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A papal defense of Jews:

Benedict XVI's new book says blaming the Jews for Jesus' death is the result of a misreading.

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In his latest book, "Jesus of Nazareth, Part II," Pope Benedict XVI says that the Jews, as a people, did not kill Jesus.

This is — fortunately — not a new pronouncement from the Roman Catholic Church. For more than four decades, it has been officially condemning anti-Semitism and rejecting any interpretation of the New Testament that held all Jews, then or now, responsible for the death of Jesus.

Since Vatican II's landmark 1965 declaration on Catholicism and non-Christian religions addressed this issue, church officials have sought to forge better relations with Jews by reinterpreting spiritual texts, expressing deep sorrow over the Holocaust and calling on Christians who by their actions or inactions were complicit in the events of the Holocaust to repent. Both the current pope and his predecessor, John Paul II, visited Yad Vashem, the Israeli memorial to the victims of the Holocaust.

Still, this text by this pope — a particularly conservative pontiff — is significant. Benedict says flatly that people have misread the Gospel According to John; that when John says "the Jews," he doesn't mean the people of Israel but the Temple authorities at the time. He also examines the notion of "the crowd" that called for Barabbas, not Jesus, to be spared crucifixion. The crowd asks for Barabbas because it's loaded with Barabbas supporters. "In any event, it does not refer to the Jewish people as such," Benedict writes.

The pope's writings are particularly welcome because they arrive during a spate of bizarre and public anti-Semitic utterances. On a radio show, troubled TV star Charlie Sheen launched into a tirade against his boss, Chuck Lorre, saying, among other things, that his real name is Chaim Levine. (It's Charles Levine.) Fashion designer John Galliano was accused of making anti-Semitic remarks in a bar and was caught on videotape drunkenly ranting "I love Hitler." Sheen's show was canceled for the rest of the season, and Galliano was fired by Christian Dior. And beleaguered WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was reported to have complained that there was a Jewish-led media conspiracy against his organization. (Assange has denied he said that.)

Over the last half a century, Catholic Church pronouncements about the history of its relations with Jews have been met with a mixture of praise and criticism. (Did the church apologize or just express sorrow?) This latest foray by the pope will surely meet with some critics. (Does he put enough blame on the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who sentenced Jesus to death?)

Considering the fact that this odious belief about the crucifixion was used to justify the killing of Jews throughout history, and considering the fact that anti-Semitism still exists, it's not possible for Catholic leaders to speak out against this often enough.

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