



Jewish-Catholic Celebration of Hannukah inside Vatican Walls

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Vatican offices have received some extraordinary guests this past week.

Meetings were held between the members of the IJCIC, the Jewish International Committee for Interreligious Consultations, and representatives of the high Vatican spheres, including Cardinal Pietro Parolin and Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, respectively Secretary of State and Secretary for Relations between States; Cardinal Kurt Koch and Fr. Norbert J. Hofmann S.D.B., president and secretary of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews; Monsignor Luis Ladaria Ferrer, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; Cardinal Peter Appiah Turkson, Prefect of the new Department for the Promotion of Integral Human Development; Monsignor Dario Edoardo Viganò, Prefect of the Secretariat for Communications; and Greg Burke, Director of the Vatican Press Office.

IJCIC is an umbrella body for representative Jewish organizational leaders committed to engaging in interreligious dialogue. It was created in 1970, in response to the launch of “Nostra Aetate”, the watershed 1965 Vatican II document on Catholic - Jewish and interreligious relations that changed the course of a long and often painful history.

The conversations covered an extremely wide range of issues. The 16 Jewish representatives learned about the Vatican’s vast new and ambitious project of reducing the number of its separate sections while merging them into large dicasteries, with the hopes of producing simplified and stronger units and unities. The Jewish delegates responded by offering closer cooperation, wherever needed, given that so many of our basic values as Jews and Christians are held in common and that our friendship has grown so much in the past decades. The meetings were aimed at a deepening of mutual understanding regarding many vital issues of the current world scene.

IJCIC, meant to be as representative of world Judaism as possible, is composed among others, of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), B’nai B’rith International, the World Jewish Congress (WJC), and delegates of the major branches of Judaism today -- the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform/Liberal movements, organized this special trip to Rome around the Jewish Hannukah holiday, to refresh communication with the most significant Vatican leaders in the various departments of the Holy See, at the offices of the central world government of the Roman Catholic Church.

They came to Rome as the trip's crowning event after meetings with leaders of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, and Orthodox Christianity in Jerusalem. This venture took place in a period of time between the regularly scheduled, recurrent meetings between IJCIC and a Vatican committee of experts in Judaism under the auspices of the ILC – the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee -- that have taken place since 1970, to discuss issues of common concern. Among highlights of Joint Declarations issuing from ILC encounters we can include those on: Anti-Semitism (1990), the Family (1994), the Environment (1998), Protecting Religious Freedom and Holy Sites (2001), Recommendations on Education in Catholic and Jewish Seminaries and Schools of Theology (2001), etc. The meetings aim at a deepening of mutual understanding regarding many issues of the world scene that are especially relevant to both sides.

Last week's Vatican meetings concluded with a happy, inclusive moment of a celebration of Hannukah. This special ceremony sealed two days of fruitful meetings. Within the library of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews on Via della Conciliazione 5, Israel's present Ambassador to the Holy See, Oren David, led a Hannukah candle - lighting ceremony with prayers, songs, and a table of excellent kosher refreshments that were enjoyed by the delegates and guests of the Vatican, the Jewish community, and the Israeli Embassy. Cardinal Kurt Koch and Father Norbert Hofmann (affectionately nicknamed "the rabbi of the Vatican"), plus Pontifical University officials, Catholic scholars, Vatican journalists and friends of "the Dialogue", mingled with Italian and Rome Jewish Community representatives and the IJCIC delegates.

The "Hannukiah", an oil or candle holder with 9 arms, modeled on the 7 armed menorah that is a symbol of Judaism and also of the Jewish State, is customarily lit one candle at a time for 8 consecutive nights, the middle one, the 9th light, being the "shamash" or servant who lights the others. Spiritually, it is interpreted as a light of hope, of knowledge, love and faith, illuminating the dark corners of the world with mounting intensity, growing by one candle each night with the passing of time.

The Jewish holiday lasts eight days and marks a miracle of faith. The story goes that a lamp was lit by the victorious Maccabee rebels against the Seleucid Empire, to rededicate the Second Temple after it had been defiled with statues of false gods. The miracle consists in the flame having lasted 8 days, even though the sanctified oil that was available was sufficient for one day only. The Jewish holiday this year took on special meaning for Catholic-Jewish relations. The event was indicative of the remarkable progress that has been made during the past half century in the substance and climate of Catholic – Jewish dialogue. Meetings this year were held in an atmosphere of pervading, natural mutual trust, an easygoing exchange that has become much more spontaneous and is no longer limited to the carefully chosen and self-censored speech of formal discourse of the past.

Jewish and Christian holidays often have points that establish some kind of connection. This is not surprising of course, since, as St. John Paul II of blessed memory said during his historic visit to Rome's Main Synagogue, Judaism is the "older brother" of Christianity. Easter house-cleaning for example, derives from the meticulous cleaning and scrubbing in Jewish households before Passover, the Jewish Easter, when family members scout around the corners of rooms to find and throw away all unleavened bread and bakery products. And Hannukah always falls close to Christmas, occurring on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev, according to the Hebrew calendar, and is celebrated beginning with the evening of the 24th of that month, while Christmas also comes on the 25th day of the month but in December, according to the Gregorian calendar. It is also celebrated beginning with the evening of the 24th of the month.

The Hannukah holiday has a very long history. It became a family and community tradition exactly two thousand one hundred fifty five years ago in 138 B.C.E., one year after the Maccabees reclaimed the Holy Temple.

A modern and comparatively brief flashback of only two decades in our times clearly reveals a notable precedent for this year's celebrations in terms of the prospering Catholic-Jewish friendship. On the first evening of Hannukah in December, 1997, a Hannukah lighting ceremony took place in the Vatican Gardens, in the presence of Cardinal Cassidy and Cardinal Tauran, at the time an Archbishop who served as the Vatican State Department's Secretary of Relations between States (or, colloquially, the Vatican's "Foreign Minister"); of Aharon Lopez, the then Ambassador of Israel to the Holy See; Israel's Minister for Religious Affairs; Tullia Zevi, President of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI) and Yours Truly, (among others.) Thus, exactly 20 years later, the Vatican again hosted a joint Catholic-Jewish celebration of Hannukah within its walls.

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