

Discussion Group "Jews and Christians" Central Committee of German Catholics

Pope Pius IX and the Jews

A Statement of July 21, 2000

Official Roman sources have announced that the beatification of Pope Pius IX is to be expected for September 3, 2000. From the point of view of the discussion group "Jews and Christians" of the ZdK, important factors speak against this, as every beatification is not only an acknowledgment of someone's personal piety and integrity, but at the same time, is meant to be a sign for the Church and society of today. What signal is supposed to be given through Pius IX's beatification in the year 2000? From the point of view of the discussion group "Jews and Christians", it can only mean a disavowal of all the declarations and statements made by Pope John Paul II and several Roman institutions as a followup to the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council, "Nostra aetate" (art. 4) on the relationship of the Catholic Church with Judaism.

For one thing is certain: Pius IX was an Antisemite \neq not in the sense of the primitive racial Antisemitism of the National Socialists; but he denounced a supposed "Judaization of society" in religious, cultural and economic matters, and claimed that this had to be confronted with all the means available to authoritarian officialdom.

It is true that Pius IX did loosen the existing anti-Jewish reins during the first two years of his reign, as several remarkable initiatives show. Thus, he allowed the Jews whose houses had become uninhabitable during the great flood of the Tiber in December 1846 to live temporarily outside of the Jewish ghetto. And he spared the heads of Rome's Jewish community the degrading annual ceremony of submission on Carnival Monday, which had been ordered by Pope Clemens IX in 1668. In addition, he dispensed the city's Jews from listening to the hated forced sermon in the church of Sant' Angelo in Pesceria. Finally, he ordered that the wall around the Jewish ghetto in the city of Rome be torn down during the night of April 17 to 18, 1848, in order to proclaim thus that he wanted to do away with this centuries-old stone symbol of the exclusion of the Jewish fellow citizens once and for all.

Unfortunately, these alleviations for the Jews only lasted a short time. Already in 1850, the pope changed his course radically. Basically, he returned to conditions as they were in the 18th century. Contrary to what had been done in all other Western European States, contrary also to what had been done in the kingdom of Sardinia, where the Jews had already been given equal rights with all the Christian citizens, Pius IX restored the ghettoization of the Jews in the Papal States. On the outside, this could be seen in the fact that he had the walls of the ghetto built up again. In so doing, he pushed Rome's Jewish citizens back into a situation which, at that time in Europe, still existed only in czarist Russia. He renewed the old oppression of the Jews, refused to allow them to practice most trades and to have administrative

positions. Once again, they were forbidden to own land. And again, the Talmud was placed on the index of forbidden books, so that the Jews in the Papal States did not even have free access to their own sacred writings.

Even the medieval ritual murder stories were revived in the Papal States. The Vatican's resumption of the aggressive manner in which mission towards the Jews was practiced gave rise to much attention and revulsion all over Western Europe and the USA. Ultimately, Pius IX could only imagine living together with the Jews on condition that, sooner or later, they would go over to the Catholic faith. In spite of everything, the number of Jewish converts remained low in the Papal States as well as in the whole of Europe; because of this, individual conversions to Catholicism were celebrated publicly as a victory of the Catholic Church over untruth, and the people concerned were rewarded with many material favors.

According to Canon Law, it was forbidden to baptize the children of Jews against the will of their parents unless there was danger of death, or one parent had abandoned the child, or the person concerned had special needs mentally. These exceptional stipulations opened wide the door to arbitrariness. Thus, it was accepted practice that once a Jewish child had been baptized, it was no longer allowed to remain with its parents unless these also went over to Christianity.

The worst case which is only one of several that became known was the so-called Mortara Affair: the evening of July 23, 1858, a police command of Bologna broke into the home of the Jewish merchant, Momolo Mortara and demanded that his six-year old son Edgardo be handed over to them immediately. The police officer explained to the horrified parents that their son had been a Christian for a long time, as had only been discovered now. According to sources, a Christian maid had secretly baptized the boy when he was sick in bed. Current law therefore demanded that the boy be removed from the Jewish house and brought up as a Christian. In an act of governmental kidnapping, the boy was brought to Rome and raised there in a Christian way. When this procedure gave rise to a cry of indignation all over Europe, Pius IX went a step further, documenting his legal point of view in a provocative way. He took the boy very especially under his wing, finally adopting him when he was thirteen. Later, Edgardo entered the Order of the Canons Regular of the Lateran as a novice; he became a monk in the monastery of San Pietro in Vincoli, and in honor of his adoptive father, he took the name Pio. In 1873, Pio Mortara was ordained a priest, and he died at a ripe old age in 1940.

Pius IX self-righteously disregarded the letters of protest from Jewish communities in Italy, England, France, Germany, the USA and Rome, as well as the diplomatic representations from Great Britain, Prussia and Russia, and even the admonitions from the friendly States of France and Austria. Such an attitude cannot be presented as a model for people today.

After the Jews of the former Papal States and of the city of Rome had received formal legal equality with all the other citizens of the kingdom of Italy, Pius IX let himself get carried away in hate-filled tirades against the Jews, which it is simply prohibited to repeat.

Since the Second Vatican Council, relations between Jews and Catholics all over the world have steadily developed for the better. Pope John Paul II himself has contributed to this in a substantial way. The beatification of Pius IX would put an unbearable burden on relations between Jews and Catholics, and in particular, it would raise questions around everything positive that the Church has attained over the last decades. Now, the credibility of the pope and of his Church are at stake. The beatification of Pius IX would destroy a bond, for which Jews and Catholics have together made great efforts for decades. On the first Sunday of Lent 2000, before the entire world, Pope John Paul II publicly expressed repentance for past crimes against the Jewish people. How is it possible, in the same year, to beatify a pope like Pius IX, whose deeds are in such stark contrast to Pope John Paul II's confession of guilt?

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