Christians and Jews: The Bergoglio-Skorka Dialogues as a Model

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The president of the International Council of Christians and Jews, Philip Cunningham, has described the dialogues between Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, the current pope, and his Argentine friend, Rabbi Abraham Skorka, as a model for Christian-Jewish relations in the 21st century. Fifty years after the groundbreaking declaration of the Council, Nostra Aetate, and its rejection of the long tradition of ecclesial anti-Judaism, there has been, by and large, a thematic relaxation of constriction in the dialogue, said the American biblical scholar in an interview on Friday with “Kath press.” What the Pope and Skorka have shown is "being on the road together as friends."

Cunningham, who teaches at the Jesuit University Saint Joseph's in Philadelphia, had come to Vienna to participate in a Holocaust Memorial. Ongoing remorse and conversion is required of all Christians in the face of "the heavy burden of guilt with regard to the murder of Jews," the ICCJ president warned on the Heldenplatz. He is convinced that "the almost inexpressible evil" of the Holocaust requires "nothing less than a deeply grounded and profound religious response," he said. At the same time, however, he warned against an "overwhelming and self-agonizing sense of guilt," which would make "any penitential change of heart impossible."

In conversation with “Kathpress,” Cunningham elaborated and cited the “unsurpassed” statement of Cardinal Walter [Kasper] from the year 2002. The then President of the Council for ecumenical dialogue and for dialogue with Jews had declared that all Christians have come to realize with greater clarity “that the faith of Israel is the faith of our elder brothers and, above all, that Judaism can be understood as a sacrament of every otherness. The Church must learn to perceive Judaism as such and to acknowledge and celebrate it.” According to Kasper, the Pontifical Commission, therefore, welcomes all initiatives that promote the growing connection to Judaism, its theological and spiritual riches, and its culture.
With this statement, Cardinal Kasper has emphasized a “special relationship to the faith of the Jewish people,” so said Cunningham. He particularly stressed that the now emeritus cardinal used the word “sacrament” for this relationship—a word that, in the Catholic tradition, signifies divine presence: “When we discover holiness in Judaism, it is then also easier to perceive holiness in other religions.”

The ICCJ President emphasized that it is fundamentally true that there ought not to be any desire for conversion in dialogue. The pope too demonstrates that, especially in his conversations with Rabbi Skorka, which, in part, have been published in book form.

The teaching of supersessionism passé

Cunningham believes that the very heated discussion about the theology of “substitution,” which most recently flared up about 15 years ago in Catholic circles, is in the meantime off the table. The occasion for the vehement debate at that time was the criticism of conservative US cardinal Avery Dulles (1918-2008), which he directed against the US bishops’ attitude of openness to dialogue.

Dulles had represented a moderate version of supersessionist theology, according to which God has rejected the people of Israel and has now transferred the divine promises to the Church. This idea had shaped the relation of Christianity to Judaism since the time of the Church Fathers. The re-thinking, which gradually set in after the Holocaust, found expression on the Catholic side with a comprehensive revision of theology, especially in 1965 with the conciliar declaration “Nostra Aetate.”

Since September 2014 Philip Cunningham has been leading the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ), succeeding as President the Jewish theologian Deborah Weissman. The umbrella organization with headquarters in Heppenheim, Germany, to which 40 national Christian-Jewish and interreligious dialogue organizations belong, is engaged in an “Abrahamic dialogue” between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The Austrian member organization of the ICCJ is the Coordinating Committee for Christian-Jewish Collaboration.

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