

Claire Huchet Bishop
on
TOMMASO FEDERICI'S PAPER

INTERNATIONAL LIAISON COMMITTEE BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND JUDAISM

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Venice

Among those present: Bishop Ramon Torella, V-P Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity, R.F. Jorge Mejia, Secr. Vatican Commission for religious relations with the Jews, Professor Tommaso Federici, Biblical theology St. Anselme, Rome, Rabbi Henry Seligman, New York, Prof. Shemaryahu Talmon, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Bishop Karl B. Fugel, Ratisbonne, Theodore Freedman, New York.

At the reception, organized by the Venice Jewish Community the honor guests were Cardinal Albino Luciani (futur Pope John-Paul I), Venice Mayor representative, Rabbis from Padoua and Trieste.

As much as I can remember the Document has not been officially endorsed by Rome, neither has it been disavowed.

It is more explicit, more forceful than any previous hierarchical document, with the exception of the Declaration of the French Bishops Commission on Jewish-Christian relations April 16, 1973.

Positive declarations

1. Unusual straight forwardness in outright condemnation of proselytism to the Jews (p.278,9 "This is why", p.281,13, 14, 15, 16, p.282,18).
2. Recognition that the First Covenant has not been abrogated (p.278,10).

3. Recognition of the permanence and mission of the Jewish people (p.280,A1). This is in sharp contrast to the old traditional attitude of mission to the Jews.
4. Acknowledgement of the special aspect of the mission of the Jewish people: sanctification of the Name (p.278,9 "This is why", p.279,7C4). This statement, introduced by the French Bishops Commission in 1973 (CATHOLIC MIND, Sept.1973, p.54, Vb) was bitterly critized at the time.
5. The God of the Catholics is the Lord of Israel (p278,B2).
Can Be... No idle reminder to many a Christian, namely that we have to proclaim to the nations the God of Israel and no other.
6. A marked change in the process of witnessing: no mention of creed, but "faithfulness to God and men". The witnessing is done by the Church and the Jews, (p.279,C1,4).
The Church witnessing is to to be done to herself first (279,D2). This eliminates any triumphalism.
7. The Church readiness to listen to Jews (p282,18, p.283,10).
A most unusual step.

Unsatisfactory passages

The way some assertions are made is rather disconcerting. See, for instance the paragraph p.278, "This is the way..." What is mentioned first should have been last. That is, first the past of the Church, then the present. But of course it is "safer" to declare at the outset that the Church has had "respect for the mission of the Jews", then to concede that it was not always so. A neat psychological trick.

1 A far too mild reference to the Church's infidelities (p278,3, p.279,2 and see also Omissions below).

Disconcerting is the mention of Jesus' gentleness and his poverty (p.279,8). These are outmoded clichés, highly debatable.

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These are the most serious shortcomings of the document.

✓ The HOLOCAUST. No mention. Once more the usual Roman diplomatic style which is always loathed to spell the offense or the offender by name. Such was the case with the famous Encyclical Mit Brennender Sorge, 1937 -so much tooted at the time, and even now sometime- where the Pope spoke of the wrong exaltation of the race, but never mentioned anti-Semitism, nor Hitler. Ditto in the Federici document, we look in vain for the word Holocaust or Nazism. Six million murdered of the people to whom the Catholic Church owes its existence, and not a word. Instead we find on p.280,A1, "attacks on the very existence of the Jewish people as such precisely because they are Jewish, with deliberate diabolical intention..." When? Where? How?

The same vagueness is found in the sentence p.279,2 about "the duty of asking pardon of our common Father and our brothers every time in history that evil and harm may have been done to a neighbor." Where? When? Which neighbor?

✓ ERETZ ISRAEL. The land of Israel is never mentioned either, just as if it did not exist. That is where the French Bishops Commission displayed unusual integrity and courage (CATHOLIC MIND, p.55,56). Probably the Venice group remembered the aggressive and bitter opposition which followed the publishing of that text on the eve of Pesach 5733. True, the attack was so vicious and relentless that Bishop Elchinger, who headed the Commission, had finally, after several months, to issue a "clarification", "regretting that, sometimes, a confusion

takes place in the dialogue, between religious and political claims in relation to the land of Israel," a skillful recanting which did not recant anything!

As usual, in the Venice text, we face the Catholic Church's reluctance to admit that the political field should be her concern. In the text there are several mention of social work as a desirable Christian activity in union with the Jews, whereas the word 'political' appears just in a general statement, p.281,10. Yet who could deny that the Church has been active in politics for the last seventeen hundred years? But conservative, anti-democratic governments have enjoyed her favor, or at least benefited from her ambiguity.(cf.Pope John-Paul II at Puebla in the face of Latin America desperate situation). Socially, the Church's works of mercy have always been outstanding, but politically she has failed to witness to the Gospel. Unfortunately, the Federici document follows the traditional line in avoiding any mention of Eretz Israel or the State of Israel.

Conclusion

It is important for our work to see the good points of the Federici Document as well as its shortcomings.

We have to remember that this is an international document and that as such the various levels of understanding among Catholics throughout the world have to be taken into consideration. After all, even a national declaration can meet bitter opposition from some national quarters, to wit the French declaration, all the more so an international one.

The Federici text shows clearly that the Catholic Church has gone a long way since Jules Isaac's JESUS ET ISRAEL, his visit to John XXIII, the publishing of THE TEACHING OF CONTEMPT. During the last thirty years we have come a full circle to the teaching of respect, which is what the Federici text is about.

Moreover, we can make good use of some of the text vagueness. For instance, when admonished, p.283,10 to "listen to Jews who want to talk about themselves and their vision of reality," this is our cue for Jewish identity which is Torah-People-Land.. And enter Eretz Israel!

A great deal becomes possible with that Federici text which definitely rejects proselytism. It can be a springboard from which every Christian can take off and soar toward new regions of Jewish-Christian respect, understanding and solidarity, the latter being foremost on today's agenda.

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