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A RABBI SPEAKS

By RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM

When Pope Paul was still Archbishop of Milan, the president of the Milan-Jewish community drew his attention to the anti-Semitic references in a book being presented to boys and girls on the occasion of their Confirmation. Cardinal Montini promptly ordered the withdrawal of the imprimatur and of the book itself.

When Pope Paul VI received a delegation of Jewish leaders in the throne room of the Vatican, he declared: "We have a common Bible, a common God, a common affinity for the Old Testament as the source of divine revelation. I use it every day in thought and in prayer. We pray together that the Almighty guide, comfort, and bless us. These bonds are what we would like to strengthen."

The two incidents exemplify the growing spirit of understanding and cooperation which has warmed the hearts and raised the expectations of Jews the world

over. Moreover, they illustrate two important aspects of this positive approach on the part of the Church to Catholic-Jewish relations: the emphasis on our

shared religious heritage, and the willingness to remove from Catholic teaching materials distorted or prejudiced references to Jews. For many, this approach found its culmination in the draft document regarding Jews and Judaism that Augustin Cardinal Bea introduced to the Vatican Council, as chapter 4 of the schema on ecumenism.

This draft document authoritatively repudiates an ancient charge which has resulted in untold suffering and martyrdom for the Jewish people. It states:

"The death of Christ was not caused by a whole people then living, and much less by a people of today. Therefore, priests must be careful not to say anything in their catechetical instruction or preaching which might give rise in the hearts of their hearers to hatred or contempt for the Jews. And the Church does not forget that from this people were born Christ Jesus according to the flesh, the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Christ and the Apostles, the foundation and columns of the Church.

"Therefore, since the Church possesses such a common heritage with the synagogue, this Sacred Synod wants to foster and commend in every way mutu-

al understanding and esteem towards each other which are obtained through theological studies and fraternal dialogues and moreover, just as it severely condemns injustices to men wherever they occur, so even more with maternal concern it deplores and condemns hatreds and persecutions against the Jews whether they occurred in times past or in our own times." (As reported by the London Jewish Chronicle, 3-13-64.)

While there have been many Catholics and Protestants as well as Jews, who were profoundly disappointed that the second session of the Ecumenical Council did not vote, even in principle, on this document, it nevertheless represents a significant departure from attitudes toward Jews reflected in past Councils of the Church. Jews do not forget that former Church Councils passed punitive and humiliating legislation against them, including the establishment of ghettos and the wearing of distinctive garb, such as a yellow star. It is no wonder that Jews have looked to the Councils of the Church with misgivings, and in the light of past Conciliar legislation, it is evident why many Jews greeted Cardinal Bea's document with a

burst of enthusiasm and appreciation. If approved in the coming session, this document will give the highest level of support and encouragement to the efforts of national and international Catholic leaders to make this humane and enlightened viewpoint permeate the entire Church, from the Vatican to the parochial school classrooms. It will add impetus and authority to the everyday dialogue that is proceeding between the Catholic and Jewish communities in many parts of the world.

The growth of dialogue between Catholics and Jews within recent years must be acknowledged as a remarkable tool for promoting inter-religious understanding between Catholics and Jews, as well as between Christians and Jews generally. Such dialogue has proceeded on every level, from scholarly exchanges between the most eminent theologians of both faiths—such as Cardinal Bea and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America—to consultations between Catholic and Jewish laymen in local communities, mutually exploring solutions to community problems and seeking cooperation and joint action

across religious lines.

Impressive as the growth of these mutual exchanges has been, we are still on the threshold of the experience. The walls of misunderstanding, built over many centuries, have not yet given way to permit a completely free flow of ideas between the two communities.

Imagine the kind of intellectual and spiritual flowering that might result if the dialogue process were extended to areas of exchange that have not yet been affected by it. Imagine, for example, a meeting between Catholic teaching nuns and Jewish teachers discussing their mutual misperceptions. Imagine, a volume on the history of relations between Christians and Jews co-authored by outstanding Catholic and Jewish scholars. How many misconceptions, might finally be laid to rest.

Those of us who have been privileged to be related to this process of Catholic-Jewish dialogue have been enriched and enlightened by it. We can only hope that the Vatican Council decree on Jews and Judaism will help translate into reality the vision of the late Pope John XXIII, of blessed memory, for a "new order of human relations".