assisi, which showcases the papacy?s unique capacity to bring religions together, could be a real boon -- provided, of course, it doesn?t turn in to another PR debacle.

Assisi is also important to Benedict XVI. Although he?s made great strides in inter-faith relations, especially with Islam, in some quarters he?s still dogged by the image of a cultural warrior associated with a September 2006 speech in Regensburg, in which he quoted a Byzantine emperor critical of Muhammad. (It?s frightening that a nutcase can recognize what many pundits and alleged experts can?t, or won?t. In his rambling manifesto for Europe, Norwegian mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik called Benedict XVI a ?cowardly, incompetent, corrupt and illegitimate pope? because his outreach to Muslims supposedly fuels ?the deliberate and systematical annihilation of European Christendom.?)

Given all that, one can expect Vatican officials to act with alacrity to put out any potential fires related to the Assisi summit.

Naturally, the fact that then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was among those seen as ambivalent about Assisi back

in ?86 also lends subtext to the October edition. In light of that history, Vatican officials will bend over backwards to insist that this is not, as Koch put it, a ?syncretistic act.?

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While I was in London recently, I had the chance to speak with several people about the new ?Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham,? a structure provided for by Pope Benedict XVI two years ago to welcome groups of Anglican clergy and laity into the Catholic fold, which is now a going concern in the U.K.

The ordinariate currently numbers roughly 900 laity and 60 clergy, including some newly minted Catholic priests who had already retired from Anglican ministry at 70.

One of the more interesting conversations came with Fr. Mark Woodruff, a former Anglican who entered the Catholic church long before the ordinariate, but who has served as an advisor for some of its groups. A veteran ecumenist and a deeply thoughtful soul, Woodruff sketched some of the promise, and the challenges, facing the new venture.

Woodruff not only took the time to answer my questions in person, but he also fleshed out his thinking in e-mail correspondence. The following are excerpts from our exchange.

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**What does the ordinariate mean?**
I think it?s genuinely an attempt to signal that in the universal church, which we believe subsists in the Catholic Church, there is endless space, with the possibility of embracing Christian tradition in its entirety and its integrity. ... This is an immense affirmation of Anglicanism and its riches. It?s possible for them to be in communion, united not absorbed tout court. Furthermore, we as a Catholic Church to some extent internalise Anglican tradition and make it our own. This is an immensely valuable tool ecumenically that we have not had before. It?s not about poaching, it is about internalising in the Catholic Church what already belongs to it, the ultimate dimension being the visible unity of the whole of Christ?s body.

**What?s the background to the ordinariate?**
The practical shape and detailing of it has been under discussion for twenty years or more. There were negotiations for something along these lines in the late 1980s. A grouping called the Congregation for the English Mission was involved in discussions with Cardinal [Basil] Hume when there was a crisis for Catholic-minded Anglicans and papalist Anglicans in those days.

At that time, the Catholic bishops here didn?t want a multiplication of jurisdictions. They wanted an integrated diocesan structure. The effect was that, when there was an influx of Anglicans in large numbers in the early 1990s -- since that time we?ve had about 500 priests in England and Wales who have come from the Anglican tradition -- it broke up relationships, traditions and shared outlooks, as people made their own way. They did so in great number, but you lost that esprit de corps.

What did that say about what we really thought of ecumenical reconciliation? Our message was that, to be in communion with the Catholic Church, you had to relinquish your old life together and simply ?convert? to Roman Catholicism. As we lost sight of the principle of corporate reunion, we also lost sight of our own principle that the church is a community of communities. That communion has not been broken up this time around. You?ve got some kind of ecclesial, Eucharistic, corporate identity, and that?s something to build on.

There are 900 laity and 60 clergy in the ordinariate. Ten years from now, what will those numbers be?

Partly, it depends on finding resources and buildings from which the Ordinariate parishes can conduct their mission. Perhaps there will be some sharing with other denominations, or existing Catholic parishes. A big concern is how to pay the clergy too, not least those with families. There are hospital, school, and prison chaplaincies that can help with this, and some have arranged to take secular employment, as permitted by the norms.

The liturgical rite is being developed and hopefully will be in use early next year. In my view, it?s a risk not to have it ready now, as inevitably people may drift from their groups into the parishes where they are now getting accustomed to church life. But when it is in use, there is no reason why it shouldn?t be a draw to other Christians who want to be built up in this way. Other Catholics will be free to attend and take part and, it may even be that, with this rite as normative, the Ordinariate will be among the most enduring manifestations of the Anglican tradition in this culture and country.

I believe that God has not gone to all these lengths for something that is merely transitional.

**Is it an open question how large the ordinariate may become?**
I happen to think that if the ordinariate project gets its liturgical life together, and it maintains a distinctive Anglican theological and spiritual tradition, it will be a great addition to the Catholic church in this country. It will embody something to which people will respond. It will have classic Anglican liturgy, it will express Catholic faith in a classic Anglican way, and it won?t have the sort of dichotomy within itself between orthodoxy and relativism that I think is troubling the Church of England.

**Are the members of the ordinariate right-wing ideologues?**
No, I don?t think they are. I think most people are ordinary Anglican churchgoers coming from the broad range of Anglican-Catholic traditions. Externally, some will be used to a fairly elaborate liturgy, others will be coming from more choral-civic ?Prayer Book? tradition, others will have been very consciously ?Vatican II? and not theologically all that different from Roman Catholics. Sociologically and demographically, they will have different perspectives, but from what I have seen there is both the sheer normality of the people and clergy, and also a range of views and their expression ? from very conservative, to very academic, very ?Anglican?, very pastoral, very spirituality-focused, to very social gospel-focused, to everything else that we can find in our regular Catholic churches.

**What?s been the Anglican reaction?**
I think there has been a great deal of neuralgia. In the English situation, the Church of England does not quite occupy the position in national life that it once did, but it still has this important position of leadership and engagement with the state and with civil society that is vital, I think, also to the mission of the Catholic church. We are absolutely bound to work together and, besides, we respond to different parts of society, and they respond to us. There has to be a partnership.

We mustn?t settle for the Ordinariate as the last word in somehow embracing an Anglican tradition within the Catholic community. The work that still needs to be done is the union of all Christians, and that has to be happening because it?s the will of Christ. The Church of England entire and the Catholic church entire have at some point to be in complete union.

I?ve stressed time and time again to these friends of mine who have come into the Catholic church: I do not want you to come in and pull the ladder up. This is not about you finding a safe haven. You are now somebody who is embedded within us, who adds something to us in terms of our understanding of Anglicanism, which helps us reach out and embrace and be friends and collaborate even more deeply. We want you, therefore, to be part of that ecumenical outreach and engagement.

It is clear to me, too, that the church in this country cannot simply go on as it is, with all of our ?denominations? experiencing a declining grip on the imagination of people. No one church can address the deepest longings in those imaginations on its own. We need each other, we relate to people differently, and even though we are disunited we urgently need to collaborate and realise more and more an ecumenism of life.

**There?s also an ecumenical vocation to the ordinariate?**
If it forgets that, it must fail. It has to be about unity, because it really does have to be about the struggle for the soul of Europe and re-evangelization. It has to be at the centre of that. Otherwise, it?s just going to be an ?ecclesiastical granny flat?. No one wants that.

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