

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING

The Vatican, Antisemitism, and the Holocaust

A Response to Kevin Madigan's
Has the Papacy 'Owned' Vatican Guilt for the Church's Role in the Holocaust?

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A few days following the April 8, 2005 funeral of Pope John Paul II, I called my parents to see how they were doing. During the course of our conversation, my father asked me if I had watched the pope's funeral Mass on television. I answered that I had. Then he asked me what I thought of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's homily. I replied that it was moving and appropriate for such a solemn occasion. My father then said, "Well, I hoped you liked it, because that Cardinal is going to be our next Pope. That homily was as close to a campaign speech as a Cardinal could make." My father's candor and matter-of-factness, so unlike his normal reserved tone in regard to Church matters, surprised me. I remember responding, "That will be impossible. The Cardinals will never give a position of such importance in faith and morals to a German only sixty years after the Holocaust." My father quickly retorted, "Just wait and see." As we all know I was wrong and my father was right, for on April 19 the College of Cardinals elected Cardinal Ratzinger pope.

Cardinal Ratzinger's election probably should not have been a surprise to me. More than likely most of the Cardinals, the majority of who had been appointed by John Paul II, were unprepared to elect an outsider and favored someone who they believed would closely follow in John Paul II's footsteps. Yet, I wonder, did the hesitation that I raised with my father ever cross their minds. Should such a reservation have entered their minds? The Cardinals, coming from a variety of countries throughout the world (often third world countries), must have individually and collectively witnessed untold horrors and human rights infringements in their own countries at some time or another. No country is perfect or without a dark past that most of its citizens would rather forget. Thus, should Germany be categorized differently? Many might argue no; however, I believe that such a response ignores the uniqueness of the Holocaust in all its magnitude and its singular goal of eradicating all Jews from this planet. It is this point precisely that the Catholic Church and its members, both clergy and laity, so often forget or choose to ignore. Benedict follows suit. But I must then ask, should not His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, as a German, take it upon himself, even more so than someone of a different nationality, the towering responsibility of remembering the Holocaust in a special way, and even more specifically, of recognizing and identifying the complicity of the Catholic Church in creating the circumstances that led to it? Has not the Catholic Church over its two thousand year history permitted and, many times, broadly propagated and even instigated Christian antisemitism that led to the untold murders of Jews over the centuries, culminating in the Holocaust?

To this day, the Holy See, the Vatican, has failed to issue any papal document that honestly addresses the Church's role in the propagation and dissemination of Christian antisemitism and how it led to its direct connection with racial antisemitism. The Holy See's Commission for

Religious Relations with the Jews 1998 document *We Remember* attempted to address this void, but, as Kevin Madigan has shown, it falls short in so many areas. As a historian of modern Germany, I would even call the authors of the document “sloppy” in their research and perhaps even purposefully careless by misidentifying Blessed Bernhard Lichtenberg’s place of death and falsely identifying Cardinal Faulhaber’s 1933 Advent sermon as “clearly express[ing] rejection of the Nazi antisemitic propaganda.” Lichtenberg did not die in Dachau, but en route to the concentration camp, in the town of Hof that sits on the border of Thüringen and Bavaria. Similarly, Faulhaber composed and preached the Advent sermons to defend the integrity of the Old Testament and not specifically in opposition to Nazi antisemitism or in defense of Jews. But these are only two weaknesses of many within the document.

Despite such documents by the Holy See, as Kevin Madigan has shown, select national bishops conferences, such as those in France and Germany, have seriously addressed the local Catholic Church’s failure to critique antisemitism, challenge National Socialism, and protest the mistreatment and murder of Jews in the Holocaust. Yet, such frankness is lacking on the part of the papacy and the Vatican. Specifically, the Holy See, especially under Pope Benedict, has shown a cautious reserve when commenting on Christianity and the Holocaust. For Pope Benedict, it has been virtually impossible to use the words Jews, Holocaust, Catholic Church, and Germany in the same sentence or even in the same address!

As Kevin Madigan has also shown, still more troubling is Benedict’s changes in the Good Friday liturgy and his overtures to the St. Pius X congregation. While I would agree with Professor Amy-Jill Levine’s recent comment made during an address at Stonehill College that it is much better to have Bishop Williamson and the St. Pius X Society under Vatican supervision than outside the Church, the number of actions in regard to Jewish-Catholic relations, which Benedict has taken or allowed to take place within the Church, is certainly troubling when viewed as a whole. The latest Vatican approval to a change in the U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults’ teaching on Jews attests to this situation. While the change in wording does reflect the teachings on Jews found in paragraph 839 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church’s universal catechism, which bears Benedict’s imprimatur when he was Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, at the same time it also appears to reflect a change in direction begun Under Pope John Paul II, which outwardly seemed to be moving toward some kind of recognition of the Abrahamic covenant as unique and salvific for Jews apart from the salvation offered by Christ. With Benedict’s change, however, that recognition is diminished. And while not directly promoting proselytization, it does open the door to proselytizing efforts by Catholics toward Jews. As we all know, such teaching also helps fuel antisemitism, especially by viewing Jews as “others” in need of “salvation” through “conversion.” And, yes, I recognize that in recent days the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has attempted to address concerns expressed by both Jews and Catholics concerning recent statements by the Bishops’ Conference. Nevertheless, in the past week, there have been troubling developments in regard to a new children’s catechism. Such mixed messages shall only instill distrust and create confusion over Church teaching.

Theological supersessionism is a central factor compelling these changes in Catholic Church’s teaching on Jews. At the same time and equally troubling is the papacy’s and Holy See’s refusal to admit a connection between Catholic antisemitism and the Holocaust. For example, on Friday, 19 August 2005, at the Cologne synagogue, in the midst of offering hopeful words concerning the Cologne Jewish community, Pope Benedict stated that, “in the twentieth century, in the darkest period of German and European history, an insane racist ideology, born of neo-paganism, gave rise to the attempt, planned and systematically carried out by the regime, to exterminate European Jewry. The result has passed into history as the *Shoah*.” While it was important that

the pope acknowledged the horrific nature of the *Shoah*, he did so by denying the historical underlayer of its Catholic-Christian societal roots. National Socialist racist ideology was not solely “born of neo-paganism,” but rather as John Pawlikowski has stated, “While the Holocaust had many parents, it could not have been realized without the indispensable seedbed of Christian antisemitism.” Nevertheless, the Vatican has regularly denied any Christian basis for the Holocaust, played out in thousands of European communities over the centuries, however much we today want to claim that such antisemitism was based on a misinterpretation of our theology. Another example is seen in *We Remember* that reads: “The *Shoah* was the work of a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime. Its anti-Semitism had its roots outside of Christianity and, in pursuing its aims, it did not hesitate to oppose the Church and persecute her members also.”

Sadly, such statements deny the incalculable influence Christian practice has had on societal antisemitism, especially virulent in Europe, upon which the Nazis built their annihilative antisemitism. I have addressed this issue in my own work on German and Austrian Catholic priests who embraced National Socialism when I wrote:

“Historically, the Catholic Church tolerated discrimination against Jews who allegedly betrayed the basic tenets of their own revealed faith by becoming obsessed with money and material goods. In turn, the Church believed that these same unfaithful Jews, especially through the influence of the Enlightenment and modernity, had attacked and undermined Christianity and its moral and religious teaching through their ‘pernicious influence’ on business, the press, art, theater, film, and politics. Though the Church rejected the National Socialist racist form of antisemitism that preached ‘a struggle against the Jewish race’ and made blood the sole determining factor of Jewish identity, it nevertheless, almost since its foundation, continued to promote a religious-based antisemitism, often referred to as anti-Judaism, by blaming Jews for Jesus’ crucifixion. Regardless of the theological logic underlying antisemitism, the negative portrayal of Jews facilitated discrimination and persecution. Even when Catholics tried to distance themselves from antisemitism or at least demonstrate moral sympathy toward Jews, it was very difficult for them to show any theological sympathy. This lack of theological sympathy led Catholics to a reductive appraisal of Jews as persistent non-believers, too alien and obstinate for the Church’s leaders to include in the gospel mandate to ‘love thy neighbor.’ The Catholic imagination had only to clothe these liturgical and homiletic perceptions into common and everyday antisemitic language. Consequently, [some Catholics during the Nazi period] attempted to institutionalize antisemitism as a Christian mandate as well as a patriotic one. In retrospect, [such individuals] were only attempting to rehearse earlier and more elemental antisemitic texts in the Catholic and Christian tradition, which were centuries old. From this referential perspective, much of the antisemitism in the Catholic Church was perceived as being partially in agreement with the spirit of Nazi racial teaching and National Socialism’s eventual antisemitic legislation. For the ordinary Catholic then, the lines between these various forms of antisemitism—racial, theological, economic, and cultural—became not only indistinguishable but mutually reinforcing.”

You will notice that in this analysis I do not adopt the term anti-Judaism to identify Christian theological antisemitism. As we see in the examples above, far too often popes and individual scholars have used such terminology in an attempt to exculpate Catholicism especially in Europe from its responsibility for the Holocaust. By contrast, in my own research and writing, I use the term Christian antisemitism and show its direct link to racial antisemitism.

In this discussion, one question continues to linger. Richard Steigmann-Gall’s 2003 work, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity* indirectly asks this question: “Is Christianity by

its very nature antisemitic?" Though scholars resoundingly criticized Steigmann-Gall's thesis concerning the "Christian" nature of National Socialism, the implications of his work that raises the question of the nature of Christianity is key to our Jewish-Christian dialogue. Can Catholicism, which views everything through a Christocentric lens, proclaim anything but supersessionism?

Throughout the Catholic Church's history, its leaders have taught Christ's command to love thy neighbor. In my own research, I have found ample evidence suggesting that there were priests throughout Germany under National Socialism who preached this commandment of love. Nevertheless, self-preservation, nationalism, and antisemitism regularly obstructed such teaching from being put into practice toward Jews. At the heart of such inaction and lack of concern was the theological precept of supersessionism that is still the central issue that causes tensions between Jews and Catholics.

Naturally, there are also so many additional issues, such as the push for beatification of Pope Pius XII, which fuel tensions between Jews and Catholics. I would argue that Catholics have no idea how painful such debates are for Jews. I can only begin to imagine the pain by listening carefully to my Jewish friends and colleagues. Unfortunately, it appears, the Pope and the majority of practicing Catholics do not or chose not to listen carefully enough; for if they did, there would be no further discussion of Pius XII's cause and no need to deny the Church's century-old role in the Holocaust. Until then, Kevin Madigan is correct: Pope Benedict "has emphatically not 'owned' Catholic guilt and that [in doing so] has damaged the cause of Jewish-Christian relations and dialogue."