Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI on the Occasion of His Visit to the Synagogue of Cologne, August 19, 2005

20/08/2005 | Benedict XVI

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Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Brothers and Sisters!

Shalom lechem! It has been my deep desire, during my first visit to Germany since my election as the Successor of the Apostle Peter, to meet the Jewish community of Cologne and the representatives of Judaism in Germany. By this visit I would like to return in spirit to the meeting that took place in Mainz on 17 November 1980 between my venerable predecessor Pope John Paul II, then making his first visit to this country, and members of the Central Jewish Committee in Germany and the Rabbinic Conference. Today too I wish to reaffirm that I intend to continue on the path towards improved relations and friendship with the Jewish People, following the decisive lead given by Pope John Paul II (cf. Address to the Delegation of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious

Consultations, 9 June 2005: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 10 June 2005, p. 5).

The Jewish community in Cologne can truly feel "at home" in this city. Cologne is, in fact, the oldest site of a Jewish community on German soil, dating back to the Colonia of Roman times. The history of relations between the Jewish and Christian communities has been complex and often painful. There were times when the two lived together peacefully, but there was also the expulsion of the Jews from Cologne in the year 1424. And in the twentieth century, in the darkest period of German and European history, an insane racist ideology, born of neo-paganism, gave rise to the attempt, planned and systematically carried out by the regime, to exterminate European Jewry. The result has passed into history as the *Shoah*. The victims of this unspeakable and previously unimaginable crime amounted to seven thousand named individuals in Cologne alone; the real figure was surely much higher. The holiness of God was no longer recognized, and consequently contempt was shown for the sacredness of human life.

This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, in which millions of Jews – men, women and children – were put to death in the gas chambers and ovens. I make my own the words written by my venerable Predecessor on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and I too say: "I bow my head before all those

who experienced this manifestation of the *mysterium iniquitatis.*" The terrible events of that time must "never cease to rouse consciences, to resolve conflicts, to inspire the building of peace" (Message for the Liberation of *Auschwitz*, 15 January 2005). Together we must remember God and his wise plan for the world which he created. As we read in the Book of Wisdom, he is the "lover of life" (11:26).

This year also marks the fortieth anniversary of the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration Nostra Aetate, which opened up new prospects for Jewish-Christian relations in terms of dialogue and solidarity. This Declaration, in the fourth chapter, recalls the common roots and the immensely rich spiritual heritage that Jews and Christians share. Both Jews and Christians recognize in Abraham their father in faith (cf. *Gal* 3:7, Rom 4:11ff.) and they look to the teachings of Moses and the prophets. Jewish spirituality, like its Christian counterpart, draws nourishment from the psalms. With Saint Paul, Christians are convinced that "the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (*Rom* 11:29, cf. 9:6,11; 11:1ff.). In considering the Jewish roots of Christianity (cf. *Rom* 11:16-24), my venerable Predecessor, quoting a statement by the German Bishops, affirmed that: "whoever meets Jesus Christ meets Judaism" (*Insegnamenti*, vol. III/2, 1980, p. 1272).

The conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate therefore "deplores feelings of

hatred, persecutions and demonstrations of antisemitism directed against the Jews at whatever time and by whomsoever" (No. 4). God created us all "in his image" (cf. *Gen* 1:27) and thus honoured us with a transcendent dignity. Before God, all men and women have the same dignity, whatever their nation, culture or religion. Hence the Declaration Nostra Aetate also speaks with great esteem of Muslims (cf. No. 3) and of the followers of other religions (cf. No. 2). On the basis of our shared human dignity the Catholic Church "condemns as foreign to the mind of Christ any kind of discrimination whatsoever between people, or harassment of them, done by reason of race or colour, class or religion" (No. 5). The Church is conscious of her duty to transmit this teaching, in her catechesis and in every aspect of her life, to the younger generations which did not witness the terrible events that took place before and during the Second World War. It is a particularly important task, since today, sadly, we are witnessing the rise of new signs of antisemitism and various forms of a general hostility towards foreigners. How can we fail to see in this a reason for concern and vigilance? The Catholic Church is committed – I reaffirm this again today – to tolerance, respect, friendship and peace between all peoples, cultures and religions.

In the forty years that have passed since the conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate, much progress has been made, in Germany and throughout the world, towards better and closer relations between Jews and Christians. Alongside official relationships, due above all to cooperation between specialists in the biblical sciences, many friendships have been born. In this regard, I would mention the various declarations by the German Episcopal Conference and the charitable work done by the "Society for Jewish-Christian Cooperation in

Cologne", which since 1945 have enabled the Jewish community to feel once again "at home" here in Cologne and to establish good relations with the Christian communities. Yet much still remains to be done. We must come to know one another much more and much better. Consequently I would encourage sincere and trustful dialogue between Jews and Christians, for only in this way will it be possible to arrive at a shared interpretation of disputed historical questions, and, above all, to make progress towards a theological evaluation of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. This dialogue, if it is to be sincere, must not gloss over or underestimate the existing differences: in those areas in which, due to our profound convictions in faith, we diverge, and indeed precisely in those areas, we need to show respect for one another.

Finally, our gaze should not only be directed to the past, but should also look forward to the tasks that await us today and tomorrow. Our rich common heritage and our fraternal and more trusting relations call upon us to join in giving an ever more harmonious witness and to work together on the practical level for the defence and promotion of human rights and the sacredness of human life, for family values, for social justice and for peace in the world. The Decalogue (cf. *Ex* 20; *Dt* 5) is for us a shared legacy and commitment. The Ten Commandments are not a burden, but a sign-post showing the path leading to a successful life. This is particularly the case for the young people whom I am meeting in these days and who are so dear to me. My wish is that they may be able to recognize in the Decalogue a lamp for their steps, a light for their path (cf. *Ps* 119:105). Adults have the responsibility of handing down to young people the torch of hope that God has given to Jews and to Christians, so that "never again" will the forces of evil come to power, and that future generations, with God's help, may be able to build a more just and peaceful

world, in which all people have equal rights and are equally at home.

I conclude with the words of Psalm 29, which express both a wish and a prayer: “May the Lord give strength to his people, may he bless his people with peace”.

May he hear our prayer!

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