

REVIEW

Stanislaw Dziwisz and David Rosen

Brothers Reunited: Catholic-Jewish Dialogue

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Reviewed by Ronald Modras, Saint Louis University

In March, 2009, the Jesuits of Krakow sponsored a conference entitled, "Catholic-Jewish Dialogue—The Road Behind Us, The Road Before Us." It was to honor the memory of one of their own, Father Stanislaw Musial, S.J., who died in 2004 after a life devoted to the work of building bridges between Catholics and Jews.

In 1942, Musial, then four, and his entire family were lined up outside their home to be executed by German soldiers for helping a Jewish neighbor. Led by "some child's instinct," as he later put it, Musial ran to the German commander, threw himself at his knees, and begged for their lives. Amazingly, the commander became emotional, and instead sent the soldiers away to look for other Jews in other homes. Haunted by this memory and by the destruction of European Jewry, Musial spent his adult life as a Jesuit priest working for reconciliation between Jews and Catholics in Poland.

Memory and reconciliation were two major themes of this conference, which included prominent Jewish and Catholic leaders from Europe, Israel, and the U.S. The two major addresses are published here, by Stanislaw Dziwisz, the Cardinal of Krakow and former secretary to Pope John Paul II, and David Rosen, an Orthodox rabbi who heads the American Jewish Committee's Department of Inter-Religious Affairs and a leader in Catholic-Jewish relations.

In his paper, Dziwisz reflected on the centuries when Poland was a refuge for Jews fleeing pogroms in Western Europe. He recalled King Casimir's founding of Kazimierz, a Jewish settlement that would become a center for Talmudic studies. With Auschwitz-Birkenau only fifty kilometers from Krakow, the location of the conference, Dziwisz assured the Jews present that Catholic Poles want to be "guardians of memory" for the Jews murdered by the German Nazis (p. 15). For those who question the value of Catholic-Jewish dialogue in a Poland with so few Jews left today, he answered, "[O]ur attitude toward people of different faiths is a yardstick of the quality of our Christianity" (p. 18). He might also have noted that Poland is exporting priests to both Western Europe and the U.S., where there are vibrant Jewish communities.

Following Dziwisz's acknowledgement that Poles have not been able to overcome all prejudices and stereotypes, Rabbi Rosen assured the cardinal that the situation in Spain is much worse, where, as in Poland, there is not a robust Jewish community with which to join in dialogue. Rosen also acknowledged "both deep-seated prejudice as well as ignorance" towards Christians and Christianity in Israel, especially among the most religiously observant Israelis (p. 43). But he pointed to Pope John Paul II's visit to Israel in 2000 as "an eye-opener to Israeli Jews concerning the changes that have taken place in the field of Christian-Jewish relations" (p. 44).

Not surprisingly, both Dziwisz and Rosen made frequent references to John Paul II, described by Rosen as arguably "the first pope to actually know the Jewish people from the inside" (p. 30).

One of the late Pope's frequent descriptions of the Jewish people, now used commonly in Catholic circles, is "elder brother." Rosen pointed out that the term goes back to a political manifesto by one of the giants of Polish literature, Adam Mickiewicz. Rosen suggested that a hundred years from now, John Paul II's efforts to improve Jewish-Catholic relations may be his major legacy. Though more traditionalist Catholics ground their criticisms of Vatican II in some of the former Pope's views, Rosen says John Paul offers no support for any turn back from the "spirit of Assisi" (recalling the location of major interfaith prayer meetings in 1986 and 2002) (p. 32).

Rosen also had kind words for the beleaguered current Pope Benedict XVI. When Benedict visited Auschwitz-Birkenau early in his pontificate, some critics were disappointed with his remarks, which some called platitudinous. Rosen, however, highlighted an important and profound idea in the Pope's description of the Nazi genocide: "by destroying Israel they ultimately wanted to tear out the taproot of the Christian faith" (p. 39). Not only did Benedict, like John Paul, call Nazism a "sin against God and man," he also linked it to an attack on Christianity itself, making his denunciation even more powerful.

The title of this little book, "Brothers Reunited," refers to a statement at the end of Rosen's presentation, in his reference to a commentary by nineteenth century Rabbi Naftali Berlin on the Genesis story of Jacob and Esau. After decades of estrangement, the two brothers reunited. Esau ran towards Jacob, and embraced and kissed him. Rabbis often wondered if the embrace was sincere. Some doubted that it was, as suggested by the common rabbinic association of Esau with Israel's enemies, including Christians. Commenting on this verse in Genesis, Rosen notes, Rabbi Berlin urged that even if the experiences of Jews with the Church have been marked by bitterness, the day will come when Esau will embrace Jacob sincerely: "Then the latter will respond and they will be truly reconciled for the benefit of all humanity" (p. 46).

Poland's Jesuits are to be congratulated for publishing these two papers, presented in both Polish and in English. In honoring the memory of Stanislaw Musial and continuing the legacy of Pope John Paul II and the Jesuits, Dziwisz and Rosen fostered a spirit more recently associated with Assisi but with deeper historical roots in Krakow.