



International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations | 19.03.1998

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Response to Vatican Document "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah"

The document "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah" was issued in March 1998 and discussed at a meeting of the International Liaison Committee later that month. It has evoked reactions among our member organizations and we wish to summarize these and bring them to your attention.

We would like first to express our appreciation of Pope John Paul II's letter to Cardinal Cassidy expressing the hope for all men of good will to work together, in which we sincerely join. We are keenly aware of the many initiatives of the Pope to improve Catholic-Jewish relations during the twenty years of his Papacy and of his personal sensitivity to the horrors of the Shoah.

The document and antisemitism

The subject of the document as conceived in 1987 was The Shoah and Antisemitism and we have found those sections warning against the dangers of antisemitism a moving testimony to your determination to fight this evil in any form and in any place. They are pointed and phrased strongly and can leave believers in no doubt, in the oft-repeated words of Pope John Paul II, that antisemitism is a sin. The clear affirmation goes far beyond previous Vatican documents on the subject and we welcome its unequivocal challenge. We are also well aware that this document will reach millions in parts of the world who have never had firsthand contact with a Jew and could help to counteract the traditional prejudices which exist there. We hope that everything will be done to ensure that the message will quickly reach grass roots level.

The historical record

Our problems with the Document relate to historical presentation and interpretation. However let us first say that the summary of the course of the Shoah, called "a major fact of the history of the century", should render impossible the obscenity of Shoah Denial among Catholics and we see in this one of the major positive aspects of the Document.

Our disappointments in the historical treatment were accentuated by the great impression made upon us by the series of statements on the subject published in recent years by National Episcopal Conferences, especially in those countries which were the focus of the Shoah - many on the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of the camps or the end of the European War. These documents were characterized by clarity, sensitivity and courage and we had hoped that the Vatican document would be written with the same categorical approach. In relating to aspects of the historical record, we will quote from these documents as examples of conclusions we had hoped would be similarly expressed in the Vatican Document.

Christianity and historical antisemitism

Initial Jewish reactions on the publication of the Document were deeply concerned by the incorporation of the quotation from the Pope's speech of 31 October 1997 in which he said "In the Christian world - I do not say on the part of the Church as such - erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability have circulated for too long". Nobody can doubt the Pope's sincere abhorrence of antisemitism but his apparent absolution of the Church from historical responsibility was, at least, puzzling. Jewish reactions went into great detail concerning the misdeeds of the historical Church. At the meeting of the International Liaison Committee, Cardinal Cassidy explained the perspective of the writers of the document. As summarized in the subsequent communiqué, he said that "the term "the Church" refers for Catholics to the inerrant mystical bride of Jesus Christ, whereas the term "sons and daughters of the Church" does not exclude members of the Church at any level". We feel it unfortunate that the distinction was not spelt out in the document as we doubt whether even all believers are aware of this distinction and the statement as it stands could (and did) lead to conclusions different from those intended. Even after the explanation, we find many Church statements confusing - including those of the Bishops' Conferences with their frequent references to failings of "the Church". What are we to make of the statement of the German and Austrian bishops from 1988 which says "The Church, which we proclaim holy and which we honor as a mystery, is also a sinful Church and in need of conversion", which would seem to conflict with the concept of the inerrancy of the mystical Church. We were glad to note that Father Raniero Cantalamessa in his Good Friday sermon delivered in the name of the Pontifical Household quoted the Pope's statement of October 31 but omitted the phrase which we found problematic.

The Document does indeed ask some of the pertinent questions that needed to be asked: "Whether the Nazi persecution of the Jews was not made easier by the anti-Jewish prejudices imbedded in some Christian minds and hearts?" "Did anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians make them less sensitive or even indifferent, to the persecutions launched against the Jews by National Socialism when it reached power?" To these questions a clear answer was expected which would have showed how the teaching of contempt has influenced Christianity throughout the centuries and how it deeply affected the Christian responses to Nazi persecution. This was to be found clearly stated in the documents of the Bishops. For example in the 1995 Statement of the Dutch Bishops: "A tradition of theological and ecclesiastical anti-Judaism contributed to the climate in which the Shoah could take place. A so-called "Statement of Revilement" taught that the Jews were a people rejected after Christ's death. These kinds of traditions meant that Catholics kept aloof from Jews and in some cases were indifferent or hostile. We reject this tradition of ecclesiastical anti-Judaism and regret its terrible outcome."

The 1997 Statement of the French Bishops, expressed the historical aspect with especial clarity: "A tradition of anti-Judaism affected Christian doctrines and teachings, theology and apologetics, preaching and liturgy in various degrees and prevailed among Christians throughout the centuries until Vatican II...To the extent that the priests and leaders of the Church for so long allowed the teaching of contempt to develop and fostered in Christian communities a collective religious culture which permanently affected and deformed mentalities,, they bear a serious responsibility."

The relevant paragraph in the Vatican Document (page 8 paragraph 1) does indeed refer to the historical record but avoids taking a clear position on the relationship between the teaching of contempt and the political and cultural climate that made the Shoah possible. Sentences such as "Sentiments of anti-Judaism in some Christian quarters and the gap which existed between the Church and the Jewish people led to a generalized discrimination...." or "[Jews} were looked upon with a certain suspicion and mistrust. In times of crisis such as famine, war, pestilence or social tensions, the Jewish minority was sometimes taken as a scapegoat and became the victim of violence, looting, even massacres" overlook the systematic unceasing persecution over sixteen centuries by the Church, its leaders and theologians, priests and laymen. It was not merely "a certain suspicion and mistrust" but an institutionalized policy of humiliation, discrimination and hatred - disseminated in canon law, in the liturgy, the catechism, from pulpits and schools directed

to reducing the Jew to a position of total inferiority in every aspect of thought and endeavor. The document only hints at the reality which is succinctly presented in some of the Bishops' statements.

(We welcome the clarification issued by Cardinal Cassidy at the ILC and reiterated in an interview with Reuters on April 2 in which he noted that there was no intention to exclude popes, bishops or any official people from any guilt and agreed that the Document could have been clearer on this point.)

The Church and the Shoah

This brings us to the consideration of the role of historical Church antisemitism in the lead-up to the Shoah and the actual behavior of Catholics during those terrible times. First of all a distinction is drawn in the Document between antisemitism, based on theories contrary to the constant teaching of the Church on human equality, and anti-Judaism. The National Socialist Regime, it is said, was a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime whose antisemitism had its roots outside Christianity. Then the right question is asked "Whether the Nazi persecution of the Jews was not made easier by the anti-Jewish prejudices imbedded in some Christian minds and hearts?"

The implication that while Christians have been guilty of anti-Judaism but antisemitism is a contradiction of the teaching of the Church is dubious and it is unfortunate that it is put forward in generalities that could well mislead many for whom this document is intended. There was indeed a change in the main emphases of antisemitism in the late 19th century from a religious basis to a more secular prejudice with a pseudo-racialist base. However can it be said that the latter was not influenced by the long centuries of Church conditioning? The antisemitic parties preaching the new ideology from the late 19th century often stressed their Christian affiliations. For example, the party of one of the formulators of modern antisemitism in Germany, Adolf Stoecker, was the "Christian Social Workers" Party, the party of the antisemitic mayor of Vienna, Karl Lueger (a major influence on Hitler), was the "United Christians" while Austria had the "Christian Social Club" and the "Catholic People's Party", France had its "Catholic Workers" Club and the "Christian Democratic Movement". and the significant role played by the Church in the Dreyfus Affair will be recalled. Thus the statement that this was "an anti-Judaism that was essentially more sociological and political than religious" plays down the fact of the unbroken line of Christian anti-Judaism/antisemitism and its impact throughout Europe. After all the Jew was still the deicide and the traditional anti-Jewish stereotypes were not changed or renounced and were absorbed into the new antisemitism. The Catholic attitude toward the Jews was unchanged and its influence cannot be excluded. This is why the suggestion of a complete dichotomy between "anti-Judaism" and "antisemitism" is misleading. One shades into the other. It was Christian anti-Judaism that created the possibility of modern pagan antisemitism by delegitimizing the Jews and Judaism. (Incidentally ancient paganism was far more tolerant of Jews and Judaism than was the Christian Church).

It is true that the National Socialist regime adopted a pagan ideology which rejected the Church - although this did not mean that all churchmen and believers rejected National Socialism. It may be noted that Hitler, Himmler and the other Nazi leaders were all baptized Christians who were never excommunicated. The same is true of the vast apparatus of killers, the product of Christian Europe. The Church is not accused of direct responsibility for the Shoah but of its legacy of sixteen centuries of conditioning which had created an environment in which a Shoah became possible and many Christians would feel no compunction in collaborating. Pope John Paul II in his speech of October 31 stated "Erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their presumed guilt circulated for too long and contributed to a lulling of many consciences". Here was a clear answer to the question posed in the Document "Did anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians make them less sensitive or even indifferent to the persecutions launched against the Jews by National Socialism when it reached power?" We regret that it was not included. Another clear statement was that of the French bishops: "It is important to admit the

primary role played by the consistently repeated anti-Jewish stereotypes wrongly perpetuated among Christians in the historical process that led to the Shoah". Such simple statements were what had been hoped for in the Document rather than the convoluted approach that was taken.

Behavior during the Shoah

"Did Christians give every possible assistance to those being persecuted and in particular to the persecuted Jews" asks the Document and replies "Many did but others did not". Jews will ever be grateful for those courageous Christians who saved and helped Jews and in other ways opposed the persecutions and in so doing risked their lives. But these heroes cannot be called the "many". Indeed the statement that "many did" does not do justice to the supreme self-sacrifice of the few (who acted as individuals and seldom received any support from the Church). Their numbers were small compared not only with those who were cowed into inactivity but with those who took an active role in the persecution and extermination (a major group not mentioned in the Document). Unlike the German and French documents, where those who stood up and rescued Jews were seen as exceptions, the Vatican document gives the impression that those who were evil, insensitive and acquiesced to the Final Solution were the exception to the overall Christian approach. However, while we feel the Document could have been more explicit, we recognize the significance of its statements: "For Christians, this heavy burden of conscience of their brothers and sisters during the Second World War must be a call to penitence. We deeply regret the errors and failures of those sons and daughters of the Church". At the same time, we feel that some of the examples of churchmen standing up to Hitler were unfortunate. Cardinal Bertram may have condemned National Socialism in 1931 but his subsequent record was very different. He opposed all public protest against the deportations and the massacres of the Jews as had been suggested by some of his colleagues and after Hitler's suicide he addressed a circular letter to the priests in his diocese inviting them to celebrate a solemn requiem service in memory of the Fuehrer. In the words of the German Bishops' statement of 1995: "Even the pogroms of November 1938 were not followed by public and expressed protests". This comes precisely into the category of response that we feel is slurred over in the text.

The question of the role of Pope Pius XII is obviously a contentious issue with differing views not only between Jews and Catholics but among Catholic scholars themselves. It would have been preferable to have left this subject to future historians. But once opened, it is a Pandora's box. The statement that the Pope was responsible for saving hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives has not been substantiated by the published documents. A final judgment on this can only be made after the Archives are opened. We are given one generalizing quotation made by Pius XII but no reference to the charge of "silence" - he never once explicitly mentioned the Jews in his public pronouncements during World War II. The issue of silence, not confronted in the Document, is faced - at least with relation to the French hierarchy - in the French Bishops' document which states frankly: "The vast majority of church officials did not realize their considerable power and influence and that, given the silence of other institutions, the impact of a public statement might have forestalled an irreparable catastrophe. The bishops of France did not speak out, acquiescing through their silence in these flagrant violations of the rights of man and leaving an open field for the spiral of death. Today we confess that silence was a mistake". The Document could well have spoken out against the silence of the hierarchies. It is not the place where the dispute on Pope Pius XII's role can be solved. But we do miss the simple statement that the earthly Church as a whole erred during this period and we see the refusal to assign any blame to it as an institution a step backward from the position of the German and French bishops.

We were disappointed by the introduction (at the bottom of page 12 of the Document) of a list of calamities experienced by other nations - and in particular "the drama of the Middle East". We with our long record of suffering can profoundly empathize with the tragedies of other peoples. But we can never forget the uniqueness of the Shoah which is the point we would have expected the Document to bring out. In no other case, was an entire people doomed to the utmost humiliation

and then extermination off the face of the earth - even to the extent of going back generations to identify their "blood". Moreover as Catholic belief as expressed in recent documents clearly links the salvation of Christians with God's redemption of the Jewish people whose covenant with him is irrevocable, Christians cannot view the Shoah as they do other genocides.

We welcome Cardinal Cassidy's suggestion, recorded in the communiqué at the end of the ILC meeting, that a joint team of Jewish and Christian scholars review the relevant material relating to the Catholic Church and the Shoah in the volumes produced by Catholic scholars and if questions still remain, further clarification will be sought. The Vatican archives are the only great archive which remain closed for the World War II period. When they are opened, there will doubtless be both positive and negative disclosures. But only in this way will the historical record be authoritatively established.

We would like to conclude, as we began, on a positive note. We appreciate Cardinal Cassidy's statement that Catholics have much to learn and that the Jewish community needs to understand better how the Catholic Church views itself. Our critique of the Document is not meant with any negative intent but as a pointer to the guidelines which we think should be adopted in Catholic teaching of the Shoah. It is in the spirit of Cardinal Cassidy's comment that the Document is not a conclusion but rather a step for further development, and that in the words of Pope John Paul II's covering letter, we will "work together for a world of true respect for the life and dignity of every human being". Indeed "We Remember" is not only an indictment of the past but, in its condemnation of antisemitism, a milestone-guideline for the future.