

Hard truths about Jews and Catholics

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 26, 2009 All Things Catholic

So far, 2009 isn't shaping up as a banner year in Jewish-Catholic relations. We've seen continuing fallout from the revival last year of a Good Friday prayer for the conversion of Jews, uproar over lifting the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying bishop, and a trip to the Middle East where the pope drew rave reviews everywhere but Israel. This week alone brought a new chapter in old debates over Pius XII, and a mini-fracas over a note from the U.S. bishops saying that Christ's message is meant for Jews too.

While each of those episodes has its own contours, collectively they seem to be telling us something important about where things stand between the two faiths.

The revolution in Jewish-Catholic understanding over the last fifty years, which has gone a long way towards healing wounds that took almost 2,000 years to accumulate, was quite possibly the most important inter-religious accomplishment of the 20th century. The question today is whether that momentum can be sustained in a new set of historical circumstances.

In that regard, recent vicissitudes seem to point to an inescapable conclusion: Lest Jewish-Catholic ties in the 21st century suffer death by a thousand cuts, it's time for rational people on both sides to confront a couple of hard truths.

For Jews: Old habits must go

Here's the first hard truth, meant for Jewish leaders (many of whom, it must be said, already get it): The old habit of criticizing the Catholic church first and asking questions later has to go, because the historical wheels are turning, and before long you may find a church that simply isn't listening.

That's a tough thing for any Catholic to say, given that the church was experienced as a source of pain by the Jewish people for so long. Yet the plain fact is that Jews do need to unlearn these psychological patterns, because pouncing on every perceived slight frustrates the best friends Judaism has on the Catholic side, and gives other Catholics an incentive to dismiss legitimate Jewish concerns.

Pope Benedict's recent trip to Israel offers a case in point. Benedict went to the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial to express solidarity with Jewish suffering. Yet when he said Jews had been "killed," rather than "murdered," he got pummeled. The pope was also faulted for not mentioning Christian anti-Semitism, even though he's acknowledged the point many times before. Ambivalence toward the pontiff hung in the air; an analysis after the trip in the *Jerusalem Post* asked, "Why have so many religious-Jewish leaders here been reluctant to accept the pope's gestures of dialogue and peace?"

Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Vatican's top official for relations with Jews, summed up widespread Catholic exasperation when he said to me in Israel: "There seems to be an official attitude of, 'That's good, but it's not enough.'" It's not much of a leap from there to thinking, "They're going to criticize us no matter what we do, so why bother?"

Indiscriminate criticism also ignores demographic reality. The leaders of the Catholic future aren't going to be World War II-era Europeans who feel a personal investment in the relationship with Judaism, but Africans, Asians and Latin Americans who probably don't know many Jews, and who don't see their churches as carrying any historical guilt for the Holocaust. Say "Jews" to the typical third world bishop, and the immediate mental image isn't of Auschwitz; it's of the Israeli wall around the West Bank and of Jewish groups influencing American foreign policy. Of course, Catholic leaders in the global South know that Christianity shares a unique scriptural and theological bond with Judaism. But they don't have an instinctive "turn the other cheek" spirit, and when confronted with what seems like axe-grinding, their tendency is either to push back or to tune out altogether.

Reaction to a new statement from the U.S. bishops about the relationship of Christianity to Judaism illustrates another problem with hair-trigger criticism. In essence, the June 18 note said that Christ is the fulfillment of God's covenant with Israel, and that proclaiming Christ is the heart of the church's mission. In response, the Anti-Defamation League suggested that Catholics might now use inter-religious dialogue to proselytize Jews.

That's not very credible on the face of it; anybody who's been around such dialogues knows that the sort of Catholics who take part are hardly likely to start thumping catechisms and insisting that Jews be baptized. More deeply, the key point is that statements like this often have little to do with Judaism. They're more about a push within the church to shore up a strong sense of Catholic identity, which means that the real targets are not Jews but avant-garde Catholics. Knowing that should inform how Jews react.

Of course, when the U.S. bishops issue a document titled "The Relationship of Christianity to Judaism," it's bound to stir Jewish interest, however much the agenda may have to do with insider Catholic baseball. There's nothing wrong with Jewish leaders requesting clarification about how to square the text with other church statements, or what its practical implications might be. The trick is to do so without being perceived as taking sides in Catholic arguments, and without drawing worst-case conclusions and then reacting to them as if they're already a fact.

For Catholics: Stop dragging Jews into our debates

Now for the second hard truth, this one directed at Catholics: We've got to stop dragging Jews into internal Catholic battles.

That tendency is best documented in the "Pius Wars," meaning debates over Pius XII and his alleged silence during the Holocaust. Catholic conservatives tend to exonerate Pius XII as part of a broader defense of papal authority and wisdom; liberals tend to see Pius' handling of the Jewish question as symbolic of wider failures of the Vatican and the papacy. In both cases, what may look like a discussion of the church and the Jews is often really about something else.

Yet the habit of treating the Jewish community as a terrain for proxy fights is far more widespread.

Part of the problem is that since Vatican II, the Catholic trailblazers in relations with Judaism have tended to come from the more liberal wing of the church, and at times -- without any ill will, and for the most part inadvertently -- some seem to want Jews to make the case for church reform. I know one prominent Jewish leader, for example, who was told by a veteran Catholic theologian that if Jews had complained more vociferously about Pope Benedict's speech at Auschwitz in May 2006, then Regensburg would never have happened. (That's a reference to Benedict's infamous speech in Germany in September 2006, linking Muhammad, the founder of Islam, to violence.) The implied suggestion was that Jews are somehow responsible for pushing the pope in one direction or another.

The result can be an unhealthy cycle in which Catholicism's in-house critics push Jews to protest whatever comes from the Vatican or the bishops, and in turn, those Jews most inclined to criticize the church feel confirmed by support from these Catholics.

On the other hand, more conservative Catholics sometimes forget that no discussion about the Catholic theology of Judaism is ever purely internal; inevitably, these matters reverberate in the Jewish world. Sensitivity is required to ensure that documents or statements on the subject, even if they're addressed primarily to Catholics, are nonetheless presented with sufficient context, and with the right tone, so that Jews don't get them wrong. (Some might feel that the June 18 note from the U.S. bishops could have benefitted from a bit more consideration along these lines.)

If Catholics truly have the best interests of Jews at heart, then in an era of transition threatening to put Judaism on a back-burner, our primary concern ought to be helping Jews solidify their relationships with the structures and leaders of the church -- not pushing them to carry water in Catholic debates, and not leaving them perplexed as to what exactly the church is trying to say.

I realize that I'm painting with an awfully broad brush, and perhaps some of this will seem exaggerated or incomplete. An optimist might argue that much of the tension in recent months is actually symptomatic of a fundamentally healthy relationship -- like a family in which siblings who love one another are nonetheless at each other's throats.

Too much is at stake, however, not to take the risk of overstating things, especially for all those Jews and Catholics who treasure the progress we've made together. These two truths, if that's what they are, need to be talked about, because otherwise the current routine of one step forward, two steps back, may repeat itself until everyone just gets tired of the dance.

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