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Father Patrick and His Elder Brothers

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French Jews admire Patrick Desbois for his efforts to commemorate Jews murdered in the Ukrainian killing fields during World War II

"I suppose you could call me a Catholic 'ba'al tshuva' (returnee to religion)... I've visited shuls all over Brooklyn... When I first came to Israel, I worked for a laundry delivery service that employed only yeshiva bocherim (yeshiva students) and me," says French Catholic priest Patrick Desbois, 52, who peppers his conversation with words in Hebrew and Yiddish.

His official title is Head of the Commission for Relations with Judaism of the French Bishops Conference. An increasingly central figure in Jewish-Catholic relations, he is the Catholic Church in France's main official liaison with organized Jewry. And, as an official consultant to the Vatican on relations with Judaism, he is extending his work to other European countries and beyond. He has recently helped organize meetings between Catholics and Jews in Spain and Germany and introduced Catholic bishops from Asia and Africa to American Jewry .

With the death this summer of the pioneer of such programs, Jewish-born French Cardinal Aron Jean-Marie Lustiger, Father Desbois has now become the Catholic cleric best known to French Jewry. Many French Jews are affording him hero status because he created and leads an internationally recognized Holocaust memorial project. An exhibit about the project is due to go to New York after its current showing at the Paris Holocaust Memorial.

"He's someone absolutely exceptional with whom we have extremely close relations," says Edith Lenczner, main spokeswoman for CRIF, the umbrella body for French Jewish organizations.

Desbois receives visitors in the North Paris offices of Yahad-In Unum (yahad means "together" in Hebrew while in unum means the same thing in Latin), a group he created to scour the World War II killing fields of Ukraine. Its aim is to locate thousands of unmarked mass graves containing the remains of 1.5 million Jews shot to death by Nazi Einsatzgruppen mobile killing squads between 1941- 1944.

The results of Desbois' efforts are on show in Paris in an overwhelmingly powerful exhibit entitled "The Holocaust by Bullets." Next year, the exhibit moves to New York's Jewish Heritage Museum. Visitors there, too, will presumably stand stunned while listening to filmed interviews of aging Ukrainian eyewitnesses to the public mass murder of their Jewish neighbors.

Since 2004, Desbois has gone to Ukraine four times a year as the head of search teams. Each year, these teams have spent an average of 15 weeks in the country, uncovering more than 500 mass graves so far. What they have heard and seen is so disturbing (their presence sometimes prompts locals to dig up graves in search of dental gold) that the teams undergo "decompression" sessions with psychologists on their return.

The American Jewish Committee presented Desbois with its Jan Karski Award in Washington in May. The award notes that his "efforts to identify the mass graves of Jewish victims of the Shoah and ensure that these unnamed Holocaust victims are remembered, combined with his dedication to furthering understanding between Christians and Jews, are a testament to the human spirit and the power of good."

A senior Israeli official who has worked closely with Desbois, but who asked that his name not be published to "avoid embarrassing his friend," told The Report: "I see Patrick as a kind of latter-day saint: his work on the Shoah in the Ukraine, on Shoah remembrance in general and on Jewish-Catholic relations is absolutely exceptional by all human standards."

Interviewing Desbois in the offices of Yahad-In Unum is an experience in itself. Situated on the top floor of an anonymous building in a poor neighborhood of Paris, a visitor easily spots a menorah and maps of Israel and Ukraine, but no visible crucifixes or other Christian symbols.

"It's intentional. We want Orthodox Jews to be able to come here," Desbois explains.

"By the way, as a Jew, how should I call you?" this journalist enquires. "I know the word 'Father' is not right for a non-Christian."

"Just call me Patrick," he replies with a laugh. "That's what everyone in Israel does. Many of my friends have made aliya, so I know people in yishuvim (settlements) in Judea, as well as members of Hashomer Hatzair (a left-wing Zionist youth group). I also take church groups on tours of Israel to study what it means to be a Jew in Israel today. We meet religious Jews, non-religious Jews, Orthodox, non-Orthodox, extreme left and extreme right. My own spoken Hebrew is not perfect, but I've given interviews in the language for Israeli TV- and I've ordered food in nearly every cafeteria in the country!"

Is Patrick Desbois an exception? How representative is he of French Catholicism - long known as "the eldest daughter of the Church?"

Although he is careful to clarify that there is no comparison between the history of relations between Jews and Christians in France and those in Eastern and Central Europe, France was nonetheless the scene of religiously-inspired massacres of Jews during the Middle Ages.

The Catholic church wielded tremendous power in France for more than 1,200 years, including a period in which the Church was more powerful than the monarchy itself. In the early 17th century, for example, the country was run by Cardinal Richelieu (of "The Three Musketeers" fame) and later by his successor, Cardinal Mazarin, who both literally told the kings what to do.

Jews, who had first arrived with the Romans more than 1,000 years before, were expelled from France in 1394, but allowed to return a century later. Their small communities were looked down upon, but tolerated as long as they were discrete, and they escaped further violence until World War II.

In 1789, the militantly atheistic French Revolution, which granted Jews full equality as individuals, smashed the power of the Catholic clergy, massacring hundreds of priests and burning and sacking countless churches.

The collaborationist Vichy government (1940-1944) wooed the church by restoring many of the trappings of its power. Many of the French Catholic leaders were arch-conservatives, but the church prudently remained largely on the sidelines during the Nazi occupation - and generally mute on the fate of the Jews. This silence has come back to haunt them with a vengeance in recent times, as the church has come to honor the genuine courage of those Catholic boarding schools that did shelter many Jewish children under false identities.

The church power structure experienced significant shake-ups in the years after the war, together with deliberate attempts to change its official attitude, and that of its adherents, toward Jews. While not virulently anti-Semitic, the church had until then dogmatically adhered to age-old notions of Jewish deicide.

In the past 20 years, however, possibly more than any of its European counterparts, the French Catholic church has shed many of the arch-conservative views it held for centuries, especially towards Jews.

"There have been tremendous changes in the Church's relations with Jews, especially in France, which has the largest Jewish community in Europe," says Desbois. "Today, the French bishops I know consider it absolutely normal to have good relations with Jews, whether they are religious or not. We are quite simply following the teachings of (the late) Pope John Paul II. He said 'the Jews are our elder brothers in faith,' and our relations with them are therefore the relations that one has with an elder brother. And I want to make it very clear that there is no missionary dimension involved in this whatsoever," Desbois tells The Report.

He admits that the reaction of French Jews to Catholic overtures was long tinged with suspicion, especially since the man behind many of these overtures, Cardinal Lustiger, was himself a convert from Judaism. But Desbois says that the purity of the Church's intentions was widely accepted when France's main bishops held an unprecedented, history-making public ceremony of repentance in 1996, in which they condemned the silence of all but a handful of their own elders during the Jewish sufferings of World War II.

Standing on the site of the former internment camp at Drancy in the Paris suburbs, the last stop for Jews before their deportation to the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Cardinal Olivier Berranger, speaking for the assembled bishops, said that the church had erred by not recognizing that the Holocaust was "a central issue on a human and spiritual level."

"We confess today... and recognize that the Church then failed in its mission, and that, together with the Christian people, the Church carries the responsibility of not having instantly acted to help those who needed it. The failings of the French Church and its responsibility towards the Jewish people are now a part of history which we recognize. We confess our fault, implore God's pardon and ask the Jewish people to hear our words of repentance," Berranger told astonished Chief Rabbi Joseph Sitruk and the heads of France's 650,000-strong Jewish community.

Desbois readily recognizes that the repentance shocked some Catholic traditionalists who criticized the church's leadership. "But here again, things have since rapidly evolved," Desbois notes. "Churchgoers can now see that the position of the Church is one of having good and close relations with the Jews. The idea that Kaddish could be read over Cardinal Lustiger's coffin at the doors to Notre Dame Cathedral would have caused an uproar in the past. This time, I assure you we did not receive a single aggressive letter on the subject," he says.

Desbois also says that since the repentance ceremony, "the church leadership has been rejuvenated. Six or seven years ago, Monsignor Lustiger (then archbishop of Paris) launched programs in which French priests went to visit yeshivot in New York. And I don't mean as simple tourists. They were received and held discussions everywhere, from Temple Emmanuel-El to Yeshiva University, as well as with the Lubavitcher and Satmar Jews in Brooklyn. All this was organized in partnership with Rabbi Israel Singer (a former top official of the World Jewish Congress.)

"I know because I organized the departures to the New York yeshivot of the men who now make up 60 percent of France's bishops. They went there voluntarily to spend several days each discussing the Talmud with roshei yeshivot [yeshiva heads]," he says.

Desbois adds that Lustiger also sent along bishops from Third World countries "who had never met a Jew in their lives." Thus, he continues, Jewish-Catholic relations have become "so normal nowadays that the press gave very little coverage to the visit of Pope Benedict to Vienna this September to express 'sadness, repentance and friendship to the Jewish people.'" He also notes that Jewish attitudes toward the Church have greatly evolved since Pope John Paul II prayed at Jerusalem's Western Wall in 2000.

What prompted Desbois' own personal involvement, despite his coming from a family that was not particularly religious? He only became a priest at the age of 31, after first training as a mathematics teacher.

"I found God relatively late, after first teaching in a very difficult and poor area of Africa. I then began to be increasingly involved in the Church as a lay worker, including months as a volunteer with Mother Teresa's mission to the dying in Calcutta, India," he explains.

His Jewish connection was sparked by the wartime experiences of his farmer grandfather, Claudius, who raised him until the age of seven. During the war, the grandfather was a prisoner of the Germans who sent him to Rawa-Ruska on the Polish-Ukrainian border, where there was a forced labor camp for French POWs who were being punished for escape attempts or involvement in Resistance activities in normal POW camps.

"The French prisoners went out on work details and saw what was happening to the large Jewish civilian population in the region. They saw Jewish groups go out to work in the morning and come back far fewer than they left. They saw children being killed. My grandfather very rarely spoke about this, but he did recount these experiences to me and I was deeply impressed," Desbois recalls.

Once he became a priest, Desbois says, he went on a winter pilgrimage to Poland in 1991. Walking with Polish farmers in the snow late one night, he asked them to tell him exactly where they were located. "They told me that we were on the Ukrainian border and it all came back to me, suddenly in that freezing night - my grandfather's accounts of the war and the killing of Jews. When I first asked the then-mayor of Rawa-Ruska, he said he didn't know. Yet, I knew that Rawa-Ruska's pre-war population was 15,000 Jews and only 8,000 non-Jews. Where were the Jews? What happened to them? People talk a lot about the Shoah, but few act to make sure it is not forgotten. I decided to make it my task to find out what had happened in that area of Ukraine... and my task has since extended to the whole country."

Desbois began attending educational sessions at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. "I attended seven sessions, not only about the Shoah, but also about the Inquisition, about anti-Semitism and about the history of the Jewish people. I suppose that with all my visits to Israel, starting in 1973 before I became a priest, I began to learn. You can't imagine how many bishops turn to me nowadays during the Jewish High Holidays to ask that I advise them on how to formulate their greetings to Jewish communities and leaders," he says.

Desbois says that close to 50 of France's approximately 120 bishops now have special advisers on Jewish affairs entrusted with their relationships with neighboring Jewish communities. "Some are priests, some are nuns and some are lay volunteers. And there is nothing exceptional any longer in seeing a bishop in ceremonial robes attending a synagogue memorial service for the Shoah," he added.

But the church's influence in France has also largely diminished in recent years. After World War II, about half of the French were regular churchgoers while many of the other half were militantly anticlerical. Today, the anticlerical movement has practically ceased to exist. But only about seven percent of the French go to church at least once a month.

"I would be wary about drawing overly hasty conclusions," cautions Desbois. "When the Pope last came to Paris ten years ago, we expected 300,000 people for the main outdoor mass and more than a million showed up."

Desbois is himself also a man of surprises. Lenczner, the CRIF spokesperson, recalls that: "Richard Prasquier, CRIF's president, recently held a working lunch with Desbois which I attended. During the meal, Desbois' mobile phone rang. Before he answered, the phone sounded a little musical message which we overheard. We were dumbfounded- the tune on his telephone answering mechanism was 'My Yiddishe Mama!'"

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Abstract (Document Summary)

"Just call me [Patrick Desbois]," he replies with a laugh. "That's what everyone in Israel does. Many of my friends have made aliya, so I know people in yishuvim (settlements) in Judea, as well as members of Hashomer Hatzair (a left-wing Zionist youth group). I also take church groups on tours of Israel to study what it means to be a Jew in Israel today. We meet religious Jews, non-religious Jews, Orthodox, non-Orthodox, extreme left and extreme right. My own spoken Hebrew is not perfect, but I've given interviews in the language for Israeli TV- and I've ordered food in nearly every cafeteria in the country!"

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