

Building Bridges Between Catholics and Jews
The Rome Conference

By

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The Conference

The auditorium at the Pontifical North American College in Rome was hushed as an American bishop prepared to answer a difficult question. Listening intently at The First Conference of Catholic/Jewish Relations at the Vatican were approximately 75 Catholics and Jews from the United States. Most of the attendees were lay people, but included in the group were several priests, rabbis, a bishop and **Cardinal William H. Keeler, the retired Archbishop of Baltimore.**

At the podium was Bishop Brian Farrell, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. The question he had just been asked was a sore point for the Jews who were attending the conference. Would the Vatican, and ultimately His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, change the Latin Missal of 1962?

To understand the question you first had to understand the context. The Latin Missal of 1962, **approved by Pope John Paul II for usage throughout the world, was further sanctioned by Pope Benedict XVI in his *Motu Proprio* of July 2007. The *Motu Proprio* allows for the celebration of the Tridentine or Latin Mass.** The Latin Mass was the only Mass celebrated by Catholics until the 1960's reforms of Vatican II changed the Mass to the vernacular or local language, and put restrictions on the use of the Latin Mass.

The prayers and rubrics or rules for the celebration of all Masses in a given year, including feast days, Advent, Lent, Holy Week and Easter are found in the Missal. The 1962 Missal called for Catholics to pray for the conversion of Jews during Masses that are celebrated during Holy Week. The call to conversion evokes an earlier era when the Missal referred to Jews as “perfidious” or faithless since they don't recognize Christ as the Messiah.

Over the centuries this negative description of Jewish people gave rise to the false charge of deicide against the Jews. Christ's death, which was foretold by Scripture and His own words, was carried out by Romans.

Bishop Farrell smiled sheepishly at the question and admitted that no one in the Vatican was aware of the offensive nature of the prayers when approving the use of the 1962 Missal. Bishop Farrell said that a decision, most likely to remove the offending prayers, would be announced before Holy Week of 2008. Cardinal Keeler said that the Vatican II document, “Nostra Aetate” which defines the relation between Christians and other faiths “trumps all else,” and would prohibit the language of the 1962 Missal, **something confirmed by Cardinal Bertone, the Secretary of State, in a press conference last summer.**

With the assurance of both a Bishop and a Cardinal, the conference continued and the subject wasn't discussed again.

Meeting the Holy Father

One of the great benefits of any conference, but especially one with a backdrop as dramatic as Rome and a subject as timely and important at Catholic/Jewish relations, is

networking. The conferees met, exchanged ideas, took meals with the seminarians at the North American College and discussed the tremendous strides that have taken place since Pope John Paul II made his historic and dramatic visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome on April 13, 1986.

The visit and the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Vatican and the State of Israel brought interaction between Catholics and Jews, or as John Paul II described them, “Our elder brothers in faith,” to a new level.

The attendees of the conference visited the Great Synagogue and toured the beautiful building. Situated across the Tiber River, about a mile from St. Peter’s Basilica the Great Synagogue serves the 10,000 Jews who live in Rome.

Two of the highlights of the conference were the rededication of the Holocaust Menorah on the grounds of the North American College and the presentation of a smaller version of the menorah to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI on October 24th at his General Audience in St. Peter’s Square. The six candle menorah sits on a bronze base depicting the Star of David that is broken nearly in two. It symbolizes the plight of the Jews during the Holocaust from 1933 to 1945. In the Audience with the Pope we were seated in the first few rows as a special honor to our group. Tony Argiz, a member of our board and his wife joined us in the Audience. The Pope congratulated the Conference attendants in our work and urged us to continue our worthy cause.

Foundation Outreach in Rome

While the conferees met, talked and built bridges between the two religions of the one great faith, Bernardo Benes and Raul Moncarz of the Our Elder Brothers Foundation were working to build a more permanent connection. Benes and Moncarz met with Catholic and Jewish leaders before, during and after the conference.

The goal of each meeting was the same to spread the word of the special relationship that John Paul II had with the Jews in churches and synagogues, through the distribution of literature, teaching in seminaries and through the universal celebration of April 13 to commemorate the visit of the Pope to the Great Synagogue of Rome.

Bernardo and Raul’s first meeting, which took place before the concert began, was with Jerzy Kluger, perhaps the most famous Jew in Rome. Kluger’s notoriety came from his close relationship with John Paul II. Kluger and Carol Wojtyla, later John Paul II, grew up together in the village of Wadowice, Poland. **Although separated during World War II, the two resumed their close bond of friendship when Wojtyla came to Rome to be made a bishop and later a cardinal serving in Rome.**

After his election as Pope one of his first official visitors was Kluger and his family. The life-long friendship and trust between the two men was one of the foundations of John Paul’s successful outreach to the Jewish community in Rome and in Israel.

The story of Kluger’s friendship with the Pope can be found in two books, “Letter to My Jewish Friend,” by John Paul II and, “The Hidden Pope” by Darcy O’Brien.

Kluger was a genial host to Benes and Moncarz as he recounted stories of his life and the friendship he shared with John Paul II. The get-together would set the tone for all of the friendly, productive meetings that followed.

Over the course of the next five days Benes and Moncarz concentrated on establishing ties with Vatican, seminary officials and others who would help to bring the

message of John Paul II and the Jews to University and secondary schools around the world. Meetings were held with representatives of:

The Prefect of the Congregation of Catholic Education
The Society of Jesus
The Legionnaires of Christ, Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum
The North American Pontifical College
The Pontificio Collegio Messicano
The Pio-Latino Americano Collegio
Gregorian University
Vatican Radio
The Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies
Service International de Documentation Judeo-Chretienne

The Cardinals

Cardinal Keeler has made Catholic-Jewish relations one of the foundations of his distinguished service and ministry to the Catholic Church. He spoke to the conference attendees and attended the daily sessions where he was called upon for remarks several times.

In his prepared remarks, Keeler described the Holocaust as having the same level of importance to Jews that the Sacraments do to Catholics. And he reiterated the words of John Paul II when he described anti-Semitism as “gravely sinful.” Both the description of the Holocaust and the restating of the Church’s position regarding anti-Semitism gave validity to the work of the conference in building a long-lasting, positive relations between Catholics and Jews. Cardinal Keeler ended his remarks with a call to Jewish people to become familiar with what the Catholic Church has done over the past two decades regarding its official relations with Jews.

Conferees also met with Walter Cardinal Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. The meeting took place after the Papal audience. Kasper appeared to be delighted to host a meeting of Christians and Jews. After brief remarks he took questions. In response to a question about parish priests who are either unaware of, or opposed to the Churches dialogue with the Jews, **Cardinal Kasper is said to have remarked that some priests are simply uninformed.**

Private meetings were also held with Jorge Cardinal Mejia and H.E. Zenon Cardinal Grochowski. Cardinal Mejia is a member of the Elder Brothers Foundation Advisory board. He met with Benes and Moncarz in his private apartment and was very attentive and enthusiastic about the work of the foundation. He gave Dr. Benes a copy of one his books in Spanish and spoke about his experience in bringing about John Paul II visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome. He also suggested a visit to the Argentinean and the Philippine colleges. He was delighted to know about the other Rome meetings that were held and the possibilities of adding more Cardinals to the Advisory Board.

Cardinal Mejia’s suggestion of visits to others in Rome who could be helpful to the cause was typical of many of the meetings that were held. All of the suggestions are being diligently followed up.

Cardinal Grochowski is the Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, visiting him was a distinct honor for the Foundation.

The appointment was characterized with cordiality and a general understanding that the Church is against discrimination and anti-Semitism even though there might be some priests that are anti-Semitic. He showed interest and enthusiasm with the work of the foundation members. He also confirmed the Church's and his view against anti-Semitism.

When asked about areas of significance for the Church, he emphasized Latin America's importance and challenge for the future. Documents were exchanged with the Cardinal and he was gracious in giving some of his works to the foundation.

The Seminaries

In addition to the meetings with the Church hierarchy Benes and Moncarz met with the rectors of four seminaries with the goal of putting emphasis on the teaching of John Paul II and the Jews into the working agenda's of their schools.

At the North American Pontifical College, Rector Monsignor James Checchio seemed open to the idea of forming a committee of seminarians that would carry the message of John Paul II with them when they began their pastoral ministries in the United States. He also pointed out that a trip to the Holy Land, where the seminarians could witness the land of the Jews that brought forth Christianity, was a part of the curriculum at the school and that approximately 40 students make the pilgrimage each year. Furthermore, Monsignor Checchio considered that the celebration of April 13 was an excellent idea.

At the PIO-Latino Americano Collegio, Fr. Luis Ovando, S.J, the Academic Dean hosted a meeting. In it he suggested that the "John Paul and the Jews" pamphlet should be discussed in one of the seminary's weekly cultural events, bringing a guest speaker who will address the topic. It was agreed by all that Dean Ovando should use Latin American speakers. Benes and Moncarz left a sufficient number of brochures, presentation cards and audio-visual materials so that when the newly ordained priests return to their countries of origin they will present and expand the horizons of their communities.

At the Pontificio Collegio Messicano, Father Jorge Echegollen Fores from Tijuana was the host. He was very open and very helpful in all his comments and observations. He pointed out that of the currently enrolled students attending the Universidad Biblica, three know perfect Hebrew and are planning to visit Israel soon.

The Academic Dean was very pleased with the program and said he would like to have one of his monthly programs on John Paul. In addition he agreed to assist the foundation to facilitate its programs in Tijuana, where he knows a Priest that has excellent relations with a Rabbi from San Diego.

Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies and Service International
de Documentation Judeo-Christian(SIDIC)

In promoting additional Academic partners in Rome we visited and interacted with the Cardinal Bea Center, a well-known interdisciplinary unit of the Gregorian University dedicated to Judaic studies. The director of the Center Dr. Joseph Sievers,

welcomed us and told us about the mission of his Center as well as the different academic endeavors in which the Center was involved.

Meeting with Dr. Ombretta Pisano, the director of SIDIC was a very pleasant experience. The Service has an excellent website on Judeo-Christian documentation as well as very worthwhile academic information. Dr. Pisano agreed to a mutual use of our websites for the benefit of all.

Vatican Radio

With the cooperation of Father Ernesto Fernandez Travieso, SJ, Program Manager of Vatican Radio for Latin America, and Sandra Ramirez, a Roman who acted as guide and interpreter, Benes and Moncarz began the process of making the pamphlet accessible in different languages such as French, Polish, Latin, German, Hebrew, Italian and others. Ramirez, who is also an experienced broadcaster, conducted an interview of Benes and Moncarz in Spanish that will air throughout the world. The subject of the ten minute interview was, of course, John Paul II and the Jews.

Summary

In meetings, receptions and over meals, the response was the same as the Catholic leaders sought to find ways to bring the message of John Paul and the Jews to a world wide audience once again.

Benes, who repeatedly said in the meetings that the work of the foundation was now his life's work, described the week as, "productive and important to Christian and Jews."

Moncarz, who as Provost Emeritus of Florida International University brought a vast amount of experience in the realm of higher education to the conversations, was impressed with the reception that the Cardinals, rectors of the seminaries and the professors of interfaith dialog all gave. "I really felt that they were listening to what we wanted to do and this will cause doors to be opened for us."