

ON IMPROVING CATHOLIC-JEWISH RELATIONS

A Memorandum to  
His Eminence Agostino Cardinal Bea  
President  
THE SECRETARIAT FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

Submitted by  
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## INTRODUCTION

With humility and in the spirit of commitment to the living message of the prophets of Israel, let us consider the grave problems that confront us all as the children of God.

Both Judaism and Christianity share the prophets' belief that God chooses agents through whom His will is made known and His work done throughout history. Both Judaism and Christianity live in the certainty that mankind is in need of ultimate redemption, that God is involved in human history, that in relations between man and man God is at stake; that the humiliation of man is a disgrace of God; that the infamy of a wicked act is infinitely greater than we are able to imagine.

He who oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,  
He who is kind to the needy honors Him.

Proverbs 14:31; see 17:5

The universe is done. The greater masterpiece still undone, still in the process of being created, is history. For accomplishing His grand design, God needs the help of man. Man is and has the instrument of God which he may or may not use in consonance with the grand design. Life is clay, and righteousness the mould in which God wants history to be shaped. But human beings, instead of fashioning the clay, deform the shape.

God calls for mercy and righteousness; this demand of His cannot be satisfied only in the temples, in space, but in history, in time. It is within the realm of history that man has to carry out God's mission.

We and the prophets employ different standards. To us the moral state of society for all its stains and spots, seems fair and trim, while to the prophets it is dreadful. So many deeds of charity are done, so much decency emanates day and night; to the prophet satiety of the conscience is callousness and flight from responsibility. Our standards are modest, our sense of injustice tolerable, timid, our moral indignation impermanent, yet human violence is interminable, unbearable, permanent. To us life is often serene, in the prophet's eye the world reels in confusion. The prophet makes no concession to man's frailty. Exhibiting little understanding for human weakness, he seems unable to extenuate the culpability of man. We and the prophets do not have the same quality of sensibility in common.

Who could bear living in a state of disgust day and night? The conscience builds its confines, it is also subject to fatigue, longing for some comfort. Yet those who are hurt, and He Who inhabits eternity, neither slumber nor sleep.

The prophet is sleepless and grave. The frankincense of some deeds of charity fails to fumigate the cruelties. Perhaps the prophet know more about the secret obscenity of sheer unfairness, about the unnoticed malignancy of established patterns of indifference, than most of us care to know, a knowledge which he does not ascribe to his own intelligence or power of observation.

The prophet's ear is directed to God, his soul is overwhelmed by His word. Yet the prophet's eye is directed to the human scene; society and its conduct are the main theme of his speeches. He is "an assayer and tester" of the people's ways (Jeremiah 6:27). This is the outstanding characteristic of the prophets: openness to the historic situation, to the divine call and its demands. In their eyes the human situation may be a divine emergency.

#### THE SINFULNESS OF HATRED

It is such a situation that we face today when the survival of mankind, including its sacred legacy, is in balance. One wave of hatred, prejudice or contempt may begin in its wake the destruction of all mankind. It is therefore of extreme importance that the sinfulness of thoughts of suspicion and hatred and particularly the sinfulness of any contemptuous utterance, however flippantly it is meant, be made clear to all mankind. This applies in particular to such thoughts and utterances about individuals or groups of other religions, races and nations. Speech has power and few men realize that words do not fade. What starts out as a sound ends in a deed.

#### PROPOSALS FOR IMPROVING CATHOLIC-JEWISH RELATIONS

The following proposals are offered in the sincere hope of improving mutually fruitful relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish community. They are also motivated by the

equally sincere conviction that the Church's vigorous repudiation of anti-Semitism - forthrightly expressed in various Papal statements and other Catholic writings - must be accompanied by an authoritative clarification of religious teachings which lend themselves to anti-Jewish interpretations and which have been frequently abused to support anti-Semitic ideology and activity.

Anti-Semitism is an ancient and complex evil, which cannot be ascribed to a single cause. Nor can responsibility for its perpetuation be invested in one particular institution. Yet, in response to the prophetic call for justice, and out of respect for the six million innocent martyred, we must ask that all institutions - political, civic, and religious - examine, and uproot possible sources of anti-Semitism in themselves; and we must confront each of the sources, including invidious religious teachings. Foremost among these is the slanderous claim that "the Jews" are collectively responsible for the Crucifixion of Jesus, that because of this the Jews are accursed and condemned to suffer dispersion and deprivation throughout the ages. This charge has been used by anti-Semites for centuries, to justify the most cruel and inhuman treatment of Jews; it has even been advanced to justify the fate of six million Jews during the Nazi holocaust.

Because we recognize that the Roman Catholic Church represents a rock of solidarity, belief, and morality in the world where so many values in the moral, ethical, and religious spheres

have foundered, we ask the Church's assistance in putting an end to such slanderous religious teachings, and in thus assuring that anti-Semites can claim no sanction in Catholic religious teachings.

We are conscious that the formularies used in the subsequent proposals may need further amplification and development as regards the detailed execution of whatever is decided upon, and we will be happy to continue our discussion for the purpose of greater clarification.

#### FIRST PROPOSAL

There has never been an age which has witnessed so much guilt and distress, agony and terror. At no time has the earth been so soaked with blood; at no time has man been less sensitive to God.

An age of supreme anguish and extreme horror calls for words of supreme spiritual grandeur, for actions the moral force of which will purify the lives of many generations to come.

The forthcoming Ecumenical Council, which has already evoked the sympathetic interest of the entire world community, provides an exceptional opportunity for the Church to exert its moral influence by reaffirming its opposition to persecution and bigotry, and its condemnation of the sin of anti-Semitism. We would hope that the Ecumenical Council will issue a strong declaration stressing the grave nature of the sin of anti-Semitism as incompatible with Catholicism and, in general, with all morality.

We recognize, however, that a condemnation of violent bigotry will not deal with one of the most profound and pervasive roots of the problem, that the urgent duty of fighting against the hatred that has brought upon the Jewish people unparalleled horror throughout the ages requires a rejection of false religious teachings:\*

Therefore, we consider it a matter of supreme urgency for the Ecumenical Council to reject and to condemn those who assert that the Jews as a people are responsible for the Crucifixion of Christ, that because of this, the Jews are accursed and condemned to suffer dispersion and deprivation throughout the ages; and to declare that calling a Jew Christ-killer is a grave sin.

This condemnation should be disseminated widely under the highest authority of the Roman Catholic Church to all who are charged with the preaching and teaching mission of the Church and to all who are responsible for the spiritual guidance of the faithful.

Such a request seems to us consonant with Catholic doctrine as we understand it. It is our understanding that the Church holds the sins of all mankind responsible for the death of Jesus; and teaches that he foreordained his own death in keeping with the Church's doctrine of God's redemptive plan.

\*With gracious encouragement of Vatican authorities, the American Jewish Committee submitted two memoranda, "The Image of the Jew in Catholic Teaching" (June 22, 1961), and "Anti-Jewish Elements in Catholic Liturgy" (November 17, 1961). In these documents, attention was drawn to sources of misunderstanding and hostility in Catholic textbooks and liturgy and it was requested that the Church seek appropriate measures to eliminate these possible bases of religious prejudice.

SECOND PROPOSAL

As St. Thomas said over 600 years ago, no man or group of men can be hindered in worshipping God in the way in which they consciously, freely, and in virtue of the light of their conscience choose to worship Him, provided that it is obvious this method of worshipping God is not anti-human or anti-social.

While we would not impinge upon the rights of any religious group to seek adherents through persuasion, we cannot but feel distressed that in the eyes of the Church the holiness of the existence of the Jews as Jews, in their loyalty to the Torah, is not acknowledged. Throughout the centuries our people have paid such a high price in suffering and martyrdom for preserving the Covenant and the legacy of holiness in faith and devotion. To this day our people labor devotedly and with commitment to educate their children in the ways of the Torah. [Genuine love implies that Jews be accepted as Jews.

Thus, it is our sincere hope that the Ecumenical Council would acknowledge the integrity and permanent preciousness of Jews and Judaism.



THIRD PROPOSAL

The Biblical imperative includes more than the exercise of justice. More than doing, it asks for love; deeper than justice, it refers to good and evil. "Seek good and not evil... Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate" (Amos 5:14a.15a).

"It has been told you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness (hesed), and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8) - doing justice as well as loving kindness. The prophets tried to excite fervor, to make hesed an object of love.

What the Lord requires of man is more than doing one's task, fulfilling one's duty. To love implies an insatiable thirst, a passionate craving. To love means to transfer the center of one's inner life from the ego to the object of one's love.

However, we do not love him who is unknown. Knowledge and charity are interrelated.

Ignorance breeds suspicion, just as false knowledge generates distortion. In our age, few Catholic priests and laymen possess adequate information about Jewish life and the spiritual and moral dimension of Jewish existence in the last two thousand years. It would be important to assert in a conciliar statement the need on the part of Catholics to seek mutual understanding of Jews and their tradition. This would imply a program that would seek to eliminate abusive and derogatory stereotypes about

Jews and Judaism, e.g. the supposed contrast in the field of law between the harsh Jewish enforcement of the lex talionis and the God of Wrath of the Hebrew Bible and God of Love of the Gospels. It would help to counteract the misconception of the period between the return from the Babylonian exile and the beginnings of Christianity as one of continuous decline; to call attention to the great spiritual, moral, and intellectual vitality of the Jewish people during the last 2500 years, the teaching, worship and observance; to disseminate positive information about Jews and Judaism; to promote mutual understanding and a greater mutual comprehension of the issues between us and also of the richness of each other's heritage.

From the other side, there is substantial ignorance among Jews as to the true relationship between Jewish communities and the Church throughout history. Some Jews see the Church's record regarding the Jewish people as one of unrelieved antagonism and hostility; they know about the yellow star and the ghetto, but not about the many Papal declarations condemning anti-Jewish violence and the efforts of Church authorities to protect Jews. Thus, more knowledge and exchange of information is needed on two levels; knowledge and understanding about Judaism as a vital religion; and honest, unapologetic viewing of Catholic-Jewish relations in past and present. For these purposes, it could become a source of great blessing if:

1. A "forum" be established with the support and approval of the Church in which knowledge about Judaism would be made available to Catholic priests and theologians. Through

such a forum problems of great importance could be discussed, views exchanged and issues deliberated by Jewish and Christian scholars.

2. Research projects and publications arranged jointly by Catholic and Jewish scholars.

3. A declaration should be issued reaffirming earlier Papal and Vatican pronouncements encouraging cooperation among religious groups in civic affairs to promote the common good (i.e., neighborhood improvement, works of charity, combatting juvenile delinquency, group antagonisms, etc.) Fortunately, such cooperation already goes on in many parts of the world. In some places however, it is difficult to engage Catholics in even the most worthy civic cooperation projects, because of the resistance of local ecclesiastical authority. We believe that working together at an objective work for love of fellow man would in itself add considerably and decisively to the purification of the souls and the creation of a climate of mutual respect.

FOURTH PROPOSAL

The prophets' preoccupation with justice and righteousness has its roots in a powerful awareness of injustice, a sense for the monstrosity of injustice. Moralists of all ages have been eloquent in singing the praises of virtue. The distinction of the prophets was in their remorseless unveiling of injustice and oppression, in their comprehension of social, political and religious evils.

Justice is precious, injustice exceedingly common. One of the troubles seems to be that we have delegated the concern for justice to the judges, as if justice were a matter for a few specialists. The prophets insist that justice must be the supreme and active concern of every man. It was not to the judges but to every member of the people that the words of the Lord are directed: "Seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow."

There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself; it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception becoming the rule and being in turn accepted.

The knowledge of evil is something which the first man acquired; it was not something that the prophets had to discover.

The great contribution to humanity was their discovery of the evil of indifference. One may be decent and sinister, pious and sinful. I am my brother's keeper. The prophet is a person who suffers the harms done unto others. Wherever a crime is committed, it is as if the prophet were the victim and the prey.

Above all the prophet's word is a call to repentance. "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean" (Isaiah 1:17). Such cleansing must be an ongoing process. As long as there is hatred in one heart, or prejudice disseminated in one public utterance, textbook, or journal, there is an overriding urgency to cry out against it.

Jews have recognized and recognize willingly and gratefully the sacrificial work done in the past by members of the Catholic community, both clergy and lay, in behalf of persecuted Jews. We can only thank the Almighty for this. Yet we must also recognize that for every Catholic who came to the aid and assistance of Jews, there were hundreds of others - also loyal Church members - who were at best indifferent to the fate of the Jewish community, and who failed to resist or condemn anti-Jewish utterances and atrocities, particularly during the time of the Nazi era. Many Jews are convinced that the failure of the great majority of European Catholic Church leaders to speak out frankly and publicly against anti-Semitism entailed suffering for Jews on many occasions and in many places. Therefore, in order for the Church to more fully and effectively disseminate to its

faithful throughout the world its abhorrence of anti-Semitism,  
we respectfully propose the following:

1. We request that a permanent high level commission be established at the Vatican for the purpose of eliminating prejudice and of watching over Christian-Jewish relations everywhere.
2. We further request that at every diocese a similar commission be established to further the demands of justice and love.

May we say in conclusion that we are certain that positive action about these points in an Ecumenical Declaration would mark a revolutionary step of the highest significance. We are of course, respectfully aware of the far-reaching implications and the complexity of the issues involved in the proposals advanced in this memorandum. It is our faith in the magnificent blessings which the spirit of God bestows upon those who are dedicated to Him, that gives us the courage to pray; that in this grave hour of history His children may be granted the wisdom and the power by which obstacles can be overcome.