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A JEWISH VIEW OF VATICAN COUNCIL II

By Marc H. Tanenbaum

(Rabbi Tanenbaum, ~~is~~ the National Director of the Interreligious Affairs Department of The American Jewish Committee, was the only Rabbi present in Vatican City at the time that the Jewish declaration was introduced before the Ecumenical Council. He was consulted by Cardinals, Bishops, Periti on background issues relating to Catholic-Jewish relations, an area in which he is recognized as an authority).

1. It is one of the ironies of history and perhaps symbolic of a turning point in Christian-Jewish relations that the Jewish declaration condemning anti-Semitism was introduced and debated by Vatican Council II during Simchath Torah, the Jewish festival of, "Rejoicing with the Torah." The irony is sharpened by the awareness that in the very Vatican City in which more than 2000 Cardinals and Bishops of the Catholic Church were considering a declaration to repudiate the deicide charge and thereby to help put an end to anti-Semitism, about 600 years ago the Jews - and their Torah, their Sacred Scrolls of Mosaic Law - were subjected to humiliating indignities. During the Middle Ages, the leaders of the Universita degli Ebrei (the Jewish community) of Rome left their cramped ghetto each year and journeyed to the Vatican to pay compulsory homage to the Pope by the presentation of a Torah Scroll, which the Pontiff would return contemptuously over his left shoulder with a derogatory remark. Thus, for example, Pope Boniface ~~the~~ VIII (1294-1303) made the oft-repeated remark to Roman Jewish leaders in which he acknowledged their reverence for the law ^{but} ~~to~~ condemned ^{ed} their "misrepresentation" of it. That "dialogue" is regarded by Jewish historians as "typical" of

Vatican relations to the Jews throughout the greater part of the Middle Ages.

And now in St. Peter's Basilica the entire Episcopal leadership of the Catholic Church has been discussing the text of a declaration "On the Attitude of the Catholic Church Toward the Jewish People and Other Non-Christians" which, if restored to its original strength and then passed, could uproot once and for always the foundations of such tragic ironies.

2. This aggiornamento (updating) of Catholicism's attitude toward the Jews is crystallized in the text of the Jewish declaration. However, the new Catholic look at the Jews and Judaism is also reflected throughout much of the other Vatican Council discussions from the first schema that was considered at this session, "de Ecclesia" to the last schema, "The Church and the Modern World."

3. The Jewish declaration -

a. Brief statement of the key elements in the decree and an examination of their historic importance - the deicide charge, anti-Semitism, proselytization, the common patrimony of Christians and Jews;

b. A description of the "fate" of the decree from 1960-1964. This report would highlight the role of the leaders of the American Catholic hierarchy in mobilizing the progressive elements of the Church in support of the Council.

c. September 28th and 29th - The "intervention" (speeches) of the 34 Cardinals and Bishops from 22 countries - what did they say? The impact of their statements in Rome and among Christians and Jews throughout the world as reflected in the Christian and Jewish press.

d. Implementation of the decree - After the passage of the decree what is involved in its implementation (revision of textbooks, liturgical references, teacher training institutes, local dialogues, etc.).

4. Other significant issues that effect Catholic-Jewish relations on social and civic levels; religious levels.

a. The religious liberty decree and its significance for pluralism and Catholic-Jewish relations in particular - the action of the Vatican Council approving the religious liberty declaration which asserts that freedom of conscience is the natural right of every man will ^{REMOVE} ~~remove~~ the cloud from what has been called "John Courtney Murrayism" (the Jesuit theologian who fought almost single-handedly for the Church to clarify its views on religious liberty and was silenced by the Holy Office).

b. Collegiality -

o The significance of this issue for greater freedom on the part of individual Bishops to promote dialogue and common civic action between Christians and Jews.

c. Lay Apostolate -

The revolutionary emergence of the laity not as "arms of the Priest" but as "the people of God," who are the Church can mean a much greater involvement on the part of Catholics in cooperative and social action with Jews as well as Protestants.

d. Church and the modern world -

The passage of this schema will demonstrate the possibilities of the Catholic Church and its more than 500 million faithful becoming in time a major agency for a social reform and international peace. The implications of this Catholic-Jewish relations to be spelled out. (Vatican Radio quotes the commitment of the Jewish people to the moral improvement of the social order as an example of the Prophetic tradition which the Church is following.

5. The religious dimension - "Return to the Hebrew Bible" -

a. While the ecumenical movement and the Vatican Council specifically, represent institutional responses to the rapidly changing conditions of the 20th Century, they are fundamentally based on a profound religious renewal - a Biblical renewal, ~~xxx~~ liturgical renewal, and a theological renewal. Catholics are restoring the Hebrew Bible to a central place in religious thought and worship, (just as Protestants are paying more attention to the liturgical and Sacramental character of their faith. It has been observed that these renewals are

rendering Catholicism more Protestant, Protestantism more Catholic, and Christianity more Jewish).

b. The new appreciation on a religious level of the Vatican Council for the Jewish people and the Hebrew Bible are reflected in the schema, "de Ecclesia" (on the nature of the Church) in chapter two, entitled, "The People of God." ("Those who have not yet accepted the Gospel are in various ways oriented to the people of God. In the first place, that people to which the Covenant and promises were given and from which Christ sprang, the Chosen People, most dear to God because of the Patriarchs." This was called in Rome the "Little Jewish Declaration on the Jews.")

c. The schema on Divine Revelation contains chapter 4 on "The Old Testament" which speaks with great love and reverence for the Old Testament. Cardinal Bea in his intervention on this schema spoke of the "Old Testament as a unique school of prayer and also a school of ethics." Cardinal Koenig, in his address to the Council Fathers, said, "Oriental studies prove the historical truth and the historical fidelity of the Sacred Scriptures, even especially as regards the Old Testament." The 19th Century objections have disappeared. (The significance of this to be developed - 19th Century higher Biblical criticisms contributed significantly to anti-Semitic attitudes in Germany).

This schema also encouraged Catholics to cooperate with non-Catholics in the preparation of "a common Bible."

A brief statement about recent cooperative Catholic-Jewish efforts together with Protestants in this pioneer work.

6. Jewish reactions to the Ecumenical Council -

a. The problem of Jewish attitudes toward Christians conditioned by old world memories and a polemical history of 1900 years.

b. The controversy in the Jewish community on Jewish activity in relation to the Ecumenical Council. How the controversy itself indicates the seriousness with which Jews have taken this event which has been called "the greatest religious event of the 20th Century."

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