

Christianity and Judaism: a heightened friendship challenged by the return of anti-Semitism and ignorance

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LISA PALMIERI-BILLIG, VATICAN INSIDER, 26 June 2019

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To name but a few of the most notable: the series of lectures organized throughout the year by the Cardinal Bea Center for Jewish Studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University commemorating the 50th anniversary of the passing of Cardinal Augustin Bea – the main architect of the Vatican II declaration “Nostra Aetate”, and thus also of the quiet revolution in interreligious relations that followed; the extraordinary three day conference on “Jesus and the Pharisees” organized by the Pontifical Biblical Institute, in cooperation with the Gregorian University, AJC, and others, with contributions from international scholars in all fields related to the subject; another three day encounter on the topic of the day, “People, Ideas, and Boundaries on the Move” regarding the global phenomenon of migration, by the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee composed of representatives of the Vatican’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) – the umbrella for the world’s most significant Jewish organizations.

The most recent event, celebrated inside Rome’s Main Synagogue, was a commemoration of 25 years of diplomatic relations between the State of Israel and the Holy See. Rome’s famed synagogue choir, featuring internationally renowned cantors flown in for the occasion, performed selections of Jewish sacred music accompanied by the synagogue’s organ (an instrument traditional for Roman Jewry while unknown in other Orthodox Jewish communities of the world). High officials of the Vatican and the Italian Church, plus leaders of the Rome Jewish community, Rome’s Chief Rabbi, Riccardo Di Segni and Israel’s Ambassador to the Holy See, Oren David, attended and spoke in honor of the occasion. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican Secretary of State, delivered a key address in which he recalled that the two states share a common commitment to religious freedom and combating anti-semitism. “The Holy See and the State of Israel are called to join forces to promote religious freedom -- of religion and of conscience -- as an indispensable condition to

protecting the dignity of every human being, and to work together to combat anti-Semitism,” he said.

It is unquestionable that on the highest levels, Vatican and other Catholic Church leaders and intellectuals are sensitive and engaged in countering anti-Semitism in all forms and of all origins. Unfortunately, it is also true that in this moment of a global surge of anti-Semitism, hateful old stereotypes and prejudices that should have definitively disappeared from common usage are making a comeback even in a religious context.

Misinformation and the failure to teach parishioners, seminarians, Catholic educators and students from elementary schools through college regarding the contents and spirit of the official Vatican and Episcopal Conference documents that followed and developed the concepts of “Nostra Aetate” play a great part in this. Vestiges of the old, mistaken and lethal “teaching of contempt” resurface on many occasions in different environments. They do not reach headlines nor are they mentioned in public discussions, as they often occur in small circles, far from spotlights.

The results are tangible on all levels, from everyday discourse to intellectual and ecclesiastic circles. Reliable sources report for example, that in certain parish churches in the “Castelli Romani” towns that surround Rome, the obvious but significant fact that Jesus, his mother, and the apostles were Jews and that Jesus never abnegated his Jewish identity is never mentioned. Yet this should be common knowledge and is essential when referring to the important and recurrent reference to our common roots in celebratory speeches. One might say it becomes even more so if we recall that Jesus’ Jewishness was denied throughout centuries in literature, art, theology and religious teaching. It would seem absurd to need to affirm that “Jesus was a Jew; he was not a Christian”, yet a basic lack of knowledge often leads to such vacuity.

Replacement theology also resurfaces frequently. In the same town where Jesus’ Jewish roots are never mentioned, a parish priest, during a lesson about the Covenant, asked the children what, in their opinion, happens whenever somebody makes a contract with another person who then fails to act according to the contract. All agreed to the priest’s reply that “If one of the partners breaks that contract it is not valid for Him any more. And so God has to seek another partner for His contract, to replace the one who broke it. The Jews did not recognize the Messiah - Christ, so we Christians are now the New Israel!” All these statements by the priest are of course flagrant contradictions of Romans 11:29 – “For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance” – a famous sentence, which is also the title of the latest official document issued by the Pontifical Commission on Religious Relations with Jews, issued in 2015.

Another reported incident: a Vatican Radio Station employee told a couple engaged in Christian-Jewish dialogue: “You must be careful with your work. You know the Jews killed Christ!” Thus the totally absurd but venomous “deicide” accusation at the basis of the “teaching of contempt” denounced by Jules Isaac to Pope John XXIII and subsequently by “Nostra Aetate”, persists in surprising circles where one would never suspect their survival.

Even on higher levels, a lack of knowledge regarding Jews and Judaism is frequently evident. For instance, the Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Santiago de Chile, Fr. Carlos Eugenio Irrazaval Errazuriz, was recently relieved of his post after he publically declared that Jewish society to this day is male dominated, and “when a couple walks down a street the

woman will walk ten steps behind the man” – obviously a false and negative description born of an ignorance regarding the realities of Jewish life and tradition, as well as being in complete conflict with the teachings of the Magisterium.

The ugliest of mendacious anti-semitic tropes are again creeping back into usage, and becoming commonplace globally in ordinary speech, where post-war taboos have fallen. To combat these dangerous and degenerative signs, it would therefore be most helpful were Catholic educators to become more aware of the negative consequences of omissions and distortions in school programs of all sorts and on all levels, as well as during the teaching of children in parishes.

Hopefully, for example, the findings and conclusions of the recent conference on “Jesus and the Pharisees” will begin to be circulated more widely so that the term “Pharisees” (often used as a synonym to “Jews”) does not continue to be interpreted to mean hypocritical, empty legalism, and the Jewish world in which Jesus lived begin to be understood in terms of its rich historical complexity.

Shoah survivors are nearly extinct, and will be completely so in a few more years. The new generations will no longer be able to benefit of first-hand accounts of the greatest horror of the 20th century but will be left with anniversaries, commemorations, records, multi-media literature and art which, however well done, will not prevent the return of anti-Semitic hatred unless vigilance is kept high. Religious instruction can be one of the most effective and powerful bulwarks, and perhaps the most important method that can be used is one that incorporates historical context as a background to understanding Holy Scriptures.

It is reassuring to know that today’s deepening mutual trust and friendship between the two brother religions is increasingly leading to concerns for a reciprocal improvement of the teachings and knowledge of the Other.

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