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June 8, 1979

POPE JOHN PAUL II's PILGRIMAGE TO AUSCHWITZ

IS AN HISTORIC TURNING POINT IN JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

by Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum

(Rabbi Tanenbaum, national interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, met with Pope John Paul II on March 12 during the first official meeting the Pope held with Jewish leaders.)

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The pilgrimage of ~~John~~ Pope John Paul II to Auschwitz on June 7 was a moral act of surpassing historic importance. It may well become the most significant development in the movement to advance understanding and friendship between Christians and Jews since the adoption of the Vatican Council's Declaration on Non-Christian Religions in 1965.

That assessment is based on the fact that virtually every Jew engaged in efforts to promote improved relations between Christians and Jews comes to the dialogue table with a consciousness deeply ^{affected} ~~formed~~ by ~~as a~~ the Nazi holocaust. Auschwitz, the chief Nazi death factory in which 2.8 million Jews and a million non-Jews were burned to death, symbolizes fatally for every Jew who lives under its shadow the loss of one-third of the Jewish people. And to the majority of American Jews - who are descendants of European immigrant parents - there is the constant haunting question that can never be evaded: why were my families destroyed and why did I deserve to live? For, there but for the grace of God anyone of us American Jews could have suffered a similar fate in the gas chambers and crematoria of Auschwitz.

Auschwitz also symbolizes the silence and indifference of the world, including the majority of Church leaders, to the massacre of Jews and other human beings. As Dr. Franklin Littell, the Methodist scholar, and other Christians leaders have recently asserted, Auschwitz is as much

a moral and spiritual crisis in the collapse of Western Christendom - the site of the Nazi holocaust - as it is a continuing trauma for the Jewish people.

Over the past several decades, Jewish leaders meeting with Christian authorities have felt that, with rare exception, most Christian leaders have sought to avoid facing the actuality of the horrors of the Nazi holocaust and, in particular, its unique demonic consequences for Jews. The several statements made about the Nazi nightmare by Christian leaders have frequently been couched in vague pieties or sentimental universalisms - another illustration of "man's inhumanity to man." Given the concrete ideology of Adolf Hitler who was determined to exterminate the entire Jewish people under his control - the "final solution" was conceived only in relation to the Jews - such vague declarations gave more offense to the Jewish spirit than consolation.

That is why the words and actions of Pope John Paul II during last week's visit to Auschwitz and Birkenau have had almost an electric effect in the Jewish community. In his characteristically direct and explicit manner, the Pope avoided generalities and spoke to the Jewish soul as much as he did to the Catholic peoples of the world:

"In particular, I pause with you before the inscription in Hebrew," he said gesturing toward the memorial plaques inscribed with Hebrew and Yiddish verses of tribute. "This inscription awakens the memory of the people whose sons and daughters were intended for total extermination. This people draws its origin from Abraham,

our father in faith" (thus reaffirming the common spiritual bonds in the Bible which link together Christians and Jews.)

Pope John Paul then added: "That very people that received from God the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' itself experienced in a special measure what is meant by killing." And then, of utmost significance, the Pope said:

"It is not permissible for anyone to pass by this inscription with indifference."

That is an ~~unprecedented~~ call, without precedent except for a similar declaration by Pope John XXIII in 1960, for an end to the widespread callousness and indifference to the suffering and destruction that the Nazis inflicted on the Jews and five million other human beings. And implicit in that Papal statement is a call today to humanity at large^e and its similar indifference to the epidemic of dehumanization in the world - to stand against the massacres, the torture, and violence ~~in~~ suffered by the Vietnamese boat people, the Cambodians, the Lebanese, the Ugandans, the Nicaraguans, the South Africans, the oppressed Jews and Christians in the Soviet Union.

When Jews speak to Christians about ~~the~~ Auschwitz, they are not interested in invoking collective guilt; they are interested in a response of collective responsibility. Pope John Paul, kneeling before the death wall of Auschwitz, did just that, and that one gesture of healing may decisively affect the entire future course of Jewish-Christian relations in our lifetime.

Commentary**PONTIFF'S PILGRIMAGE TO AUSCHWITZ
IS CHRISTIAN-JEWISH TURNING POINT**

By Marc H. Tanenbaum* (6-8-79)

The pilgrimage of Pope John Paul II to Auschwitz on June 7 was a moral act of surpassing historic importance. It may well become the most significant development in the movement to advance understanding and friendship between Christians and Jews since the adoption of the Vatican Council's Declaration on Non-Christian Religions in 1965.

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(more)

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