

# America

Oct. 8, 2007

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

\$2.75

## The Latin Liturgy

Implications for Catholic/Jewish Dialogue

*Anthony J. Cernera and Eugene Korn*

A Bishop Remembers • *Emil A. Wcela*



The Nobel Women's Initiative  
Interview by *George M. Anderson*

Readers respond to the  
Catholic faculty 'problem'



What the pope's letter means for the church's 'elders in the faith'

# The Latin Liturgy and the Jews

– BY ANTHONY J. CERNERA AND EUGENE KORN –

**P** OPE BENEDICT XVI'S RECENT LETTER to bishops authorizing wider use of the 1962 Roman Missal, commonly referred to as the Latin Mass, has provoked strong reactions from Jews and Catholics worldwide who are committed to furthering the historic work of reconciliation begun at the Second Vatican Council with the "Declaration on the Relation of the

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Church to Non-Christian Religions” (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965). Many are concerned that some language in the missal harkens back to the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition within Christianity, which for some 18 centuries saw Jews as a threat to Christian society. This tradition was forthrightly and courageously rejected at Vatican II. Yet we and many others in the interfaith community believe these issues can be addressed while still honoring the pope’s laudable desire to reach out to those Catholics who feel a special connection to the Latin rite. There is much to learn from the present controversy. Indeed, it is a crucial moment in the history of Jewish-Catholic dialogue, a test of how far our relations have progressed.

*Nostra Aetate* was one of the most dramatic developments in Catholic teaching to emerge from Vatican II. The declaration initiated a new phase of Catholic understanding of Jews and Judaism, creating a historic possibility for Catholics and Jews to begin reversing their age-old relationship of hostility and denigration in favor of a relationship of “fraternal bonds” and “shared spiritual patrimony.” Later on Pope John Paul II personally sought to quicken the pace of this reconciliation. His papacy embraced the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* like no other, and he left a stunning legacy of teachings, documents and public gestures that fostered renewed hope and understanding among Catholics and Jews.

One contemporary Catholic theologian, Mary C. Boys, S.N.J.M., has summed up post-Vatican II Catholic teachings on Catholic-Jewish relations as “the six R’s”: (1) repudiation of anti-Semitism; (2) refutation of deicide—the charge that the Jews killed God by killing his son, Jesus; (3) repentance after the *Shoah* (Holocaust); (4) recognition of Israel; (5) review of the teaching about Jews and Judaism and (6) rethinking efforts to convert Jews. *Nostra Aetate* started a journey from which there appeared to be no return.

### A Step Backward?

Many Catholics and Jews fear that the official document authorizing wider use of the Latin Mass, *Summorum Pontificum*, signals a reversal of the salutary developments of the council. Their concerns are warranted. Since it was composed before Vatican II, the 1962 Roman Missal was not informed by *Nostra Aetate* and later church teachings on Catholic-Jewish relations. That missal (sometimes called

the Missal of John XXIII) contains a prayer for use on Good Friday that singles out Jews for conversion, attributes to them a particular blindness and asks God to lift the “veil from their hearts.” This inches perilously close to a view of Judaism as a fossilized and invalid faith and draws explicitly on *Adversus Judaeos* language to characterize Jews. Meanwhile, the Missal of Paul VI in wide use today strikes a categorically different tone, instructing Catholics to pray that the Jewish people “will grow in the love of God’s name and in faithfulness to his covenant.”

The words of the 1962 Good Friday prayer are inconsistent with the church’s binding commitments undertaken in *Nostra Aetate* to deplore anti-Semitism, eschew negative depictions of Jews and “foster and recommend mutual understanding and respect.” John Paul II taught repeatedly that the church’s “attitude to the Jewish religion should be one of the greatest respect, since the Catholic faith is rooted in the eternal truths contained in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the irrevocable covenant made with Abraham” (Sydney, Australia, Nov. 26, 1986). *Guidelines on Religious Relations With the Jews* (1974) states that the witness of Catholics to Jesus Christ should not give offense to Jews. Numerous

Catholic documents have expanded upon the language of *Nostra Aetate* to stress that a thoughtful and respectful understanding of Judaism is crucial for Catholic self-understanding, and that Catholics should strive to understand Jews not by means of stereotypes but by “the essential traits that Jews [use to] define themselves in light of their own religious experience” (Prologue to *Guidelines*). It is difficult to see how any honest parsing of the 1962 Good Friday text could be harmonized with these directives.

How are Catholics to understand these disparate postures and theologies? It is a commonplace of logic that from false premises, any conclusion—no matter how absurd—validly follows. Yet one need not be a logician to know that inconsistent church statements and incoherent theologies only weaken belief and undermine credibility. Nor does it matter that “only a few” Catholics will likely use the 1962 rite. Once authorized by the church, the text becomes an official expression of Catholic belief. *Lex orandi, lex credendi* (our prayer is our faith). Theological validity is not a matter of counting heads.

Reviving the demeaning descriptions of Jews threatens to undermine the decades of trust and fraternal relations

Many are concerned that some language in the 1962 missal harkens back to the tradition that for some 18 centuries saw Jews as a threat.



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with the Jewish people that the church has labored to achieve. Many Catholics see this not merely as a social setback but a spiritual one as well. Surely the dialogue between Catholics and their “elders in the faith” has reaped spiritual rewards and insights for both groups.

For Jews, the 1962 Good Friday prayer causes deep pain. Jews around the world remain proudly committed to the faith of their ancestors and the biblical covenant between the children of Abraham and the creator of heaven and earth. After centuries of anti-Semitism and misunderstanding fostered by negative religious stereotypes, Jews are still learning to trust and to hope that the future can indeed be different. Few things have helped strengthen this budding trust more than the church’s new respect for Jews and Judaism. Unfortunately, the 1962 Good Friday prayer weakens the Jewish hope that when Catholics want to dialogue, conversion will not be an important motive and that the old anti-Jewish prejudices will no longer be at work.

### Lessons From the Controversy

We can glean important lessons from the present controversy. For faithful Jews, the call to conversion is an existential issue. No matter how much Jews wish to learn from and appreciate Catholics, when the specter of conversion lurks in the background of dialogue, no Jew with theological integrity can participate. When Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, an observer at Vatican II and the most important Jewish theologian there, saw that the penultimate version of *Nostra Aetate* contained an allusion to conversion, on the eve of Yom Kippur he flew to Rome to speak to Pope Paul VI and the council’s bishops. He emotionally professed: “If faced with the choice of baptism or the crematoria of Auschwitz, I would choose Auschwitz.” The bishops deleted the reference.

Forty years have passed since *Nostra Aetate* was proclaimed, and genuine progress has been made. The dialogue between Catholics and Jews matured under the teachings and legacy of John Paul II. From the earliest days of the implementation of *Nostra Aetate*, Catholic colleges and universities were called to do their share in continuing the theological dialogue that would deepen understanding and reconciliation between the two religions. There are now 28 academic centers in the United States committed to the mission of dialogue. Our work has taught us to understand our religious differences more clearly, and in doing so we become better Catholics and better Jews. Our communities have achieved much progress, and both have too much invested to permit stasis or regression. Pope Benedict XVI understands this and has made it clear in speech and gesture that nurturing Catholic-Jewish relations is as much a priority for him as it was for the church during the council.

The issues raised by permitting the older prayer sharp-

en theological questions that Jews and Catholics need to ask themselves: What are the limits of our recognition and respect for each other's faith? Can our traditions overcome past problems? Can we see the image of God in the face of the other, or does the other's faith threaten my convictions? As recently as 60 years ago the answers to these questions precluded positive Catholic-Jewish relations and made our practical differences seem unbridgeable. But the fruits of 40 years of Catholic-Jewish dialogue are obvious.

### A Solution at Hand

A pastoral solution could be at hand. The pope's letter confirms that modifications to the Latin rite are possible, and the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, stated on July 19 that substituting the text of the 1970 prayer in the Roman Missal for the 1962 text could resolve the problems without sacrificing any principle. We are awaiting further word from the Vatican on this possibility.

The statements issued by Jewish and Catholic organizations resonate with a respectful tone and a balanced understanding of the intricacies that any modifications to an approved text of the church require. It is a conversation not only between faiths but between friends. When our Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding considered its options for addressing the Latin Mass, we chose to work directly

with Cardinal Walter Kasper of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews to encourage further theological reflection on the 1962 Good Friday prayers. Our strategy was to follow the rules of the new dialogue, which call for an earnest desire to seek solutions and not sensationalize the issue in headlines. Within a week, the response from Cardinal Kasper indicated the commission was committed to the search for an appropriate solution consistent with the teachings of *Nostra Aetate*.

The precedent of Catholic sensitivity to Jewish integrity set at Vatican II is a good one to follow in 2007. Such sensitivity has deepened since the council, enriched by our growing understanding of each other and the recognition that God has intertwined Catholic and Jewish destinies. Such a seemingly small editorial change in the 1962 missal would express the sea change in that new relationship and demonstrate our ability to resolve our differences amicably without loss of integrity on either side. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI on the 40th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, we must "overcome past prejudices...indifference and the language of contempt to continue the Jewish-Christian dialogue...to deepen the bonds of friendship." **A**

From **America's** archives: "The Jews and Vatican II,"  
Nov. 30, 1963, at [www.americamagazine.org](http://www.americamagazine.org)

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