



Response to Vatican Document 'We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah.'

19/03/1998 | International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations

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The document "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah" was issued in March 1998 and discussed at a meeting of the International Liaison Committee later that month. It has evoked reactions among our member organizations and we wish to summarize these and bring them to your attention.

We would like first to express our appreciation of Pope John Paul II's letter to Cardinal Cassidy expressing the hope for all men of good will to work together, in which we sincerely join. We are keenly aware of the many initiatives of the Pope to improve Catholic-Jewish relations during the twenty years of his Papacy and of his personal sensitivity to the horrors of the Shoah.

The document and antisemitism

The subject of the document as conceived in 1987 was The Shoah and Antisemitism and we have found those sections warning against the dangers of antisemitism a moving testimony to your determination to fight this evil in any form and in any place. They are pointed and phrased strongly and can leave believers in no doubt, in the oft-repeated words of Pope John Paul II,

that antisemitism is
a sin. The clear
affirmation goes far
beyond previous
Vatican documents
on the subject and
we welcome its
unequivocal
challenge. We are
also well aware
that this document
will reach millions in
parts of the world
who have never had
firsthand contact
with a Jew and
could help to
counteract the
traditional
prejudices which
exist there. We
hope that everything
will be done to
ensure that the
message will quickly
reach grass roots
level.

The historical record

Our problems with
the Document relate
to historical
presentation and
interpretation.
However let us first
say that the
summary of the
course of the
Shoah, called " a
major fact of the
history of the
century", should
render impossible
the obscenity of
Shoah Denial
among Catholics
and we see in this
one of the major

positive aspects of
the Document.

Our
disappointments in
the historical
treatment were
accentuated by the
great impression
made upon us by
the series of
statements on the
subject published in
recent years by
National Episcopal
Conferences,
especially in those
countries which
were the focus of
the Shoah - many
on the fiftieth
anniversary of the
liberation of the
camps or the end of
the European War.
These documents
were characterized
by clarity, sensitivity
and courage and we
had hoped that the
Vatican document
would be written
with the same
categorical
approach. In
relating to aspects
of the historical
record, we will
quote from these
documents as
examples of
conclusions we had
hoped would be
similarly expressed
in the Vatican
Document.

***Christianity and
historical***

antisemitism

Initial Jewish reactions on the publication of the Document were deeply concerned by the incorporation of the quotation from the Pope's speech of 31 October 1997 in which he said "In the Christian world - I do not say on the part of the Church as such - erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability have circulated for too long". Nobody can doubt the Pope's sincere abhorrence of antisemitism but his apparent absolution of the Church from historical responsibility was, at least, puzzling. Jewish reactions went into great detail concerning the misdeeds of the historical Church. At the meeting of the International Liaison Committee, Cardinal Cassidy explained the perspective of the writers of the document. As summarized in the subsequent communiqué, he said that "the term

"the Church" refers for Catholics to the inerrant mystical bride of Jesus Christ, whereas the term "sons and daughters of the Church" does not exclude members of the Church at any level". We feel it unfortunate that the distinction was not spelt out in the document as we doubt whether even all believers are aware of this distinction and the statement as it stands could (and did) lead to conclusions different from those intended. Even after the explanation, we find many Church statements confusing - including those of the Bishops' Conferences with their frequent references to failings of "the Church". What are we to make of the statement of the German and Austrian bishops from 1988 which says "The Church, which we proclaim holy and which we honor as a mystery, is also a sinful Church and in need of conversion", which would seem to conflict with the concept of the inerrancy of the mystical Church. We were glad to

note that Father Raniero Cantalamessa in his Good Friday sermon delivered in the name of the Pontifical Household quoted the Pope's statement of October 31 but omitted the phrase which we found problematic.

The Document does indeed ask some of the pertinent questions that needed to be asked: "Whether the Nazi persecution of the Jews was not made easier by the anti-Jewish prejudices imbedded in some Christian minds and hearts?" "Did anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians make them less sensitive or even indifferent, to the persecutions launched against the Jews by National Socialism when it reached power?" To these questions a clear answer was expected which would have showed how the teaching of contempt has influenced Christianity throughout the centuries and how it deeply affected the Christian responses to Nazi persecution.

This was to be found clearly stated in the documents of the Bishops. For example in the 1995 Statement of the Dutch Bishops: "A tradition of theological and ecclesiastical anti-Judaism contributed to the climate in which the Shoah could take place. A so-called "Statement of Revilement" taught that the Jews were a people rejected after Christ's death. These kinds of traditions meant that Catholics kept aloof from Jews and in some cases were indifferent or hostile. We reject this tradition of ecclesiastical anti-Judaism and regret its terrible outcome."

The 1997 Statement of the French Bishops, expressed the historical aspect with especial clarity: "A tradition of anti-Judaism affected Christian doctrines and teachings, theology and apologetics, preaching and liturgy in various degrees and prevailed among Christians throughout the centuries until Vatican II...To the

extent that the priests and leaders of the Church for so long allowed the teaching of contempt to develop and fostered in Christian communities a collective religious culture which permanently affected and deformed mentalities,, they bear a serious responsibility."

The relevant paragraph in the Vatican Document (page 8 paragraph 1) does indeed refer to the historical record but avoids taking a clear position on the relationship between the teaching of contempt and the political and cultural climate that made the Shoah possible. Sentences such as "Sentiments of anti-Judaism in some Christian quarters and the gap which existed between the Church and the Jewish people led to a generalized discrimination...." or "[Jews} were looked upon with a certain suspicion and mistrust. In times of crisis such as famine, war, pestilence or social tensions, the Jewish

minority was sometimes taken as a scapegoat and became the victim of violence, looting, even massacres" overlook the systematic unceasing persecution over sixteen centuries by the Church, its leaders and theologians, priests and laymen. It was not merely "a certain suspicion and mistrust" but an institutionalized policy of humiliation, discrimination and hatred - disseminated in canon law, in the liturgy, the catechism, from pulpits and schools directed to reducing the Jew to a position of total inferiority in every aspect of thought and endeavor. The document only hints at the reality which is succinctly presented in some of the Bishops' statements.

(We welcome the clarification issued by Cardinal Cassidy at the ILC and reiterated in an interview with Reuters on April 2 in which he noted that there was no intention to exclude popes, bishops or any official people

from any guilt and agreed that the Document could have been clearer on this point.)

The Church and the Shoah

This brings us to the consideration of the role of historical Church antisemitism in the lead-up to the Shoah and the actual behavior of Catholics during those terrible times. First of all a distinction is drawn in the Document between antisemitism, based on theories contrary to the constant teaching of the Church on human equality, and anti-Judaism. The National Socialist Regime, it is said, was a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime whose antisemitism had its roots outside Christianity. Then the right question is asked "Whether the Nazi persecution of the Jews was not made easier by the anti-Jewish prejudices imbedded in some Christian minds and hearts?"

The implication that while Christians have been guilty of anti-Judaism but antisemitism is a contradiction of the teaching of the Church is dubious and it is unfortunate that it is put forward in generalities that could well mislead many for whom this document is intended. There was indeed a change in the main emphases of antisemitism in the late 19th century from a religious basis to a more secular prejudice with a pseudo-racialist base. However can it be said that the latter was not influenced by the long centuries of Church conditioning? The antisemitic parties preaching the new ideology from the late 19th century often stressed their Christian affiliations. For example, the party of one of the formulators of modern antisemitism in Germany, Adolf Stoecker, was the Christian Social Workers' Party, the party of the antisemitic mayor of Vienna, Karl Lueger (a major influence on Hitler), was the United Christians while Austria had

the Christian Social Club and the Catholic People's Party, France had its Catholic Workers' Club and the Christian Democratic Movement. and the significant role played by the Church in the Dreyfus Affair will be recalled. Thus the statement that this was "an anti-Judaism that was essentially more sociological and political than religious" plays down the fact of the unbroken line of Christian anti-Judaism/antisemitism and its impact throughout Europe. After all the Jew was still the deicide and the traditional anti-Jewish stereotypes were not changed or renounced and were absorbed into the new antisemitism. The Catholic attitude toward the Jews was unchanged and its influence cannot be excluded. This is why the suggestion of a complete dichotomy between "anti-Judaism" and "antisemitism" is misleading. One shades into the other. It was Christian anti-Judaism that created the possibility of

modern pagan
antisemitism by
delegitimizing the
Jews and Judaism.
(Incidentally ancient
paganism was far
more tolerant of
Jews and Judaism
than was the
Christian Church).

It is true that the
National Socialist
regime adopted a
pagan ideology
which rejected the
Church - although
this did not mean
that all churchmen
and believers
rejected National
Socialism. It may be
noted that Hitler,
Himmler and the
other Nazi leaders
were all baptized
Christians who were
never
excommunicated.
The same is true of
the vast apparatus
of killers, the
product of Christian
Europe. The Church
is not accused of
direct responsibility
for the Shoah but
of its legacy of
sixteen centuries of
conditioning which
had created an
environment in
which a Shoah
became possible
and many
Christians would
feel no compunction
in collaborating.
Pope John Paul II in
his speech of
October 31 stated
"Erroneous and

unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their presumed guilt circulated for too long and contributed to a lulling of many consciences". Here was a clear answer to the question posed in the Document " Did anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians make them less sensitive or even indifferent to the persecutions launched against the Jews by National Socialism when it reached power?" We regret that it was not included. Another clear statement was that of the French bishops : "It is important to admit the primary role played by the consistently repeated anti-Jewish stereotypes wrongly perpetuated among Christians in the historical process that led to the Shoah". Such simple statements were what had been hoped for in the Document rather than the convoluted approach that was taken.

Behavior during

the Shoah

"Did Christians give every possible assistance to those being persecuted and in particular to the persecuted Jews" asks the Document and replies "Many did but others did not". Jews will ever be grateful for those courageous Christians who saved and helped Jews and in other ways opposed the persecutions and in so doing risked their lives. But these heroes cannot be called the "many". Indeed the statement that "many did" does not do justice to the supreme self-sacrifice of the few (who acted as individuals and seldom received any support from the Church). Their numbers were small compared not only with those who were cowed into inactivity but with those who took an active role in the persecution and extermination (a major group not mentioned in the Document). Unlike the German and French documents, where those who stood up and rescued Jews were seen as

exceptions, the Vatican document gives the impression that those who were evil, insensitive and acquiesced to the Final Solution were the exception to the overall Christian approach. However, while we feel the Document could have been more explicit, we recognize the significance of its statements: "For Christians, this heavy burden of conscience of their brothers and sisters during the Second World War must be a call to penitence. We deeply regret the errors and failures of those sons and daughters of the Church". At the same time, we feel that some of the examples of churchmen standing up to Hitler were unfortunate. Cardinal Bertram may have condemned National Socialism in 1931 but his subsequent record was very different. He opposed all public protest against the deportations and the massacres of the Jews as had been suggested by some of his colleagues and after Hitler's suicide he addressed a circular

letter to the priests
in his diocese
inviting them to
celebrate a solemn
requiem service in
memory of the
Fuehrer. In the
words of the
German Bishops"
statement of 1995:
"Even the pogroms
of November 1938
were not followed
by public and
expressed protests".
This comes
precisely into the
category of
response that we
feel is slurred over
in the text.

The question of the
role of Pope Pius
XII is obviously a
contentious issue
with differing views
not only between
Jews and Catholics
but among Catholic
scholars
themselves. It would
have been
preferable to have
left this subject to
future historians.
But once opened, it
is a Pandora's
box. The statement
that the Pope was
responsible for
saving hundreds of
thousands of Jewish
lives has not been
substantiated by the
published
documents. A final
judgment on this
can only be made
after the Archives
are opened. We are
given one

generalizing
quotation made by
Pius XII but no
reference to the
charge of "silence"
- he never once
explicitly mentioned
the Jews in his
public
pronouncements
during World War II.
The issue of
silence, not
confronted in the
Document, is
faced - at least with
relation to the
French hierarchy -
in the French
Bishops' document
which states frankly:
"The vast majority of
church officials did
not realize their
considerable power
and influence and
that, given the
silence of other
institutions, the
impact of a public
statement might
have forestalled an
irreparable
catastrophe. The
bishops of France
did not speak out,
acquiescing through
their silence in
these flagrant
violations of the
rights of man and
leaving an open
field for the spiral of
death. Today we
confess that
silence was a
mistake". The
Document could
well have spoken
out against the
silence of the
hierarchies. It is not
the place where the
dispute on Pope

Pius XII's role can be solved. But we do miss the simple statement that the earthly Church as a whole erred during this period and we see the refusal to assign any blame to it as an institution a step backward from the position of the German and French bishops.

We were disappointed by the introduction (at the bottom of page 12 of the Document) of a list of calamities experienced by other nations - and in particular "the drama of the Middle East". We with our long record of suffering can profoundly empathize with the tragedies of other peoples. But we can never forget the uniqueness of the Shoah which is the point we would have expected the Document to bring out. In no other case, was an entire people doomed to the utmost humiliation and then extermination off the face of the earth - even to the extent of going back generations to identify their "blood". Moreover as Catholic belief as expressed in recent

documents clearly
links the salvation of
Christians with
God's redemption
of the Jewish
people whose
covenant with him is
irrevocable,
Christians cannot
view the Shoah as
they do other
genocides.

We welcome
Cardinal Cassidy's
suggestion,
recorded in the
communiqué at the
end of the ILC
meeting, that a joint
team of Jewish and
Christian scholars
review the relevant
material relating to
the Catholic Church
and the Shoah in
the volumes
produced by
Catholic scholars
and if questions still
remain, further
clarification will be
sought. The Vatican
archives are the
only great archive
which remain closed
for the World War II
period. When they
are opened, there
will doubtless be
both positive and
negative
disclosures. But
only in this way will
the historical record
be authoritatively
established.

We would like to
conclude, as we

began, on a positive note. We appreciate Cardinal Cassidy's statement that Catholics have much to learn and that the Jewish community needs to understand better how the Catholic Church views itself. Our critique of the Document is not meant with any negative intent but as a pointer to the guidelines which we think should be adopted in Catholic teaching of the Shoah. It is in the spirit of Cardinal Cassidy's comment that the Document is not a conclusion but rather a step for further development, and that in the words of Pope John Paul II's covering letter, we will "work together for a world of true respect for the life and dignity of every human being". Indeed "We Remember" is not only an indictment of the past but, in its condemnation of antisemitism, a milestone-guideline

