



Overview of Catholic-Jewish Relations in Latin America: 1968 to the End of the Century

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Is there a future for the interfaith relationship and especially the Catholic-Jewish relationship in Latin America? If the pioneering and current efforts dealing with both theological and political matters are continued in a systematic manner, the response is 'yes'.

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1968 to the End of the Century

by Leon Klenicki

Interreligious relations, and very especially Catholic-Jewish relations, has been a recent development in the life of Latin America. Before the 1965 promulgation of the Conciliar Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* (in which No. 4 addresses Christianity's relationship with Judaism and the Jewish people) there were sporadic efforts in different countries of the continent.

The heroic interfaith programs of the Councils of Jews and Christians in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Chile helped prepare an atmosphere for dialogue. In Argentina, however, the Catholic leadership officially disapproved of the interreligious relationship. Though this mood changed in 1965, some indifference to the relationship between Catholics and non-Catholics remained.

In August 1968, at the time of the visit of Pope Paul VI to Columbia, CELAM (the Episcopal Conference of Latin America) and the Anti-Defamation League organized the first official meeting of Catholics and Jews in Bogota. In many respects, this revolutionary step forward inspired groups in Latin America to develop interfaith programs. The meeting, attended by lay people, bishops, priests and rabbis, issued a statement addressing three areas for action.

One area for action was community service it recommended "collaboration free of all prejudice through the medium of existing civic organizations." It also recommended "contact and common action by Jewish and Christian families, with a view to offering services of a family and social character."

A second area focused on mutual study and cultural exchange. It stated that "CELAM (Episcopal Conference of Latin America) and the corresponding Jewish organizations should encourage the reciprocal establishment of study courses and seminars in theological departments. Lecture tours by Catholic and Jewish experts should be promoted. Study of the Bible by joint family and student groups is recommended, and texts and commentaries of mutual interest are to be made available. An address list of persons in Christian-Jewish

relations work is to be prepared."

The third area for action addressed the reality of prejudice. It stated that "the meeting proposes to concern itself with discovery of existing mutual prejudice in schools, seminaries, and families.

Textbooks, catechisms and prayer books, as well as dictionaries and encyclopedias, are to be revised, with a view to eliminating every form of mutual prejudice."

A fourth area for action, "Shared Worship," recommended "that knowledge of each other"s liturgies be promoted and the use of terms in the vocabulary of worship defined."

The Bogota colloquium opened the possibility for other meetings and the distribution of publications. In this respect CELAM did its utmost to spread basic information on Jews and Judaism through Catholic religious leadership and

local bishops' conferences. In 1990 it developed Suggestions for the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Teaching – a pioneering document that paralleled the Holy See's effort on the same subject. The Suggestions described the history of the Catholic-Jewish relationship after Nostra Aetate, the need to understand the first century of the common era, the relationship between rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity, the meaning of land for the Jewish people and the need to overcome misunderstandings in the teaching of the New Testament and the presentation of Judaism. It also referred to common liturgical themes and the need for the two faith communities to understand each other's liturgical expressions. These Suggestions were followed by a volume called The Jews: A Manual for Catholic-Jewish Relations. It included some of the Vatican Council

11 documents, studies by Catholic and Jewish scholars, and recommendations on how to implement the Catholic-Jewish relationship at the pew level.

At a 1985 Bogota meeting the document *To Dialogue in Order to Serve* was issued. It dealt in a sincere and committed manner with the problems facing the interfaith dialogue in Latin America, Christian prejudice, and Jewish mistrust and fear about the use and abuse of the dialogue for ideological purposes. The document stressed specific recommendations in the areas of education, liturgy, social action, the family and the ways to make known the Catholic documents on interfaith relations through the educational system of each diocese.

There have also been sessions to study Vatican documents. For example, on September 5-6, 1990, the *Anti-Defamation*

League, the Latin American Jewish Congress and CELAM met to discuss The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society. The colloquium was devoted to a historic and theological understanding of racism and the way it was considered in the document. There were historical as well as theological addresses. Attention was paid to the serious matter of anti-Semitism so clearly manifest in Argentinean life at the time.

Individual bishops' conferences have prepared documents on Catholic-Jewish relations. The best example is the document of the National Commission for Catholic-Jewish Religious Dialogue of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops which issued the document Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Dialogue. In eleven chapters it develops a short history of the Catholic-Jewish relationship and

the meaning of Judaism and the Jewish people in Christian theology. It condemns anti-Semitism in all its forms and it critiques and recommends overcoming the teaching of contempt vis-à-vis Jews and Judaism. It clarifies theological misunderstandings related to the perception "that Judaism is a religion of fear while Christianity is one of life" which inspired the teaching of contempt towards Judaism. It stresses the central meaning of the State of Israel in Jewish life: "as the fruit of his promise, God gave the ancient land of Canaan in which the Jews lived through Abraham and his descendants." Finally, Paragraph I talks about eschatological expectation, pointing out that "both are awaiting the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God; for Christians this has already begun with the coming of Jesus Christ, while Jews are still awaiting the coming of the Messiah. At all

events, this eschatological perspective awakens, as much in Jews as in Christians, the awareness that we are walking on a road, like the people who came out of Egypt, searching for a land "flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:8)."

On September 16-18, 1997, in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, delegations from the Anti-Defamation League, B'nai B'rith Argentina, B'nai B'rith Uruguay and the Latin American Jewish Congress took part in a meeting with CELAM to discuss the present state of the dialogue and the future. The Belo Horizonte meeting recommended implementing specific projects:

0. Creation of a model guide for local churches and synagogues, focusing on family life and the different problems that we confront in

- today's
society,
testifying
that the
way to
interfaith
dialogue is
friendship
and
solidarity in
action;
0. Preparation
of a study
guide on an
ti-Semitism,
racism and
discriminati
on to be
used at
educational
and general
levels;
 0. Preparation
of
educational
material
that will
help the
Jewish
community
to
understand
the
meaning of
Christianity;
 0. Preparation
of studies
on the New
Testament
that will
help to
present a
correct und
erstanding
of Judaism;
 0. Promotion
of mutual
knowledge
in our
respective
liturgical
traditions;
 0. Exploring
the

possibility
of joint
prayer.

The document pointed out: "As believers in the God of Peace, it is our great wish that the peace process will advance in the Middle East. At the same time we condemn the actions of terrorist violence, some of them occurring in Latin America, and particularly in a tragic manner in Argentina, resulting in death, mourning and pain. [We seek] absolute respect for different points of view and religious opinions within existing religious pluralism and in relationship with our respective faith communities. [We express] our support to the Councils of Jews and Christians in Latin America and also at the international level to the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ). [We ensure] our commitment to maintaining constant open channels of dialogue so that we can reach theological and social goals that come out of our faith in God and

our common
Abrahamic
tradition. Finally,
because of the
imminent visit of
Pope John Paul II to
Rio de Janeiro, in
connection with
the Second World
Encounter of
Family Life, we
greet this
messenger of unity
and peace and we
pray for him and
for the success of
this pastoral visit
dedicated to
strengthening the
family, the
fundamental basis
in our faith
communities."

Interfaith dialogue
and very especially
Catholic-Jewish
relations is
developing slowly
in some countries
of the South
American
continent. The
B"nai B"rith in
Uruguay,
Argentina, Brazil
and Chile are
promoting creative
programs. The
B"nai B"rith of
Uruguay, for
example, has
developed a
program of
education on
Christianity and
Judaism. The
studies prepared
by Dr. Jacobo
Hazan – sixteen
booklets on
interfaith dialogue
– have inspired
many of the

programs in Uruguay as well as in other Latin American communities. The materials have also been distributed in the United States through ADL's Hispanic contacts. In Argentina the B'nai B'rith has organized Passover celebrations as well as the annual commemoration of the Holocaust. For this purpose, the liturgy prepared by Eugene J. Fisher and Leon Klenicki, which has been translated by CELAM, serves as a text adapted to the local situation.

In Argentina, the Universidad Austral is doing pioneering work through meetings which focus on theological matters. This is a unique contribution in the country. There have been meetings to discuss Pope John Paul II's document On Faith and Reason and Emmanuel Levinas' thought on interreligious dialogue. A 1999 colloquium discussed Historical Experience: Reckoning of the Soul and

Reconciliation which focused on the reality of the country after the criminal actions of the generals' junta. In Chile the B'nai B'rith and individual priests and rabbis are involved in discussing political matters or theological questions of the moment. The joint Jewish-Catholic group that helped prisoners and families of prisoners under the Pinochet dictatorship is an example of Catholic-Jewish joint testimony to justice and respect for the human person.

Is there a future for the interfaith relationship and especially the Catholic-Jewish relationship in Latin America? If the pioneering and current efforts dealing with both theological and political matters are continued in a systematic manner, the response is "yes". Otherwise, sporadic interfaith meetings are an occasion for tea and sympathy but not for creative and effective

interreligious
projects.

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