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INSIGHT ISRAEL: JEWISH-CATHOLIC DIALOGUE AT THE VATICAN

by

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A few weeks ago, I was privileged to be part of a delegation from Israel -- and from the Jewish World -- which participated in the 16th meeting of the International Jewish-Catholic Liason Committee (I.L.C.), which has been the official dialogue process between the Catholic Church and the Jewish People for the past 27 years. This four day meeting -- which concluded with a private audience for our group with the Pope on Thursday, March 26th -- focused on the new document of the Church on the Shoah, entitled **WE REMEMBER; A REFLECTION ON THE SHOAH** and on the theme of Education, with an emphasis on what we will need to do to better educate about each other in the years and decades ahead.

In addition to myself, the Israeli delegation consisted of Ambassador Shmuel Hadas, the former (and first!) Israeli ambassador to the Holy See, who is now a member of the Executive Committee of the I.C.C.I., Dr. Geoffrey Wigoder, chairman of the Israel Jewish Forum on Interreligious Relations and past co-chairperson of the I.C.C.I., Judge Mayer Gabay, current chairperson of the I.C.C.I., Rabbi David Rosen, director of the Israel office of the Anti-Defamation League and their co-liason to the Vatican, as well as Vice-chairperson of the I.C.C.I. and Mr. Aryeh Doobov, of the World Jewish Congress office in Jerusalem. All six of us represented the Israel Jewish Forum on Interreligious Relations, which is the Israeli constituent of I.J.C.I.C. (the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations), the official Jewish partner to this dialogue with the Pontifical Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews, headed by its president, Cardinal Edward Cassidy.

As I pointed out in the introduction to a paper which I presented at this meeting on The Teaching of Christianity in Israel, this dialogue was in many ways a continuation of the international symposium which we sponsored in Jerusalem last February (1997) which was entitled The Future of Jewish-Catholic Relations in the World and in Israel/The Holy Land. During last year's symposium, at which Cardinal Cassidy was one of the main speakers, the theme of reciprocal education was repeatedly evoked as the main issue which we must confront jointly for the future. It was no accident, therefore, that this year's International Liason Committee's agenda was designed to focus primarily on Education.

turn awareness of past sins into a firm resolve to build a new future in which there will be no more anti-Judaism among Christians or anti-Christian sentiment among Jews, but a shared mutual respect, as befits those who adore the one Creator and Lord and who have a common father in faith, Abraham.

Turning awareness of past sins into a new situation of mutual respect will not be easy. First of all, the situation has not been quite as symmetrical as this last paragraph suggests. It is somewhat surprising to equate anti-Judaism among Christians over the centuries with “anti-Christian sentiment among Jews”. This is confusing the persecutors with the persecuted. This is one of the problems. Due to the very difficult history of Christian-Jewish Relations over the centuries, it will take the Jewish People a long time to adjust and genuinely accept the reconciliation process now going on within the Catholic Church. Many Jews, perhaps even most Jews, do still not accept the statements of the Vatican as real, in the light of what they know about Christianity’s relationship to Jews and Judaism for most of our history.

This means that the noble goal of developing “a shared mutual respect” between Catholics and Jews will not become a reality by merely publishing documents and statements. Unless these are accompanied by a serious and systematic process of education on both sides, the new thinking among Catholic and Jewish leaders of the dialogue will only be an ivory tower experience. In order to make the new thinking of the Catholic Church more widely known in Jewish communities around the world, including in Israel, an educational approach -- and educational materials -- will need to be developed, so that Jews around the world can begin to become more aware of the remarkable changes that have taken place in the Catholic Church during the past fifty years. Similarly, Catholic Education, which has only begun to address this subject in serious and significant ways, will have to do much more to spread their new doctrine from the hierarchy to the masses around the world.

Education is the path for developing a “shared mutual respect”. But unlike politics or grand statements and documents, it is a slow and arduous process, one that will probably take a few generations to actually plan and implement. But, to paraphrase Rabbi Tarphon, we must begin now.

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