

From Vatican II to Ratzinger. Evolutions and Devolutions of Jewish-Christian Relationships

Marina Melchionda (January 27, 2010)



From Pius XII's silence to John XXIII's Vatican II; from John Paul II's openings to the ruptures with Ratzinger. Interview with Alberto Melloni, Professor of Church History at the University of Modena, holder of Unesco Chair for Religious Pluralism and Peace, and Director of the John XXIII Foundation for Religious Studies in Bologna

As Professor of Church History, is it true that the church attempted to convert the persecuted?

There was no planned attempt to convert persecuted Jews. We do know that the long tradition of forced baptisms and the discipline of the "favor fidei" have left indelible marks that in some cases even outlasted the great tragedy of the Holocaust. So much so that in some situations we know there were Jewish children who were baptized, often with the belief that they were orphaned not only in terms of family but in a larger sense of belonging to a community.



We also know that in other situations – one became famous because of Pope John Paul II – where priests and religious people adopted them because the children hidden in religious or Catholic homes were handed over to the community where there few survivors. We also recognize that this situation brings up difficult discussions. In France, for example, Msgr. Roncalli the nuncio was an old acquaintance of the Jewish Agency in Istanbul and had expressed his commitment to the return of Jewish children to Jewish authorities. The Holy Office, however, produced a statement which reiterated the old principles of Christianity and disapproving of the temporal power of the Jews. Children baptized as “*in vitis parentibus*” were to be brought up Christian, as if Israel were a kind of global ghetto where baptized Jews should never return. In that debate, a clever game of delays and postponements that was played among the secretary of state, the nunciature, and the episcopate managed to avoid the issue and went on to become an international disaster. But it is revealing that despite the rescue that did exist (and in several cases was very brave) it could not change the mindset that saw baptism as the best thing that could happen to a Jew.

Two popes, John Paul II and Paul XII, will soon be canonized. The first is generally beloved while the second is a controversial figure because of the political line adopted during the Fascist period. In a recent interview published in [H2ONews](#) [2], Father Giancarlo Centioni testified to the clandestine network created by Pope Pius XII to help Jews escape the Holocaust. According to Father Centioni hundreds of these Jews were aware that it was Pius XII who was helping them, through priests, through the Raphael's Verein, through the Verbiti German Society in Rome. This is a little-known truth. Will it serve to give this pope a place in history?

These canonizations have not yet taken place. There is talk that John Paul II's canonization will occur in October, but there is no date for Pope Pius XII's. In December Pope Benedict XVI approved a decree attesting to Pius XII's heroic virtues that could be taken into consideration, depending on assessments by the pope and the secretary of state who also evaluate related political acts such as the theological opinion within Catholicism. But in view of this act there has been a great mobilization campaign that has tended to say that the debate over Pius XII's canonization was the result of a conspiracy hatched by the USSR, Israel, and Polish Catholics angered that on the morning of September 1, 1939 the Pope did not say the word “Germany” and that soon after Yalta left Poland under the Russian heel.

By the mid-Sixties, when the accusation of Pius XII's silence exploded in public opinion, Paul VI who had closely collaborated with Pacelli, decided to publish eleven books of Acts of the Holy See during the Second World War. There was no unifying theme, but it was an attempt to suggest that the Holy See knew little because he feared a worse reaction by denouncing the Holocaust and that through the diplomatic network he had acted against the perpetrators of the Holocaust who attacked Europe from the east and west. Today the trend has reversed, that is to say that the rescue operations put in place during the war and especially in Rome can now be traced back to the pope's orders.

Therefore Pius XII will be canonized for just this reason. In my opinion, there is a fundamental weakness – at times very prudent in terms of history, at other times blatantly apologetic – in many of these positions. Pius XII's choice to remain silent was full of awareness. After Roncalli's publication of his diaries, we know with certainty that his choice led him to never say the word “Jew” from 1939 to 1945 and to never speak of the Holocaust from 1945 to 1958 when the topic appeared in public historical and theological debates. It is obvious that this is not evidence of sympathy for the Nazis, which there never was. It is evidence of a belief in the neutrality of the Vatican and the Bolshevik threat that was expressed until the end of 1943.

There was also the belief that there was bad anti-Semitism and good anti-Semitism that needed to look at baptized Jews in a different way, and was part of this intricate maze of illusions, attitudes and choices which also helped the unfortunate victims who knocked on the doors of houses of worship. In this, his Father Pacelli fully represents the contradictions of the church.

On the testimony of Father Centioni, the chaplain of the Fascist militia who was close to Msgr. Hudal and able to go and speak with Kappler (to complain about the lack of brothers who could absolve the poor victims of the Ardeatine graves) I ask myself two questions that stem from the assumption that obviously this ancient prelate was telling the truth and that his memories are accurate. One, if this



life-saving rescue effort was really that wide-spread and authorized by Pius XII himself (since Paul VI could not have not known about it), wouldn't it have been documented in some way by the Sixties? And two, if the underground rescue network that saved the Jews must test this absurd idea that history should "prosecute" a man half a century later, how should we judge this network, through which Nazis passed through, often coincidentally, while fleeing to Latin America, and who was ultimately responsible for it?

I think there is a lot to work to be done on this, and this work will not come to a close the day after the secret Vatican archives are opened. What emerges from any archive, especially one that contains millions and millions of documents, is always a complex picture, a series of meanings and events that will take years to be properly framed. The idea that a pope like Pius XII needs hasty lawyers who want to transform doubts into merits and hasty accusers who transform facts into guilt basically shows that he is not the problem, but rather what the Holocaust has taught us about the Church, Europe, and the man we would like to deal with by finding a couple of guilty people (or a couple of heroes) to answer these questions.

The declaration "Nostra Aetate" by the Vatican II Council was the first official effort made by the Catholic Church to begin a dialogue with other religions. Several representatives of the Jewish faith at the time claimed that this gesture came too late and that the Church was one of the main institutions that remained silent when confronted with anti-Semitic hatred. But what were, in effect, the real consequences of the Council?

The genesis of Vatican II Council's Nostra Aetate is significant. It must have been a document on Judaism, what John XXIII had promised to Jules Isaac. Abandoned in the preparatory phase of maneuvers in the dark, it was resubmitted in June 1962 to Pope John, then "diluted" to become a document about all religions to prevent Arab Catholics from seeing him as acknowledging the State of Israel which the church at that time did not want to do. This is also why the Israeli diplomacy and Golda Meier herself was skeptical that this document could have an effect, except to accredit the dynamic organizations of American Judaism that the very naïve Catholic Church confused with Israel.

It was one of the great accomplishments of Ambassador Maurice Vischer and his right hand Nathan Ben Horin to convince Jerusalem that without this step and without the theological clarification the Church would never escape its own contradictions and uncertainties. And they were absolutely right because the condemnation of anti-Semitism "quovis tempore et a quibusvis" and the definitive repulsion for the killing of a god signaled a turning point where the Catholic Church was leader and prophet among its sister churches. Not only that but I think that the association between Judaism, in which Christianity has a necessitated relationship, and other religions has given the theology of religions a new paradigm of great importance.

The antecedent and the pure dependence on the promise of Israel from God in fact constructed Israel as a sacrament, as we later saw. If today the Catholic Church is able to perceive the manifestations of anti-Semitism with a degree of readiness it must be forced to reconcile, with all due respect to all the "relativists of the council,"* its attitude toward conversion that has offended Jews and the faith itself.

During his pontificate, John Paul II has deepened the relationship and dialogue with the Jewish people, through initiatives such as highly symbolic visit to the Wailing Wall and the Synagogue of Rome. What have been the most significant results?

The results of the grand gestures – made almost as a new form of teaching – of John Paul II are slow in coming, as would be expected within a large institution like the Catholic Church. Twenty-four years after his visit to the Synagogue, Benedict XVI has agreed to repeat the visit and the uninterrupted precedence now obligates future popes to continue this tradition which is an important sign. The very fact that Ratzinger has acknowledged that small group of Lefebvrists who for months



have monopolized his attention and created a lot of trouble for him, shows that the Pope is fully aware that his predecessor was fundamental. That he quoted in the synagogue the formula of mea culpa recited in 2000 on anti-Semitism is another positive result of the dialogue begun by Wojtyla with the knowledge that it was about removing a roadblock, certainly not just picking off an incrustation from a more rigid period.

In “Nostra Aetate: Origins, Promulgation, Impact on Jewish-Catholic relations” you do not view Benedict XVI as a “father” of Vatican II. In effect, it seems that his papacy seems more directed at opening up to the Orthodox Church rather than the Jewish world. Are we going backwards?

He was not a “father” of the council in a purely technical sense. In another sense, however, there is the technical observation that his focus is on the East rather than on his fluctuating relationship with Judaism. Of course Benedict XVI is not an anti-Semite like many Lefebvrists and can do nothing other than break with a certain culture of contempt which resurfaces in some areas of society, even those that are Catholic. He has a clear and precise intention of maintaining good relations with Judaism as well as with Israel, and his words in the synagogues of Cologne, New York, and Rome demonstrate that. But his theological system is founded on the belief that the Hellenization of Christianity is “the” fundamental hub of theology and in thus he senses an “independence” of faith and Christian theology with respect to the relationship with Judaism that cannot be underestimated.

Benedict XVI's visit to the Synagogue of Rome has caused mixed reactions, especially by the president of the Assembly of Italian Rabbis, Giuseppe Laras, who was not present. Was this reaction expected?

It seems to me that the visit to the Synagogue of Rome has been a great success for Chief Rabbi Di Segni. During his visit Wojtyla found himself in front of the man who, at the Vatican, lightly joked that he was called the “Pope of the Jews.” Rabbi Di Segni belongs to a younger generation and has a more “ordinary” authority if I may say so and therefore it was he who assumed the greater risk. He gained a lot from Benedict’s visit; he put the pope in a position where he agreed to refrain from mentioning Pius XII by name. It led him to make a statement about the alliance that a careful theologian like Ratzinger knows will weigh on the dialogue. As a pope who has given up repeating the formulas of Nostra Aetate against anti-Semitism once and for all, he reminded them that...the council is a crucial point and non-negotiable for Jews!

Laras’ reservations stated frankly that the visit could become an endorsement of mental attitudes and negative theology within the church. This seems to have helped Di Segni and has been useful overall because he has made it clear that the situation might not have ended with a modest success, but in a great disaster. And this has given everyone a sense of responsibility.

How do you think the attitude toward anti-Semitism has changed or evolved in today’s Italy? Expressions such as “dirty Jew” and “cheap Jew” have not disappeared. Excluding the return to fascism, what is the danger?

Those expressions are still used today in part because the Mid-East crisis has given new legitimacy to the persistence of collective stereotypes of hatred, resentment, and contempt. Conversely, the wave of Islamophobia created by immigration has motivated a right-wing, pro-Israeli political movement that reinforces these stereotypes. And finally, within the church’s Catholic identity and the national-Christian movement that is gaining support in some areas, Judaism is considered something that you can attach to Christianity with a hyphen. The real problem is the generational transmission of knowledge and the depth of attitudes that can be objectified and fought only if they are recognized and understood.

What meaning should Holocaust Remembrance Day have today?

Memory is hazardous material. On the one hand, the calendar is full of memorial obligation days, of



days you “must remember” that are divided in a shockingly impartial way among the victims of Nazi-Fascism and communism, mafia and war, with the risk that memory is a zero-sum game when everything is mixed together. The idea that memory stirs emotion, and that emotion prevents the iteration of evil presupposes an automatic response that does not exist.

What strikes me on “memory tours” which are, of course, very useful and necessary, is that it’s the young Italians not the Jews who identify with the victims (a more emotionally comfortable position) and not with the murderers or those who were indifferent from which they are objectively descended. Is it significant that the law on Italian memory does not contain the word “Fascism?” Even the memory of the righteous (in addition to being necessary and sacred) often serves as a form of collective absolution at a cheap price. Marquard and I did a little book on this: if memory does not contain a foundation of historical knowledge (even worse if one imagines that history serves to remember or judge events but not understand them) it threatens to undermine and trivialize it.

Do you think that it would be opportune to create one single day that is recognized all over the world?

I don’t know about the whole world, but I do know that Europe has a single measure for a thousand things but not for this – and this is indicative of what is occurring over the course of generations. Witnesses who could inspire emotion with their lives are passing away, and their knowledge is passing away along with them. Several colleagues have launched a European network to study the papers of Pius XI, which the Vatican has opened and which contain the genesis of the Holocaust and the genome of ecclesiastical attitudes.

It would take hundreds of young scholars to do what in the end will feed not the circuit of memory, but that of knowledge. But are governments today able to understand this and invest in this? Everything seems to be making more and more a museum out of memory, which while it is needed, it will always be more electorally profitable research, I’m afraid.

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