



NEWS

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CATHOLIC, JEWISH LEADERS ASK CONTINUED DIALOGUE IN LIGHT OF VATICAN STATEMENT

WASHINGTON--An official of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) is among several Catholic and Jewish leaders who today issued a joint report asking for "further deepening dialogue" between the two communities in light of a recent Vatican document on Jews and Judaism.

Dr. Eugene Fisher, executive secretary of the NCCB's Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations, was one of the eleven participants who released their report following a meeting in New York City to evaluate "Notes on the Correct way to present Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church", released by the Vatican on June 24.

The report praises the "positive elements" of the Vatican document and asks for their implementation on the local level. At the same time, it calls for continued discussion and scholarly exploration on areas in which differences exist.

Progress in Jewish-Catholic relations since the Vatican Council 20 years ago, says the statement, has taught Catholics and Jews "that we can face genuine differences and still retain a spirit of trust and mutual respect."

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The Vatican document urged Catholics to a deep and serious study of Judaism saying "there is evident in particular a painful ignorance of the history and traditions of Judaism of which only negative aspects and often caricature seem to form part of the stock ideas of many Christians."

Among the positive contributions of the Vatican document which the report notes are its recognition of the "continuous spiritual fecundity of the Jewish people from the rabbinical period to modern times", its emphasis in religious liberty and its continuing condemnation of anti-Semitism.

The report of the Catholic and Jewish leaders acknowledges that the Vatican document "was greeted with some praise but also some sharp criticism by groups in the Jewish community." The International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations on June 24 had criticized the Vatican document for what it called a "totally inadequate" treatment of two "absolutely crucial aspects of contemporary Jewish existence", the modern state of Israel and the Nazi Holocaust during World War II.

The July 23 report says that the Vatican document needs to be viewed in the context of previous papal and Vatican statements, including these words of Pope John Paul II on Good Friday, 1984: "For the Jewish people who live in the State of Israel and who preserve on that land such previous testimonies to their history and their faith, we must ask for the desired security and the due tranquility that is the prerogative of every nation and

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condition of life and of progress for every society."

The report also notes that the Vatican document was clarified at a press conference on the day of its release by Msgr. Jorge Mejia, the Secretary for the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews which issued the document. In that press conference Msgr. Mejia pointed out that Jews can and should draw "salvific gifts" from their own religious traditions and highlighted the important task which Catholic educators have in developing in their students an understanding of the dimensions of the Holocaust and its significance for Jews and for Catholics.

"Had there been prior consultation with the Jewish community along the lines of these clarifications, much of the criticism which concerns us now might have been avoided," said the report.

Signers of the report were: Rev. Charles Angell, S.A., Director, Centro Pro Unione, Rome, Italy; Ms. Judith H. Banki, Associate Director, Interreligious Affairs, The American Jewish Committee; Professor Thomas Bird, Chair, Department of Slavic Studies, Queens College, New York City; Dr. Eugene J. Fisher, Executive Secretary, Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations, National Conference of Catholic Bishops; Rabbi David M. Gordis, Executive Vice President, The American Jewish Committee; Bro. William J. Martyn, S.A., Executive Secretary, Ecumenical Commission, Archdiocese of New York; Rabbi Alan Mittleman, Program Specialist, Interreligious Affairs, The American Jewish Committee; Rev. John T. Pawlikowski, O.S.M., Professor of Social

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Ethics, Catholic Theological Union, Chicago; Rabbi A. James Rudin, Director, Interreligious Affairs, The American Jewish Committee; Zachariah Shuster, Consultant for International Relations, The American Jewish Committee; Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, Director, International Relations, The American Jewish Committee.

The text of the statement follows:

On June 24, 1985, the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jewish People issued a document entitled, "Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church." Intended to overcome "a painful ignorance of the history and traditions of Judaism" among Christians, the document was greeted with some praise but also some sharp criticism by groups in the Jewish community.

As Roman Catholics and Jews engaged in the Jewish-Christian dialogue, we have met together to evaluate the document in both its positive and problematical aspects. Strengthened by twenty years of progress in our relationships, we have learned that we can face genuine differences and still retain a spirit of trust and mutual respect.

The "Notes" should be viewed within the context of previous statements of the Vatican (e.g. Nostra Aetate, 1965 and Guidelines, 1975); of the Pope (e.g. Mainz, 1980 and Rome, 1982); and of national episcopal conferences (e.g. Dutch bishops, 1970; Belgian bishops, 1973; French bishops, 1973; Swiss bishops, 1974; U.S. bishops, 1975; German bishops, 1980; Brazilian bishops, 1983). Positive elements of the "Notes" which will need to be implemented on the local level include necessary interpretations of the negative references to Jews in the New Testament, Jesus' relationship with the Pharisees, the congruence of Jesus' teachings with basic pharisaic beliefs and the recognition of the "continuous spiritual fecundity of the Jewish people from the rabbinical period to modern times." The "Notes"' emphasis on religious liberty and the continuing condemnation of anti-Semitism also provides catechetical opportunities.

We are of the opinion that the "Notes" are clarified by, and should be read in conjunction with, the comments made by Msgr. Jorge Mejia, Secretary of the Commission and a signatory of the "Notes," which were published simultaneously with them in L'Osservatore Romano on June 24. Had there been prior consultation with the Jewish community along the lines of these clarifications, much of the criticism which concerns us now might have been avoided. To us, dialogue means just that: open communication before, during and after, a point which the "Notes" themselves would seem to affirm.

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The "Notes" do not preclude and indeed appear to us to invite further scholarly exploration of the basic relationship between the Church and the Jewish People.

With regard to teaching about the Holocaust and the State of Israel--subjects of urgent concern to the Jewish community--we commit ourselves to continued dialogue between our two communities. Catholics, as Msgr. Mejia's commentary makes clear, need to grapple with the significance of the Holocaust for Christians as well as Jews. While we may not agree on the religious significance of the State of Israel, we recall the words of Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, President of the Commission and also a signatory of the document. Speaking of the return of the Jews to the Land and of the creation of the State of Israel, he said, "To have a place under the sun where to live in peace and security, with due respect for the rights of others, is a form of hope." (Westminster Cathedral, March 10, 1985). We recall also Pope John Paul II's statement on Good Friday, 1984:

"For the Jewish people who live in the State of Israel and who preserve on that land such precious testimonies to their history and their faith, we must ask for the desired security and the due tranquility that is the prerogative of every nation and condition of life and of progress for every society."

In the spirit of good will that has developed between us since the Second Vatican Council, we affirm the need for further, deepening dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people in order that significant issues may be clarified to our mutual satisfaction.

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