Chief Rabbi of Rome criticises Vatican document

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In an article for the official online magazine of the Jewish Community of Rome, the Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Community of Rome, Riccardo de Segni, has praised the recently published Vatican document "A Journey of Hope", which takes stock of interreligious dialogue 60 years after the conciliar declaration Nostra Aetate, whilst at the same time voicing clear criticism of certain aspects.

De Segni began by welcoming the fact that the document emphasises the uniqueness of Jewish-Christian dialogue and the shared spiritual heritage. The central theological pillars remain the Jewishness of Jesus, God's irrevocable covenant with the Jewish people, and the shared struggle against anti-Semitism. The document also highlights that, despite massive tensions in the dialogue following the events of 7 October 2023 (which are not mentioned by name in the text itself), these pillars of decades-long cooperation have remained steadfast.

However, de Segni takes a very critical view of the fact that the Vatican expressly insists that there are not two parallel paths to salvation and that Christ remains the sole Saviour. In de Segni's words:
"This is a long-standing topic of discussion within Christianity, which is linked to interfaith dialogue and could be resolved differently from a theological perspective. One must take note of the firmness of this position and, in this light, make it clear that the notion of the sole path to salvation once meant that there was no alternative to the conversion of the Jews, which was actively sought, as they would otherwise not be saved; more recently, the view has emerged – and I am expressing this idea here in very simplified terms – that, thanks to Jesus, the Jews will be saved even if they do not believe in him and are not aware of him. This is a stance that is tolerable insofar as it does not – as in the past – turn into pressure to convert, which would completely undermine the good intentions of the dialogue. A pressure which, at least in official statements, does not appear to exist, but which, according to some indications, seems never to have completely disappeared."

Nor is it understandable that the document completely avoids the term 'Israel' and, in so doing, also ignores the Jewish people's connection to their land. De Segni writes:
"The emphasis on 'biblical and theological studies' as the specific framework for dialogue conceals something else: the difficulty of grappling with the complexity of Jewish reality, which, as the note states, consists of faith, religious identity and the transmission of the divine word. Yet the Jews are also a people, with a history (not merely one of persecution), and their identity includes a relationship – albeit a conflict-ridden one, yet ever-present – with a land that is never mentioned in the note. A land in which half of the Jewish people live today. And then there is the ancient name for Jewish reality, Israel (which does not yet mean the 'State of Israel'), and it is striking that this name never appears in this document, apart from a single mention of the 'Israelites'. This brings to mind the words of Psalm 83:5: 'That the name of Israel may be forgotten.' One almost feels a certain nostalgia for the time when the Church used this term polemically and as a substitute (Verus Israel or Novus Israel), but at least mentioned it. Why this reluctance? Strangely enough, in contrast to this, it is stated that Jesus was 'fully a man of his time and of his environment: the Jewish Palestinian one of the first century'. This is a quotation from a document dating from 1985, yet today the idea of a Palestinian Jesus sounds strange."

In conclusion, de Segni's verdict is as follows:

“When professors of Sacred Scripture from different backgrounds discuss a complex text together, that is certainly a dialogue; just as the drafting of doctrinal documents and the commentary on them is a dialogue. What is missing, however, is another, more important dialogue, namely the one that involves the people, the various ‘flocks’ – more or less devout – with their ‘shepherds’ – more or less competent. If there is a lack of willingness to understand the other’s identity, with all their problems and difficulties, as has been the case in recent years..., the longed-for ‘path of hope’ will struggle to get off the ground.”

Riccardo di Segni’s article can be found in the original Italian on the website of the Jewish Community of Rome.