

Church in Israel struggles to find its Hebrew voice

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 14, 2009



Children wait for the arrival of Pope Benedict XVI at an open-air mass on Mount Precipice in Nazareth May 14. (CNS/Reuters)

Nazareth, Israel

In theory, the Catholic presence in the Middle East ought to be a natural bridge with the other two great monotheistic faiths of the region, Islam and Judaism. As far as Islam goes, that's long been a practical reality: Arab Christians share both language and culture with their Muslim neighbors, and, for the most part, a common political perspective.

With Judaism, however, the picture is far cloudier. Arab Christians tend to be on the opposite side of a cultural and political divide from many Israeli Jews, limiting the possibilities for face-to-face contact, and sometimes making those occasions more likely to spark tension than understanding.

Largely unknown to outsiders, however, the Catholic presence in Israel is not limited to Arab Christians. For the first time on this trip, Benedict XVI today acknowledged another face of the church, one that may have much greater potential for engaging both Judaism and civil society: Its small Hebrew-speaking community.

"I greet the Hebrew-speaking Christians, a reminder to us of the Jewish roots of our faith," the pope said during an evening vespers service in Nazareth.

Some experts believe the development of Hebrew-speaking Catholicism is the only way for the church to find its voice in Israeli life.

"Otherwise, in addition to the religious divide, the church and Christianity will always be viewed as foreign," said Fr. David Jaeger. "This is an added, and crushing, burden on our ability to communicate."

Jaeger, a Franciscan priest who was born a Jew in Israel in 1955, serves as the delegate in Rome of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land. He is also a legal advisor to the Vatican in its negotiations with the Israeli government on the tax and legal status of church properties.

Officially, the number of Hebrew-speaking Catholics in Israel is estimated to be only a few hundred, composed

in part of converts from Judaism, including a handful of Holocaust survivors. Given Jewish sensitivity to purported Christian proselytism, this community tends to maintain a deliberately low profile -- sometimes regarding itself, observers say, almost as a "hidden heaven" with the mass of Israeli society.

It's that bit of diplomatic tact, Vatican officials told *NCR*, that helps explain why Benedict XVI has not mentioned the community more often or more prominently, or why the pontiff has not visited any of its four centers in Israel.

Jaeger, however, said there's potentially a much larger pool of faithful in the country.

Official Israeli statistics identify 27,000 non-Arabic speaking Christians, though Jaeger said the number is likely larger because many do not have official state documents. Some are Christians who settled in Israel under the "law of return," which allows entry to anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent. Experts say that tens of thousands of Christians from the former Soviet Union, for example, have immigrated to Israel in recent decades.

In addition, Jaeger said, there are also many migrant workers who are in effect permanent residents, even if they don't have that status legally. For example, a considerable number of Filipino immigrants are living and working in Israel.

While these non-Arab Christians are mainly immigrants, their future is within Israeli society. They and their children, assuming they remain in the country, will become Israelis speaking Hebrew.

Many of these Christians aren't Catholic -- those from the former Soviet Union, for example, are mostly Orthodox -- but their presence nonetheless suggests that the number of Catholics who could form the basis of an Israeli voice for the church is considerably more than a few hundred.

Right now, Jaeger said, they amount to "a flock without a shepherd."

Israel has a robust culture of political debate, and Jaeger said there are many discussions to which the church could contribute, citing as examples abortion, end of life issues, workers' rights and the new economy as examples. Yet, he said, usually its voice is not heard.

In part, he said, that's because "the existing church structures have more than enough to do paying attention to the concerns of the national minority to which they minister so admirably." The reference is to Israel's Arab population.

After spending even a short time here, however, it seems clear that the problem is not simply time and resources. It's also that the vast majority of Arab Christians here are themselves Palestinians, meaning that they identify strongly with Palestinian resentments.

Two vignettes from Pope Benedict XVI's swing in Israel and the Palestinian Territories this week makes the point.

Earlier in the week, Israeli authorities shut down a press center for Palestinian journalists that had been opened at a hotel in East Jerusalem. When asked if the Vatican would condemn the move, Fr. Peter Madros, an advisor to the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, said: "The Vatican does not need to condemn every move of Israel. Otherwise, the Vatican would be condemning every other day."

Yesterday, Benedict XVI visited the Aida refugee camp on the Palestinian-controlled West Bank, in Bethlehem. Rana Bishara, a local Palestinian artist and a Catholic, was on the hand for the event, but she wasn't thrilled about what she had seen and heard from the pope during this trip.

"The pope visited the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, but we've been living the Holocaust for 61 years," Bishara said, referring to the events of 1948 which led to the creation of the State of Israel and the beginning of exile for hundreds of thousands of Palestinians.

In general, Bishara said, she's now convinced that the pope -- her pope -- is "in the pocket of Israel."

However understandable those frustrations, they're unlikely to make the basis for a "natural bridge" with Israel and Judaism.

The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which is the official Catholic structure covering Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, does have an arm for the Hebrew-speaking community: "The Apostolate of Saint James the Apostle," founded in 1955 with centers in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Haifa and Beersheva. It's currently led by Fr. David Neuhaus, a Jesuit born in South Africa.

The group describes its aims as:

- To establish Hebrew-speaking Catholic communities in the state of Israel for Catholics integrated into Israeli Jewish society.
- To be a bridge between the universal church and the people of Israel by strengthening the relationship of Jews and Christians, and by reminding the church of her Jewish roots.
- To bear witness to values of peace and justice, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Jaeger, however, believes that if the church is to find its voice within Israeli society, a separate ecclesiastical structure is required -- one that would have its own identity.

"There's a huge interest in the church in Israel," Jaeger said. "People are very willing to pay attention and to listen, if not always to agree. But right now, a cultural, linguistic, and mental screen prevents that from happening."-----

John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His traveling with Pope Benedict XVI in Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories May 8-15. Read NCRonline.org daily for his dispatches from the Holy Land.

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