



Orthodox Judaism and the Catholic Church, celebrating a new milestone in Catholic-Jewish relations

Lisa Palmieri-Billig* | 01.10.2017

The top representatives of the world's three main bodies of Orthodox Judaism from Europe, Israel and the U.S., presented Pope Francis with a memorable document entitled "Between Jerusalem and Rome".

A highly significant event in the history of Catholic-Jewish relations, as well as of intra-Jewish relations, took place August 30. The top representatives of the world's three main bodies of Orthodox Judaism from Europe, Israel and the U.S., presented Pope Francis with a memorable document entitled "[Between Jerusalem and Rome](#)".

Its significance lies in its being the very first of its kind to receive unanimous consensus by international Jewish Orthodoxy. The document evaluates and proposes joint commitments based on a dialogue begun 52 years ago with the publication of the Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate*. It expresses deep appreciation and esteem for the way the Catholic Church and successive papacies in the 20th and 21st centuries -- particularly those of John Paul II and Francis -- have acted to implement a positive revolution in teaching regarding Jews, Judaism and Israel, based on the principles of the landmark Vatican II document.

The delegations included: from Israel's Chief Rabbinate - Rabbi Ratzon Arousi, Rabbi David Rosen plus the past and present Director Generals of the Chief Rabbinate, Oded Wiener and Moshe Dagan; from the U.S., Rabbi Marc Dratch, President of the Rabbinical Council of America and Professor David Berger; and from the Conference of European Rabbis, the Chief rabbis of Moscow, Rome, Vienna, Brussels and the Ukraine: Pinhas Goldschmidt, Riccardo Di Segni (Vice President of the Conference), Aryeh Folger, Albert Guigui, Avihal Apel and Yaacov Bleich.

Rabbi David Rosen, International Director of Inter-religious Relations for AJC (the American Jewish Committee), and member of the original bi-lateral Vatican-Israel Committee that led to establishing diplomatic relations between the two States 23 years ago, is also an advisor on interreligious affairs to Israel's Chief Rabbinate, and an international president of Religions for Peace. Declaring that we are living in a "Golden Age of Catholic-Jewish relations", he pointed out that "as miraculous as the delegation's message itself is, getting the three Orthodox Jewish bodies to agree on this approach and agree on a common text is an even bigger miracle."

In fact, the delivered text was originally meant to be issued on occasion of the 50th anniversary of "Nostra Aetate", but it took nearly 2 years of internal deliberation to gather complete consensus. Another delay of six months by the Vatican was necessary before this important meeting could finally take place.

Israel's Ambassador to the Holy See, Oren David, remarked on "the speed and efficiency with which the event was organized in the end, within only a few days of notice by the Vatican and Jewish representatives arriving on short notice from 3 continents." He felt that "the contents of both the rabbinical document and Pope Francis' response are quite remarkable."

The very special dialogue between these two fraternal religions may be said to have been officially launched back in 1947 at the famous meeting in Switzerland of the "International Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism" of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ).

There, under the leadership of the historian and Holocaust survivor Jules Isaac – who later met with Pope John XXIII to present his notes on the tragic consequences of the Church’s “Teaching of Contempt” – 10 basic points were adopted by foremost Christian and Jewish leaders, to launch a new approach to Jewish-Christian relations aimed at wiping out all anti-Semitism based on negative theological stereotypes.

Another flashback - December, 2015, seven decades later, in the Holy See’s Press Room, the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews celebrated “Nostra Aetate”’s 50th anniversary by presenting a new document entitled “The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable”, (Romans 11:29.) The document received wide attention in the Jewish world, but even more astounding was another document presented by Rabbi David Rosen at the same Vatican Press Conference where he had been invited to be one of the 2 Jewish respondents (the other was Prof. Edward Kessler, Founder and Director of the Woolf Institute of Cambridge University).

In the “Vatican Insider” report on that press conference, published in English and Italian respectively, on December 13 and 14, I wrote: Rabbi Rosen presented an “Orthodox Rabbinic Statement on Christianity” issued last week and signed to date by 48 “Orthodox Rabbis who lead communities, institutions and seminaries in Israel, the United States and Europe”. Signatures include some distinguished and very authoritative names. Listing several historic rabbinic statements regarding appreciation for the teachings of Jesus, it states, “Now that the Catholic Church has acknowledged the eternal Covenant between G-d and Israel, we Jews can acknowledge the ongoing constructive validity of Christianity as our partner in world redemption, without any fear that this will be exploited for missionary purposes. As stated by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel’s Bilateral Commission with the Holy See under the leadership of Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen, ‘We are no longer enemies, but unequivocal partners in articulating the essential moral values for the survival and welfare of humanity’. Neither of us can achieve G-d’s mission in this world alone.”

In the wider world of Orthodox Jewry, this document elicited a mixed reaction, incorporating diffidence and doubts. Rabbi Rosen noted that the barriers to engagement in dialogue by many Jews has been due more to historic than theological reasons. Rosen recalled that already in the year 2000 a document concerning the new relationship between Christianity and Judaism, “Dabru Emet” (“Speak Truth”), was signed by over 220 rabbis and intellectuals from all branches of Judaism, but the Orthodox have always been in the minority and unable to reach an overall agreement up to the present.

After much intra-Jewish discussion, 2 years later, a subsequent document by Jewish Orthodoxy, this time truly representative, has now been issued. Its first draft, originally slated for publication in 2015 but lacking the necessary consensus, was discussed and refined, incorporating points that were deemed important but missing previously. The text incorporates into a broader context some statements contained in the document presented by Rabbi Rosen in 2015.

Bishop Ambrogio Spreafico, President of the Italian Catholic Bishops Conference’s Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue notes that the importance of this Jewish document is its “official” nature, as a united statement of the three great Orthodox Jewish bodies of Israel, Europe and the U.S.

In an interview published by “Avvenire”, he recalled that while Orthodox communities represent only about 10% of U.S. Jewry (the largest Jewish diaspora community) and are a minority in the Judaism of European countries and even in Israel, the central boards of the nationally recognized Jewish communities of Europe are mostly led by Orthodox rabbis, while in Israel, Orthodox rabbis are the only ones with authority over Jewish laws regarding marriage, divorce, etc.

The Conservative, Liberal, Reform and Reconstructionist movements along with Jewish Humanists or “secular” Jews have historically been the pioneers and most fervent advocates of interreligious relations, believing in the necessity of dialogue for better reciprocal understanding and for a future

of a more peaceful coexistence. Orthodox Jewry, on the other hand, remained more cautious, perhaps more marked by the trauma of negative past experiences. They continued suspecting that Christian engagement would be aimed solely at efforts of converting Jews and accused participating Jews of being too naïve and gullible. They based their mistrust on the long history of theological anti-Semitism, forced conversions and rigged theological “disputes” in which the predetermined victor was always the Church.

While Orthodox Jews have participated for many years together with other world Jewish religious bodies in the official dialogue with the Vatican first under the auspices of the Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, and then through the bi-lateral commissions of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, they imposed a veto on all “theological” dialogue. However, the definition of “theological” being a rather nebulous concept, at annual meetings issues of central concern to both religions, (such as ecology and sustainable development, the family, justice, peace, the religious significance of the Land of Israel, etc. -- topics that might be categorized as both “theological” and social) have been discussed and at often led to joint cooperative action. Both sides have stressed that self-awareness of our separate, strong religious identities favors, rather than impairs productive dialogue.

In his address to the Orthodox Jewish delegation, Francis recognized that “The Statement ‘Between Jerusalem and Rome’ does not hide ... the theological differences that exist between our faith traditions. All the same, it expresses a firm resolve to collaborate more closely, now and in the future.”

“Between Rome and Jerusalem” states that “despite the irreconcilable theological differences, we Jews view Catholics as our partners, close allies, friends and brothers in our mutual quest for a better world blessed with peace, social justice and security....

“Conscious of the fact that there is not wide enough awareness in our respective communities of the momentous change that has taken place in the relationship between Catholics and Jews; and in light of...a shared vision for a just and ethical society; we declare: We are not enemies, but unequivocal partners in articulating the essential moral values for the survival and welfare of human society.”

The document refers to seeking “partnership of the Catholic community in particular, and other faith communities in general, to assure the future of religious freedom...aware of the very real danger facing many Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere as they are persecuted and menaced by violence and death in the hands of those who invoke God’s Name in vain through violence and terror.”

“Between Jerusalem and Rome” praises Nostra Aetate’s noteworthy contributions to reconciliation, such as reference to “the Divine election of Israel” as being a “ ‘gift of God,’ that will not be revoked,” and that “ ‘the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God’, strongly decrying ‘hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism , directed against Jews at any time and by anyone’ as a matter of religious duty.”

Papal statements to combat anti-Semitism are mentioned appreciatively, such as John Paul II’s repeated affirmation that anti-Semitism is “a sin against God and humanity” and Pope Francis’ admonition that “...an outright attack on the State of Israel is also anti-Semitism. There may be political disagreements between governments and on political issues, but the State of Israel has every right to exist in safety and prosperity.”

Francis concluded the encounter with warm blessings and good wishes for the forthcoming Jewish New Year. “Shanah tovah!”, he exclaimed in Hebrew. “May the Eternal One bless and enlighten our cooperation” he said, “so that together we can accept and carry out ever better his plans -- plans for welfare and not for evil”, for “a future and a hope” (Jer 29:11)....Finally, I would invoke upon you, and

upon all of us, the blessing of the Most High for the shared journey of friendship and trust that lies before us. In his mercy, may the Almighty bestow his peace upon us and upon the entire world. Shalom Alechem.”

Editorial remarks

* Representative in Italy and to the Holy See of AJC - the American Jewish Committee

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