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Deep forces at work in Catholic-Jewish dialogue

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 16, 2007 All Things Catholic

Journalists are forever asserting that something "stands at a crossroads," and, truth to be told, often it's just a rhetorical device to lend drama to whatever follows. Chronic overuse of the image, however, doesn't mean there are no real crossroads, and today one can make a very good case that Jewish/Catholic relations are fast arriving at one.

Given the revolutionary impact of Pope John Paul II, his death would have been sufficient all by itself to generate a sense of transition. Deeper forces, however, are also at work.

For one thing, the realities of 9/11, Regensburg, the bombings in London and Madrid, and a host of other factors have caused Islam, at least to some extent, to supplant Judaism as the top inter-faith priority of the Catholic church. Moreover, the passage of time means that the acute personal sensitivity to the Holocaust which inspired the pioneers in Jewish/Catholic relations is fading. Bishops and theologians from the global South, who will be increasingly consequential, often don't feel the same sense of historical obligation.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops will shortly be losing Dr. Eugene Fisher, who has been synonymous with Catholic/Jewish relations for 30 years, and with impact far beyond the borders of the United States. Fisher is taking early retirement as part of a "down-sizing" of the conference. Try as Fisher might to insist that his departure does not signal a diminished commitment from the U.S. bishops, veterans on both sides of Jewish/Christian dialogue cannot help but be concerned. (I recently interviewed Fisher about his departure and the future of the dialogue. The interview appears in the Feb. 23 issue of *National Catholic Reporter*, which will be available on NCRonline.org Feb. 20. [1]).

All this comes to mind because last Friday, I was asked to address the national convention of the Anti-Defamation League, a pillar of the so-called "Jewish lobby" in America, about what the future might hold for Catholic/Jewish relations.

Over the years, critics inside and outside the Jewish community have complained that the Anti-Defamation League, and in particular its national director, Abraham Foxman, can be overly alarmist with regard to Israel, or to anything perceived as anti-Semitism. A Jan. 14 *New York Times* magazine piece by James Traub, for example, called Foxman an "anachronism."

On the other hand, both John Paul II and Benedict XVI have received delegations from the Anti-Defamation League on numerous occasions, suggesting the group is viewed warmly on the Catholic side. In turn, the ADL has repeatedly praised both popes. At the time of John Paul's death, Foxman said the late pontiff "worked

tirelessly to repair the church's 2,000 year history with the Jewish people," and a recent essay by an ADL expert on inter-faith relations concluded that Benedict XVI "has devoted himself to maintaining close ties with the Jewish community, based on mutual understanding and respect."

There wasn't much indication in Palm Beach that the ADL has been chastened by calls for restraint, given what many members perceive as growing threats to Jewish interests -- such as state-sponsored Holocaust denial in Iran, or recent critical comments about Israel from former President Jimmy Carter.

"James Traub of the *New York Times* notwithstanding," said Glen S. Lewy, the recently elected chair of the ADL, speaking directly to Foxman, "we need you, the Jewish people need you, the world needs you, to remain loud and passionate and indignant."

Sustained applause followed.

In my presentation, I briefly stepped through my list of ten "Mega-Trends" shaping the future of Catholicism:

- The Shift from North to South
- Secularism and Catholic Identity
- Islam
- Changing Global Demographics
- Women
- Laity
- Biotechnology
- Globalization
- China
- Pentecostalism

I then teased out some "good news" and "bad news" for Catholic/Jewish relations. Taking into account my audience, I treated anything that promotes a positive political stance towards Israel in Catholic circles as ipso facto good for Catholic/Jewish relations; in reality, I know things are more complicated. I should also note that much of this was pitched at a level of high generalization, to which there are endless exceptions.

In terms of "good news," I said, Islamic-inspired terrorism is creating a new sympathy for Israel, which may,

over time, balance what has long been perceived as a pro-Palestinian tilt in Vatican diplomacy and in much international Catholic opinion. Further, if the ecumenical interests of Catholicism in the 1960s, '70s and '80s tended to draw the church into a pro-Palestinian orbit, both with the Orthodox (who, at the time, were heavily conditioned by the Soviets) and with mainline Western Protestantism, the growing importance of Pentecostals and Evangelicals today is likely to nudge Catholicism in the opposite direction. Finally, growing reservations in the Holy See about the perceived "hyper-secularization" of Europe, and about the political direction of the EU, have pushed Vatican diplomacy towards greater reliance on the United States as the church's primary international point of reference, which inevitably means greater sensitivity to Israel.

On a more spiritual note, for many younger priests and bishops, "Catholic identity" for all practical purposes means identification with the pontificate of John Paul II, and that means taking Catholic/Jewish relations to heart. In addition, the deeply Biblical mentality of much Southern Catholicism may revive Catholic interest in the Old Testament, thereby deepening appreciation for the "genetic bond" between Judaism and Catholicism. Finally, Catholicism and Judaism may be able to offer a joint spiritual and moral witness on the challenges associated with the rapid aging of Western societies, as well as emerging biotechnologies.

Now, for the bad news.

As I noted above, Southern Catholic leaders often don't feel the same sense of personal moral anguish for the Holocaust as bishops and theologians from the North, especially Europe. It's no accident that the early Catholic heroes of the dialogue were mostly Europeans, such as Cardinal Jan Willebrands of Holland, or Franz König of Austria, or Augustine Bea of Germany. These men witnessed the terrifying failure of millions of Christians to respond to the Holocaust, and so the cry "never again!" resonated with them deeply. Southern Catholics, while certainly not insensitive to the Holocaust, are less likely to accent its singularity, and correspondingly less likely to see Jewish/Catholic reconciliation as a towering pastoral priority. All this is in addition to the fact that across much of the South, Catholics lack personal experience of Jews because Jewish communities are infinitesimally small.

In terms of secular politics, Southern Catholics tend to be skeptical of the West in general, and of the United States in particular. They're often deeply ambivalent about Israel, and that will no doubt be a flash point in the Jewish/Catholic relations of the 21st century. Trends in Europe, including reactions to Islam and fears about national identity related to declining fertility rates and falling populations, are likely to fuel nationalistic and xenophobic movements which are also often anti-Semitic.

In general, the press for internal consolidation within Catholicism, driven by the Catholic identity movement, will mean inter-faith relations may occupy a less central place in the Catholic imagination. Further, the identity movement also means that Catholicism will be less likely to be swayed in its own internal decisions by the sensitivities of its inter-faith partners. The fact that many Jews object to the beatification of Pope Pius XII, for example, will frankly count for less than it once did. Finally, the Biblical literalism of both Pentecostalism and much of Southern Catholicism may revive older Scriptural language and imagery about Judaism, such as the idea of Christian "supersessionism," which many dialogue veterans regarded as largely set aside.

In the face of all this, I offered a few bits of "friendly advice."

First, I encouraged the ADL to use every resource at its disposal to encourage, cajole, and urge Israel to resolve the outstanding differences with the Vatican over implementation of the 1993 Fundamental Agreement. How to explain the long-running failure of these negotiations is maddeningly complex, and there's plenty of blame to go around, but one element has been the on-again, off-again interest of Israeli authorities. This situation, I told the ADL delegates, is like a tumor in Catholic/Jewish relations; it's one of the first things that comes up when I talk to most bishops on the subject these days.

Second, I suggested that Jewish leaders make a point of trying to build relationships with up-and-coming Catholic theologians, lay activists and bishops from the global South. In particular, I suggested that Benedict XVI's upcoming visit to Brazil in May for the CELAM meeting, bringing together the bishops of Latin America, offers one such opportunity to forge ties.

Third, I noted that many bishops and other Catholic leaders in "flash point" regions where Christians and Muslims live side-by-side, such as Northern Africa and Asia, are struggling to come to terms Islam, especially its more radical forms, and to foster dialogue with it. The Jewish experience of living as a minority under both Christians and Muslims over the centuries could provide the basis for profitable exchanges with these "border zone" Catholics.

Fourth, I suggested that Jewish and Catholic moralists support one another in carving out responses to the new ethical challenges posed by the biotech revolution, such as cloning or the uses of genetic screening and diagnosis.

Fifth, I proposed that Jewish leaders engage Pentecostal Christianity, as well as the burgeoning Charismatic movement within Catholicism, using the language of Scripture rather than systematic theology or the historical memory of the Holocaust. Increasingly, the only case for Jewish/Catholic relations which will cut ice in global Christianity will have to be rooted in the Bible, especially the Old Testament and the letters of Paul.

None of this will magically dissolve whatever challenges the future will bring, but at least it might help those concerned with Jewish/Catholic relations get ahead of the curve.

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I'll offer two footnotes to the ADL meeting, one of which concerns a point I wish I had made in my lecture, but which didn't occur to me until it was too late.

I had several conversations around the edges of the ADL meeting, and I was struck by the way these people seemed to "get" the Catholic identity movement. When I said that today's desire to accent Catholic distinctiveness is, to some extent, a reaction against secularism, that claim didn't seem to require any gloss.

Only later did it occur to me that nobody needs to explain to Jews what it means to defend one's identity against pressures to assimilate to another worldview. For precisely that reason, Jews *invented* the "politics of identity."

In fact, one could probably describe today's Catholic thrust to reaffirm traditional dress, speech, ritual, and doctrine as the church's own version of "building a fence around the law."

Again, whether this is an appropriate response is not, for now, the point; the reality is that this impulse is gathering strength in the Catholic church, and Jews are in a special position to understand it. The question of identity -- of how to strike the right balance between being "sold out" to the surrounding culture, and being "sealed off" from it -- may therefore offer a promising new focus in Catholic/Jewish conversation.

The second footnote is a vignette from the conference, which says much about possibilities for reconciliation.

The ADL has adopted the custom of bestowing a "Courage to Care" award each year to honor rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust, often bringing to light previously unknown stories of heroism. This year the award went to Ernst Leitz II, a German who owned a company that manufactured Leica cameras, and who in the 1930s and 1940s saved an estimated 200 to 300 German Jews by sending them to France, England, the United States and Hong Kong as "employees" of his company. After the war Leitz never wanted to be honored for his efforts, and it's only in recent years that the details of his "Leica Freedom Train" have emerged.

Accepting the award was Leitz's granddaughter, Cornelia Kuehn-Leitz. To thank the ADL, and to try to express the spirit of her grandfather, Kuehn-Leitz decided that she would recite a few lines from the German poet Johann Wolfgang Goethe in his (and her) native language.

So it was that for several minutes during lunch, a crowd of ADL delegates -- some of whom are Holocaust survivors, and all of whom are fiercely dedicated to keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive -- sat and listened to thundering Teutonic oratory, crisply pronounced by a blond-haired, blue-eyed German woman. The irony in the room seemed as dense as the core of a neutron star.

A moment of stunned silence followed. Foxman then rose and said, "For many of us here, the sound of the German language is painful. But today, I was able to listen with affection and respect." He planted a kiss on Kuehn-Leitz, who was visibly emotional, and thunderous applause broke out.

Anyone taking bets that reciting Goethe in bracing German cadence could get a standing ovation from the ADL would, no doubt, have made the odds astronomically long, and yet there it was -- testament, perhaps. to the ineradicable resilience of hope.

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