

Silent Tension and Harsh Debates. The Pope's Visit to the Synagogue of Rome

Maria Rita Latto (January 19, 2010)



Pope Benedict XVI visited the main Jewish synagogue in Rome on Sunday January, 17. He was the first pope in 24 years to visit the Tempio Maggiore, or Great Temple. It was an event that stirred up many debates and tensions not only between Catholics and Jews, but also within Italy's Jewish community.

Jewish leaders from around the world traveled to Rome for the German-born Benedict's third visit to a synagogue as pope, after visiting synagogues in Cologne, Germany and New York. It was an opportunity for him to follow in the steps of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, who in Rome, 1986 was the first pontiff to ever visit a synagogue.

The disappointment in the Jewish community was prompted by the Pontiff's decision last month to position wartime Pope Pius XII closer to sainthood. Some Jews and historians have argued that Pius, pope from 1939 to 1958, was largely silent on the Holocaust and should have done more to prevent the deaths of 6 million Jews at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators. Among the victims there were more than 1,000 Roman Jews who were deported in 1943 from the old Ghetto neighborhood, across the river from the Vatican.



Piero Terracina, one of about a dozen survivors of the deportation, said he would not attend Benedict's visit. "I am convinced that if the Pope had come out, had made one single gesture, the Roman Jews would not have been deported, but that didn't happen," Terracina declared in the *Corriere della Sera*. The Vatican rejects these accusations, stating that Pius was not silent but worked behind the scenes because public intervention would have worsened the situation for both Jews and Catholics in a wartime Europe dominated by Hitler. If this is so, why has the Vatican refused to open the archives from Pope Pius' tenure to show proof?

Furthermore, signing a decree attesting to Pius' "heroic virtues," and practically paving the way for him to be beatified once a miracle attributed to his intercession is confirmed, was another negative fact in the eyes of the Jews. Jewish groups want the process frozen until more Vatican archives are opened to scholars.

Rabbi Giuseppe Laras, president of Italy's rabbinical assembly, announced that he would not attend the visit on Sunday to protest what he said were a series of moves by the Vatican seen as disrespectful to Jews. "The Pope knew perfectly well that several weeks later he would be visiting the Synagogue and he knew how sensitive we are about the issue of Pius XII.

Wouldn't it have been opportune to delay [the decision] by a few months?" Laras asked the Milan newspaper *Il Giornale*. On the other hand, Rabbi Arthur Schneier, who hosted Benedict's visit to a New York synagogue in 2008, said he respects those made uncomfortable by the beatification plan, but told the Associated Press that "one should not be paralyzed by the past, one has to move on." Days before the visit, Rome's Chief Rabbi Riccardo Di Segni tried to reassure the Jewish community: "It will be a meeting of peace, friendship, and mutual respect," he said. "But above all it will be an example of how to coexist even if we have differences." Cardinal Walter Kasper, the top Vatican official in charge of Jewish relations, said that "problems and difficulties will be open until the last day of history," but "the visit will not speak about the problems but about what we have in common." Kasper also said that the beatification is an "internal question of the Church" and has to do with the "spiritual judgment" of Pius, not his historical role.

Other disputes that have strained Jewish-Catholic relations include Benedict's rehabilitation of a Holocaust-denying bishop last year and his 2007 decision to revive Latin Mass, which includes a prayer for the conversion of Jews.

After so many controversies taking place over several weeks, the day of the visit to the Synagogue finally arrived. The Pope was welcomed with warm applause despite the chilly weather. Before entering, he placed flowers before memorial tablets marking two of the darkest moments in the history of the Jewish community of Rome: one commemorates the round-up and deportation of 1,022 Jews on October 16, 1943; the other recalls October 9, 1982, the day of a terrorist attack at the Synagogue in which a two-year-old child was killed.

Among those present at the Tempio Maggiore were survivors of Nazi extermination camps who had decided not to boycott the ceremony; they were visibly moved when the Pontiff mentioned in his speech the Shoah, one of the greatest tragedies in human history. He called on Catholics and Jews to keep an open dialogue and work together to tackle problems, such as poverty and disease. "This rule urges Jews and Christians to practice, in our time, special generosity towards the poor, towards women and children, strangers, the sick, the weak, and the needy." Christians and Jews "share to a great extent a common spiritual heritage," but "often remain unknown to each other," he said. "It is our duty, in response to God's call, to strive to keep an open space for dialogue, for reciprocal respect, for growth in friendship, for a common witness in the face of the challenges of our time which invite us to cooperate for the good of humanity...." Benedict XVI also told the audience that the Vatican "provided assistance, often in a hidden and discreet way," but he did not mention Pope Pius by name.

There was a heavy silence indicating that tensions are still present and that there is an invisible presence, one that is impossible to ignore and continues to create an evidently embarrassing situation.



Although the Pope did not mention Pope Pius by name, it was inevitably uttered by the president of the Jewish Community of Rome, Riccardo Pacifici, who observed that the Pontiff's visit "will leave a profound mark," not only from a religious perspective, "but most of all, the positive effect we hope it will have on civil society." Pacifici also stressed his appreciation for the Pope's "courageous position" on immigration. Recalling that his father, Emanuele Pacifici, escaped the Holocaust because he was hidden in the convent of the Sisters of St. Marta in Florence, Pacifici noted that thousands of Catholics had helped Jews, emphasizing that they did so "without asking for anything in return." In this context he deemed the supposed silence of Pope Pius XII a "missed opportunity" that could have given courage and hope to those who fled extermination. Pacifici concluded his speech by stressing that the dialogue between Jews and Christians "can and must continue."

The Chief Rabbi of Rome, Riccardo Di Segni, who presided over the event, remembered John Paul II's visit in 1986. On that historic occasion he referred to the Jews as "our beloved brothers." It was the first visit by a pope to a Jewish house of worship and was an important step toward largely improved relations. "If ours is a relationship of brothers," Rabbi Di Segni said, "we should ask ourselves quite sincerely where we are on this journey and how far we still have to travel before we can arrive at an authentic relationship of brotherhood and understanding, and what we have to do to achieve this." And, referring to the previous days' debate, he stated that while "the silence of God" is inscrutable, "the silence of man is on a different level" and "it does not escape justice." Once again the presence of Pius XII is impossible to escape until the Vatican archives become accessible, clarifying any doubts and eliminating every shadow.

The wound is still present and it is impossible to recover from it. Several hours before the Pope's arrival, Pacifici was outside the Synagogue talking with journalists and stated that he belonged to a generation of Jews who for many years refused to buy items produced in Germany as a reaction to the horror they had lived through, even indirectly. He also was also reminded of friends who for a long time would not take a plane that flew over German air space. Pacifici said that, luckily, those times are over. A German pope visiting the Synagogue is a small step and, despite the debate, his presence was an occasion to pray together, find common ground, and break the silence.

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