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Vatican Move—A Boon to Jewish-Catholic Dialogue

Vatican sources suggested yesterday that the "Jewish" declaration proposed by Augustin Cardinal Bea (Jews should not be made scapegoats for the Crucifixion) may be acted on before the end of the current session of the Ecumenical Council. Jewish and Protestant leaders, here and abroad, hailed the declaration as a major step toward eliminating friction between Catholics and Jews. Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, director of the Department of Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee who has worked with Cardinal Bea's secretariat, here writes the meaning of the declaration in terms of the way it might be worked out practically in this country.

By Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum

While Pope Paul VI was still Archbishop of Milan, the president of the Milan-Jewish community drew his attention to 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 last month in the throne room of the Vatican, he declared: "We have a common Bible and common God, a common affinity for the Old Testament as a source of divine revelation which I use every day in thought and prayer. Therefore, we pray together so that the Almighty guide, comfort, and bless us . . . These bonds are what we would like to strengthen."

These two incidents illustrate vividly the religious and human relations implications contained in the decree regarding the Jews that Augustin Cardinal Bea introduced to the Vatican Council Friday. Should the Council fathers adopt this decree—as millions of Jew throughout the world devoutly hope and pray they will—Pope Paul VI's example, both in deed and in word, might be seen as providing decisive guidance to the world's 550 million Catholics as to how the substance of the decree is to be translated into daily practice.

The decree, which condemns it as "unjust and injurious to call the Jewish people a decide one" and which declares as "anathema" anti-Jewish attitudes and practices, represents the capstone effort of Catholic authorities to repudiate an ancient charge which has resulted in untold suffering and martyrdom for the Jewish people. Catholic scholars and writers in the United States, Europe and Latin American have long emphasized that the Jews should not be made a scapegoat for the sins of all mankind.

Unfortunately, despite such statements, the charge of Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus and their consequent rejection and punishment by God is still found in Catholic textbooks, sermons and liturgical commentaries. The importance of Cardinal Bea's decree, if it is approved, is that it will give the highest level of support and encouragement to the efforts of Catholic scholars, theologians, clergymen, teachers, religious journalists, professional and lay officials of international and national Catholic bodies to make this humane and enlightened viewpoint permeate the entire Church, from the Vatican to the parochial school classroom. It cannot but help as well to influence beneficially other multiple sources that lead to anti-Semitism, which involve the complex inter-action of the home, school, peer group, neighborhood and mass media.

The implementation of the decree, quite obviously, rests entirely in the hands of the Church and can be understood as part of the Church's vast and impressive effort of renewal and reform. It is neither fitting nor proper for non-Catholics to comment regarding the procedures which the Church may choose to adopt for implementing the decree. Unquestionably, however, individual Jewish scholars and competent Jewish organizations devoted to the promotion of inter-religious understanding stand ready to cooperate with Catholic authorities should their co-operation be requested.

The growth of dialogues between Catholics and Jews within recent years must be acknowledged as a remarkable tool for promoting this 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 co-operation and joint action across religious lines. We believe that such dialogues have been enormously beneficial, for both Catholics and Jews who have learned better to understand one another, but also for the common good of the community as a whole.

Impressive as the growth of these mutual exchanges has been, only a small proportion of Catholics and Jews has been touched by 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 jointly co-authored by outstanding Catholic and Jewish scholars. How many misconceptions, exaggerations, and historical absurdities might be finally 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, in its essence and through its implementation, will multiply these opportunities for Catholics and Jews everywhere, and will help translate into reality the vision of the late Pope John XXIII of blessed memory for "a new order of human relations."

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