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The Auschwitz visit

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All Things Catholic

On the subject of Benedict's visit to Auschwitz, it is by now clear that in the Jewish world, the event drew mixed reviews. Some said that the pope's presence, all by itself, was significant at a time when the president of Iran has publicly questioned the Holocaust; others were moved by Benedict's somber, reverent tone, and his plaintive question of "Where was God?"

Other Jews, however, said the pope's speech left something to be desired. Benedict did not acknowledge any general Christian or German complicity in the Holocaust, claiming that Germans were "used and abused" by the Nazis; he did not say anything about contemporary anti-Semitism; and he reopened old wounds by praising Edith Stein and the Carmelite presence at Auschwitz.

Some compared the visit unfavorably with John Paul II's June 7, 1979, trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau, widely remembered as an important turning point in Jewish-Christian relations.

The irony is that John Paul in 1979 said more or less the same things that got Benedict in trouble in 2006.

In his homily that day, John Paul did not acknowledge any generalized Christian involvement in the slaughter of Jews, nor did he say anything about the role of his fellow Poles; he did not refer to modern anti-Semitism; and he too invoked Edith Stein.

If anything, Benedict went farther in accommodating Jewish sensitivities, because rather than celebrating a Catholic Mass as John Paul did in 1979, Benedict opted for an inter-faith ceremony with significant Jewish participation. In so doing, he avoided triggering Jewish concerns about attempts to "Christianize" the Holocaust.

So why the praise for John Paul in 1979 from the Jewish world, and the mixed reviews for Benedict in 2006?

I've published a piece in the print edition of *NCR* this week exploring that question. (It will appear in the June 16 issue, which will be available online at NCRonline.org mid-day June 16). The bottom line seems to be that in the succeeding 26 years, John Paul "raised the bar" in terms of Jewish expectations of popes. His visit to the Rome synagogue in 1986, the 1998 Vatican document "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah," the pope's appearance at Yad Vashem and the Western Wall in 2000, all collectively created a new climate in which rhetoric that seemed pioneering in 1979 could be taken by some as disappointing in 2006.

On the other hand, most Jewish sources added two points.

First, they appreciate Benedict's insistence that by killing Jews, the Nazis meant to kill God, because it clearly signals the pope's conviction that God and the Jews enjoy a special relationship.

Second, they welcomed Benedict's Wednesday General Audience following the Auschwitz visit, in which he used the explicit language on anti-Semitism that some hoped for in his Auschwitz text: "Auschwitz must not be forgotten, and the other 'factories of death' in which the Nazi regime tried to eliminate God in order to take his place!" the pope said. "We must not cede to the temptation of racial hatred, which is at the origins of the worst forms of anti-Semitism!"

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