

Italian bishops sponsor a first Catholic-Jewish colloquium



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A historical meeting in Salerno

LISA PALMIERI-BILLIG, VATICAN INSIDER, 3 DECEMBER 2014

A landmark event took place in Salerno these past days. Under the auspices of the Italian Bishops Conference (CEI) and organized by Rev. Cristiano Bettega, Director of the CEI's National Office for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue (UNEDI), outstanding Jewish and Christian leaders from Italy and other European nations, from the U.S., Israel and even Iraq, met, spoke, listened and marked the new signposts of theological and educational breakthroughs from which there is no turning back. It was in fact agreed that now the only possible direction is to move forward.

It was the first time an initiative of such deep significance to Christian-Jewish relations was taken on Italian soil by the CEI, which was presided over by its Secretary General, Bishop Nunzio Galantino; Bishop Mansueto Bianchi, President of its Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue and Rev. Cristiano Bettega. Over 400 people of all ages and from all parts of the country filled the assembly hall for 3 days, paying utmost attention to the continuous flow of stimulating speeches.

This Salerno Meeting was the fruit of an intense interreligious dialogue born in Milan via decades of regular encounters between Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini of blessed memory (*il compianto...*) and the city's former Chief Rabbi, Prof. Giuseppe Laras, now President of Italy's North-Central Rabbinical Courts.

A touching moment of intimacy between the Cardinal and the Rabbi was revealed at the meeting. Rabbi Laras visited his good friend just a day before his death. Cardinal Martini asked the Rabbi to bless him, which he did. Then at Rabbi Laras' request, Cardinal Martini blessed him in turn.

Cardinal Francesco Cocolmerio, the former Auxiliary Bishop of Milan and now President of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts was a prime mover of the Colloquium along with Rev. Beteaga and, on the Jewish side, Rabbi Laras and Vittorio Bendaud, Co-ordinator of the Maimonides Foundation.

Cardinal Cocolmerio recalled that "among the most precious messages received from Cardinal Martini is love for the people of Israel. He taught this to us with words and by example. His witness rests on clear and certain Scriptural and theological bases." The

cardinal went on to stress “the falseness of the so-called doctrine of substitution, according to which the Church, the new people of God replaced Israel, the former people of God. No substitution and above all no possibility for such substitution!” Cocopalmerio said “the Church is the new people of God” at the same time Israel also “was, remains and will always be the people of God” – as upheld by Paul. Therefore “any wish or worse, any attempt to convert Jews to the Christian faith appears illogical and unacceptable.”

These and similar concepts were echoed and explored in depth by other renowned Christian speakers, such as Bishop Bruno Forte, Archbishop of Chieti-Vasto and member of the CEI’s Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue; Prof. Pierre Lenhardt of the Ratisbonne Christian Center for Jewish Studies; Biblical scholar Msgr. Luigi Nason; Msgr Finantonio Borgonovo archpriest of the Duomo of Milan; Msgr. Simone Giusti, Bishop of Livorno; Professor Pasto Daniele Garrone of the Waldensian Theological Faculty; Rev. Philipp Renczes, Rector of the Cardinal Bea Center for Jewish Studies, Frère John Di Taizé and Sr. Mary Boys, professor at the Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Bishop Forte spoke “An Eternal Covenant: Israel and the Church” with reference to Christian faith and its “holy root (cf Rom 11, 16 – 18)”. “Marcionism”, he said, which sees the New Testament as triumphant over “the evil God of the Jews” to stress the superiority of the Gospels -- “although refuted by the Church, exercised great influence over the Christian conscience and was certainly one of the remote causes of the anti-Semitism that has not ceased to meander in its ranks.” Interpreting the Jewish Bible as mere allegory also deprives it of its historical significance for Christians. “What must be safeguarded”, he said, “is the independent value of the First Covenant and the permanent religious significance of Israel”. He recalled that Jesus is “a Jew forever.”

Jewish speakers all represented Jewish Orthodoxy. Due to sudden illness, Rabbi Laras was absent, but his speech was read out. Laras affirmed “we must never lose faith in the dialogue”. Our common duties, he said, are 1) to combat anti-Semitism, 2) strive for coexistence characterized by dignity and peace 3) combat the sacrilegious equation of religion with fanaticism, violence and war 4) strengthen and uphold the beauty of the Torah (*the Jewish Bible*). While remaining faithful to our respective traditions, “we feel that, God willing, our paths, so separated and distant from each other in the past, will eventually meet. Our journey has already begun and if we persevere and invest in it, with the help of HaShem, (*the Holy Lord*) serving him shoulder to shoulder, we will dwell in His presence. We don’t know when this will happen but we feel it will...if each of us with humility and courage, remain true to this commitment in our daily lives.”

Other outstanding Jewish speakers included Rabbi Irving Yitzhak Greenberg Professor at the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership USA and his wife, Blu Greenberg, of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance; Rabbi David Rosen, International Director for Interreligious Affairs of AJC (American Jewish Committee) and member of the Bi-Lateral Commission between Israel and the Holy See; Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, President of the Ohr Torah Stone Colleges, Prof. David Meghnagi, Director of the International Master program in the Didactics of the Shoah at Rome III University, and Rabbi Eugene Korn, Academic Director of the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding & Cooperation in Israel.

Rabbi Rosen, in a penetrating analysis, addressed “the reasons for both opposition as well as support in the Jewish community for dialogue with the Church...”. “The historically negative Jewish view of Christianity was substantially the result of what Jews experienced in the name

of Christianity....whose image is overwhelmingly still taken from the tragic past” he said. However Saint John Paul II’s visit to Israel, “at Yad Vashem in tearful solidarity with Jewish suffering.... at the Western Wall paying respect to Jewish tradition and placing there the text asking Divine forgiveness for the sins committed by Christians down the ages against Jews...were stunning revelations for much of Israeli society.” Some significant consequences of his visit was the creation of the Bi-lateral Commission between the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry. Today “we have certainly entered a new stage in terms of Orthodox Jewish engagement with the Christian world....”

Rabbi Rifkin spoke of Judaism’s gift of ethics and monotheism; Blu Greenberg gave an inspiring lesson in Jewish Biblical exegesis of the Ten Commandments; Rabbi Eugene Korn presented a stimulating summary of his book, “Rethinking Christianity: Rabbinical positions and possibilities”, now available in Italian.

Rabbi Korn’s Jewish analysis of Christianity has often been presented in partnership with Sr. Mary Boys, who offers a Christian perspective on “rethinking” Christianity’s historical relations with Jews. She built a clear and detailed case for “situating texts in their historical context” as the key to overcoming vestiges of anti-Jewish stereotypes and emphasizing “the importance of renewed attention to Biblical study – not simply exegesis, but also interpretation”.

Rabbi Greenberg discussed the commonalities and differences of our 2 covenantal “religions of redemption”. The differences between our two faiths, he said, “... are secondary to what we hold in common – particularly if one assumes – as I do – that it was God’s intention to reach out to the nations through Christianity alongside the continuing covenant of Israel.” Regarding “the mission of our era”, he said “we thank God for the privilege of being alive at this time and for being granted the opportunity to repair our history and to join together to repair God’s world.”

With a touch of Jewish humor, Rabbi Greenberg ended his speech with a pertinent joke. “When the Messiah finally came, a press conference was called. He answered all questions but when he was asked “Is this your first or second coming?” his comment was, “No comment.”

In addition to the speeches, the colloquium heard some beautiful vocal prayers of the Jewish and Christian traditions. And finally, a focus on the crisis presently challenging us all was given by Rev. Georges Jahola who lives in Mosul. He presented a very moving witness and call for help regarding the fate of Christians whose survival is under threat in Iraq today.