



## **Rabbi Weiner's March 2009 Bulletin Article**

### **The Concerns and the Constituency of Pope Benedict XVI**

Jews throughout the world have reacted with great concern and alarm in recent weeks as Pope Benedict XVI lifted the excommunication of four renegade Bishops appointed by the late Cardinal Marcel Lefebvre before his death. The ADL has publicly denounced the decision. Eli Wiesel condemned it. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel announced the cancellation of a high level meeting between it and the Vatican. To better understand this crisis, we need to know a little history of the Catholic Church, a history which, with all due respect, is not all that well known to the Jewish lay community.

In 1965 the Second Vatican council initiated a wide range of reforms of Catholic doctrine that were to have a tremendous influence on Catholic theology, Catholic practice, and the relationship of the Church to the Jewish people. Many are familiar with certain aspects of the Second Vatican Council. The suspension of the Tridentine, or Latin Mass, a revised Catechism, and in so far as the Jewish community is concerned, a reversal of traditional Catholic teaching of Deicide, the belief that the Jews are collectively responsible for the killing of Jesus were among its most well known decisions. It is almost difficult to imagine the impact that these reforms have had on Jewish- Christian relations throughout the world. Indeed, although we live in a nation dominated by Protestants, Catholics number about 1.1 billion people worldwide, and as the world's largest and oldest established church, they remain the most influential Christian body in the world. Interfaith relations, Vatican recognition of the State of Israel, the former Pope John Paul II, attending an Italian synagogue -- so much of what we take for granted today would have been unimaginable even 45 years ago.

As Jews, we celebrated these reforms. After all, they were, and remain "good for the Jews". Today it is not uncommon for Church elders and leaders to proclaim their commitment to Israel and love of Jews, even praising us as the elder brothers in faith. But just yesterday, in historical terms, official church documents and liturgy referred to the perfidy of the Jews, and encouraged measures to either convert us or oppress us. That an entire generation of Jews has had basically no experience with this demonstrates the benefits of these reforms to our community. (It also demonstrates the courage of early pioneers of such reforms, like the late Sister Rose Thering, who fought for these changes as early as the 1950's.)

But not everyone was so happy. These reforms, both theological and practical, had their opponents. And among the most significant of these opponents were Cardinal Marcel Lefebvre, who organized the society of St. Pius the 10<sup>th</sup> as a vehicle for promoting "Traditional Catholicism". As a Cardinal occupying the leadership of the Catholic community of France, he was highly influential. Yet when he ordained his own Bishops, both he and they, were excommunicated.

So how do we get dragged in to this most recent Church controversy? Simply because the positions on issues concerning the Jewish community espoused by the society of St. Pius the 10<sup>th</sup> have been a throwback to the difficult days before the Second Vatican Council. Among other things, the charge of Deicide, allegations of a Jewish conspiracy to control the world – many of these positions are easily obtainable on the web. Oh, and there is one other thing. Holocaust denial looms large in the public statements of some of their Bishops. And we rightly ask: are these the people the church really wants back? One can understand the anger and the confusion within the Jewish community.

I am not so confused. Yes, I am angry at the Pope's decision--- actually disgusted – but I understand what impels the Pope to take this action. It has to do with distinguishing what I will call concerns of the church and the constituency of the church. And Jews, here is a newsflash for you. We better understand that when it comes to the church, we are a concern, and not a particularly high one at that. I do believe that the church desires good relations with the Jewish people. But we are not the constituency of the church. Ultimately the church is going to do what is good for the church, even if it means endangering temporarily relations with the world's Jewish community.

Pope Benedict XVI is no fool. He remains one of the world's leading Catholic intellectuals. He has spoken out against Anti-Semitism in the church and for positive relations with Jews. Yet his real concern is not the Jewish community, but the condition of the worldwide Catholic Church, a church that in many ways is in trouble. He is a theological traditionalist who has made his career opposing secularism and its influence in modern Western society. In a Europe that is increasingly abandoning its Christian orientation, he has called for the reinvigoration of Christian life. And as he looks into the future and understands so much opposition to traditional Catholic doctrine regarding such issues as birth control, abortion, married priests, divorce, stem cell research, female clergy, from both society at large, and even from within the lay community of the Catholic Church, he envisions a challenging future. Instead of shifting with the times in an attempt to encourage greater Catholic affiliation, he has decided to hold firm, as did his beloved and popular yet no less traditional predecessor John Paul II. I am not saying I agree or disagree. After all, the church is not my constituency – though it is my concern. But to achieve his goals, he would rather have the traditional movement represented by SSPX with him. There is no way to fully comprehend his reversal of the excommunication of the Bishops of SSPX despite their Holocaust denial and other well documented anti Jewish sentiments. It doesn't mean that the church has adopted or reconsidered its repudiation of the negative Jewish attitudes and rhetoric of the SSPX. But the church has always

feared schism and splintering To this day, the church has never reconciled itself to the Protestant Reformation or the split of the Eastern Catholic Church (what we call Orthodox Christianity) in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Healing this rift with the small but influential group of renegades suits the interests of the church, and is a far higher priority than a bunch of angry and disappointed Jews.

So what should be our response? At time like these it is important for us to think critically, not emotionally. Yes, we are angry, yes we are disappointed. But I do not believe that all hope is lost. Like in all relationships, and especially in relationships involving religious communities, there are periods of growth and cooperation, and periods of setback and disappointment. Space does not permit me to give more specific examples. But if one were to graph the relationship between the Jewish people and the church since 1965, I suspect it would look like the stock market, at least until recently. Month in, month out there are rises and declines, followed by additional rises and declines. But if one looks at the market in terms of years or decades, one sees continued growth and opportunity. Yes we are angry, and feel cheated and betrayed by the recent decisions of the church. Well, we should be, because we were. But it is worth remembering that there are 70 or 80 Catholics in this world for every Jew. We need the church far more than the church needs us. And we have gained far more from this dialogue since 1965 than in all the years preceding it. So now is not the time for breaking off dialogue, or issuing press releases that make us feel good but accomplish nothing. Now is the time to do what we have always done: articulate our views and concerns passionately yet respectfully, reminding the church of the moral leadership that it has the potential to offer in our troubled world, and pointing out where its actions fall short of its words. We can't stop this terrible decision. But we can encourage the Church to demand more concessions from SSPX for before it is allowed full communion with the church. And we can point out how this decision flies in the face of the Second Vatican Council, and threatens all the good that has been achieved.

And when all else fails, we must remember that the church is going to do what it needs to do in pursuit of its own best interest. It's a challenge to us that we act accordingly. So ask yourselves: Is open confrontation with the church on an issue so dear to them worth the effort or are we better off continuing to advocate along the lines of the past 45 years, two steps forward, one step backwards, but at least always moving in a direction that serves our own interests?

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