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Jewish/Catholic ties and thoughts on Pius XII

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 9, 2012 All Things Catholic

I was in Chicago earlier this week to present the 17th annual Cardinal Joseph Bernardin lecture on Jewish/Catholic relations. Co-sponsored by the Chicago archdiocese and a variety of Jewish groups, the series commemorates a landmark speech delivered by the late Bernardin at Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1995.

Opening ferverinos Tuesday night were offered both by Cardinal Francis George and by Rabbi Michael Balinsky for the Chicago Board of Rabbis, reflecting the deep ties between the two faiths in the Windy City. (Earlier in the day, I spoke at a lunch with a standing group that's roughly 30 years old of Jewish and Catholic scholars in the Chicago area.)

My topic was the future of Jewish/Catholic relations in the 21st century, and the following is a summary of what I tried to say.

First, I sketched three broad trends in Catholicism, drawn from my 2009 book, *The Future Church*:

- The dramatic demographic shift in Catholicism from the global north to the global south, with projections suggesting that by 2050, three-quarters of all Catholics will live in Latin America, Africa and Asia. If demography is destiny, in this century, places such as Mumbai, Manila and Nairobi will be what Paris, Leuven and Milan were to the 15th and 16th centuries -- the primary centers of new theological imagination, political leadership and pastoral models.
- Evangelical Catholicism, meaning a powerful thrust to recover an unapologetic and uncompromising form of Catholic identity, rooted in traditional markers of Catholic thought, speech and practice. The effort to foster a "thick" Catholic identity is the clear idée fixe of the church's leadership class today, and it's also the defining generational trait of the most actively committed young Catholics.
- Islam, especially its radical currents, which is more topical than ever in light of the Arab Spring and the profound uncertainty it has created about the future of many Muslim societies. Catholicism is undergoing a historic shift from Judaism to Islam as the church's paradigmatic interfaith relationship, meaning the one that sets the tone for all the rest ? the laboratory in which the psychology, methodology and language of Catholic interfaith dialogue takes shape.

Those three forces suggest a mixed bag for Jewish/Catholic relations.

The good news is that none of this augurs any fundamental rollback on the Catholic commitment to good neighborly relations with Judaism, which has come to be an utterly conventional feature of church life in the last 50 years. Keeping lines of communication open with Jews simply has become part of the job description of what it means to be a Catholic leader these days.

That's not to say, of course, the relationship doesn't have its ups and downs. Under Benedict XVI, we've seen flash points such as the global cause célèbre over the lifting of the excommunication of four traditionalist bishops, including one who's a Holocaust denier; a controversy over the Good Friday prayer for the conversion

of Jews in the old Latin Mass; and mixed reviews for his speeches at Auschwitz in 2006 and Yad Vashem in 2009. We'll undoubtedly see another eruption whenever the Vatican gets around to beatifying and canonizing the wartime Pope Pius XII (more on that below).

The point, however, is that reasonable people on both sides grasp that the ties of friendship have become so deep that they'll survive whatever the latest fracas may be.

Now for the bad news. In the 21st century, the relationship with Judaism risks being consigned to a permanent Catholic back-burner -- something seen as nice and desirable, but not really a "get out of bed thinking about it" priority.

Here's why. In the next few decades, leadership in Catholicism will increasingly come from parts of the world where Judaism does not have a significant sociological footprint. Catholic leaders, especially in the West, will be less inclined to play down controversial aspects of Catholic identity for the sake of interfaith détente, whether with Jews or anyone else, and an increasing share of the church's limited interfaith time and treasure will be invested in Islam.

In that light, the challenge is to lay out a new logic for Jewish/Catholic relations capable of lending it a fresh sense of urgency. From the Catholic side, I see two possible new pillars that might do the trick.

First is a common witness against forms of secularism hostile to religion, especially to a right of citizenship for people of faith and for religious institutions in public life.

To be sure, not all secularists have such a chip on their shoulders. In principle, "secularism" can simply mean church/state separation, a level playing field for both religious and nonreligious actors, and protection of minority rights. In such a milieu, religious people and groups are free to bring their values to public life just like anyone else. That seems more or less what Nicolas Sarkozy in France has in mind when he talks about *Laïcité positive*, meaning roughly, "healthy secularism," or David Cameron in the United Kingdom with his notion of a "big society."

Yet there are currents in the West with a more fundamentalist reading of the secularist creed, which seek to muzzle public expressions of faith. To steer Western societies away from that extremist position, some heavy intellectual and political lifting will need to be done, and the two faith traditions in the West with the most sophisticated resources to pull it off are Judaism and Catholicism.

In effect, Jews and Catholics together could form the frontlines in the struggle against what one might call "unhealthy secularism."

For an iconic expression of the possibilities, consider the recent crucifix case in Europe in which an Italian atheist asked the European Court of Human Rights to order Italy to take the crucifixes off the walls of its public school classrooms as a violation of her child's religious freedom. Originally, the court ruled in her favor, but last year, in a stunning and unexpected result, the full court overturned that decision. The appeals ruling held that when religious symbolism is tied up with national identity, a country has the right to put that symbolism on display in its public spaces.

Italy was backed in its appeal by a coalition of Catholic and Orthodox states in Europe. The Vatican was not a party, but behind the scenes, it took a keen interest. Most remarkably, the lawyer who successfully defended Italy's right to keep the crucifix on the wall was an Orthodox Jew -- Joseph Weiler, an expert on European constitutional law who was born in South Africa and today teaches at New York University.

Weiler made his case as a constitutional lawyer, not as a Jew. Still, the image of him standing in the Grand

Chamber of the Court of Human Rights wearing his *kippah*, thundering away in defense of the crucifix, left a deep impression on many Catholic observers. One part of his argument is that hostility to any religious tradition ultimately imperils them all -- hinting at a compelling basis for Christian/Jewish partnership in the years to come.

A second possible new pillar of Jewish/Catholic relations in the 21st century is the defense of religious freedom around the world.

This issue has risen to the forefront in part because of new church/state battles in the West, but even more because of the harrowing realities of anti-Christian persecution around the world. In effect, we are witnessing an entire new generation of Christian martyrs. According to the Catholic relief agency Aid to the Church in Need, about 150,000 Christians are killed every year, either out of hatred for their faith or hatred for the works of charity and justice their faith compels them to perform.

Take a look at what's happened in just the past few days. Two Coptic Christians were convicted in Upper Egypt for an alleged assault on a Salafist Muslim, charges that many observers believe were trumped up. A Pentecostal pastor and his wife were violently dragged out of Sunday services at their church by Hindu radicals in Karnataka, India, with the pastor badly beaten. In Pakistan, gunmen opened fire on the Grace Ministry Church in Faisalabad, leaving several church-goers badly injured. And in Sri Lanka, a radical Buddhist party has publicly called for reprisals against a Catholic bishop who denounced human rights abuses by the government.

That, by the way, is hardly a comprehensive run-down. They just happen to be the stories that crossed my personal radar screen.

Facing these realities, Christian leaders in the West will be increasingly pressed to do three things:

- Rally their own grassroots in support of persecuted coreligionists around the world;
- Raise public awareness about anti-Christian violence, including telling the stories of the new martyrs in ways that can win hearts and minds;
- Apply political and legal pressure to try to save Christians in harm's way.

To be frank, these are not skills most Christian leaders heretofore have had much reason to cultivate. We're so accustomed to thinking of Christianity as the socially dominant majority that conceiving of Christians as a persecuted minority is still a psychological stretch, however much it may be the reality on the ground in a growing number of places.

In terms of where Christians might turn for help, it seems almost superfluous to say that Judaism is the obvious choice. By force of painful circumstance, no religious tradition on the planet has developed a more sophisticated set of skills for fighting religious persecution than the Jews.

Given that defense of religious freedom is destined to be the premier social and political concern of the Catholic church in the 21st century, if Jews come to be thought of as a primary partner and resource, then Jewish/Catholic relations may well find a powerful new lease on life.

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Speaking of Pius XII, the Vatican Secret Archives staged a rare public exhibit recently, and among the documents they rolled out were a handful of letters from Jews expressing gratitude for the pope's efforts during the Second World War.

One 1942 letter, for example, came from a rabbi and a doctor held in a camp in southern Italy, thanking the pope for sending clothing and expressing concern. Another 1944 letter came from a group of former inmates, saying that the pope's intervention saved them from deportation to Poland and virtually certain death.

Those letters were welcomed by defenders of Pius XII as additional evidence that his humanitarian efforts have been massively underappreciated. Critics continue to insist that the Vatican should open its complete archives from the war years, estimated to contain as many as 2 million documents, before reaching judgment.

In light of the recent disclosures, this may be a good time to restate my admittedly counter-intuitive take on the Pius XII business: In terms of Jewish/Catholic relations, the absolutely best thing that could happen would be to canonize him tomorrow.

That's for two reasons.

First, it's abundantly clear that Pius XII, sooner or later, will be declared a saint. Benedict XVI signed a decree of heroic virtue in 2009, raising Pius XII to the status of "venerable," and the near-universal consensus among those who pay attention to sainthood cases is that Pius XII will one day win the halo.

Second, positions on Pius XII have hardened over the years, and it strikes me as deeply unlikely that any new revelation, from the secret archives or anywhere else, will move opinion. That's because the debate over Pius is basically counter-factual in nature -- it's not about what he did, but rather what he should have done, and no new piece of empirical evidence is going to resolve that one way or the other.

My conclusion is that this issue will be a source of heartburn until it's taken off the table. The only two ways to do that are to announce definitively that sainthood will never happen, which is a non-starter, or to get it over with.

Admittedly, many people wiser than I have suggested that the church ought to wait at least until the archives from the war years are fully open, and perhaps even longer, until the last Holocaust survivors have passed from the scene -- out of respect for their sensitivities, if nothing else.

I understand those instincts, but I can't help suspecting that they rest on mistaken assumptions. For one thing, I'm skeptical that the mere passage of time will do much to change the calculus. We're now more than 800 years removed from the Sack of Constantinople, for instance, yet my experience suggests that resentments in Orthodox circles are still very much alive. Similarly, it would be tough to argue that Muslim grudges about the Crusades have dimmed much as a result of centuries of water under the bridge.

Once a painful historical memory attains quasi-mythical status, it never really dies.

These reflections, of course, have nothing to do with the merits of the question, meaning whether Pius XII truly was a saint. Looking at it solely through the lens of Jewish/Catholic ties, however, the choice seems to boil down to taking the hit quickly or courting death by a thousand cuts. At least in terms of political logic, the better option seems fairly clear.

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