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The Past, Present and Future of the Christian-Jewish Relationship

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PLENARY SESSION

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The role of religions in a world of conflict

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(Translation by Murray Watson)

Peace and dialogue among religions: The Council

Thank you for the invitation to address this important conference, which is assessing the history between Jews and Christians since Vatican II. As we all know, *Nostra Aetate* represents a broad and renewed vision of Catholicism in terms of its relationship to the world of other religions. There is a very particular historical journey by which, not only Jews, but also believers in other religions, found a place in this text. I think of the effort made by the Middle Eastern bishops at Vatican II, to ensure that the Council spoke about Islam. But there were also more remote requests, arising from the fact of Catholicism living alongside other religions in specific parts of the world. Such situations of coexistence raised questions for Catholics about the meaning of other religions, and how they might deal with them. For example, at the end of the 1930s, the Holy See undertook a survey among bishops living in Muslim countries, regarding ways of relating to Muslims. It concluded that it was necessary to establish relations as good neighbours, relations of courtesy, since Muslims were impervious to Catholic missionary efforts.

For fifty years now, however, beginning with this brief declaration from the Council—*Nostra Aetate*—other religions have been on the horizon of the Catholic Church, both concretely and theologically. The theological status of believers of other religions has changed: from being (Jews excepted) *infideles*, they have become, in the Council's own words, those who “expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of human beings”. As regards the Jews—and it is not coincidental that I mention it—the trajectory is symbolized by the title of the memoirs of Rome's Chief Rabbi, the unforgettable Elio Toaff: “From ‘Perfidious Jews’ to ‘Elder Brothers’”. As regards the world of other religions, *Nostra Aetate* (as you have already stated) repudiated anti-Semitism, persecutions and hatred directed toward Jews—but it also distances itself from conflicts with Islam, stressing nevertheless that they were not simply the one-sided responsibility of Christians, as was the case regarding Judaism:

“Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding, and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all humanity social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.”

After a centuries-long history of conflict, the Vatican sought to turn a new page with Islam. The declaration frames the new relationship between Catholicism and other religions (even given their profound differences) within a framework of peace and universal brotherhood. This, in fact, is how the document begins:

"In her task of promoting unity and love among men and women, indeed among nations, [the Church] considers above all ... what people have in common and what can lead them to live out their shared destiny together".

It was with such a vision in mind that, since the 1960s, paths of dialogue have been developing, paths upon which the Catholic Church has been embarking, more or less successfully. That vision, expressed in that declaration's few short lines, is that dialogue between, or with, religions plays a decisive role in how individuals and peoples who differ can live together. The Council concluded twenty years after the end of the Second World War, and was made up of a generation of bishops who had witnessed the war. During the 1960s, the international climate was still impacted by the Cold War. Peace was a major issue in those years. Dialogue between religions is a contribution to living together in peace: that is what Vatican II said, in an almost matter-of-fact way.

The declaration *Nostra Aetate* was approved on October 28, 1965. Two weeks earlier, on October 4, 1965, Paul VI had gone to the United Nations—the first pope ever to do so—to speak about peace at the U.N. headquarters¹. "Jamais plus la guerre!" he had shouted from the U.N.'s podium. He had insisted that peoples rediscover themselves as being "alongside each other and no longer as "one above the other" or "one against the other". He had not spoken about religions in an assembly where representatives of Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu states were seated—and also the U.N. Secretary-General, the Burmese Buddhist U Thant. He had, however, ended his speech by recalling that peace demanded spiritual and religious principles:

"The edifice of modern civilization has to be built on spiritual principles, for they are the only ones capable not only of supporting it, but of shedding light on it and inspiring it. And we are convinced, as you know that these indispensable principles of higher wisdom cannot rest on anything but faith in God."

For the Church of the Council, the contribution made by religions—and by dialogue among them—was the determining factor in maintaining peace and establishing friendly interactions between peoples. It was a simple conviction, but a profound one, which would be seriously put to the test.

Religions: A leftover from the past, or leading figures in the future?

That vision was not shared by European culture (and let us not forget that Vatican II, while it was opening up to the world, was very much addressing Western culture). The prevailing public discourse insisted on the fact that the development of modernity would lead to an inevitable process of secularization, or to the ending of the role of religion—in short: the more modern things were, the less religion there would be. The prediction was of a progressive secularization, which would sweep religion away, and not only in the Christian world, but in Judaism and Islam as well. As modernity grew, the whole world would become like "one big France," secular and secularized.

The cultural *koiné*, rooted in a historical framework that dated back to Auguste Comte—who argued that we had entered an age without myths—passed on the dogma that the advance of modernity would gradually erode religion's place. In Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union, Communist regimes were

¹ Literally, "the Palace of Glass".

persecuting religious groups, whom they had reduced to ghosts from the past. By all appearances, the twentieth century would be the most secularized century in history, a time of ideologies and not theologies.

Jung's teachings about religious archetypes were pointless. Historians of religion who had come to affirm, with Mircea Eliade, the universality of religious concepts came across as a group of erudite specialists. Overall, religions would become a topic of past history and not a living reality in the present. This is the great blunder made by a consistent portion of Western European public culture, which did not look beyond its own enclosure, and did not delve sufficiently into the depths of history. The historian of religion Mircea Eliade considered the most significant event of recent history to be the emergence of the Asian peoples—emergence on the political, economic and religious levels. All you have to do is travel to Bangalore, surrounded by both Indian gods and computer technology, to realize that greater modernity does not mean less religion.

Public opinion (which was convinced that religion was gradually wasting away) was confronted with a “divine surprise,” both before and after ‘89, when it witnessed Khomeini’s victory in Iran in 1979. It was the comeback of religious sentiment in public life. Between 1978 and 1989, we saw it in a different form, with John Paul II and the people’s movement, Solidarity, which liberated Poland. We see it in Africa, in the leadership of so many religious figures, such as the Anglican Desmond Tutu. I could talk about the development of Hindu fundamentalism, and say more about that. I should also mention liberation theology in the Christian world and even in the Muslim world (though in a different form). Nor can I ignore the surprising rise of Christian Pentecostal and neo-Protestant movements, which have nearly reached a half billion believers today, even though they are a fluid movement, made up of many different groups.

Yes, I could speak of the “divine” surprising us, and disproving the dogma of the inevitable decline of religions. What took place was what Gille Kepel has called “la revanche de Dieu”—God making a comeback. Religion has become a determining factor in the geo-political landscape, and not as a *quantité négligeable*, as had been predicted. But was that really a surprise? I won’t get into that question, except to say that, when Vatican II speaks in *Nostra Aetate* about dialogue among religions, it is expressing a broader vision of human history, which considers religious communities as part of the future of the world.

Religions in a globalized world

In a world of globalization, religions have made a comeback as key actors. With globalization, a major change took place: all types of identity (national, religious or cultural) have been re-structured, because they have come into contact—as never before in history—with the faithful of all religions. There is no part of the world which is religiously homogeneous—not even Saudi Arabia, as we know very well (there are nearly two million Filipino and Indian Catholics there, with no freedom of worship). Furthermore, with the end of ideologies, religions have become a component—I mean, an ideological component—conferring legitimacy on states, political groups and governments. In what used to be called the Third World, socialism—as a component conferring legitimacy—collapsed, and what has happened is a process whereby leaders have donned the mantle of a religion (often meaning Islam or a neo-Protestant form of Christianity).

While the West, trusting in the secularizing power of modernity, believed in a re-shaping of Islam, what took place (as Olivier Roy has shown) was that the religion of the prophet Muhammad adopted modernity, spreading itself to new lands, and making use of new methods. Islam (especially in its Shi’ite

variety, which had been fused with a reading of Ali Shariati, who had himself adopted the teachings of Frantz Fanon) now presents itself as a liberation theology for the oppressed. These are just a few of the changes that have taken place; we could also speak about Hinduism, and the religious nationalism of the *hindutwa*.

Faced with the explosion of religion in its most varied forms, concerned public opinion has begun to see religions as a threat to civilization and human rights. The world of religions is viewed as pervasive and threatening. In order to provide some order in this complex scenario, the theory of the clash of civilizations and religions has been revived. I say “revived,” because it has a long cultural history. In 1993, faced with a nascent form of globalization that was marked by conflict, the American scholar Samuel Huntington proposed interpreting the world’s conflicts as “clashes of civilizations”—civilizations that were defined by religion. It was a theme that he developed further in a 1996 volume, which became highly popular. Communities of peoples, based on culture and religion, replaced the ideological blocs of the Cold War. Some civilizations were destined to clash. It was just what the orphans of the Cold War felt they wanted to hear. September 11, 2001 was assumed to be the proof of that theory: was this not a clash of civilization and religion?

In reality, worlds are much more complex and divided than that. Let me use the example of Islam, in which today there is a fragmentation rooted in conflict—not merely between Sunnis and Shi’ites, but even within the same Sunni world. And so religions are not destined for conflict by their theological chromosomes, as if some people were compelled, by a theological vocation, to battle others, in a kind of re-enactment of the Crusades. Religions involve history, geography, politics and connections to other phenomena as well. The world of religions does not lend itself to the kind of interpretation that the awful over-simplifiers of our time—for whom everything must be good or evil—wish to impose on it. Religions are complex because, in their centuries-long or millennia-long journey through history, tradition and doctrine, they represent the lived experience of millions of the faithful: peoples, prayers, culture, and social relations.

Dialogue and reality

Religions are interwoven with the histories of peoples—there have been attempts to involve religions in conflicts, if only because it was their faithful who were fighting; they have been used to justify clashes and wars ... but they have also been an ingredient—a force, even—for peace-making. We should be aware of the role of religions in our conflict-filled world. For at least two decades now, the policies of various states have shown every awareness of that.

In fact, as I said earlier, religions are defined by their history, and by the country where they live. Most of all, they are not all equal, in terms of their internal structures, their coherence, their way of relating to society, and with regard to the use of violence. Catholics (I’m just joking here) look everywhere for another religion’s pope that they can talk to. But the structures and styles of representation of those religions are varied. Think about the vast Sunni world and the lack of representation in it, which led to ISIS’s self-proclaimed caliphate.

But what can we do with the world of religions? The historical experience of the last few decades of this globalized world shows how religions can pour fuel on the fires of wars, but can also pour water on the fires of conflicts. A long time ago, in 1986, John Paul II, perceiving the issue of conflicts and religions, invited the world’s religious leaders to Assisi—the town of St. Francis, a Christian witness to peace and peaceful encounter—so that they could pray together for peace, one *beside* the other, and not one *against* the other. It was a great insight: it wasn’t concerned with merely developing a bilateral dialogue

(and here we are talking about the dialogue between Jews and Catholics), but with offering an image of peace, in which the different religions were together for peace. At the time, people spoke (and still speak today) of “the spirit of Assisi”. At the time, John Paul II said: “Perhaps today, more than ever before in the history of humanity, the intrinsic link between an authentically religious way of acting and the great gift of peace has become very obvious”. And, in his address as he bid farewell to Assisi, Pope Wojtyla said: “Peace awaits its builders ... Peace is a workshop, open to all and not just to specialists, savants and strategists. Peace is a universal responsibility”.

In a globalized world, religions have a particular responsibility: a task involving themselves and their own faithful, highlighting the intrinsic link between a truly religious way of acting and the great gift of peace (and, therefore, dissociating religion from violence and terrorism). But there is also the task of building up peace between individuals and between peoples, and seeking possible and certain solutions, in order to live together. Today, no religion is an island, and living together with others creates tensions. All religious leaders are called, not merely to oversee their own community, but also to look out for others, and to look toward a peaceful way of living together ... toward dialogue ... toward encounter.

As some of you may already know, since 1986—since Assisi—the Community of Sant’Egidio has continued to journey in the spirit of Assisi, gathering religious leaders from around the world, to foster encounter, to disarm and dialogue, to tackle situations of conflict together. Over the course of those decades of the human experience of encounter with other religions—and also of proximity to so many situations of conflict, to the combatants and those who suffer because of war—we have become convinced that believers possess a specific kind of strength to contribute to peace. Believers are able to be peace-makers, and they are often able to lead peoples to encounter each other, and to live together.

In conclusion, I would like to say that my words are not merely a hope, or the expression of romantic sentiments. In the experience of Sant’Egidio, I have seen how a religious community can be peace-makers—not pacifists, but peace-makers. That was the case in the peace agreement between the government and guerrilla movement in Mozambique, which was signed at Sant’Egidio in Rome in 1992. But there have been other similar experiences, [in which Sant’Egidio] has served, either in a leading role or as simple helpers, in Africa and other parts of the world (such as recently in Mindanao, in the Philippines). Sometimes, religious communities “hide underground” the strength they possess—strength that is useful in making the world more peaceful, and improving the lives of whole peoples. We possess great strength when it comes to peace!

Conclusion

Fifty years have passed since *Nostra Aetate*, and much has happened in terms of dialogue. But there is still so much yet to do because, as time passes, generations change and situations evolve. And also because we are living in a time in which there is a resurgence of cultures which see the other as the enemy, and there are terrible situations of violence. It is necessary to bring peace to the faithful of each of the religious communities, who are often exposed to media which preach hatred. One of the responsibilities of religious leaders is (as I have said) to practise dialogue and interreligious encounter. Education directed toward respect and love for others is the answer to the scandal of hatred and violence in the name of God. Throughout its long history of faith, Israel has had contact with different peoples and religions, and has always understood its own vocation in the light of those differences.

Dialogue among religions is a precondition for a peaceful world. It is a concrete precondition, but it is also a prophecy and a vision of a peaceful world. There is an esthetic of dialogue which is so educational, when people from various religions come together in peace, showing just how beautiful peace-within-

difference is. And not just that: it is also a public rejection of the link between religion and violence. Peace must always be made by bringing differing groups together, and never by eliminating the other. That is what a civilization built on living together means.

It is not the entire religious world that is following this path. Many people oppose dialogue and religious commitments toward peace. Keeping their distance seems (to them) to be the safer path. Hatred can even seem to be the best way to be authentic. Religious or terroristic fanaticism has opposed a deep understanding of the role religions can play in peace-making, which we have been fortunate to discover in our own time, and which is in keeping with many of our traditions. In one of his rants, Bin Laden stated: "They want dialogue, and we want death". There is truth in that message: our world, on every level, from the international stage to the outskirts of our cities, is dying without dialogue. And that is what they [people like Bin Laden] want: the death of the world, the death of the beauty of difference. Today, with globalization, we are closer to each other and more interdependent. No religion can be an island. It isn't possible to remain just half-way, a little distant from others, as in the past. Today, the path that leads to peace passes through dialogue. Distance leads us onto dangerous roads. The ambiguity of our words sparks violence in fragile souls, or in the souls of young people.

Here in Rome, on the shores of this Mediterranean Sea, we say that it is a sea of religious and cultural differences, but it is also a sea of wars. Here people battle each other in the name of religion—just as they battle each other for power and money. Countries like Syria and Libya have vanished. Christians have been chased out of Iraq and Syria. Peace seems impossible—or only as the victory of one over the other. Real civilization—whether in the world, or around the Mediterranean—is a civilization of living together. Living together: that is what civilization means in our global world. And religions, which have brotherhood written into their very DNA, can make a fundamental contribution to that goal.

And religions *pray*. Even in the midst of war, they pray for peace without ceasing. The prayers of holy people are a mighty force which leads to peace, as the Bible teaches us.

I would like to conclude with the words of the official Byzantine liturgy praying for peace:

"All-powerful and merciful God, we pray to you:
 keep us far from the fires of hatred;
 and kindle the flame of love
 in the heart of every nation."

As the prayer for the Jewish New Year says:

"Our Father, our King: grant us good news once more."