



## **Benedict acknowledges progress, challenges in Catholic-Jewish relations**

### **Pope also meets with Catholic seminarians, German Protestants**

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By JOHN L. ALLEN JR., *National Catholic Reporter*  
Cologne, Germany

Visiting a German synagogue where more than half the congregation perished in Nazi death camps during World War II, Pope Benedict XVI today issued a strong denunciation of anti-Semitism, and a stark acknowledgment of the horrors of the Holocaust.

Cologne is home to the oldest Jewish community north of the Alps, and numbered some 20,000 at the time of the Second World War. According to synagogue officials, more than 11,000 perished during the war.

The pope called the Shoah, the preferred Hebrew term for the genocide of Jews by the Nazis, "an unspeakable and previously unimaginable crime."

Known as one of the premier Catholic theologians of his generation, Benedict also reflected on the Christian understanding of Judaism, quoting St. Paul to the effect that "the gifts and call of God are irrevocable" -- language generally understood to mean that the Jewish covenant with God, made before the birth of Christ and long believed by many Christians to have been superseded, is still valid.

Before Benedict spoke, the cantor of the Cologne synagogue, Adam Adler, sang a reading from Genesis. When he finished, another member of the congregation blew the shofar, or ram's horn, a traditional way of calling people to worship.

The hour-long encounter opened with a brief visit by Benedict XVI to a Holocaust memorial in an outer part of the synagogue. As he walked into the main worship area, the congregation sang Shalom alechem, or "peace be with you." Later, as Benedict exchanged gifts and greetings with members of the congregation, a small group played traditional Yiddish Klezmer music.

In a final touch of affection, as the pope was preparing to pull away in his car, a man from the congregation wearing a traditional Jewish yarmulke and tallit sprinted towards the pope's window and planted a kiss on the glass.

Despite these gestures of brotherhood, the visit also offered small reminders of points that have sometimes divided Catholics and Jews.

The pope, for example, pressed Jews and Christians to be frank with one another not just about what they share, but also about theological differences rooted in "profound convictions in faith."

Though he did not unpack the point, most observers understood this, at least in part, as a reference to debates over whether Christians should formally renounce attempts to convert Jews -- something that Benedict and other doctrinal conservatives see as a betrayal of Christianity's missionary imperative.

Abraham Lehrer, a leader of the synagogue community who greeted Pope Benedict, raised another sensitive issue. He told the pope that a decision by the Vatican to fully open its World War II archives "would be a good thing."

Those archives have been partially opened to researchers, but some material is still withheld pending what the Vatican has described as cataloguing and preparation. Some researchers and Jewish activists have clamored for full access, especially with regard to debates over Pope Pius XII and alleged "silences" on the Holocaust, though Vatican experts insist that remaining material will not add to the already familiar historical record.

Lehrer, whose mother is a Holocaust survivor and was present for the pope's visit, also warned that anti-Semitism persists in many environments, including the Catholic church.

(CNS/KNA)

Pope Benedict XVI walks with Rabbi Natanael Teitelbaum as he enters the synagogue in Cologne, Germany, Aug. 18. The pope recalled with sorrow the Nazi persecution of the Jews as the "darkest period of German and European history" and said the Catholic Church has a duty to remember the Holocaust and teach its lessons to younger generations.

Benedict's message on anti-Semitism carried special resonance, coming from the first German pope in more than 500 years, and a man who was briefly, albeit involuntarily, enrolled in the Hitler Youth, and who was drafted into the German army during World War II before deserting.

"In the 20th 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," Benedict XVI said.

"The result has passed into history as the Shoah. ... The holiness of God was no longer recognized, and consequently contempt was shown for the sacredness of human life."

Benedict warned that anti-Semitism is not merely an artifact of the past.

"Today, sadly, we are witnessing the rise of new signs of anti-Semitism and various forms of a general hostility toward foreigners," he said.

On the church's theological understanding of Judaism, Benedict XVI invoked John Paul II.

"Both Jews and Christians recognize in Abraham their father in faith," he said, "and they look to the teachings of Moses and the prophets. Jewish spirituality, like its Christian counterpart, draws nourishment from the psalms. ... In considering the Jewish roots of Christianity my venerable predecessor, quoting a statement by the German bishops, affirmed that 'whoever meets Jesus Christ meets Judaism.' "

Acknowledging great progress in Catholic-Jewish relations, Benedict said there's still work to do -- including developing the confidence to be critical of one another.

"We must come to know one another much more and much better," the pope said. "Consequently I would encourage sincere and trustful dialogue between Jews and Christians. ... This dialogue, if it is to be sincere, must not gloss over or underestimate the existing differences: in those areas in which, due to our profound convictions in faith, we diverge, and indeed precisely in those areas, we need to show respect for one another."

## **Meeting with German Protestants**

Addressing another kind of dialogue later in the day, Benedict XVI met with an ecumenical delegation, composed especially of German Protestants, in a session at the archbishop's residence.

The pope said that coming from Germany, where Catholics and Protestants are fairly evenly split, gives him special sensitivity to ecumenical questions.

"As a native of this country, I am quite aware of the painful situation which the rupture of unity in the profession of the faith has entailed for so many individuals and families," he said.

Benedict acknowledged the impatience of many believers on both sides of the Protestant-Catholic divide for more rapid progress, but warned that "there can be no dialogue at the expense of truth."

For one thing, Benedict made clear that when Catholics discuss unity, they mean inside the Catholic church, where Christian unity already "subsists," in a well-known phrase of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Yet unity, the pope said, does not have to mean uniformity.

Benedict made another theological observation about ecumenism. Many of the most pressing theological divides between Christians, he said, such as the nature of sacred ministry and priesthood, rest on a correct understanding of the Bible and the church.

Finally, Benedict called on Christians to practice "spiritual ecumenism," meaning "prayer, conversion and the sanctification of life." Citing ecumenical writer Paul Couturier, the pope called on Christians from the different confessions to form an "invisible cloister" of believers praying passionately for unity.

## **Seminarians also gather**

In between these two appointments, Pope Benedict met with a group of 2,000 seminarians from a variety of countries, saying he wanted to highlight the "vocational dimension" of World Youth Day. In a six-paragraph talk, Benedict spoke fluently in five languages: German, French, English, Italian and Spanish.

In what may well have been a coincidence, Benedict read in English a paragraph that included the following line: "The role of formators is decisive: the quality of the presbyterate in a particular Church depends greatly on that of the seminary, and consequently on the quality of those responsible for

formation." The remark comes on the eve of a Vatican-sponsored visitation of American seminaries, intended in part to take stock after the sexual abuse crises that have rocked the U.S. church.

One bit of unacknowledged trivia about the meeting with the seminarians is that the church in which it took place, St. Pantaleon, is the only parish in Cologne entrusted to the sometimes-controversial Catholic group Opus Dei. Vatican officials told NCR that the choice was based on the fact that St. Pantaleon was available, and is located conveniently near the center of the city.

As the pope made the rounds on Friday, hundreds of thousands of young pilgrims poured in and out of Cologne's legendary gothic-style cathedral, where the remains of the Three Wise Men are believed to rest. Thousands formed long lines to go to confession, while others prayed on either side of the chapel that houses the remains.

The New Testament line associated with the Three Wise Men, "We have come to worship him," is the official theme of the Cologne World Youth Day.