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VATICAN REJECTS RACISM, ANTI-SEMITISM, ANTI-ZIONISM

by RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM

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Two religious myths -- lies, in fact -- which have wrought much havoc in Western civilization were powerfully repudiated last week.

One religious lie is that of apartheid which has resulted in terrible oppression of black people in South Africa. More than 300 years ago, the Dutch Reformed Church there declared that God cursed Noah's son, Ham, father of black people, and his children. That false Biblical teaching was used to justify the enforced segregation of South Africa's blacks.

The other religious lie was that of deicide, the canard that the Jewish people are collectively responsible for the death of Jesus. That absurd teaching became the engine for nearly 2,000 years of anti-Semitism which helped destroy millions of Jewish lives.

Last week, the Vatican Secretariat for Justice and Peace, issued a major document on "The Church and Racism." The declaration rejected apartheid and racism in all its forms as a "sin" and urged that it be uprooted.

The document termed anti-Semitism "the most tragic form that racist ideologies has assumed in our century, with the horrors of the Jewish holocaust and called for its complete elimination.

Significantly, it added that today "anti-Zionism" often serves as a screen for anti-Semitism."

With the personal endorsement of Pope John Paul II, this latest Vatican instruction to the entire Catholic world could go a long way in countering the racist ideologies of both apartheid and anti-Semitism.

Historic footnote: The Vatican Secretariat on Justice and Peace, which drafted this far-reaching document, is headed by His Eminence Roger Cardinal Etchegaray of Marseilles. I first met Cardinal Etchegaray in the 1970s, when he hosted an international Vatican-Jewish meeting in his chancery.

This warm-hearted cardinal helped save Jewish lives during the Vichy regime in France, and since then has been a steadfast and loyal friend of the Jewish people and Israel. At the last World Synod of Bishops meeting in the Vatican a year ago, he unexpectedly called on the Catholic Church to confess its sins of anti-Semitism and ask forgiveness of the Jews.

He was ably assisted in drafting this text by Bishop Jorge Mejia, formerly secretary of the Vatican Secretariat on Religious Relations with the Jews. Bishop Mejia of Argentina, is also a long-standing friend of the Jewish people.

Cardinal Etchegaray's personal stature lends great credibility to this major Vatican declaration.



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Rabbi Tanenbaum is international consultant to the American Jewish Committee and a widely-recognized expert on Vatican-Jewish relations.