

A historic conference in a land of history: A Catholic-Jewish summit in Warsaw

A Joint Declaration concluded four days of discussion on “The ‘Other’ in Jewish and Catholic Tradition: Refugees in Today’s World” during the 23rd bi-annual meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee



Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Holy See’s Commission

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Warsaw, Poland, a city and land where “some of the most abhorrent events in world history” took place, where almost 3.5 million Jews who had lived side by side with Polish Catholics for over 800 years were nearly totally annihilated by the Nazis in the 20th century, along with 3 million Catholics and others - 1/10 of the total Polish population. Today a tenuous, problematic, fragile rebirth is underway, after a Polish Pope wrought an irreversible new brotherhood between the two religions. This country, with its burden of tragedy and seeds of hope was appropriately chosen to host **the 23rd bi-annual meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee.**

This ILC, created in 1971, is composed of representatives of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, and the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) that includes delegates of the major organizations of world Jewry: the American Jewish Committee (AJC), the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the Israel Jewish Council on Interreligious Relations (IJCIR), the World Jewish Congress (WJC) and six rabbinical organizations representing the entire spectrum of contemporary Jewish religious diversity, ranging from Orthodoxy to Conservative, Liberal and Reform Judaism. It is the official body for formal relations between Catholics and Jews worldwide.

A Joint Declaration concluded four days of discussion on “The ‘Other’ in Jewish and Catholic Tradition: Refugees in Today’s World”. The two delegations were headed respectively by Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Holy See’s Commission, and Martin Budd, Esq., Chair of IJCIC. Over 50 Catholic and Jewish delegates from five continents attended.

The Declaration incorporated the conclusions of working groups on the mounting phenomena of contemporary antisemitism, the persecution of Christians, issues of religious freedom, and the refugee crisis. “Continuing commitment to open and constructive dialogue

as a model for interreligious and intercultural understanding in the world, most especially with religious leaders of the Muslim community” was recommended.

“The religious imperatives of Christians and Jews”, says the Statement, recognize “the tensions between the obligations of love of strangers ... and concerns for security and fear of change.” Prof. Fr. Joseph Sievers of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, addressing the conference, noted the Scriptural roots of our common commitments - in the Torah (Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy) - and in the New Testament. A passionate call to keep doors open to refugees (without excluding necessary security measures) “for the good of our own future and not just that of the migrants” was made by the Polish Jewish journalist and activist, Konstanty Gebert.

“Antisemitism in both speech and action has resurfaced in Europe and elsewhere, and persecution of Christians, most notably in much of the Middle East and parts of Africa, has reached levels not seen in a long time” the declaration noted, adding that antisemitism, which “takes many forms...is a danger not only to Jews but also to democratic ideals”, and “the persecution of Christians has increased every year between 2012 and 2015.” Recommendations were made for “improved and revitalized educational programs” against antisemitism and “the obligation to raise consciousness across the world...and be a voice for the voiceless” regarding the persecuted Christians. Ongoing working groups were proposed.

A special session on “Present day Catholic and Jewish life in Poland” was held , with contributions from Cardinal Henryk Muszynski the former Primate of Poland and first President of the Episcopal Conference’s Commission for Relations with Jews; the Polish Jewish historian, Prof. Stanislaw Krajewski and Fr. Prof, Pawel Rytel-Andrianik of the Polish Episcopal Conference.

Professor Krajewski paid tribute to the achievements of the Polish Episcopal Conference’s Committee for Relations with Jews, created 30 years ago and led successively by the former Primate of Poland, Archbishop Muszynski, then Archbishop Primate Stanislaw Gadecki and today by Bishop Mieczyslaw Cislo. He spoke of “all the good things happening in Polish Christian-Jewish relations” including two decades of an “amazing” National Day for Judaism observed across the country.

However, said Krajewski, he also had to speak about current politics, particularly the Polish government’s flagrant attempt “to dismantle the democratic checks and balances introduced after 1989”. He reported the increasingly monolithic power of the ruling party, (PiS) which won in 2015 with only a small parliamentary majority. The Polish government has lent a deaf ear to recommendations from the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission, he said.

Last month, he recalled, “318 NGO’s wrote to the Polish PM asking to ‘denounce the repeated acts of hatred and violence against NGOs defending human rights, equality and tolerance...the attacks are due to the passivity of the government toward the growing presence of racism, xenophobia homophobia and hatred in public life.’”

The political far right, which is anti-Semitic, is among supporters of the government and “Jews are beginning to feel afraid.” On November 18, 2015 at the Wroclaw market place, an effigy of an Orthodox Jew holding a EU flag was burned. Prof Krajewski expressed his “gratitude to Archbishop Gadecki and Bishop Cislo for strong criticism of that act.” Critics of

government policy are labeled as “anti-Polish”, he said, and this rhetoric “is felt by many Poles, including a large majority of Polish Jews, as detrimental to Poland. What is more, in Poland, its anti-Semitic overtones are obvious. As one internet post states, ‘behind each anti-Polish expression, publication, movie, one can find a Jew.’ The hate speech will probably result in physical violence, possibly with tragic consequences. Today, this threat must not be ignored in Catholic-Jewish dialogue” Krajewski warned.

He also expressed concern regarding the large populist following of the “most active wing of the Church, which represents the most conservative variety of Catholicism, strongly nationalistic, xenophobic, anti-Western, anti-EU...connected to Fr. Tadeusz Rydzyk and his media conglomerate” centering around Radio Maryja, (the second largest worldwide Catholic radio station), the nationalist newspaper “Nasz Dziennik” and “Trwam” TV.

Archbishop Henryk Muszynski, who said he “agreed in general” with Prof. Krajewski’s analysis, added that he found “the political exploitation of religion particularly disturbing”.

In a more positive vein, Bishop Mieczyslaw Cislo spoke of the multifaceted commitments of the Polish Bishops Conference’s Commission for Relations with Jews, which he heads, including “teaching seminarians the Jewish roots of Christianity” and organizing annual events across Poland for the Church’s “Day of Judaism”. The University of Lublin, (a town where an important Yeshiva – Center for Jewish learning – was active before World War II), he recalled, has invited internationally renowned rabbis such as Riccardo Di Segni, Chief Rabbi of Rome, and presented an honorary degree to Rome’s former Chief Rabbi, Elio Toaff. The Polish Episcopal Conference recently stated that “Anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism is a sin.... we hope that the Catholic-Jewish dialogue will serve to transform the face of our land.”.

Recognition of Polish Catholics solidarity with Jews was recalled at various moments of the conference. At the opening event, on behalf of Jerusalem’s Yad Vashem, three Polish Catholics were posthumously recognized by the Israeli Ambassador to Poland, “as ‘Righteous Among the Nations’ for saving Jewish lives during the Shoah, embodying the noblest realization of Catholic-Jewish relations.”

Cardinal Koch, in “looking back with deep satisfaction on our shared achievements since our first ILC meeting forty five years ago” recalled “how much we are indebted to the groundbreaking efforts of Pope John Paul II” - the Polish Pope who first visited a Synagogue and under whose leadership diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Israel were established.

Fr. Pawel Rytel-Andrianik told of research underway though not yet completed - “revealing that approximately 1,000 Catholic priests in Poland were involved in saving Jewish people at the time of the Holocaust” and “eleven out of thirteen Diocesan bishops/administrators who remained in their dioceses in Poland during the Holocaust were helping Jewish people.” However, he added, “we are aware that we have not yet seen all of the documents in Yad Vashem regarding this theme.”

The mixed delegation was deeply moved by Warsaw’s monument commemorating the victims of the Treblinka Death Camp, and in Warsaw, the monument to the Jewish ghetto fighters in an empty square where the ghetto’s buildings once stood. While visiting the adjacent, exquisite “Polin Museum of the History of Poland’s Jews” inaugurated only 3 years ago, we had the opportunity to ponder over the complex, often positive relations between

Catholics and Jews living in Poland. Eight centuries of Polish Jewish life unfold to the visitor in a highly interactive, beautifully architected space, where objects of the past are virtual realities. As one visitor remarked, “If a blackout occurred, the museum’s display would disappear.”

The land is haunted by the ghosts of a vibrant people with a special cultural heritage, both religious and secular, that contributed significantly to the building of the Polish nation. The empty spaces once bustling with human activity, the invisible presence of “Shtetl” (Jewish towns), of destroyed synagogues and cemeteries, call out as a reminder of John Paul II’s appeal in 1993 on the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising: “As Christians and Jews...we are called to be a blessing to the world...It is therefore necessary for us...to first be a blessing to one another.”

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