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Box 51, Folder 4, Vatican Council II - Schema, 1964.

COMMISSION ON JEWISH AFFAIRS
CONFERENCE ON THE VATICAN SCHEMA ON JEWS
November 22, 1964, Congress House
Presentation by - Dr. Leo Pfeffer

Thank you, Paul, for your very generous introduction. I want to make it clear at the outset and very emphatically clear that the views I express here are neither necessarily or unnecessarily those of the American Jewish Congress. They are exclusively my own. The position of the American Jewish Congress has been made clear in statements which were issued in the Post and in the statement of Jewish organizations in which it has joined, as reported in the newspapers yesterday and today. Mr. Polier who has just left, and presumably will be back very shortly, is Chairman of the Governing Council of the American Jewish Congress. If there is anybody here who is authorized to present the position of the American Jewish Congress it is he. It is not myself.

This is important because the views which I will express are quite different from those which on the whole have been adopted by American Jewry both before and after the Schema was published. The views I express are considerably less enthusiastic than those which you have read in the papers or you have seen otherwise. I take, you can perhaps say, a somewhat less euphoric view of the schema, its background and its future than most of American organized Jewry. So I am very pleased to be able to offer to you what is probably a dissenting opinion, and perhaps not a popular one. I don't think it will be one for winning friends among Jews or among Christians. Nevertheless, I think that no service is rendered by failing to be frank and expressing one's beliefs on this very important matter.

The proposed schema on the Jews has simply received a preliminary vote, indicating approval in substance. It has not been promulgated; it has not received even a final vote of approval by the Council and is still subject to change and modification. It will not become official until sometime late in 1965 or perhaps 1966. I think, however, that it can be assumed that it will be adopted in substance, and I proceed from that assumption.

This proposed schema on Jews cannot be understood except in the context of all the other major schemas, statements and chapters which have emanated and which will emanate from the Vatican Council, including those in the initial session next year. These include the schema and statement on the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, that is the right to use English in the Mass in the United States and England, or German or French or Italian in the Mass in Germany, France or Italy. Another schema which must be considered is the schema on collegiality, that is that the authority of the Church is exercised by the Pope together with the bishops who are the successors of the apostles. Also to be considered is the chapter on the laity in the schema on the nature of the Church, and the schema on religious liberty which unfortunately was not even considered but was postponed to the next session. Here, too, I am certain in some form, it will ultimately be adopted.

In the same category is the proposed study on birth control which are certain to lend to changes in present doctrine that in some form will be adopted sooner or later.

These schema, statements and proposals together with the schema on the Jews, are all a part of what Pope John called "aggiornamento", that process of adjustment and updating through which the Catholic Church is going through and must go through so that it may survive into the twenty-first century as it has survived in the first twenty.

To the believing Catholic, of course, the Church was established by God through Jesus, to be eternal, and will therefore continue to the end of time, no matter what happens in and to the world. But to the believing Jew, the same is true of the Torah, given by God through Moses. Nevertheless, this fact did not prevent the Rabbis from promulgating the Talmud, the Oral Torah which, perhaps, may be called the aggiornamento of Judaism, and served very much the same purpose.

In any event, one who is not bound by the doctrines and dogma of Catholicism is at liberty to suggest that the Church survived these twenty centuries because it has been able to adjust to the demands of changing times and civilizations. And it is again doing this.

The great advances of therapeutic and preventive medicine have diminished the effects of the natural control of population through disease and therefore have required the Church to reexamine its traditional position on birth control. The United States Supreme Court was almost destroyed because it delayed in recognizing the crisis of the Great Depression and updating its doctrines to meet that crisis. It is not irreverent for a non-Catholic to suggest that the Church is facing a similar experience with respect to the crisis of over-population.

Similarly universal concepts of freedom of conscience, expressed in the United Nations Charter, its Declaration of Human Rights and in the constitutions of practically all civilized nations, requires the Church to reexamine its traditional positions on religious liberty. Say too, the schema on collegiality reflects the demands of contemporary democracy. To survive, the Church must adapt itself to these demands and challenges. The world of tomorrow will not accept a church which forbids effective population control so desperately needed in the twenty-first century. Nor will it accept a church which denies the right of expression to beliefs and doctrines of other faiths, or which requires of its adherents an unquestioning belief in the infallibility of a single human being.

These things the twenty-first century can not accept any more than the Talmudic century could accept a faith which required death for Sabbath-breaking or blasphemy or literal application of lex talionis. Implicitly the rabbis in the yeshivah recognized this, and implicitly the bishops at the Vatican Council recognize this and are engaged in the difficult process of making that adjustment which will enable the Church to survive and to live in the world of the twenty-first century.

The analysis I suggest, is equally true in respect to the schema on the Jews. The world has learned that it cannot maintain the dogma of deicide and remain civilized. The price of this education has been tragically high. Two thousand years of persecution climaxed by the mass destruction of six million human lives. But the price has been paid and the understanding has finally come. Christianity could not long survive a post-Hitler world if clung to what it has taught these two thousand years. The schema on the Jews, therefore, when was finally promulgated, and I said I am confident it will be, will be an act of self interest on the part of the Church, enlightened self interest, but self interest nonetheless.

From this assumption, in which I fully believe, certain consequences follow. First and foremost we owe Christianity and the Church no debt of gratitude. If deicide were to end today and never be heard of again it would simply mark the termination of the longest and most grievous wrong committed against a people in human history. Jewry would no more owe a debt of gratitude to Christianity than the Negroes of 1863 owed to white America for the Emancipation Proclamation. The proper response, as some Christians have already noted, would be for Christianity to beg forgiveness of the Jew just as the white ought to beg forgiveness of the Negro.

There is considerable talk about preferential treatment to compensate the Negro people for the terrible wrong America has done to them. Perhaps there should be reparations paid by Christianity to Jewry for the grave wrong of fifty generations. Of course, we do not ask for this, and I, for one, would reject it if it were offered. But we owe Christianity nothing. The Vatican Council is giving the Jews nothing.

I have long felt that intervention by Jewry at the Vatican Council was ill advised. It could not but give rise to the impression that the Jews were lobbying the same way integration groups lobby in Washington when Congress is considering a bill in which they are interested. The same impression was conveyed by Cardinal Cushing when he said that "the Jews are getting what they want." This, I think, is a particularly unfortunate consequence of Jewish intervention in Rome. Unfortunate, too, I suggest, would be any obsequious expression of gratefulness, nor are we under any obligation to express our appreciation by yielding to the demands of Cardinal Spellman or others that we support, or at least relax our strong opposition to federal aid to parochial schools or any other issue on which we have taken a stand which is opposed to that of the Catholic Church or other Christian Churches. Nor are we under any obligation to suppress any historic truths, including those relating to the role of Pope Pius XII or of Christianity in general in that evil decade of Nazism. I think that those within the Jewish community, organizations or individuals, who have gone out of their way to justify the silence of Pius XII or of Christianity in general have done no service either to Jewry or Christianity.

One final point. While we demand no reparations we do expect and have a right to expect that the Church will follow through in implementing it. Four hundred years ago, the Council of Trent, decreed that Jesus died voluntarily to save

all mankind, and that therefore, implicitly, the Jews were not to be blamed. But this decree did not bring an end to the terrible anti-Semitism of the Middle Ages nor did affect the content of the teachings in the churches and the schools throughout Christianity. As Rabbi Kertzer pointed out, Paul VI in his final talk at the Council was strangely silent in respect to the schema on the Jews and made no reference to it. There was no admission of guilt or wrong, no expression of an intention or effort to make the schema real or meaningful. The schema would be a fraud not only upon Jewry but upon the world, if it were allowed to suffer the fate of the decree of the Council of Trent about 400 years ago. The schema will be meaningless unless it is translated into the teachings and the preachings in every church and every parochial school; in every Catholic college, every Catholic university in the world. Unless the Church commits itself fully and unqualifiedly to continue and consummate a process of which the schema is but the first initial step, unless it does this in its every day teachings, liturgy and practices, then the wrong that has been committed for two thousand years will be aggravated and compounded rather than rectified and atoned.

I am not pessimistic. I am perhaps a little cynical, but I am not pessimistic. I believe the Church will do this, I am certain it will do this. I think we are looking at the dawn of a new generation, a new era, an era based upon the enlightened self-interest of Christianity; an era which will mark, I believe, the beginning of the righting of a wrong of two thousand years. Thank you.