

CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM—CONSULTATION

Topic: Jesuit Kaddish  
Convener: Leo Lefebure, Georgetown University  
Moderator: Carol Ann Martinelli, Independent Scholar  
Presenter: James Bernauer, S.J., Boston College  
Respondent: Noel Pugach, University of New Mexico

James Bernauer, S.J., presented a paper, “Jesuit Kaddish: Jews, Jesuits and Holocaust Remembrance.” Although there have been major statements from the Vatican and from several conferences of bishops regarding the failure of Catholics during the period of the Holocaust, organizations within the Catholic world have been far less articulate about their own responsibilities for these failings. “Jesuit Kaddish” addresses the history of Jesuit conduct toward the Jews and how it prepared for weakness in dealing with the anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism of the 19th and 20th centuries. At the center of Jesuit conduct was a theological indifference to the disappearance of Judaism. The question Rabbi Abraham Heschel pressed on his Jesuit friend, Father Gustave Weigel in 1964 went to the heart of the matter: “Is it really the will of God that there be no more Judaism in the world? Would it really be the triumph of God if the scrolls of the Torah were no longer taken out of the Ark and the Torah no longer read in the synagogue, our ancient Hebrew prayers in which Jesus himself worshipped no more recited, the Passover Seder no longer celebrated in our lives, the Law of Moses no longer observed in our homes? Would it really be *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* to have a world without Jews?” The fact that Heschel used in his last sentence the very motto of the Society of Jesus—“For the greater Glory of God”—made the question a direct interrogation of the Jesuit approach to Jews. Fortunately the beginning of Jesuit confrontation with its history has been underway and from that chorus of critics, “Jesuit Kaddish” proposes a statement of repentance. “Jesuit Kaddish” is profoundly personal, emerging, of course, from the speaker’s own life but also from encounter with Jesuits whose minds and hearts are entwined with the Jewish dead from the Shoah. There is the Jesuit Pope speaking of the Jewish artist Chagall’s painting, “White Crucifixion.” There is the Jesuit teacher who spoke with love of Judaism to the young rescued Jew who was to become one of the greatest Holocaust historians. There is the Jesuit student who witnessed the violent mistreatment of Jews at the train deporting them to a death camp. Their fate became the tragedy of his life. And then there was the Jesuit resister who was executed by the Nazis and whose ashes were scattered over a field of Berlin sewage. Jesuits and Jews encounter the Shoah amid ashes but also in interior communion, through the words of the Kaddish.

Noel Pugach responded, praising Bernauer’s honesty in recognizing the history of Jesuit failings in relation to Jews. He stressed the importance of Bernauer’s comments on the historical Jesuit practice of “Asemitism,” the exclusion of Jews from human society and the total indifference to them, which together with Anti-Semitism prepared the way for the Shoah. Pugach also considered factors that informed Jesuit support for Jews, both in their scholarly work and also, probably more importantly, the human contacts that connected Jesuits and other rescuers to Jews. Pugach stressed the importance of basic human connections to Jews that enabled rescuers to ignore the risks. Pugach noted Bernauer’s attention to French and German Jesuits and asked about the roles of Polish Jesuits during the Shoah. He acknowledged Jesuit efforts after World

*Consultation: Christianity and Judaism*

War II to build trust and work for reconciliation with Jews, and he expressed concern about the current growth of Anti-Semitism and asked what Jesuits are doing today to counter it. Pugach concluded by noting the original meaning of “Kaddish” as the sanctification of God’s name; only later did the practice become related to honoring the dead.

The lively discussion that followed explored the situation of Jesuits and other Catholics in Poland and also turned to the roles of Karl Rahner and his student Johann Baptist Metz in relating to Jews.

LEO D. LEFEBURE  
*Georgetown University,  
Washington, DC*