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Benedict & The Jews

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Distinctly Catholic

The headline at the Times - "Pope Exonerates Jews" was not exactly on the mark. Pope Benedict does something more important than "exonerate" the Jews for the death of Jesus: That exoneration was affirmed at the Second Vatican Council in its seminal document *Nostra Aetate* in the 1960s. Benedict argues, in excerpts of his forthcoming book, *Jesus of Nazareth ? Part II*, not only that the charge of deicide was always misplaced, but that such misplacement cast centuries of Christians in the role the centurions played at the Crucifixion, seeking a scapegoat to avoid looking to their own guilt.

As always with something Pope Benedict writes, there is a lot to unpack here. So, let's start with the basics. Pope Benedict is not, here, delivering a papal text on the relationship between Christians and Jews, now or then. He is giving his personal theological reflection on the biblical account of the Crucifixion. He is not just trying to advance Jewish-Catholic relations by making nice about the legal murder of Jesus Christ. This book is, like its first installment, the profoundly personal reflection of a very fine Catholic theologian, who happened to be elected Pope. And, at its heart, there is this person of Jesus of Nazareth whom some of us have come to recognize as the only Son of the God of Abraham.

Jews can be forgiven for thinking their history would be less dreadful had Jesus the Jew not garnered such a following. Pope Benedict here does not engage that history per se: He engages its source. He looks at the biblical accounts that have been so distorted through the centuries to blame the Jews for the death of Jesus so that we Christians can avoid thinking about the real moral and spiritual implications of the Crucifixion. For centuries, Christians have made the Jews the scapegoats for the death of Jesus, just as the centurions did at the time, visiting their violence upon him. Given the cosmic claims we Christians make about that death of Jesus, you would have thought it would have dawned on us that we are all of us responsible for the death of Christ on account of our sins.

To wit, the Ur-text of anti-Semitism, from the Gospel of Matthew "Let His blood be upon us and upon our children" that text does not impute a blood libel to the Jews. Benedict correctly insists that those words are not about a curse at all. After all, we want that blood upon us and upon our children because that is the blood which we believe saves us from our sins. "It means that we all stand in need of the purifying power of love which is his blood. These words are not a curse, but rather redemption, salvation," Pope Benedict writes. How then have Christians failed to grasp this essence of the text and contort it into a justification to begin a pogrom?

For Pope Benedict, the reason to avert our eyes from the true meaning of the biblical accounts of the Crucifixion has to do with the temptations to which we remain so prone. So, when he considers Pilate's haunting question, "What is truth?" Benedict writes, "It is the question that is also asked by modern political theory: Can politics accept truth as a structural category? Or must truth, as something unattainable, be relegated to the subjective sphere?" Here is, in a sense, the heart of Pope Benedict's pontificate, a reminder to Christians that our claims are not mere subjective claims, but claims about truth and about history that cause us to re-evaluate everything. This is what the New Evangelization is all about, getting to the root of the Christian proclamation, discerning those parts of our own lives and times that are resistant to that proclamation but discerning in the death and resurrection of the Lord the means to convert.

The consequence of this refusal to recognize the truth is evident to Benedict: "As a result the rule of pragmatism is imposed, by which the strong arm of the powerful becomes the god of this world." This is a very important and still dangerous reading of the lessons that flow from Calvary. The powerful cloak themselves in all sorts of arguments just think of the way everyone accepts the idea that tax cuts for the super-rich will stimulate the economy. That makes further tax cuts pragmatic. There are similar arguments from the left, most obviously about the right to abortion: If it is not a good time for me to have a child, well, terminate the pregnancy and whatever you do, don't feel guilty about it, it is the pragmatic thing to do. And, of course, anti-Semitism served a similarly pragmatic function for the powerful in history. Need someone to blame? Blame the Christ-killers!

Pope Benedict's treatment of the deicide issue is important not just for the way it invites Christians to think about what the Crucifixion demands of us. Even though that was its primary intent, this book will have an effect on Jewish-Catholic relations. Already, Elan Steinberg of the American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors and their Descendants told the AP, "Holocaust survivors know only too well how the centuries-long charge of 'Christ killer' against the Jews created a poisonous climate of hate that was the foundation of anti-Semitic persecution whose ultimate expression was realized in the Holocaust." And, let there be no doubt, there are still anti-Semites in the Church, some of them in positions of authority. There are members of the Vatican diplomatic corps who share the same kind of antipathy to Israel as their secular brothers and sisters in Brussels. I have heard derisive comments about Jews from the mouths of clerics too often for my comfort level. Benedict's book is not only an invitation to re-examine the roots of anti-Semitism, it is a powerful rebuke to those who harbor such thoughts and see no conflict with their Catholicism. It will be curious to see how the Pope's comments will, or will not, cause more attention to be paid to the anti-Semitic attitudes of Pope Pius IX who is on the road to canonization, and of Pope Pius XII, whom many at the Vatican still want beatified. Pius IX's acquiescence in the kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara from his Jewish parents because a Christian nurse had baptized him should forever preclude his canonization. The case of Pius XII is more complicated. And, on May 1, when the world focuses on Pope John Paul II, whose legacy appears more and more mixed as we learn of the involvement of his top aides in the covering up of sex abuse charges, the Polish pontiff's commitment to removing anti-Semitism from the heart of the Church remains one of his greatest achievements. It is curious that we needed a Pope born a few miles from Auschwitz and another from Germany to really advance the cause of ridding the Church

of this cancer.

With good reason, many of us have been frustrated with some of the communications and other fiascos during Benedict's pontificate. Think back to the condom controversy last year, or the Regensburg speech. But, in these two books the Pope has written, he is educating a new generation of Christians in their faith in ways previous popes did not and could not do. At heart, Pope Benedict is still a professor, a teacher, someone committed to passing on not just the faith, but the intellectual architecture to make sense of that faith in an often confusing world. His writing is clear and inviting, deep without being ponderous. I suspect they will be widely read both now and in the future. And, if they are, the fact that he is rooting out one of the ugliest cancers in the history of Catholicism, all the better. As Benedict himself never tires of saying, we must cling to the truth, and the truth of Christianity's historic anti-Semitism cannot be denied. It must be confronted, repented and changed. And Pope Benedict is furthering that confrontation, repentance and change.

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