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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 II 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 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 anti-Semitism, racism and d iscrimination 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 unde rstanding 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

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occasion for tea and sympathy but not for creative and effective interreligious projects.

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