

The Future of Catholic-Jewish Relations

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It is an honor to address this International Liaison Committee meeting. I thank the officers of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) who invited me to discuss an important theme that all of us will help define and shape in the years ahead: the future of Catholic-Jewish relations throughout the world.

In age, the ILC and IJCIC have reached the biblical number of forty years and I was privileged to be present at the creation of both in 1971. Extraordinary excitement, energy and élan were in abundance back then...it was only a half dozen years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council and the actions taken there by the world's Roman Catholic bishops in adopting a series of reforms including, of course, the *Nostra Aetate* Declaration.

The year 1971 was also about a quarter century after the end of World War Two and the *Shoah*; it was an era dominated politically and religiously by those individuals who have been given the title, "The Greatest Generation;" the men and women, both military and civilian, of the Allied nations whose combined extraordinary efforts were required to defeat Nazism and Fascism. It was also an era when Holocaust survivors were rebuilding their personal and professional lives in Europe, Israel, North and South America and elsewhere. Some survivors of the *Shoah* provided leadership in establishing the ILC and IJCIC.

While the ancient Israelites were compelled to wander in the Sinai wilderness for four decades following their Exodus from Egypt, they ultimately entered the Promised Land, but they do so without the physical presence of Moses to lead them. That task was left to Joshua.

While IJCIC members and our Roman Catholic counterparts have not yet entered the interreligious Promised Land of universal mutual respect, knowledge and understanding, we have not wandered aimlessly or in vain during the past forty years. Rather, these have been fruitful decades filled with creativity and achievement. However, we do share one thing in common with the biblical Israelites. After forty years Catholics and Jews are no longer led by our original leaders; today we are the "Joshua" generation of interreligious leadership.

If this is so, then it is, as a United States President declared in another context almost 150 years ago, “altogether fitting and proper” to remember those who were once our mentors, our colleagues and our teachers, but who are no longer in the land of the living and who are unable to share this noteworthy anniversary with us.

We pause for a moment to name them in our hearts.

After forty years of Catholic-Jewish relations involving the ILC and IJCIC we are—dare I invoke a pagan image? — we are akin to Janus at this meeting in Paris. We look back upon the past and at the same time we strain to perceive the future of the shared historic enterprise we call Catholic-Jewish relations. We can not know what lies ahead, but I cannot move to the future without mentioning the continuing vital themes that have been with us for decades as well as noting some current trends.

Those issues, albeit predictable, will remain important whenever Catholics and Jews meet in a serious and systematic way. I refer to the impact of the Shoah on Catholic-Jewish relations and religious thought, the persistence of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, the meaning of modern Israel for both communities, the need for historians to jointly study the appropriate Vatican archival documents and analyze the record of Pope Pius XII vis-a-vis Jews and Judaism during his nineteen year pontificate, the prickly nexus of mission, witness, conversion and *teshuvah*, the issues of human rights, religious liberty and freedom of conscience, the relationship between religion and state, the impact of liberation theology on our encounter, developing purposeful moral guidelines for the galloping advances in bioethics, and examining the teachings and images of the “Other” in the Catholic and Jewish traditions.

In addition, much greater attention must be paid to our inadequate record in involving women and young people in the central decision making process of Catholic-Jewish relations. We also require an effective answer to the oft heard charge that we are merely engaging in a delicate but superficial minuet of “ecclesiastical diplomacy.” I have no doubt these themes and others equally familiar will remain with us in the years ahead. They will not soon disappear; nor should they.

But I am also concerned by what many see as a recent series of flashpoints including the controversy surrounding the Holocaust-denying views of Richard Williamson, a member of the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX), the troubling issues that emerged surrounding the Good Friday prayers regarding Jews, and other points of tension. There is a clear sense among some observers in both communities that our long standing relationship is being minimized in many parts of the world; that a sense of intellectual and spiritual exhaustion has set in that inhibits further necessary advances. Let us at this ILC meeting resolve there must be no erosion, no retreat from the permanent commitment and support that is required as we face an uncertain future and as we continue our historic work together.

But beyond the current Catholic-Jewish scene, I believe there are four overarching realities that transcend our well defined and sometimes repetitive agenda; four towering existential realities that will shape our future together.

I place the first two realities together because they are inter related: they are demography and geography.

The rapid and continuing global population growth has major consequences for Catholics and Jews. Since the fifth century, Europe and, more recently, North America, have been the key centers of Catholic population, clerical leadership, religious thought and theology. However, today most of the world's Christians, including Catholics, reside in South America, Africa, and Asia; it is a demographic trend that is accelerating even as the number of Christians, including Catholics, is either barely holding steady or actually declining in Europe and North America. Christian and Jewish communities on those two continents are older in age and fewer in number than their co-religionists in the rest of the world, especially when compared to residents of the "Third World."

This shift in population centers will influence both the Christianity and Judaism in the 21st century and especially Catholic-Jewish relations. Some recent figures reported in the Vatican's Statistical Yearbook of the Church make the point.

Between 2000 and 2008 the Catholic population in Asia grew by 33%, by 15.6% in Africa, in Oceania by 11 % and in the Americas by 10.9 %; most of the latter growth took place in Central and South America. The increase in the European Catholic population during those same eight years was only one per cent. One of every five Catholic priests today is from either from Asia or Africa and, as we speak, European priests make up only 47% of the world's Catholic clergy, a drop of four per cent per cent in less than a decade.

Could Europe and North America, the long time spiritual, intellectual and population cores of Catholicism and Judaism, be losing their dominance and influence? We do not know the answer to that question because human history is always more than a series of demographic statistics and geographical trends. However, several examples are perhaps indicative of things to come. Interestingly, the experience of one major faith community outside our own encounter is illustrative.

The Anglican Church was established by English King Henry VIII in the 16th century; the break with the Holy See in Rome came in 1534. As the British Empire expanded throughout the world, Anglicans left Britain and established "mission churches" in colonial possessions in Africa, Asia, Oceania, the Caribbean and South America. It was a classic example of faith following flag; in this case the flag was the Union Jack.

Today the Anglican Church in the United Kingdom and its American counterpart, the Episcopal Church, are suffering losses in membership, but the younger Anglican "mission churches" are increasing in size, and are politically and theologically more conservative than their ecclesiastical mentors. It is an old story: the child has grown up and broken from the inherited views, opinions and beliefs of its parent.

Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly expressed his concern about the shrinking number of active Catholics on the European continent. The causes for the pope's concern are many including the clergy sexual abuse scandals, the "secularization" of the "First World," and the decreasing

Catholic birth rate in North America and Europe. These factors have created a growing shortage of priests and sisters on both sides of the North Atlantic. It is a trend likely to continue.

Catholics in general and priests in particular from Africa, Asia and much of Central and South America often have had minimal contact with large viable Jewish communities. As a result, there is frequently a gap in Catholic knowledge of and personal experience with Jews and Judaism. In a similar fashion, Jews, except for those living in Central and South America, have had limited contact with Catholic clergy and laity from the three Third World continents.

But the future may be surprisingly different because in an ironic twist of history some painful past events may offer unanticipated and unexpected opportunities to build positive Catholic-Jewish relations. While some see a large breach even an abyss between Hispanic Catholics and Jews, the fissure may not be as wide as it may first appear.

I am indebted to Professor Jacqueline M. Hidalgo of Williams College in the United States for alerting me to this unique possibility in interreligious relations. Her essay on Hispanics and Jews will appear in the forthcoming volume of essays dedicated to the memory of our late friend, Rabbi Leon Klenicki. Dr. Celia Deutsch, a Sister of Zion, is the editor in chief, and Dr. Eugene Fisher, a colleague at many of our ILC meetings, and I are the co-editors.

Professor Hidalgo recounts that a sizeable number of the early European settlers in Latin and South America were conversos or crypto/"secret" Jews who fled the Iberian Peninsula as a result of the Inquisition and the Expulsions from Spain and Portugal. Such refugees who fled to the Americas and the Caribbean islands came into direct contact with the indigenous natives, the "Indians" of the region, who, Hidalgo documents, were also victims of Spanish/European religious and political prejudice and persecution.

I am reminded of this because the small Florida island where I live was the scene 480 years ago, 1521, when the Spanish conquistador, Ponce de Leon, received a fatal poison arrow wound from the native Calusa Indian tribe. Today's Calusas still proudly recall their ancestors' deadly action against the hated invader. It is not ancient history for them.

Hidalgo shows how *conversos*, crypto Jews and the native tribes were often united in their hatred of the European colonialists. Incredibly, today that long ago shared history between Jews and Native Americans is increasingly coming to light as the descendents of both groups are re discovering their family roots. Modern descendents of "secret Jews" are in contact with their Hispanic Jewish past even as Roman Catholic Indians are re discovering their own family tribal histories that predate conversions to Catholicism.

While Hidalgo's research in this area is a pioneering effort, it does offer a fascinating and hopeful glimpse into the possibilities of developing a new set of relationships, an additional and unexpected bridge of human solidarity between Judaism and Catholicism. It merits our collective future attention.

Following the horrific expulsions of Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, the religious influence of that once influential group was diminished and

frequently overshadowed by Jews of Central and Eastern Europe (the Ashkenazim). That history is well known since most of the Jews present trace their family roots to Europe or live today on this continent.

Poland, Germany, Austria, France, the former Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Hungary, Ukraine, Romania, Belarus, Russia and other European countries became important centers of Jewish life. When the anti-Semitic persecutions intensified in that part of the world, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, new Ashkenazi centers grew in size and influence in modern Israel and the United States.

But one result of Israel's creation in 1948 was the arrival of 850,000 non-Ashkenazim Jews from Arab and/or Muslim countries in Africa and Asia. Some members of that group were descendents of the expelled Spanish and Portuguese Jews, but most stemmed from ancient Jewish communities in Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen, and Ethiopia that had existed for over a thousand years. Not surprisingly because of their critical population mass, they are challenging and changing the dominant Ashkenazi image and reality of modern Israel.

For 2000 years, the overwhelming majority of Jews lived in the Diaspora outside of Israel, their biblical homeland. However, a major population change is currently underway, and in the near future, if not already, more half the world's Jews will live in Israel, a nation that many people forget is located not in Europe or North America, but in southwest Asia.

But Israel also has a growing Christian population, the only nation in the region to show such growth. Phillippe Fargues, director of the Euro-Mediterranean Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration, reports that in 1914, Christians constituted 26.4 percent of the total population in what is today Israel, the Palestinian areas, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria; by 2005, they represented at most 9.2 percent.

In another twist of history, the land in Asia that both faiths call "holy" is likely to be a future major arena for Catholic-Jewish relations; a land where Jews, unlike the sites of other encounters, are the majority and Catholics the minority.

The third reality after geography and demography that will influence future Catholic-Jewish relations is chronology; the relentless "march of time." It has been slightly more than 45 years since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council and the *Nostra Aetate* Declaration. That means two generations of Catholics and Jews throughout the world have been born since then, and many of them, as this group knows only too well, are often unfamiliar with, at best, or unaware of, at worst, the recent advances in Catholic-Jewish relations the Council set in motion in 1965.

Chronology also means, as mentioned earlier, the eye witnesses to the best and worst in our shared history—victory in World War Two, the Shoah, the creation of the State of Israel, the Second Vatican Council and the remarkable actions of several popes and Jewish leaders— will become fewer and fewer with each passing year. Many of us speak to college, university, and seminary students, and we have discovered that the mists of legend and forgetfulness often obscure much of our achievement in Catholic-Jewish relations. This reality demands that we

redouble our educational efforts to make the record of the past decades permanent and meaningful especially to younger Catholics and Jews.

It was the sociologist Max Weber who raised the issue of whether and how religious charisma can be transmitted and “routinized” from one generation to another. Catholics and Jews have, by Weber’s standard, done a good job in “routinizing” Catholicism and Judaism for thousands of years and successfully transmitted our charisma, teachings and traditions from generation to generation. But are we doing as well in transmitting the charisma of positive and constructive Catholic-Jewish relations? Or will our efforts be at first minimized, then marginalized, and finally, God forbid, trivialized as future generations of Catholics and Jews, of priests and rabbis engage in more “important” work than interreligious projects and programs?

Heraclitus declared: “No person ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and it is not the same person. “ Chronology may not entirely shape our future, but is an irreversible reality of Catholic-Jewish relations.

The fourth and final reality that will influence our future relations is technology. Forty years ago when we established ILC and IJCIC, there were no fax machines, no e mail, no Internet, no Skype, no I Pads, no Kindles, and few if any conference telephone calls, There were no on-line academic courses, no “virtual” colleges, universities, and yes, seminaries that exist today only in cyber space. In 1971 there were no e-books, e-magazines, and “texting” back then referred to biblical studies and not to instant communication between people. There were no online internet partnerships among libraries; the latest being the connection between libraries in Berlin and Israel.

There were no social networks like Facebook and Twitter, no personal blogs, mobile cell phones were a rarity—a luxury— and the personal computer we take so much for granted today was in its early development stage. Today’s laptop I am told by experts in the field has more power than the computers of the 1969 space craft that first brought humans to the moon.

Like the other three realities mentioned above, technology will dramatically shape our future relations with one another. Let me count the ways.

Jews and Catholics can now easily communicate today with one another outside the once formal boundaries of Church and Synagogue. It is not simply that Catholics and Jews often share the same workplace or workspace. Rather the technology that is so easily available allows them to “go global” and encourages people to discuss any issue, for example, the influence of Moses Maimonides upon Thomas Aquinas. They can do this with a series of contacts in all parts of the world. They no longer require the leadership of clergy, the physical setting of a college or university campus, or reading the actual books in libraries; none of that is needed to establish, develop or strengthen Catholic-Jewish cyberspace encounters. And, of course, such Catholic-Jewish encounters are frequently independent of academic or clerical guidance and leadership. A papal declaration, a rabbinical statement and a personal blog all look the same on a computer screen.

In addition, technology now provides what some have termed “webinars” as opposed to traditional “seminars.” Webinars allow teachers to reach in one morning more students around the globe than they could ever reach in person during their entire academic careers.

For centuries, Jews and Catholics conducted worship services as faithful “Peoples of God” in stationary physical buildings: churches and synagogues. One biblical commandment in Exodus commands us: “Build Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among you.” (Exodus 25:8). The text does not say that God dwells in the sanctuary, but rather God dwells within the people assembled in the sanctuary. I have, as an Internet devotee, seen this verse interpreted to mean that God also dwells among those connected to one another via the computer.

We are also seeing the proliferation of “couch churches” or “sofa synagogues.” That is, the creation of decentralized gatherings of Jews and Catholics who study, pray, and share meals together in a non structured form; they do this “without benefit of clergy.”

One result of the Pope’s actions two years ago in the case of Williamson, a well known Holocaust denier, was Benedict’s poignant words of apology in March 2009 that included specific reference to the Internet and the vast amount of information it contains:

An unforeseen mishap for me was the fact that the Williamson case...momentarily upset peace between Christians and Jews, as well as peace within the Church, [it] is something which I can only deeply deplore. I have been told that consulting the information available on the internet would have made it possible to perceive the problem early on. I have learned the lesson that in the future in the Holy See we will have to pay greater attention to that source of news...

My point is a simple one. Advocates of Catholic-Jewish relations must learn to utilize the new communications and information technology that is exploding throughout the globe. Do we need another negative Williamson case to illustrate this point? Do we need an Egyptian revolution to grasp the fact that millions and tens of millions of people can communicate, analyze and organize their political, economic, cultural, social and religious convictions in a single instant, a single click of the computer?

We who would be Catholic and Jewish leader need to recall that in the past control of land routes, river and sea lanes was vital to gain influence and shape history. Today control of cyber space and social networking is paramount.

The next forty years will bring even more technology to the Catholic-Jewish table. I am aware there is no substitute for “up close and personal” interreligious encounters. We are all the beneficiaries of such encounters, including our days together here in Paris. But I am also keenly aware that we, the leaders of international Catholic-Jewish relations, often operate as if it were still 1971, as if the world and the people we are supposed to be leading are somehow waiting for us to act, to teach, to motivate, to lead. Not at all. Technology has empowered them to create their own interreligious realities. We must do the same.

Those engaged in the Christian-Jewish encounter might recall Bette Davis' famous line in the American 1950 award winning film, "All About Eve:" "Fasten your seat belts; it's going to be a bumpy night."

But Hollywood must not have the last pessimistic or negative word regarding our future relations. Instead, I conclude with the prophet Zachariah who spoke of "prisoners of hope." (Zach. 9:12). That is who we are or we would not be here today. And that is who we must always be in the future.