

The Holy See and the Middle East Peace Process: Is the Agreement with Palestine a help or hindrance?



(©LaPresse) Cardinal Parolin

Vatican Secretary of State speaks about on Israel, Palestine, the peace process, anti-semitism and islamist radicalization

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For the first time since Francis appointed him Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the key figure of Vatican diplomacy today, expressed his views on the main issues of concern to Israel and Jews around the world: Vatican-Israel, Vatican-Palestine and Catholic-Jewish relations; combating rising anti-Semitism; the responsibility of religious leaders and Muslims in particular to countering Islamist radicalization on all levels; the Vatican's efforts to further peace in the Middle East; the opening to scholars of the Vatican's World War II archives.

Our meeting took place in the historic rooms of the Apostolic Palace. We talked for nearly an hour. The date was providential: 50 years after Vatican II and 'Nostra Aetate' revolutionized Catholic-Jewish and interreligious relations, and 20 years after the Fundamental Agreement ushered in a new era with the beginning of diplomatic relations between the State of Israel and the Holy See. The conversation, though planned much earlier, came on the heels of Israel's disappointment over what it considered a premature and detrimental recognition of "the State of Palestine", and shortly after official Vatican clarification that Pope Francis had not called Abu Mazen "an angel of peace" but rather expressed his hopes that the Palestinian President could become one.

We know that Pope Francis and the Holy See are sincerely committed to helping to achieve peace between Israelis and Palestinians. However, the recent move to sign an agreement with "the State of Palestine" whose boundaries have yet to be defined by a bi-lateral treaty, has left Israeli disconcerted. Even "angels of peace" require well thought-out plans of action. Israel fears that Palestinians will continue to seek international legitimation without conceding to direct talks aimed at a two state solution. The Holy See has a distinguished and centuries old reputation for expert diplomacy. What strategy do you envision for convincing both Palestinians and Israelis to make the necessary compromise for a lasting peace, and in this context, what steps could be taken to unify the different Palestinian forces into renouncing all forms of violence and endorsing a democratic Palestinian State based on the recognition of Israel's right to exist and a pledge to uphold the values expressed in the 1948 UN Charter on Universal Human Rights?

The Holy See repeatedly calls for Israelis and Palestinians to take bold decisions towards reconciliation and peace. Both peoples must first solve internal problems and difficulties, because, unfortunately, there are some who seem not to want peace or who are content to maintain the status quo. I hope, however, that the majority of citizens and groups are in favor of peace. Support from the international community is needed in order to rebuild confidence and facilitate a dialogue that has been hampered by a history of struggle and clashes which have left deep wounds. Certainly, a point of reference for everyone must be, as you mentioned, the values expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the UN resolutions that have addressed the issue.

I wish to underscore that the Holy See does not see the future signing of the Agreement with the State of Palestine as an adverse or contrary initiative to the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. On the contrary! Although this is an agreement that essentially concerns the life of the Church, it is thought of in terms of the good of the whole society. Indeed, an agreement by which the Palestinian state will be committed to recognizing fundamental rights, including that of freedom of religion and conscience, is a step towards contributing to the development of a country that will be democratic and respectful of diverse religious realities. The Holy See also hopes that the Agreement may in some way contribute to the achievement of lasting peace through a two-state solution. This cannot be done at the expense of the legitimate rights of Israelis and Palestinians, who are called to treat each other not as enemies or adversaries, but as neighbors and, I would say more, as friends and brothers, eager and willing to find a negotiated solution for the good of both parties.

It is not up to the Holy See, in and of itself, to have a political strategy to settle the conflict. The Holy See points out general principles and calls for dialogue and peace. In this regard I would like to recall Pope Francis' pilgrimage to the Holy Land last year, whose basic theme was peace as a gift of God and, at the same time, a commitment of man. It was followed by the Vatican's initiative to invite the Israeli and Palestinian Presidents to pray together for peace, in the presence of Patriarch Bartholomew.

Apart from the historic papal visits of John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis, more than 20 years have passed since a high-level diplomatic mission of the Holy See was received in Israel (headed, at the time, by Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran). When will there be another one, and how do you view relations between the Holy See and Israel today?

I would frame the matter slightly differently, emphasizing above all the meaning and scope of the last Popes' visits to the Holy Land, which are undoubtedly a sign that the Holy See cares. Just to mention the latest one, I think that Pope Francis conveyed an important message and was able to achieve what seemed at first a very difficult task, namely that everyone felt included and embraced. This result could not be taken for granted. The actual preparation of the visit had not been easy, because one had to prevent the visit, the gestures and the words of the Holy Father from being misused or misinterpreted by either side giving rise to undesirable consequences.

In recent years, a number of Church officials in charge of various Departments of the Holy See came to the Holy Land for various reasons, such as Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Commission for Religious Relations with Jews.

With regard to relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel, I would like to recall that we have recently celebrated the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations, which resulted from the Fundamental Agreement between the Parties, signed on December 30th, 1993 and ratified in early 1994. We have since gone a long way in strengthening the bond of mutual friendship and dialogue. A further outcome of the Fundamental Agreement was the Understanding on the legal entity of the Church, dated November 1997, while another one relating to taxation and property, the so-called "Economic Agreement", is nearing completion after years of negotiation, and I hope that it will be signed in the near future.

Has the Vatican requested that Israel give force of law to the legal agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel concluded more than a decade ago? What is its present status?

Rather than it being a request from the Holy See, it is an internal requirement of the Israeli legal order, to ensure that what has been agreed to in an international agreement can then be applied within the country in terms of legislation and administration. The issue concerns both the Fundamental Agreement of 1993 and the Understanding on the legal personality of the Church of 1997. Although they have both been ratified, they have not yet been incorporated into Israeli domestic law. The Holy See has raised the issue on several occasions and has received assurances from the Israeli authorities that they would try to remedy this. There are also concrete proposals which are the subject of study and discussion, especially regarding the Understanding on the legal personality of the Church.

Pope Francis, as Benedict XVI, St. John Paul and St. John XXIII before him, communicates well his feelings of closeness and sensitivity to the concerns of the Jewish People. How do you see the state of Catholic-Jewish relations today?

Catholic-Jewish relations have had a very positive development especially after the Second Vatican Council and the Nostra Aetate Declaration of 28 October 1965 concerning the relations of the Church with non-Christian religions, which has helped create a new season of dialogue and brought many benefits. The 50th anniversary of this important document is coming up soon. There is a special Office in the Holy See, the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, which maintains regular contact with various Jewish institutions, including the International Jewish Committee on Inter-religious Consultations. As you mentioned, the last Popes have in various occasions had the opportunity to express closeness to the Jews, who are regarded as "elder brothers", and have also visited several synagogues. When Pope Francis was Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he maintained good relations with the Jewish community in Argentina - as he does today with the Jewish community of Rome - and established ties of friendship with some of its leaders. He often receives representatives of various Jewish organizations Jewish from all continents. I can therefore confirm, with satisfaction, that the state of relations between Catholics and Jews has greatly improved in recent decades. We are heading down the right direction of a journey that must always move forward.

World Jewry is very concerned over the explosion of anti-Semitism in Europe, a disease we had hoped had been conquered after the trauma of World War II and the Shoah shook European society to the roots. Every act of Islamist terrorism on European soil in the past decades has singled out a Jewish target either alone or in concomitance with symbols of free speech. Anti-Semitic stereotypes are returning to common speech. European Jewish citizens are presently expatriating from many countries in droves. What statements, what action could

the Vatican propose to counter the terrifying phenomenon which, singling out Jews, is also the historically proven first step towards the death of democracy, freedom and human rights?

I can assure you that the Holy See is and feels itself to be in the front lines of the fight against any temptation of renewed anti-Semitism. It has spoken out and explicitly condemned anti-Semitism in many ways, both within the Church and within the international community. I recall Pope Francis' "strong" words in his address to a delegation of the aforementioned *International Jewish Committee on Inter-religious Consultations*, when he said that because of our common roots, a Christian cannot be anti-Semitic. On that occasion, he also added that humanity needs our common witness in favor of respect for the dignity of men and women, who are created in the image and likeness of God, and towards peace. The Holy See sends out similar messages in various international forums. I would like to add that the Holy See has also spoken out against all forms of intolerance directed towards Christians, Muslims or those belonging to other religions as well.

The Islamist totalitarian ideology is radicalizing many young people all over the world and claiming a terrifying toll of victims among Christians, Yazidis, other minorities and non-extremist Muslims themselves in Africa, Asia and the Near East. How can Jews, Christians and Muslims on one hand, and Israel and the Vatican on the other, work together to combat this common enemy of the entire free world?

One of the major challenges of the contemporary world is terrorism. It is important to counter it with all available means. Since this is a global threat, it requires the cooperation of everyone to deal with it at various levels, from military security, to the political and economic levels, in order to block the sources of financing that fuel terrorist groups. However, the greatest challenge to be met is in the area of ideas and education. In this regard, a great responsibility falls upon religious leaders, who are called upon to promote the education of their flock towards dialogue, peace and the culture of encounter. Jews, Christians and Muslims throughout the world run a large number of schools, associations and educational institutions of various kinds. It is essential that all those heading these institutions re-examine their educational programs. If necessary, we must have the courage to rethink the methods and content of their curriculums in order to work together to draw up paths that will promote those fundamental values without which there can be neither dialogue nor peace. We must fight against a mentality that tends to exclude others and to impose a "monochrome" culture at the expense of diversity. We must denounce, in particular, any manipulation of religion aimed at justifying violence or terrorism. Regarding the Islamist totalitarian ideology which you mention, Muslims themselves have a special responsibility to combat it. Moreover, it is always important to promote respect for minorities, and more generally, respect of human rights that harbor at their core the fundamental right to religious freedom. It is vital to develop the concept of citizenship as a point of reference of social life. Indeed, it is not about tolerating minorities, but recognizing that they are a living part of the community on a par with the majority, and encouraging their involvement in the search for the common good.

The IHRA – the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance – is an international task force that does useful educational work to counter Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism. Why is the Vatican not a partner of the IHRA, at least as an observer?

The Holy See has long been active in the field of education, especially in schools, to counter both Holocaust denial and anti-semitism. The Holy See maintains close contact with the IHRA at the highest level, and some of its representatives have attended the Organization's

recent meetings. The Secretariat of State, in particular, has established fruitful relations with the heads of the Organization and has appointed a contact person, Father Norbert Hofmann, SDB, Secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews in order to pursue those relations. Further steps to progress in this collaboration that has existed for some years will be duly considered.

This year we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Vatican II document “Nostra Aetate”, which marks a fundamental change and rapprochement between the Catholic Church and the Jews, as well as with the other world religions. Although there is always more work to be done, this document and all the important subsequent documents issued by the Vatican on this delicate issue have penetrated to parishes all over Europe and the U.S. Latin American countries have lagged behind somewhat. What more could be done to update and transform Catholic teaching in Latin America regarding relations with the Jewish religion and people, especially in view of the great influence of the present, much beloved Argentinian Pope?

Catholic teachings do not change from one country to another or from one continent to another. What is different are the circumstances and feelings which are affected by many factors. For example, the fact that the Pope is Argentinian has had a very positive influence for the Church in Latin America. However, the question to which you refer has been pointed out to us several times by Jewish organizations and we have raised it at the level of the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America.

And finally, the usual question: when will the complete Secret Archives on World War II become open and consultable to scholars?

The issue of the archives and of their opening is always being considered, but the groundwork is taking longer than expected, and this delay is due to technical-archival issues. What makes the situation more complex is the huge number of files that are in the Vatican. As far as opening those related to the pontificate of Pope Pius XII is concerned, it should be noted that the Holy See seeks to contribute to historical truth in its entirety. In this context, the forces which opposed the barbarity of the Holocaust and the dedication, sometimes to the point of sacrifice, of those who saved the lives of many Jews will surely be among the topics to be explored. In this regard, the Catholic Church has been committed to this task at many levels for quite a while, and one could highlight the fact that the diocesan archives around the world are already unearthing big surprises. The Holy See intends, as it has done in the past, to make the documents from its archives available in the same manner as already indicated in recent years. Upon completion of the preparatory work for the consultation, all those who hold the academic qualifications required for historical research will be able to consult the available documentation.

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