

Conflict intensifies at Auschwitz convent

WASHINGTON (CNS) — New Jewish protests in July over the Discalced Carmelite convent at Auschwitz have focused world attention once again on the former Nazi concentration camp in Poland and the long-simmering Catholic-Jewish controversy over the convent there.

Seven American Jews staging a protest demonstration at the convent July 14 were beaten up and dragged away by Polish workers.

In the days that followed, international controversy over the convent escalated rapidly, drawing the Vatican, the Israeli and Polish governments and world Jewish organizations into the conflict along with the Polish Catholic Church.

While some Jewish leaders called for Vatican intervention and immediate removal of the nuns, Catholic officials asked for more time, and the Polish government pledged to step in and help speed up the move.

At a news conference in Paris, a top World Jewish Congress leader, Theo Klein, called for a worldwide suspension of Catholic-Jewish dialogue until the controversy is resolved.

"If the pope visits countries where there are Jewish communities, I hope they will refuse to meet him," he said.

After delivering a letter to the Vatican and meeting with some Vatican officials, several representatives of the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center said the church officials had urged patience.

On July 23, about 90 young European Jews and Christians, mostly from Belgium, marched peacefully in front of the convent while about 200 residents of Oswiecim — the Polish name for Auschwitz — looked on.

One of the demonstrators described the presence of a convent at the entrance to Auschwitz a "Christianization of the Holocaust."

"Only silence can do justice to the memory of the victims," said David Berlowitz, chairman of the European Union of Jewish Students, which sponsored the July 23 march.

The July 23 edition of the Italian Catholic newspaper *Avvenire* reported that the superior of the convent, Sister Maria Teresa Magiera, said the nuns planned to stay at the current site, praying quietly. Sister Magiera would not tell reporters whether the nuns would be willing to move to the new site, according to *Avvenire*.

The convent was established in 1984 as a place of prayer for the victims of the gas chambers at Auschwitz.

In 1987, after widespread Jewish protests that its presence desecrated the memory of more than 3 million Jews killed there and in nearby Birkenau during World War II, Catholic and Jewish officials meeting in Geneva reached an agreement under which the convent was to be moved within two years.

After the original move deadline of Feb. 22 passed earlier this year, Jews' objections to the continuing presence of the nuns grew.

The American Jews involved in the July 14 confrontation were led by Orthodox Rabbi Avraham Weiss of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, N.Y. Witnesses said about 20 residents of Oswiecim and several policemen watched without intervening as six workmen from the convent dragged the protesters off the property, punching and kicking them.

The World Jewish Congress, the U.S. State Department and the Israeli government lodged protests with the government of Poland over the treatment of the protesters.

"The only voice of condemnation we have not heard is a voice from the Vatican," Rabbi Weiss said in a telephone interview with Catholic News Service.

In their letter to the Vatican, leaders of the Simon Wiesenthal Center urged Polish-born Pope John Paul II to intervene to hasten the nuns' departure, saying the delays were harming Catholic-Jewish relations.

The Vatican has maintained an official hands-off stance on the grounds that the issue is local and should be dealt with by the church in Poland.

"The Vatican has never been directly involved, and I don't think that will change now," an informed Vatican official said July 24.

As for the prospects of the conflict damaging Catholic-Jewish relations, he said "the Jews say this, we don't."

Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, chairman of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Relations, said he has been told, however, that the pope has intervened quietly at least three times to remind the nuns that they must obey church authorities and abide by the 1987 Geneva agreement.

Rabbi Tanenbaum, a longtime leader in U.S. and international Jewish-Catholic relations, said he feared the escalation in tensions was moving the controversy out of the hands of moderates in both the Catholic and Jewish communities and into the control of extremists.

Jesuit Father Stanislaus Musial, adviser



In Oswiecim, Poland, a worker (left) grabs Rabbi Avraham Weiss of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, N.Y., during a July 14 protest against the presence of a Carmelite convent at the former Nazi death camp at Auschwitz.

on Catholic-Jewish relations to Cardinal Franciszek Macharski of Krakow, was quoted in European newspapers as saying, "Our mistake was in placing too early a deadline for construction (of a new convent), which it was impossible to meet for technical reasons."

In an interview in the July-August issue of *30 Days*, an international Catholic monthly, Father Musial traced disagreement over the convent in part to profound differences in the ways Catholics and Jews commemorate the dead.

Catholics are accustomed to placing flowers, religious symbols and even chapels at memorial sites, he said, but the Jewish "attitude toward such places is one of distance, a distance which manifests itself with an absence of symbols and with silence."

He added that in Jewish tradition "a place associated with criminal acts must be

disassociated from normal, daily things.... It is unacceptable from the Jewish perspective that individuals live at such a site."

He said an outdoor cross recently erected on the convent grounds has increased Jewish anger because the cross to them is a symbol of "the sufferings they experienced at the hands of Christians throughout history."

In its letter to the Vatican, the Simon Wiesenthal Center predicted that the "ugly confrontation" of July 14 "will surely lead to other such manifestations if the church continues to delay the relocation of the Carmelite convent."

"At Auschwitz the church is staking exclusive claim to a symbol that is not hers: a symbol soaked in Jewish blood and martyrdom.... Here the church is trespassing on the greatest Jewish cemetery in all of Jewish history," the letter said.

Founder of Imani Temple urges black bishops to join

By Laurie Hansen
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Father George A. Stallings, founder of a church for black Catholics, has invited the 13 U.S. black Catholic bishops to join his efforts to achieve "justice and equality."

"What we want is the right — which we will continue to claim as our own — to determine who we are and what we are.... How can we leave that task to a church with a long and depressing history of racism, discrimination and prejudice?" Father Stallings asked in a July 21 letter to the bishops.

He called it frustrating that while every Black Catholic Congress convened since 1889 has focused on the importance of education for blacks, the Archdiocese of Washington recently closed three inner-city Catholic schools.

The archdiocese has said the schools were not closed but consolidated to provide the best Catholic education possible.

The priest also criticized The Catholic University of America in Washington for having too few black students and faculty

members, and for lacking courses on black literature, music, history and religion.

In a statement, the university said it is making "serious efforts to recruit black faculty members and students."

Father Stallings' letter was a response to a July 12 appeal from the nation's black bishops that Father Stallings return to unity with the church.

Father Stallings, former evangelist for the Archdiocese of Washington, founded the Imani Temple in Washington July 2. Cardinal James A. Hickey of Washington subsequently suspended Father Stallings for celebrating unauthorized liturgies.

The black bishops' statement called Father Stallings a talented person. "His gifts belong to us and to the church he was ordained to serve," they said.

"We urge him, we implore him to return to the unity of the church and to continue to encourage the church to reform," they said, adding that the only way such reform is possible is "within the unity of the one Catholic Church."

In his response, Father Stallings told the black bishops their "demonstrated record

of leadership makes every African-American proud.

"You stand in a long and rich tradition of African-Americans who have dedicated their lives to the reality of one, holy, catholic and apostolic church," he said.

But he compared the bishops' criticism of his decision to form Imani Temple to charges white clergymen in Birmingham, Ala., leveled at the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement during the 1960s.

"Just as you have chosen to do, they issued a statement that described Dr. King's work as 'unwise and untimely,'" said Father Stallings. "You know as well as I do that African-American Catholics have waited far too long for the church to take seriously our demands for full inclusion in its work, witness, spirituality and strength."

He denied that his formation of Imani Temple indicates a "separation from the Catholic Church."

"I did not depart from the church nor its mission or mandates. Rather the church

abandoned its zeal and energies in the pursuit of justice and the transformation of society," he charged.

In the letter, he stated six "general principles," to which he said Imani Temple is committed:

- Formation of programs in the areas of Bible study and spiritual development, membership development, lay leadership, tithing and finance, youth culture and behavior, African and African-American spirituality and heritage, employment training and economic development, communication, disability and access, worship and senior citizen security.
- Development of liturgies that are "both authentically Catholic and African-American."
- Formation of a "sensitive indigenous African-American clergy."
- Education as a "primary means to our empowerment."
- Support for the growth of African-American businesses.
- Training for white priests who work in African-American parishes.

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