

## **Rabbi Riccardo Di Segni, “On dialogue between Jews and Christians, the Church must find the right balance.”**

January 16, 2025

[Rabbi Riccardo Di Segni, The Chief Rabbi of Rome, delivered these remarks on the 36th Annual “Day of Dialogue” at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome. The theme this year was “Hope.” The [full text](#) was published in *Shalom*, the publication of the Jewish community of Rome. An unofficial translation follows.]

As is well known, the topic of this annual meeting is decided by agreement between the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI) and the Italian Rabbinical Assembly (ARI). This year, being a jubilee year for the Catholic Church, we thought it might be interesting to discuss this theme of its biblical origins. But at the same time, we are living in very difficult times that impact, among other things, Jewish-Christian dialogue. A reflection on this point cannot be avoided, arising specifically as a conversation among friends, which is what is taking place here today. So, my speech will first speak a little about the Jubilee, and then about the difficult moment we are going through.

About the Jubilee, a tradition with biblical foundations, you can find ample explanations in the resources we have helped to prepare. Here I would like to speak of a detail and a discussion about the Jubilee that is very interesting in defining the boundaries between the two faiths. A couple of weeks ago, there was a small but heated discussion on the social networks in our community, which escaped the [notice of the] general public. As you know, the tone of social media is not exactly one of subtle and refined debates. However, the topic under discussion was interesting. It had just happened that the ceremonies for the opening of the [jubilee] Holy Door had taken place in various cities and the clips were circulating in the media. In some of these it was seen that before the bishop knocked on the door and said, "open the gates of righteousness for me", that someone sounded the shofar, the ram's horn. There was a specific biblical reference in this, because it is the Bible that prescribes that the beginning of the jubilee must be solemnly announced by the sound of the shofar throughout the earth, as on the day of Yom Kippur. Jubilee derives from *Jovèl* which in turn means "ram" or "ram's horn". Why did Jewish social media get agitated? Because the shofar for the Jews has great importance, it is at the center of the New Year's liturgy, and its sound makes the conscience tremble. When I was asked what the shofar means to the Jews, I explained that it is to Jews what bells are to Christians. Remember Pier Capponi, "you will sound your trumpets, we will play our bells". Even if in that case the meaning was military, it is a sign of the cultural importance of that sound that characterizes Christian civilization that has abandoned [use of] the shofar. Now the resumption of this instrument has seemed to some in our community to be the appropriation of one of our sacred things, and someone has also spoken of supersessionism.

I have spoken along two lines in this debate, pointing out a contradiction and a problem. Just three weeks earlier there had been another story, this one much more widespread in the media, when the pope had himself photographed praying in front of a nativity scene in the Nervi room in which the baby Jesus, placed there prematurely, was resting on a Palestinian keffiyeh. This raised a lot of consensus on one side, and a lot of protests on our side, for two reasons: the first political, because

it was a very well-defined choice, and the second, in my opinion more serious, of a religious nature, because Jesus and Christianity were being stripped of its Jewish roots and transformed into something else. With respect to these protests with which I agreed, I pointed out that on the one hand we protest if Christianity is de-Judaized and on the other hand we protest if it is Judaized, as is done by playing the shofar. Here it is a question of defining, both for our sensibilities, but above all for Christian sensibilities, what the boundaries are between the two faiths. The problem has arisen for about half a century every year at Easter, when on Holy Thursday groups of Christian faithful gather to evoke the Last Supper by reciting the Pesach haggadah containing the ritual seder meal. I have seen some of these texts, in which there is a first copy-paste part of the seder rite and then the Christian proclamation. This is a mixture that sounds very strange to a Jew, but which has not failed to raise warnings even from Catholic authorities, though moderate, who do not consider excessive Judaization acceptable. The problem is to find the right balance. And it is not easy. But it is current, because the moment we are living in is one in which it seems that the Church is once again giving in to the temptation to sever ties with Judaism. And here we now come to current events.

The war that has been unleashed since October 7, 2023 has had Jewish-Christian dialogue among its victims. A wave of anti-Israeli hostility has arisen in the world, in some cases formally limited to criticism of the government and its prime minister but then extended to the Jewish people who have united in solidarity with the fate of threatened Israel; the accusations against Israel have rekindled and exploited anti-Jewish sentiments that have never subsided. The vocabulary used has served to demonize and reverse the sense of guilt for the genocide, with words and concepts typical of a tradition of hostility that has been going on for thousands of years (cruelty, revenge, children, etc.). What does the Catholic Church and dialogue have to do with this? It is that the ongoing tragedy does not only involve Gaza, but the entire region, and involves a momentous risk for Israel that is not understood or is underestimated; and these concepts and words accusing Israel, instead of being balanced in an objective vision, have been taken up by a part of the Church, from the bottom to the top, which has thus acted as a sounding board and moral endorsement of the condemnation. And why shouldn't it do so, one wonders?

Let's broaden our perspective for a moment on what is happening in the world not so far from us: South Sudan, 400 thousand dead; Yemen 400 thousand; Syria at least 400 thousand; Tigray (Ethiopia) at least 300 thousand, 13 million refugees and 24 million internally displaced persons. The number of Christians in the Middle East is falling dramatically. In Iraq alone, from 1.5 million to 250,000.

This incomplete list of ongoing horrors is accompanied by, if one considers the views of the leaders of the Catholic Church, omissions, distractions, [keeping of a] low profile, [and] generic quotations, which contrasts with the systematic and almost daily attention, words of reprobation, and condemnations of Israel. High-minded motives, the very noble compassion for suffering and the condemnation of the cruelty of war, become suspect however, when monothematic and unilateral. One could object that this type of argument, "there is more to it than that", falls into the disparaged category of so-called "whataboutism", which serves to evade or deny the facts. In reality, all the facts (the real ones, not the distorted ones of uncritically recycled propaganda), are to be condemned, but

here there is really much more [at work], and selective indignation—to use an expression common today—loses its moral force. In defense of the pope, Giuseppe Rusconi wrote that "a pope cannot divide the world into children and stepchildren and so must denounce everyone's suffering." I fully agree. But this is precisely what the pope does not do. We know that the pope is on the phone every day with the parish priest of Gaza. How many phone calls have you made to Sudan, Syria, Ethiopia, Congo, Yemen and how many times have you talked about it? We don't know. But we do know that with the media support of the Church, Israel, in the original sense of the Jewish people, and then of the State that has this name, is back in the defendant's dock.

In all this there is further reflection to be made. With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there has often been talk of disproportion, referring to the Israeli reaction. The real disproportion is another: it is, as compared to other much more tragic events, that media attention has focused on those facts, the poisoned and lying propaganda that takes hold of people. Why is there this disproportion? Because Israel is involved. In America, with bitter irony, they use a play on words: *No Jews, no news*—if there are no Jews there is no news. And why? The Jews, despite being a small minority of humanity, are often at the center of events of exceptional gravity and excessive attention. All this could have a political and rational explanation. But for a religiously sensitive audience, political explanations should not suffice. What we have been seeing in recent months is the repetition of an ancient and constant pattern. For many, Israel represents an exposed nerve that is enough to stimulate, to evoke excessive reactions. It is an enigma, an unresolved problem, a reality with which it is difficult to live in peace, an obstacle to the balance of people and societies. And it is no coincidence that this difficulty finds expression precisely in the critical words of the leader of millions of faithful. For those who believe and seek inspiration and encouragement in religion, there is something much more here than politics, psychology, sociology. It is Israel's special condition in the history and faith of humanity, which most of the time leads humanity to express itself towards Israel in the worst possible way, as in these days, but which could and should instead have a virtuous and positive evolution. This is the challenge for those who still hope for dialogue. A dialogue that has been ruined for months, but which is not and must not be, for those who believe, a trivial event to be interrupted.

I know that those who organized today's meeting, those who host it, those who speak, those who listen to us are aware of the need for dialogue and friendship and, as far as they can, oppose the political and theological drifts that are threatening them. I thank you for your attention and sympathy and I hope and wish you not to remain a minority island. I would like to end with a quote from Rabbi Sacks (*To Heal a Fractured World*, p. 166) that evokes today's theme of hope: "Optimism and hope are not the same thing... Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active virtue. It doesn't take courage to be optimistic, but it takes a lot of courage to hope. The Hebrew Bible is not an optimistic book. It is, however, one of the great literatures of hope."

Hope is precisely the theme of this meeting, and this is the feeling that we should share, despite everything.