

A theologian-pope sidelines theology

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 22, 2010 All Things Catholic

If it's true that only a soldier can fully grasp the horrors of war, perhaps it likewise takes a theologian to appreciate the limits of theology. That may help explain a striking paradox about the papacy of Benedict XVI: He's a true theologian-pope, yet a core element of his legacy will be to sideline theology as the focus of Catholicism's engagement with other religions.

Another chapter was added to that legacy this week with the pontiff's Jan. 17 visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome, the first time a pope made the trip since John Paul II's groundbreaking visit in 1986.



Understandably, media attention was concentrated on debates over Pope

Pius XII, the wartime pontiff whose alleged "silence" on the Holocaust is among the most polarizing issues in Catholic-Jewish relations. In late December, the Vatican announced that Benedict XVI had signed a decree of heroic virtue for Pius, moving him a step closer to sainthood.

On that score, the visit seemed to mark the birth of a new star in the Jewish world: Riccardo Pacifici, President of the Jewish Community in Rome, who had the rare opportunity to challenge the pope in public.

"The silence of Pius XII on the Holocaust is still painful," Pacifici said in a speech welcoming Benedict to the synagogue. "Perhaps he could not have stopped the trains of death, but he could have transmitted a signal, a final word of comfort, for our brothers and sisters on their way to the ovens of Auschwitz."

To be sure, Pacifici and the pope's other hosts made it clear that Jewish-Catholic ties will survive tensions over Pius XII, and he acknowledged the courage of many Catholics in risking their lives to save Jews. (Members of Pacifici's family were sheltered by the Sisters of Martha in Florence). Nevertheless, Pacifici's comments also suggest that prominent Jewish leaders do not plan to sit on their hands as Pius XII moves toward canonization.

In his own speech, Benedict XVI offered an indirect defense of his controversial predecessor, asserting that during the war, "The Apostolic See itself provided assistance, often in a hidden and discreet way."

Yet a focus on what wags call the "Pius Wars" overlooks what is arguably the far more consequential element of Benedict's remarks last Sunday. In effect, Benedict blew past the doctrinal substructure of Catholic-Jewish relations in order to propose a new platform for political and social action.

Some experts on Jewish-Catholic relations faulted Benedict's speech for its obvious theological lacunae. Fr. John Pawlikowski of the Catholic Theological Union, for example, noted that Benedict's doctrinal remarks were largely a patchwork of quotations from John Paul II (and Vatican II), and that he never addressed the two thorniest doctrinal issues: the continuing theological significance of the Jewish covenant, and the legitimacy of missionary efforts directed at Jews.

In effect, however, skipping such matters seems to have been the point. After a declaration of "esteem and affection" for Jews, coupled with the usual pledges to fight anti-Semitism and to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive, Benedict got down to business in sections six through nine of his speech. There, he proposed the Torah as the basis of a "great ethical code" for humanity, leading Jews and Catholics into "areas of cooperation and witness" on a cluster of issues:

- Resisting the siren song of secularism, "reawakening in our society openness to the transcendent dimension"
- Defending the right to life and the family
- Promoting justice for "the poor, women and children, strangers, the sick, the weak and the needy"
- Acting on behalf of peace, especially peace in the Holy Land

All this amounts to an application of what Benedict has described as a shift from "inter-religious" to "inter-cultural" dialogue. In 2008, Benedict penned an introduction to a book by his old friend, Italian politician and philosopher Marcello Pera, in which the pope wrote: "Interreligious dialogue in the strict sense of the term is not possible without putting one's own faith into parentheses, while intercultural dialogue that develops the cultural consequences of the religious option ? is both possible and urgent."

Put in layman's terms, what Benedict is saying is that trying to find a lowest common denominator of theology upon which Christians and Jews can agree -- or, for that matter, Christians and Muslims, Christians and Hindus, etc. -- will inevitably result in a loss of identity on both sides. Given that bolstering Catholic identity is the stated priority of his pontificate, that's a no-go. The more profitable enterprise, in Benedict's eyes, is to elaborate a set of shared values, and then to pool resources to apply those values in social and political debates.

"On this path we can walk together," the pope said, "aware of the differences that exist between us, but also aware of the fact that when we succeed in uniting our hearts and our hands in response to the Lord's call, his light comes and shines on all the peoples of the world."

That effort to unite hearts and hands, not to blaze new theological trails, will likely be the "Benedictine legacy" in inter-religious affairs.

As it happens, we already have an example of the Benedictine legacy in action. This week, the Mixed Commission of the Chief Rabbinate in Israel and of the Holy See held its ninth meeting in Rome. The topic? Not Jewish and Christian perspectives on the Bible, or the significance of the Mosaic covenant, or respective attitudes about the Messiah. Instead, it was the effort to carve out a distinctively religious form of environmentalism in contrast to secular environmental movements.

"Humankind today faces a unique environmental crisis which is substantially the product of unbridled material and technological exploitation," a statement said at the conclusion of the meeting. "While this challenge must obviously be addressed through the necessary technical means, as well as self restraint, humility and discipline, the participants emphasized the essential need for society to recognize the transcendent dimension of Creation that is critical to ensure sustainable development and progress in an ethically responsible manner."

Painting a spiritual shade of green is an example of inter-cultural dialogue at work, and under Benedict XVI, such projects appear to be the future of inter-faith relations.

This week, I was asked to write a piece for *The Forward*, a national Jewish weekly, explaining Benedict XVI's approach to Catholic-Jewish ties. Here's how I concluded the piece, which I think captures the lasting significance of Benedict's synagogue visit once the dust settles on Pius XII:

"Benedict's approach ? boils down to this: 'Let's each of us be ourselves internally, and let's see what we can do together in the outside world.' It might not be everything some Jews (or Catholics, for that matter) would desire, but at this moment in Catholic history, it may well be as good as it gets."

The full article is here: [Making Sense of Benedict's Jewish Policy](#) [1]

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Though this is admittedly an odd way of putting things, one might say that the aim of next October's Synod of Bishops on the Middle East, called by Pope Benedict XVI to address the crisis in the region, is to change the music from The Clash to Fleetwood Mac.

If Christianity in the Middle East came with a pop music soundtrack, in recent decades it would have been dominated by The Clash's famous '80s number, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" Increasingly, the answer has been "go." In 2007, the World Council of Churches estimated that the Christian population of the Middle East has plummeted from 12 million to 2 million in just the last 10 years. A century ago, Christians constituted twenty percent of the population of the Middle East, while today the most generous estimates put it at five percent, and some say it's lower still, around two percent.

Daniel Pipes, writing in the *Middle East Quarterly* in winter 2001, predicted that within a relatively brief arc of time, Christians "will effectively disappear from the region as a cultural and political force."

A reminder of how perilous things can be came on Jan. 6, when Islamic fundamentalists opened fire outside a Coptic church in the village of Hagaza in Egypt, killing seven Christians on their way to Christmas services. (Following the Gregorian calendar, Christmas in the East is celebrated on Jan. 6). Bishop Joannes Zakaria, a Coptic Catholic, wrote recently in *Oasis*, a journal dedicated to Christianity in the Middle East and sponsored by Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice: "Sadly, our Coptic community is continually struck and wounded ... I must acknowledge that there's a terrorist strategy, in an Islamic matrix, which aims to transform our Christian feasts into days of mourning and sadness."

On Tuesday, the Vatican released the *lineamenta*, or preparatory document, for the Synod on the Middle East, and the thrust seems to be to change the tune to something like Fleetwood Mac's 1977 classic, "Don't Stop (Thinking about Tomorrow)." The document calls upon Christians to stay put, embracing life as what Benedict XVI has called a "creative minority," passionately engaged in their societies despite their reduced numbers.

"What is God asking of us at this time?" the document asks. "To remain so as to commit ourselves to these events which are under the care of providence and divine grace? Or are we to leave?"

It's clear which reply the document prefers. Whether that will be the real-world answer of Christians in the region, however, is much less certain.

Beyond the root question of Christianity's survival, the *lineamenta* sketches an ambitious agenda for the synod, which will take place in Rome Oct. 10-24 and which will bring together the leadership of the seven churches of

the Middle East: Armenian, Chaldean, Melkite, Syriac, Coptic, Maronite and the Latin Rite. They will be joined by bishops and other participants from around the Catholic world, in what the Vatican hopes will be an impressive show of solidarity for the church in the Holy Land and across the Middle East.

I'll write more about the synod as the date approaches. For now, here's the link to [the full text of the *lineamenta*](#) [2].

For the record, Archbishop Nikola Eterovi?, secretary of the Synod of Bishops, said in a Vatican news conference on Tuesday that comments on the *lineamenta* will be considered not simply from bishops' conferences and other official institutions, but from "individual persons of the entire world." Hence for anyone wanting to put in two cents about the fate of Christianity in the Middle East, now's your chance.

The plan is for all suggestions to reach Rome by Easter, so that Benedict XVI can present the official working document for the synod (the *Instrumentum laboris*) during his June 4-6 trip to Cyprus.

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