

God Decides the When and the How

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Pope Benedict XVI has recently reformulated the Good Friday intercession for the Jews for the 'extraordinary' rite which he has rehabilitated, the Roman Missal of 1962. This reformulation was necessary, because parts of the old wording were found insulting on the Jewish side and were also found offensive by many Catholics. Admittedly the new formulation too has led to new irritation and raised questions of principle both among Jews as well as among many Christians.

The irritation on the Jewish side is to a great extent not rationally but emotionally based. One should however not dismiss it as an expression of oversensitivity. Collective memories of forced catechesis and forced conversions are still alive even among Jewish friends who have been involved for decades in intensive conversation with Christians. For today's Jewish world, the memory of the Shoah is a traumatic and community shaping mark of identity. Many Jews view a mission to the Jews as threatening to their very existence. Sometimes they speak of a Shoah through other means. So there is still the need for a great measure of sensitivity in Jewish-Christian relations.

The Saviour of All People

Meanwhile it should be noted that the Good Friday intercession of the 1970 Roman missal, that is of the 'ordinary' rite, was not changed. That shows that with the new wording the Church is not retreating back from 'Nostra Aetate', which contains the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on non-Christian religions. That holds all the more true, in that the substance of 'Nostra Aetate' is also contained within the formally higher ranking Constitution on the Church 'Lumen Gentium', and for that reason is in principle not open to reconsideration. Furthermore there have been a great number of statements since the Council, including those of the present Pope, which refer to 'Nostra Aetate' and which confirm the content of this Declaration.

By contrast to the Good Friday intercession of 1970, the rewording of the 1962 prayer speaks of Jesus as the Christ and the Saviour of all people – and so Saviour of the Jews as well. Many have heard this message as something new and unfriendly to the Jews. But it is based on the whole of the New Testament and points to what all parties know to be for Christians as for Jews the enduringly basic point of difference. Even if this point of difference is not explicitly mentioned in 'Nostra Aetate', and does not appear expressly in the 1970 intercession, the 'Declaration' can as little be detached from the context of the

Council documents as a whole as the Good Friday prayer of the 1970 Missal can be detached from totality of the Good Friday liturgy, which has for its content precisely this Christian article of faith. The reformulation of the 1962 prayer therefore says nothing new, but only expresses what hitherto was taken for granted but, evidently, was not sufficiently brought into focus.

Both sides must learn

In the past this belief in Christ that differentiates Jew and Christian often gave rise to a 'language of contempt' (Jules Isaak) with all the bad consequences that followed. If we now take care to show mutual respect, then that respect has to consist in a mutual acknowledgement of our difference. Therefore we do not expect the Jews to assent to the Christological content of the Good Friday intercession. But they should respect the fact that we Christians make our prayer in accordance with our faith, just as we of course respect their way of praying. In this matter both sides still have something to learn.

This is the really controversial question: Should Christians pray for the conversion of the Jews? Can there be a mission to the Jews? In the reformulated prayer the word conversion is not to be found. But it is there implicitly - in the petition that the Jews be enlightened so that they recognise Jesus Christ. It should also be noted that the 1962 Missal provides the individual intercessions with headings. The heading for the prayer for the Jews was not changed: it reads as before: 'Pro conversione Iudaeorum – For the conversion of the Jews'. Many Jews have read the new formulation through the prism of this heading, and it is this that has caused the just described reactions.

No organised mission to the Jews

On the other hand one can point out that, by contrast to many evangelical circles, the Catholic Church does not recognise an organised and institutionalised mission to the Jews. Pointing this out resolves the problem of a mission to the Jews on a practical level, but does not yet resolve it theologically. It is the merit of the reformulated intercession that in its second part it gives the first indication of a principled theological answer.

The Pope starts from chapter 11 of the Epistle to the Romans, which is also fundamental for 'Nostra Aetate'. The salvation of the Jews is for Paul a deep mystery of the election of divine grace. God does not repent of his gifts, and the promises of God for his people have not been revoked despite that people's disobedience towards him. God has however because of their unbelief made the mass of his people obstinate with the exception of a holy remnant. The hardening of the Jews provides salvation to the Gentiles. The wild branches of the Gentiles are grafted onto the holy root-stem of Israel. However God has the power to re-engraft the branches that have been cut off. When the fullness of the Gentiles enters into salvation, then all Israel will be saved. Israel remains a bearer of promise and of blessing.

Sometimes an enigma, sometimes a witness of God

Using apocalyptic language, Paul speaks of a mystery (11, 25). By that more is meant than that the Jews are to other peoples sometimes an enigma, sometimes a witness of God. Paul understands by mystery God's eternal will to salvation – a will which through the Apostle's preaching is revealed in history. Specifically the Apostle refers to the prophets Isaiah (59, 20) and Jeremiah (31, 33f). He thereby refers to what was promised both by the prophets and by Jesus – the gathering at the end of time of all peoples on Zion, and with that gathering the then imminent universal peace (shalom). Paul views his missionary work among the Gentiles in this perspective. His mission is to prepare for the gathering of all peoples, which, once the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, will provide salvation to the Jews and lead to eschatological peace for the world.

So one can say that it is not on the basis of a mission to the Jews, but on the basis of a mission to the Gentiles that God, at the end, when the full number of the Gentiles has come in, will bring about the salvation of Israel. Only he who has hardened the mass of Israel, can undo that hardening. He will do it when the 'Deliverer' comes from Zion. In Pauline language that is none other than the returning Christ. For Jews and Gentiles have the same Lord.

Giving witness of one's faith

The reformulated Good Friday prayer gives expression to this hope in a petition directed at God. Basically with this prayer the Church repeats the prayer of the Our Father 'Thy kingdom come' and the primitive Christian liturgical exclamation 'Maranatha – come Lord Jesus, come soon'. Such prayers for the coming of God's kingdom and for the fulfilment of the mystery of salvation are by their very nature not an appeal directed at the Church for missionary activity. Quite the opposite, they respect the complete inscrutability of the hidden God. So with this prayer the Church does not take direct charge of the fulfilment of the unfathomable mystery. She just cannot do that. Rather, she leaves the when and the how wholly in God's hands. God alone can initiate the kingdom of God in which all Israel is saved, and eschatological peace is granted to the world.

The exclusion of a targeted and institutionalised mission to the Jews does not mean that Christians should sit around and do nothing. One must distinguish between a targeted and organised mission on the one hand, and Christian witness on the other. Of course Christians have to give witness to their 'elder brothers and sisters in the faith of Abraham' (John Paul II) at the point where such witness is called for; they have to give witness of their faith and of the riches and beauty of their belief in Jesus Christ. That is what even Paul did. On his missionary journeys he went each time into the synagogue first, and only when he met with unbelief there did he go to the Gentiles.

Such a witness is demanded also of us today. It must certainly be given with tact and with respect; but it would be dishonest if in meeting with their Jewish

friends Christians remained silent about their own faith or even denied it. We expect the same in relation to us from believing Jews. This behaviour is entirely normal in the dialogues with which I am familiar. For an honest dialogue between Jews and Christians is only possible, on the one hand, on the basis of a shared belief in the one God, the creator of heaven and earth, and in the promises given to Abraham and the Patriarchs; and on the other hand, in awareness of and with respect for the basic point of difference, which consists in the belief that Jesus is the Christ and the Redeemer of all people.

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