

# JEWISH LEADERS BLAST GOOD FRIDAY PRAYER

Pope Benedict XVI heard a torrent of criticism following the release of the revision of the Latin Good Friday prayer for the Jews. The Holy Father had altered the prayer in reaction to complaints from some Jewish leaders who objected to its former reference to Jews' "blindness." The old prayer also asked God to "remove the veil from their [the Jews'] hearts." However, though the pope rewrote the prayer, the new version was met with ire by people still angry that it asks God for a conversion of all to accept Jesus as the Savior of mankind.

Abe Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League, intoned, "we are deeply troubled and disappointed that the framework and intention to petition God for Jews to accept Jesus as Lord was kept intact." Foxman went on to hold himself out as an expert in Catholic theology, saying the revised prayer "is a major departure from the teachings and actions of Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II, and numerous authoritative Catholic documents, including *Nostra Aetate*."

Others also inserted themselves into an internal Church matter. Rabbi David Rosen, head of the American Jewish Committee and chair of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (which includes B'nai Brith, the World Jewish Congress, and many other organizations), opined: "This new version for the Latin rite appears to be a regression from the path advanced by the declaration of the second Vatican Council. We urge the Catholic Church to deepen its exploration of the full implications of *Nostra Aetate*'s affirmation of the eternal validity of God's Divine Covenant with the Jewish People."

Sir Sigmund Sternberg, a Jewish papal knight and founder of a British interfaith organization called Three Faiths Forum,

offered this reprimand to the Vatican: "The Second Vatican Council said we should be nice to the Jews." How exactly praying for Jews constitutes not being "nice," Sternberg didn't say. Further, in an editorial rife with factual errors, prominent Jewish newspaper the *Forward* charged that Pope Benedict XVI undid the good interfaith work accomplished by popes John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II. The paper even claimed: "Christian missionizing [i.e., prayer]...demeans Judaism and ultimately threatens Jewish security."

The United Kingdom's Council of Christians and Jews also lectured the Vatican on Catholic teaching, claiming that the new prayer "appears to go against the grain of all that the Church has taught for the last 50 years." The chief rabbi of Rome, Riccardo Di Segnie, also expressed displeasure with the new prayer, as did Rabbi Guiseppe Laras, chairman of the Italian Rabbinical Assembly. Rabbi Laras even warned, "the prayer will eventually strengthen the positions of those Jewish environments that oppose the dialogue with the Catholic Church."

An international coalition of Conservative rabbis, also called the Rabbinical Assembly, took a stance on the matter. They drafted a statement charging that the new Catholic prayer would "cast a harsh shadow over the spirit of mutual respect and collaboration that has marked these past four decades." After rethinking their words, however, the rabbis struck that line and adopted another resolution stating that they were "dismayed and deeply disturbed" by the prayer.

Why anyone should be surprised that Catholics continue to pray that all may worship Jesus is baffling. The Church's belief in Jesus as the Savior of all mankind has never wavered, despite what some of these critics may claim. As Cardinal Walter Kasper, head of the Vatican's relations with the Jews, told reporters, "We think that reasonably this prayer cannot be an obstacle to dialogue because it reflects the faith of the Church and, furthermore, Jews have prayers in their liturgical

texts that we Catholics don't like. I must say that I don't understand why Jews cannot accept that we can make use of our freedom to formulate our prayers."

It appears that some Jewish leaders agree with the cardinal. Rabbi Jacob Neusner (whose analysis of Jesus' life played a significant role in Pope Benedict XVI's book *Jesus of Nazareth*) spoke to the press when the whole controversy began. Rabbi Neusner explained he wasn't concerned about the Catholic prayer, adding "I've pointed out that the synagogue liturgy has an equivalent prayer which we say three times a day, not just once a year." The rabbi was referring to the prayer said by Jewish men thanking God for not making them gentiles.

Hillel Halkin, a translator of Jewish literature and contributing editor of the *New York Sun*, was perplexed as to why some Jews are outraged. He wrote, "Frankly, I don't see how it's possible to be a believing Christian without hoping that the Jews will one day accept Jesus." Halkin also argued that one Jewish High Holy Day prayer is "a prayer for Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus to abandon their religions and accept the Torah of Israel," and wondered how Jews would respond if Christians were to request it be abandoned.

As Cardinal Kasper has made it clear, by affirming that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior of all mankind, the Church is giving "witness to our faith." The goal of the revised prayer is certainly not to disparage Jews. It must be hoped that when this controversy dies down, the excellent relations between Catholic and Jewish leaders can once again resume. Interfaith dialogue can continue without sacrificing deeply held beliefs or ordering others to alter theirs.