

Bumps in the road should not slow journey

VATICAN CITY - Summer brought a few bumps in the road of generally good Catholic-Jewish relations, bumps almost certainly caused inadvertently.

In a further example of how internal church matters can negatively impact the church's external relations, Pope Benedict XVI's July decision to widen access to the Tridentine Mass and his brief encounter Aug. 5 with Redemptorist Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, a Polish priest accused of anti-Semitism, led to expressions of concern by several Jewish groups.

On both occasions, the Vatican responded with statements reaffirming the Catholic Church's commitment to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the completely new chapter the council opened in Jewish-Catholic relations.

Despite the hiccups, Oded Ben-Hur, the Israeli ambassador to the Vatican, said, "Officially and institutionally, relations are constantly improving."

In an Aug. 16 interview, the ambassador said: "Sometimes the mishaps, which look terrible at the beginning, can strengthen us by forcing us to clarify them. Trial and error is a form of education."

More than 40 years after the Second Vatican Council, "given the long and difficult history between Christians and Jews, we may expect bumps along our common road, but if the commitment of those who decided to walk this road together is strong, the bumps won't stop them."

At the same time, he said, "brothers should always bear in mind the need to be sensitive and to remember the reciprocal responsibility of brothers and to be more aware of the implications the moves they make have on our relationship."

More than a month after Pope Benedict XVI published his document granting wider use of the 1962 Roman Missal, often referred to as the Tridentine rite, concern

continued over the text of a Good Friday prayer in the missal. Ben-Hur said the chief rabbis of Israel sent a letter of concern about the prayer to Pope Benedict in early July and were expecting a response.

The controversy demonstrated how even the most carefully studied papal document is open to interpretation and further fine-tuning.

According to most observers, the papal permission to use the old rite on Good Friday would be limited to parishes that always celebrate the liturgy only according to the 1962 Roman Missal, which is expected to be only a small portion of the Catholic faithful.

Even so, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state, told reporters in late July that the problem of the Good Friday prayer would be studied at the Vatican and might be resolved by deciding that even those who use the 1962 missal would use the 1970 text of the prayer.

Ben-Hur said members of the Jewish community expect the Vatican to fulfill promises to correct the situation.

After the Second Vatican Council, the 1962 missal's prayer "for the conversion of the Jews" was replaced with a prayer that the Jews would continue to grow in love for God and in fidelity to the covenant he made with them.

By praying for the conversion of the Jews, the older prayer appears to contradict the Second Vatican Council's teaching that "God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their fathers; he does not repent of the gifts he makes or of the calls he issues."

Writing in the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, in December 2000, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote, "As Christians we are the inheritors of their faith in the one God."

"Our gratitude," the future pope wrote, "must be extended to our Jewish brothers and sisters who, despite the hardships of their own history, have held on to faith in this God right up to the present, and who witness to it in the sight of those peoples who, lacking knowledge of the one God, 'dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death.'"

Two years later, Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Commission for Relations With the Jews, told a U.S. conference that Christians cannot ignore their core belief in the universality of salvation in Christ.

However, he said, “this does not mean that Jews, in order to be saved, have to become Christians; if they follow their own conscience and believe in God’s promises as they understand them in their religious tradition, they are in line with God’s plan, which for us comes to historical completion in Jesus Christ.”

Because Jews believe in the one God, creator of all and source of salvation, “mission understood as a call to conversion from idolatry to the living and true God does not apply and cannot be applied to Jews,” the cardinal said.

While Christians acknowledge that all believers - themselves first of all - are called to ongoing conversion, the history of Catholics who forcibly tried to convert Jews and of Christian attacks on Jews during Holy Week have made the 1962 prayer a symbol of an attitude definitively rejected by the Second Vatican Council and the popes who have followed.

The council’s presentation of the official Catholic attitude toward the Jews and Judaism “is still a small plant that still needs time to grow,” Ben-Hur said. “Our main mission is one of teaching to overcome the abyss of ignorance” of one another.