Spiritual and Ethical Commitment in Jewish-Christian Dialogue

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I am very honoured for the opportunity that I am given to deliver some reflections on the spiritual and ethical commitment in our Jewish-Christian dialogue to this International Council of Christians and Jews, and especially do this on the occasion of the celebration of the eightieth birthday of its patron, Sir Sigmund Steinberg. My reflections may be an expression of my profound appreciation for his remarkable and indeed historic contribution to promoting understanding and co-operation of Christians, Jews and Muslims. Sir Sigmund Steinberg is a living example and an inspiring model of the spiritual and ethical commitment in Jewish-Christian dialogue, which we have to continue for the sake of the new, and hopefully better, century we initiate this year.

- I -

Let me begin with a recent story. I had the good fortune to accompany the Holy Father on his recent trip to Ukraine. While most of that visit was dedicated to the pastoral care of Ukrainian Roman Catholics and Eastern Catholics, a good deal of time was also spent in trying to bridge the gap between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. Nonetheless, in the interest of Jewish-Christian reconciliation, the Holy Father was able to put some time aside to visit Babi Yar, the scene of the massacre of 100 000 Jews within a few days in September 1941. There he knelt silently in prayer and then recited the Psalm *De profundis:* "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; 0 Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy" *(*Psalm 130, 1-2). It was an intensely emotional moment.

I begin my address with this story to assure the Jewish community that the Catholic Church will not forget the Shoah, nor will we forget the pain inflicted upon the Jews over the centuries by those who often were Christians, nor will we ever support in any way the evil of anti-Semitism. I, therefore, repeat the words of the Second Vatican Council in *Nostra Aetate* of 1965, which for us is still the basis and the compass for our relations: "The Church reproves every form of persecution against whomsoever it may be directed. Remembering, then, her common heritage with the Jews and moved not by any political consideration, but solely by the religious motivation of Christian charity, she deplores all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism leveled at any time or from any source against the Jews."

This Declaration is not done out of political consideration. Our motive is not political, it is theological, and it is ethical. It is informed by reasons of justice and by reasons of revealed truth.

By justice, because all forms of discrimination and defamation are opposed to respect for human dignity. In his message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace 1999 Pope John Paul II stated that respect for human dignity and human rights is the secret of true peace. "When the promotion of the dignity of the person is the guiding principle, and when search for the common good is the overriding commitment, then solid and lasting foundations for building peace are laid", he wrote. And he continues: "The history of our time has shown in a tragic way the danger which results from forgetting the truth about the human person. Before our eyes we have the results of ideologies such as Marxism, Nazism and Fascism, and also of myths like racial superiority, nationalism and ethnic exclusivism ... it must be said again that no affront to human dignity can be ignored, whatever its source, whatever actual form it takes and wherever it occurs

In a later paragraph he comes back to this point affirming: "One of the most tragic forms of discrimination is the denial to ethnic groups and national minorities of the fundamental right to exist as such. This is done by suppressing them or brutally forcing them to move, or by attempting to weaken their ethnic identity to such an extent that they are no longer distinguishable. Can we remain silent in the face of such grave crimes against humanity? No effort must be judged too great when it is a question of putting an end to such abuses, which are violations of human dignity."

In his message for the World Day of Peace 2001 the Pope underlines the counterpoint of discrimination and defamation. His thesis is: "Dialogue between cultures for a civilization of love and peace." "I therefore [he writes] consider it urgent to invite believers in Christ, together with all men and women of good will, to reflect on the theme of dialogue between cultures and traditions. This dialogue is the obligatory path to the building of a reconciled world, a world able to look with serenity to its own future. This is a theme which is crucial to the pursuit of peace."

The respect for human dignity and human rights is fundamental for all human relations and for peace all over the world. But, for the relation between Jews and Christians, there is a further

argument that should be analysed in order to oppose and reject discrimination and defamation. The Council's condemnation of all forms of anti-Semitism is inspired by God's revelation and witnessed in the Bible itself. According to Biblical witness, Abraham is our common father in faith. Jews and Christians, we both are children of Abraham.

An interdenominational group of more than 200 rabbis and Jewish scholars published a remarkable common statement Dabru Emet saying: "Jews and Christians worship the same God. Before the rise of Christianity, Jews were the only worshippers of the God of Israel. But Christians also worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, creator of heaven and earth. While Christian faith is not a viable religious choice for Jews, as Jewish theologians we rejoice that, through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel." The authors of this declaration go on stating: "Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book — the Bible (what Jews call 'Tanakh' and Christians call the 'Old Testament')."

This far-reaching common ground is fundamental for the specificity of the dialogue between Jews and Christians. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in an article in *L'Osservatore Romano* (29 December 2000) with the title "The Heritage of Abraham" writes: "It is evident that dialogue of us Christians with the Jews stands on a different level with regard to other religions. The faith witnessed on the Bible of the Jews, the Old Testament of Christians, is for us not a different religion but the foundation of our own faith."

And the Council's Declaration Nostra Aetate declared: "[The Church cannot] forget that she draws nourishment from that good olive tree onto which the wild branches of the Gentiles have been grafted." Continuing on this theme, Nostra Aetate goes on stating: "the apostle Paul maintains that the Jews remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made. ... neither all Jews indiscriminately at [the time of Jesus' death], nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion. Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from Holy Scripture." These affirmations of 1965 are the binding teaching of the Catholic Church; they are therefore valid still more than 35 years later. They lay the foundation of the spiritual and ethical commitment in Jewish-Christian dialogue.

- II -

With this Declaration the Second Vatican Council opened the door for a re-evaluation of the role of Judaism in God's plan of salvation past and present and for the exploration of the special linkage between Judaism and Christianity.

Let me remember some steps of this re-evaluation. The work of Nostra Aetate continued with the establishment by the Holy See of an Office for Catholic-Jewish Relations in 1967 and finally a Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews in 1974 within the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

In 1974 this Commission issued the Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing Nostra Aetate. It states: "the links and relationships render obligatory a better mutual understanding and renewed mutual esteem." Further the Guidelines declare: "Christians must therefore strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism; they must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in light of their own religious experience."

The Guidelines lay out the basis for the Dialogue with Judaism: "Dialogue presupposes that each side wishes to know the other, and wishes to increase and deepen its knowledge of the other. It constitutes a particularly suitable means of favouring a better mutual knowledge and, especially in the case of dialogue between Jews and Christians, of probing the riches of one's own tradition.

Dialogue demands respect for the other as he is; above all, respect for his faith and his religious convictions."

The Guidelines also set forth areas in which dialogue would have a proper role: in the study of liturgy, in the formation of Catholic laity and clergy and in joint social action.

Eleven years after, in 1985, the Commission published the Notes on the Correct Way to Present Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Catholic Church. Here there is a concern that Judaism is not presented in Catholic teaching as being merely a historical and superseded reality. It refers to "the permanent reality of the Jewish people ... the people of God of the Old Covenant, which has never been revoked ... as a living reality closely related to the Church."

The claim for dialogue was very fruitful. The dialogue developed in the last decades on many levels, national and international, popular and academic, educational and political. Whilst the Church Fathers wrote Tractatus contra Judaeos, several of today's theologians write Tractatus de Judaeos in the sense of Tractatus pro Judaeos. Throughout nearly two millennia Christians have tended to characterize Judaism as a failed religion or, at best, a religion that prepared the way for, and is completed in, Christianity. Now we are aware of God's unrevoked covenant with his people and of the permanent and actual salvific significance of Jewish religion for its believers.

These few quotations demonstrate that dialogue is much more than mutual information and objective communication. As Jewish thinkers like Martin Buber taught us, dialogue has a deeply existential, spiritual and ethical meaning. In his already quoted message on dialogue between cultures Pope John Paul II writes:

> Individuals come to maturity through receptive openness to others and through generous self-giving to them; so too do cultures. Created by people and at the service of people, they have to be perfected through dialogue and communion, on the basis of the original an fundamental unity of the human family ... In this perspective, dialogue between cultures ... emerges as an intrinsic demand of human nature itself, as well as of culture. It is dialogue which protects the distinctiveness of cultures as historical and creative expressions of the underlying unity of the human family, and which sustains understanding and communion between them."

Such a dialogue, as the Pope states, "never implies a dull uniformity or enforced homogenisation or assimilation; rather it expresses the convergence of a multiform variety, and is therefore a sign of richness and a promise of growth."

With the Second Vatican Council we can add that even biblical revelation has a dialogical structure where God addresses men as his friends (Dogmatic Constitution, Dei Verbum, 2). In his revelation God takes us seriously, he takes care of us, he turns towards us and communicate with us. This dialogical structure of revelation is the deepest spiritual foundation of inter-human dialogue, inter-human respect, and solidarity.

With this kind of dialogue we are not at the end, we are still in the beginning, and I dare say, with such kind of dialogue, we will never be at the end; this dialogue will go on and must go on and will link us together forever.

- III -

The most important spiritual and ethical impulse for the new dialogue and for the revolutionary shift of the relations between Jews and Christians was the horrors of the Holocaust. Indeed, the most important, although somewhat controversial, fruit of the dialogue was the promulgation of We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah, published by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews in March 1998. There were before other documents on this painful and dark historical chapter published by national Bishops' Conferences, as the French, the German, and others. But this was the first universal document of the Catholic Church dedicated to remembering the particularity of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust and the seriousness with which all Catholics must take account of how the evil of the Shoah was possible in Christian lands.

Jewish organizations and institutions welcomed the declaration though they had expected more and though they criticized some affirmations of historical and theological nature. I think, it is not the place to enter anew in this discussion. My predecessor, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, tried to explain to you some difficult points, and I fully agree with what he said, especially with his affirmation, that this is a first word but not the last word on this issue.

Nevertheless, the title of the declaration is important: "We remember", we will not and we cannot forget; for oblivion would cause new injustice to the victims of an unprecedented atrocity crying to heaven. The memory of this passion in the twentieth century must be preserved in the strict biblical and theological sense of zikkarôn, anamnesis, memoria. A famous — although much disputed — phrase of the Chassidim says: "oblivion leads to exile, memory is the mystery of salvation." So memory touches the depth of both our faiths and our respective understanding of teshuva (conversion, reconciliation, forgiveness). The memory of the tragedy of the Holocaust can lead us to the memory of our deepest spiritual and ethical roots.

How could anyone presume to utter a last word on such a human and cultural catastrophe which raises profound ethical and theological questions, not the last question of theodicy, i.e. the question: How can these horrors be reconciled with the belief in a just and merciful God? How are prayer, faith, and theology still possible after Auschwitz? The answer, which convinces me, is this:

We can pray, after Auschwitz, because in Auschwitz there was prayer and because such prayer in Auschwitz helped many of the victims to preserve human dignity and to prevail spiritually and ethically on their tormentors.

- IV -

We Remember can not be the last word. Pope John Paul II himself has been in the forefront of the ongoing dialogue with Jews and Judaism. He has been an example of the Catholic Church's developing relationship of reconciliation with the Jewish community. This has grown gradually since his visit to Mainz, Germany on November 17, 1980, when he referred to Jews as "the people of God of the Old Covenant, which has never been revoked", but truly blossomed with his historic visit to the Synagogue of Rome on April 13, 1986.

During that visit to the Synagogue he stated: "The Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain way is 'intrinsic' to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship that we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers."

The culminating occasion of the Pope's dedication to Jewish-Catholic dialogue was his pilgrimage in March 2000 to the Holy Land. At Yad Vashem, in Jerusalem on March 23, 2000, the Holy Father prayed: "In this place of solemn remembrance, I fervently pray that our sorrow for the tragedy

which the Jewish people suffered in the twentieth century will lead to a new relationship between Christians and Jews. Let us build a new future in which there will be no more anti-Jewish feelings among Christians and anti-Christian feelings among Jews, but rather the mutual respect required of those who adore the one Creator and Lord, and look to Abraham as our common father in faith. The word must heed the warning that comes to us from the victims of the Holocaust and from the testimony of the survivors. Here at Yad Vashem the memory lives on, and burns itself into our souls. It makes us cry out: I hear the whispering of many — terror on every side! But I trust in you 0 Lord: I say You are my God" (Psalm 31:13.15).

Who can forget the image of Pope John Paul II, standing alone at the Western Wall of the Temple, the Kotel, in Jerusalem, as a pilgrim praying to God for forgiveness in a spirit of repentance? The prayer he placed into the wall that day was the same that he prayed during the Liturgy for the First Sunday of Lent, March 12, 2000 at St. Peter's Basilica: "God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your name to the nations. We are deeply saddened by the behaviour of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the covenant."

In Incarnationis mysterium, Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the Pope writes about a "purification of memory": "[This] calls everyone to make an act of courage and humility in recognizing the wrongs done by those who have borne or bear the name of Christian. ... Because of the bond which unites us to one another in the Mystical Body, all of us, though not personally responsible ... bear the burden of the errors and faults of those who have gone before us. In this year of mercy the Church ... should kneel before God and implore forgiveness for the past and present sins of her sons and daughters" (no. 11). This expression "sins of her sons and daughters" was often criticized as not going far enough and as not unambiguously including the institution of the Church. But priests, bishops, popes are sons of the Church as well. They too have to pray every day: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

I offer this brief survey as a reminder of what has been accomplished about the spiritual and ethical commitment in our dialogue. I hope we can celebrate this history of accomplishment together, even as we continue to work to strengthen the bonds of friendship.

- V -

Here I would like to say a few things about the Declaration Dominus Jesus issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. I want to express anew my sincere sadness about the pain the interpretation of it caused. As I said at the International Liaison Committee meeting in New York, my friends' pains are also my pains.

According to the Catholic tradition, the Declaration must be read and interpreted — as any magisterial document should — in the larger context of all other official documents and declarations, which are by no means cancelled, revoked or nullified by this document.

The problems raised by this text are not Jewish-Christian related but are linked with the intention of the document. The Declaration mainly deals with inter-religious dialogue. It argues against some newer relativistic and, to some degree, syncretistic theories, which advocate a pluralistic vision of religion and classify both Jewish and Christian religions under the category of "world religions". It argues against theories that deny the specific identity of Jewish and Christian religions, and do not take into account the distinction between faith as answer to God's revelation and belief as human search for God and human religious wisdom. Thus, the Declaration defends the specific revelation character of the Hebrew Bible too, which we Christians call the Old Testament, against theories claiming, for example, that the Holy Books of Hinduism are the Old Testament for Hindus.

The document Dominus Jesus does not deal with the question of the theology of Catholic-Jewish relations proclaimed by Nostra Aetate, and of subsequent Church teaching. What the document tries to "correct" is another category, namely the attempts to find a kind of "universal theology" of inter-religious relations, which, in some cases, has led to indifferentism, relativism and syncretism. Against such theories we, as Jews and Christians, are on the same side, in the same boat, if I am allowed to say so; we have to fight, to argue and to bear witness together. Our common self-understanding is at stake.

Dominus Jesus does not state that everybody needs to become a Catholic in order to be saved by God. On the contrary, it declares that God's grace, which Christians believe is the grace of Jesus Christ, is available to all. Therefore, the church believes that Judaism, i.e. the faithful response of the Jewish people to God's irrevocable covenant, is salvific for them, because God is faithful to his promises.

This touches the problem of mission towards Jews, a painful question with regard to forced conversion in the past. Dominus Jesus, as other official documents, raises this question again by saying that dialogue is a part of evangelisation. This stirred Jewish suspicion. But this is a language problem, since the term evangelisation, in official church documents, cannot be understood in the same way it is commonly interpreted in everyday speech. In strict theological language, evangelisation is a very complex and overall term, and reality. It implies presence and witness, prayer and liturgy, proclamation and catechesis, dialogue and social work. Now, presence and witness, prayer and liturgy, dialogue and social work, which are all part of evangelisation, do not have the goal of increasing the number of Catholics. Thus evangelisation, if understood in its proper and theological meaning, does not imply any attempt of proselytism whatsoever.

In a similar way, the term mission, in its proper sense, is referred to conversion from false gods and idols to the true and one God, who revealed himself in the salvation history with its elected people. Thus mission, in this strict sense, cannot be used with regard to Jews, who believe in the true and one God. Therefore — and this is characteristic —there exists dialogue but there does not exist any Catholic missionary organization for Jews.

As we said previously, dialogue is not mere objective information; dialogue involves the whole person. In dialogue I want to communicate something that is important for me and for my life; ultimately in dialogue I want to communicate somewhat from me, what gives meaning to my life, what supports me, what inspires, encourages and also consoles me. Because it is important for me and makes my happy, I want to share it with others so that they too may be blessed. Dialogue, in this deeper sense, implies witness of my deepest faith, a witness which proposes but by no means imposes one's own faith, on the contrary, it implies respect for every other conviction and every other faith. So in dialogue Jews give witness of their faith, witness of what supported them in the dark periods of their history and their life, and Christians give account of the hope they have in Jesus Christ. In doing so, both are far away from any kind of proselytism, but both can learn from each other and enrich each other. We both want to share our deepest concerns to an often-disoriented world that needs such witness and searches for it. This leads me to my last point.

- VI -

Our dialogue, the dialogue between Jews and Christians, cannot be a happy but isolated island; it stands in the context of a world that is changing in a breath-taking way in all fields of life. It is no longer the world I experienced in my own childhood and youth, the world of the Second World War and the postwar period. Every time I spoke to my students about that period, they felt bored, their problems were others and we know that their problems are urgent enough.

Certainly, and I repeat, the past must be remembered and our memories have to find a way to be

reconciled. We may not and we cannot forget the horrors of the Holocaust; we must remember them as a warning for the future. Our memory must be memoria futuri. So our dialogue should not be merely past oriented, but future oriented. Our dialogue should more and more become a contribution for the solution of today's and tomorrow's spiritual and ethical problems and challenges. Our so-called post-modern world needs our common witness.

As Jews and Christians we have so many values in common, values lacking to our world which is often without orientation, but values urgently needed for building a new and a better world. Let us, therefore, not forget our often bad and sad history but let us learn from it and share what we learnt with our young generation.

In this regard I would like to quote anew the Statement Dabru Emet which states: "Jews and Christians accept the moral principles of Torah. Central to the moral principles of Torah is the inalienable sanctity and dignity of every human being. All of us were created in the image of God. This shared moral emphasis can be the basis of an improved relationship between our two communities. It can also be the basis of a powerful witness to all humanity for improving the lives of our fellow human beings and for standing against the immoralities and idolatries that harm and degrade us. Such witness is especially needed after the unprecedented horrors of the past century."

"Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace. Jews and Christians, each in their own way, recognize the unredeemed state of the world as reflected in the persistence of persecution, poverty, human degradation and misery. Although justice and peace are finally God's, our joint efforts, together with those of other faith communities, will help bring the kingdom of God [as a Christian theologian I prefer to say: bring the foretaste of the kingdom of God] for which we hope and long. Separately and together, we must work to bring justice and peace to our world. In this enterprise, we are guided by the vision of the prophets of Israel."

I could continue with a long list of urgent common problems. In our secularised and often cynical world we have to testify to the sanctity of God's name as the protection for the sanctity of human life which is created in God's own image. Jews and Christians can co-operate for the value of life, of the unborn and the living, of family, of solidarity, of forgiveness and reconciliation. As both see the world as God's creation they can work together against environment destruction and for the preservation of creation.

- VII -

To sum up I would like to make two points. First: Our dialogue needs intensification; it needs to discover its very existential and religious depth. We do not meet as any community, not as political or economical pressure groups. Each one of us may have his or her personal political and economical interest, we may have our political agenda. But this is not our agenda here; this is not our concern here. We do not meet as any group, we meet, and we have dialogue as faith communities. We have to foster our religious relations and promote what constitutes the very spiritual and ethical identity of both our communities.

Second: We should do this not only for our own sake, but for the promotion of our world, in favour of a better world and as a responsibility for our young people and their hopes. We cannot waste time with useless, superficial, transparently self-promoting public quarrels. We share a rich, common spiritual and ethical patrimony; we have a common responsibility to hand down to the next generations and to make it bear fruit for a better world of justice and peace. Indeed, a high and holy task awaits us.

Together we must give witness to what the prophets of Israel taught us: "Justice will dwell in the

wilderness; and in the fertile land, righteousness. Justice will bring about peace; justice will produce calm and security for ever" (Is 32,16f.).

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