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The Sodano Code

The Vatican's stale policy on the Middle East.

by Joseph Bottum

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FOR MORE THAN TWENTY years, Pope John Paul II showed a way to work for the defeat of totalitarianism. It was not by armies, although it relied on the threat of American power to keep the dictators from military adventures. And it was not by appeasement, although it knew how to practice patience when it had to. At its deepest, the pope's vision required simply that we refuse government by the lie, that we name and know things for what they are, and his Catholic call for democratic reform seemed to have effect everywhere, from Paraguay to Poland.

Everywhere, that is, except the Middle East, where from Algeria to Afghanistan dictatorships flourished during his pontificate. But the problem may not be that John Paul II's method failed there. The problem may be that it was never tried--not even by John Paul II.

Since the founding of Israel in 1948, the Vatican has never had a clear idea how to respond to tensions in the area. Too much seemed to swirl out of control. There were questions of how best to protect the various ancient Catholic populations, delicate relations with the Orthodox churches, and complex disputes about ownership of the holy places in Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Galilee. And tinting everything was the rising Arab-Israeli conflict. For the Roman diplomats, the disproportion was obvious: Supporting Israel risked the murder of Christians in Islamic countries; supporting the Arabs risked a stern note from the Israeli ambassador.

The Vatican was never anti-Israeli, and it certainly never condoned or praised terrorism. But, bit by bit, Rome's advisers and experts on the Middle East came to be those whose first impulse was to take the Arab, and particularly the Palestinian, side in any dispute with Israel or the United States. Relations were formed with Islamic and Baathist governments, and as the Christian communities of the Middle East weakened--their decline over the last 50 years has been precipitous--protecting the little that remained came to seem even more important.

Meanwhile, a kind of functional pacifism gradually took hold among Roman theologians, as the traditional canons of Catholic just-war theory were ratcheted up to a standard impossible for any military action to meet. And layered on top of all this was the hunger of the foreign-policy bureaucrats in Rome to be like government advisers everywhere else in Europe: So many other things--especially homosexuality and abortion--separated them from their secular counterparts, they were grateful for a topic on which they could share elite European opinion.

The nadir may have come in February 2003, during the agitation before the invasion of Iraq, when Tariq Aziz, Saddam Hussein's deputy prime minister, was brought to Italy to be feted at St. Francis's church in Assisi and treated to an audience with John Paul II in Rome. But you can see the same impulse in the Vatican's current secretary of state, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, who announced on Vatican Radio last week: "As it has done in the past, the Holy See condemns the terrorist attacks of one side as well as the military reprisals of the other. In fact, the right to defense of a state is not exempt from respect for the norms of international law, especially as regards the safeguarding of civilian populations. In particular, the Holy See now deplores the attack on Lebanon, a free and sovereign nation."

The moral equivalence between terrorism and the response to terrorism was troubling--and, indeed, Sodano was indulging in *more* than moral equivalence, for he singled out the Israelis for blame "in

particular." The problem Israel faces is precisely that Lebanon is not "a free and sovereign nation," but a weak and captive nation, unable to assert its sovereignty over areas dominated by a terrorist organization.

Meanwhile, the Italian press trumpeted, as a denunciation of Israel, Pope Benedict's request that the Carmelite nuns he was visiting "also pray for the terrorists because they don't know that they are doing evil not only to their neighbor but to themselves as well"--though that is, in fact, sound Christian theology, and it names the terrorists precisely as *terrorists*, who must turn away from violence. But when Benedict later announced "neither terrorist acts nor reprisals can be justified," he appeared to be back in the territory of Cardinal Sodano.

Of course, in one sense, Sodano was merely indulging the kind of ritual statement--everybody's wrong, but Israel most of all--that the Vatican has been issuing for decades. It didn't mean much in 1973, and it doesn't mean much now.

In another sense, however, Sodano's remarks on Vatican Radio--and similar statements by other Catholic figures, from the custodians of the holy places in Israel to the editorialists in the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*--are most disturbing precisely because of their datedness. The situation in the Middle East is no longer simply a battle between Israelis and Palestinians. With the increasing role of the Iranians, and the refusal of the Arab League to involve itself, the fight doesn't even really center around the Arabs.

It is, rather, a war between the Islamists and the West--a proxy fight, in which the totalitarian governments of Syria and Iran have aimed the weapon of terrorism at modern democracies. And, for the Catholic Church, the answer cannot remain the old, ritual statements about the Middle East, dusted off one more time. John Paul II had a vision for confronting totalitarianism--a way of refusing government by the lie and naming things for what they are. It is time for the Vatican to apply that vision to the Middle East.

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Le *Weekly Standard*, organe des néo-conservateurs, titre son édition datée du 31 juillet 2006 : « La Guerre du Hezbollah » (« Hezbollah's War »). Sans surprise, la revue assure mensongèrement que le parti libanais a enlevé des soldats de Tshal en territoire israélien, alors qu'ils ont été faits prisonniers en territoire libanais. De même, la revue accuse la Syrie d'instrumentaliser le Hezbollah, ce qu'elle illustre en montrant Hassan Nasrallah parlant sous l'effigie du président Bachar El-Assad. Encore et toujours, il s'agit de pousser à l'extension de la guerre.

Cependant, la vraie surprise est un article de Joseph Bottum dénonçant les vaticinations du Vatican. L'auteur se plaint de l'absence de politique claire du Saint-Siège au Proche-Orient. Ou plutôt, il feint de croire à cette absence en oubliant de mentionner son soutien à l'Autorité palestinienne et son exigence d'internationaliser Jérusalem, son opposition à la première guerre du Golfe, à l'embargo contre l'Irak et à la seconde guerre du Golfe.

Joseph Bottum préfère attaquer l'adversaire de toujours : le cardinal Angelo Sodano. L'homme qui hier préconisait l'Ostpolitik, c'est-à-dire le compromis avec les Soviétiques en échange de la liberté pour les catholiques d'Europe centrale, dialoguerait aujourd'hui avec les musulmans dans l'intérêt des catholiques du Proche-Orient.

Il ne s'agit pourtant que d'une salve d'intimidation. Le conflit qui s'annonce pourrait être d'une grande violence : les chrétiens maronites du général Michel Aoun ont viré casaque et fait alliance avec le Hezbollah depuis plusieurs mois. Dès lors, le Saint-Siège pourrait succomber à la tentation d'approvisionner le Hezbollah en armes et munitions. C'est ce dont les néo-conservateurs cherchent à le dissuader.

