

Benedict's plea

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On January 25, 1904 Theodor Herzl obtained an audience with Pope Pius X to seek Vatican support for the Zionist enterprise. The pontiff held out his hand, but Herzl did not kiss it - though he felt uncomfortable not doing so.

The father of modern Zionism outlined his plans. The pope's response was disappointing: "We cannot give approval to this movement... We can never sanction it... The Jews have not recognized our Lord; therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people."

The Church has come a long way in its attitude. The principal milestone was the 1965 Second Vatican Council's *Nostra Aetate* which repudiated the precept of collective Jewish guilt for the death of the Christian messiah.

In 1986, John Paul II became the first modern pope to visit a synagogue, where he called Jews "our beloved elder brothers." And in 1994, the Vatican - casting aside the age-old belief that the Church had replaced the Jews as the "true Israel" - established diplomatic relations with the Jewish state.

In parallel with these signs of progress, there has been some backsliding. In the late 1980s, John Paul II met twice with Kurt Waldheim after the Austrian president's Nazi connections emerged. The Church moved glacially to relocate a group of Carmelite nuns who had set up a convent at Auschwitz. The pope sullied his papacy with a nauseating, 20-minute meeting with Yasser Arafat on September 16, 1982 - long before the PLO chief feigned his renunciation of terrorism. The pontiff went on to meet Arafat 10 more times.

BENEDICT XVI has had a troubling record. In 2005, the pope condemned a litany of terrorist atrocities while conspicuously avoiding mention of the 57 Israelis killed that year during the second intifada.

In 2007, Benedict moved to canonize Pope Pius XII ("Hitler's pope"). Last year, he reintroduced the Tridentine Mass, which *Nostra Aetate* had rendered archaic: The Latin original contained a Good Friday prayer for the conversion of "the perfidious Jews." Benedict's revised version lets Catholic conservatives pray that God "remove the veil" from the hearts of Jews and end their "blindness."

During Operation Cast Lead, a senior Vatican cardinal, Renato Martino, referred to Hamas-ruled Gaza as one "big concentration camp."

But it was the lifting last month of the 1988 excommunication of four arch-conservative bishops associated with the Society of Saint Pius X that brought Catholic-Jewish relations to a nadir. Jews do not much care about theological issues within the Church unless they impact on us directly. But one of those readmitted bishops, Richard Williamson, is an unregenerate Holocaust-denier.

Someone in the Vatican hierarchy did Benedict a great disservice in not forewarning him about Williamson. Only after criticism crested, and the (Protestant) German Chancellor Angela Merkel called on Benedict to make "very clear" his rejection of Holocaust-denial, did the German-born pope take action. (To his credit, Benedict has refused to receive Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.)

As a matter of Jewish dignity, *The Jerusalem Post* called for a moratorium on public contacts between the organized Jewish community and the Vatican - which is now saying Williamson must accept *Nostra Aetate* to be granted full communion, and has told him to publicly recant his Holocaust denial. To no avail.

ON THURSDAY, leaders of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations met with Pope Benedict in Rome. The audience had been scheduled before the Williamson controversy broke. Canceling it would have exacerbated tensions and embarrassed the pope - which is not the Jewish way. These communal leaders sensed the Vatican wanted to set matters straight. It appears they were right.

The pope told them: "Any denial or minimization of [the Holocaust] is intolerable... This should be clear to everyone, especially to those standing in the tradition of the Holy Scriptures."

He then repeated, verbatim, the prayer Pope John Paul offered when he visited the Western Wall in 2000 and asked the Jews to forgive the Christians who had persecuted them over the centuries. Benedict ended: "I now make his prayer my own."

We welcome this reiteration of the late pope's entreaty. Still, as the Holy Father may know, in Jewish tradition, absolution requires not just the confession of a sin, but its cessation.

