



# Combating Anti-Semitism Together

01.02.2021 | Norbert Hofmann

**On the occasion of the Day of Judaism in Italy (January 17, 2021), L'Osservatore Romano published this text by Fr. Norbert Hofmann, Secretary of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism, on the need to join forces to combat anti-Semitism.**

The Day of Judaism that the Church in Italy celebrates on Sunday, January 17, is a sign of the great appreciation of the Catholic Church for Judaism. This day intends to offer Christians the opportunity to remember with gratitude the Jewish roots of their faith, and to become more familiar with the ongoing dialogue with Judaism. In addition to Italy, the Day of Judaism is celebrated on January 17 also in Poland, Austria and the Netherlands, introduced by their respective Bishops' Conferences.

Let us then retrace together the activities undertaken by the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism during the year that has just ended. The coronavirus pandemic has also marked Jewish-Catholic dialogue since March 2020, so much so that, to date, it has not been possible to hold any meetings or live encounters. Contacts with Jewish interlocutors were naturally maintained through the means of social communication: the relationships established in the past and the friendships developed over time have not been jeopardized. However, an understandable sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction has remained, because irreplaceable in any dialogue, and especially in the Jewish-Catholic dialogue, is the personal dimension of direct contact, fundamental for the deepening of mutual trust and care.

The last major international meeting, almost exclusively of a political nature, took place in Jerusalem on 22 and 23 January 2020, on the occasion of the World Holocaust Forum, organized with the participation of the State of Israel (represented by the head of state, President Reuven Rivlin), of the European Jewish Congress (EJC), and with the collaboration of the Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem. The main objective was to commemorate the Shoah 75 years later, reflect on its significance today, and clearly identify the current trends of anti-Semitism in order to better orchestrate the future fight against this phenomenon. Forty-seven heads of state or world leaders welcomed the invitation to attend, including United States Vice-President Michael R. Pence, Russian President Vladimir Putin, French President Emmanuel Macron, German President Franz-Walter Steinmeier, Prince Charles from Great Britain, and President Sergio Mattarella from Italy. The Holy See sent as representative the President of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Cardinal Kurt Koch, who is responsible for contacts with the Jewish world.

On the evening of January 22, President Rivlin invited representatives of individual states to a state banquet. The next day everyone gathered at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial to hear the following speakers: President Reuven Rivlin, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, EJC President Moshe Kantor, President Vladimir Putin, Vice-President Michael R. Pence, Prince Charles, President Emmanuel Macron, President Franz-Walter Steinmeier, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, Chairman of the Yad Vashem Council, and the Chairman of the Ya Vashem Directorate, Avner Shalev. The event ended with a musical moment and a religious ceremony, a memorial prayer for the Jews killed in the Shoah.

In the message addressed to the participants of the World Holocaust Forum, Pope Francis stressed that the Holy See will continue to follow the path of friendship and promote dialogue with

all people of good will: “I express my fervent hope that by continued vigilance and positive education the iniquities perpetrated during one of the darkest periods of our history will be eliminated from the face of the earth. Reiterating the Holy See’s commitment to pursuing the path of friendship between all, I appeal to men and women of good will everywhere to remain steadfast in efforts for promoting dialogue, mutual understanding, and human fraternity as the basis of lasting peace”. This statement by the Pope is fully in line with the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, which he later published on 4 October 2020.

The fact that the Holy See was present at the meeting was greatly appreciated by all. The participation of Cardinal Kurt Koch was given exemplary organizational support by the Apostolic Nuncio to Israel, Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli. This memorable meeting was naturally reported by the mass media around the world. The message was clear: all states are united in the fight against anti-Semitism. Israeli President Rivlin recalled this common goal in his speech: “Today we mark the ability of the international community then to unite, to work for a common goal, and the duty and the imperative of the international community today to continue to work together on the basis of shared values as we face anti-Semitism and racism, radical forces that spread chaos and destruction, hatred and fear of human dignity and humanity itself.”

In the fight against racism and anti-Semitism, the international community of nations has always been able to rely on the Holy See. In fact, in the Conciliar declaration *Nostra aetate* (n.4), promulgated on October 28, 1965, we read: “Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any person, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel’s spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”

This affirmation of 1965 has been repeatedly reiterated and deepened by successive popes. Saint John Paul II, undisputed “ice-breaker” in the Jewish-Catholic dialogue, and Benedict XVI repeatedly stressed in speeches addressed to Jewish delegations that anti-Semitism absolutely cannot claim any place in the Catholic Church. Pope Francis recalled that a Christian cannot be an anti-Semite by the very nature of Christianity due to the fact that it has Jewish roots. Speaking to a delegation of the Jewish community of Rome on 11 October 2013, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the deportation of Roman Jews, he expressed his unequivocal position against all forms of anti-Semitism: “It will also be an occasion to heighten our attention and be watchful so that forms of intolerance and anti-Semitism do not recur under any pretext, here in Rome and in the rest of the world. I have said it on other occasions and I would like to repeat it now: it is a contradiction for a Christian to be anti-Semitic. His roots are a bit Jewish. A Christian cannot be an anti-Semite! May anti-Semitism be banished from the heart and life of every man and every woman!”

The voice of the Pope has a moral authority: not only is it heard in Catholic circles, but it has an echo in society in general, which is also received in the political realm. Before the participants in a conference of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), held in Rome on the theme of anti-Semitism on January 29, 2018, Pope Francis entered in depth into the substance of the question: “It is not merely a question of analyzing the causes of violence and refuting their perverse reasoning, but of being actively prepared to respond to them. Thus, the enemy against which we fight is not only hatred in all of its forms, but even more fundamentally, indifference; for it is indifference that paralyzes and impedes us from doing what is right even when we know that it is right. I do not grow tired of repeating that indifference is a virus that is dangerously contagious in our time, a time when we are ever more connected with others, but are increasingly less attentive to others.” For Pope Francis, indifference is therefore one of the decisive roots of anti-Semitism. If one thinks of the time of National Socialism in Germany, there were numerous executioners and many victims; however, most of the people were non-participating observers, who mostly knew or suspected everything, but who did not intervene due to their selfish indifference. Taking a stand, bearing witness, proclaiming the truth, risking one’s life:

these are apparently the qualities only of martyrs. Today as yesterday, martyrs are rare, because people have lost the courage to resist; it is much more comfortable to adapt, not to offend anyone, simply to swim in the “mainstream”.

Pope Francis has not been the only one to condemn anti-Semitism; long before him, on September 6, 1938, one of his predecessors, Pope Pius XI, had already done so in a speech given before a group of Belgian pilgrims. He had claimed that anti-Semitism was unacceptable and that in reality we were all “spiritually Semites”. Since then, the successive Popes have all implicitly or explicitly taken a stand against anti-Semitism. Pope John Paul II himself gave a visible and eloquent signal with his visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp on June 7, 1979, and to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem on March 23, 2000. Also in the document of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews entitled *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, there is an explicit condemnation of anti-Semitism, which is however to be distinguished from anti-Judaism: “(...) we cannot ignore the difference which exists between anti-Semitism, based on theories contrary to the constant teaching of the Church on the unity of the human race and on the equal dignity of all races and peoples, and the long-standing sentiments of mistrust and hostility that we call anti-Judaism of which, unfortunately, Christians also have been guilty.” Understanding whether anti-Judaism, already partially present in the New Testament and among the early Church Fathers, paved the way for racist anti-Semitism is one of the tasks that modern research on anti-Semitism continues to deal with.

A significant part of this research is the study of the Shoah, which can be seen as the unprecedented historical culmination of an irreconcilable hostility towards Jews. Two-thirds of European Jews were exterminated by the German National Socialists with deadly and systematic precision. The Holocaust must therefore remain an “eternal memorial” in history, so that such a human aberration can “never again” be repeated. The memory of the Shoah does not only concern Jews, but all humanity, called to respect and recognize the value of every human being, regardless of origin, religion, and skin color.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) has existed since 1998 and more than thirty states now belong to it. Since 2015 the Holy See, that is, the second section of the Secretariat of State, has sent a contact person to the IHRA conferences to express its solidarity with this cause. The organization has as its motto a trinomial full of meaning: “Remembrance, education, research”. It is important that future generations remember this “human ignominy” and study it, but above all it is essential that they learn from it to recognize racist and anti-Semitic tendencies, and nip them in the bud.

{newsItem.description->f.format.html()}