

# Addition of two meetings shows pope's concern for Jews

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI's addition of two meetings with Jews in the United States underlined the pope's continuing interest in improving Catholic-Jewish relations.

It's a relationship that is extremely important to the German pope, but which has had its ups and downs since he was elected three years ago.

The pope has pleased many Jewish leaders by emphasizing that Jews have a special place in salvation history. He has visited a synagogue and the Auschwitz death camp, suspended the sainthood cause of a priest suspected of anti-Semitism and expressed full support for the new relationship with Judaism launched by the Second Vatican Council.

But the comments he made at Auschwitz in 2006 prompted some Jewish representatives to ask why he didn't explore the roots of anti-Semitism and the responsibility of Christians – including those in his native country.

Perhaps the most sensitive issue is the question of conversion, and it has come to the fore in recent weeks.

After the pope relaxed restrictions on the Tridentine Mass in 2007, Jews objected to the restoration of the old Roman Missal's Good Friday prayer for the conversion of Jews, which spoke of the Jews' "blindness."

In February, the pope took the unusual step of personally rewriting the prayer. But although he removed the offensive language, the revised text's reference to the salvation of the Jews left many fearing it called for their conversion.

The prayer, which is only used by a small number of Catholic communities, now begins: "Let us pray for the Jews. May the Lord our God enlighten their hearts so that they may acknowledge Jesus Christ, the savior of all men."

Cardinal Walter Kasper, who coordinates Catholic dialogue with the Jews, emphasized that the prayer is eschatological in nature, referring to the end of time, and is not a call for a missionary effort among the Jews.

But Jewish leaders continued to press for clarification of the new text.

In response, the Vatican published a statement April 4 saying the newly formulated prayer “in no way intends to indicate a change in the Catholic Church’s regard for the Jews.” The Vatican underlined the bonds of “esteem, dialogue, love, solidarity and collaboration between Catholics and Jews.”

The Vatican’s explanation, it is hoped, will help ensure the success of the two U.S. meetings, a brief encounter with Jews in Washington and a visit to the Park East Synagogue in New York.

From the moment of Pope Benedict’s election, some wondered how the Jewish community would react to the choice of a German pope who had been forced to enroll in the Hitler Youth during the Nazi era.

In fact, many Jewish leaders praised the new pope as a thoughtful dialogue partner and rejected the idea that he was in any way a sympathizer with Nazism.

Rabbi Israel Singer, vice president of the World Jewish Congress, met with Pope Benedict in 2005 and called him “an old friend in new white robes,” the man who “gave the theological underpinnings to the gestures of Pope John Paul.”

What many Jewish leaders appreciated was the pope’s clear teaching that Christianity has a special relationship with Judaism.

As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he said several years ago: “It is evident that we come from the roots of Israel and that their Bible is our Bible and that Judaism is not just one of many religions but is the foundation, the root of our faith.”

In one of his first acts as pontiff, Pope Benedict sent a message to Rome’s chief rabbi expressing his intent to advance dialogue with the Jewish community.

Later in 2005, marking the 40th anniversary of “Nostra Aetate,” the Vatican II

declaration on relations with non-Christians, the pope cited the shared spiritual roots of Catholics and Jews and called for a common witness on issues of life, human dignity, the family and peace.

The pope showed sensitivity to Jewish concerns the same year when he effectively suspended the beatification cause of Father Leon Dehon, founder of the Sacred Heart of Jesus religious order, and formed a commission of church experts to study the priest's writings for alleged anti-Semitism.

On a sainthood cause with even greater potential impact, Pope Benedict late last year established a commission to study archival material about the papacy of Pope Pius XII and examine how his possible beatification would affect Catholic-Jewish relations.

The move was not an abandonment of the sainthood cause, but it signaled that the pope would be looking very carefully at its wider consequences, including interreligious and diplomatic aspects.

On his very first foreign trip in 2005, Pope Benedict visited a synagogue in Cologne, Germany, that had been destroyed in a 1938 Kristallnacht pogrom and rebuilt after the war. In a moving encounter, he recalled the Nazi persecution of the Jews as "the darkest period of German and European history."

A year later, however, when he visited Auschwitz in Poland, some Jewish leaders criticized the pope for not focusing enough on the Nazis' Jewish victims and for not explicitly condemning anti-Semitism.

The pope responded a few days later, telling a general audience in Rome that humanity must not give in to "the temptation of racial hatred, which is the origin of the worst forms of anti-Semitism."

One of the pope's most intriguing "encounters" with Judaism came in his 2007 book, "Jesus of Nazareth." The most quoted author in the pope's book was Rabbi Jacob Neusner, a U.S. professor of religion and theology.

Responding to Rabbi Neusner's own book, "A Rabbi Talks With Jesus," the pope praised him for taking the Gospel of Jesus seriously and for correctly grasping Jesus'

own understanding of his mission as the Son of God – even though, in the end, the rabbi could not accept Christ as savior.