

Notes and News

Vatican-Israel

If all goes well, at the end of this April a new ambassador will reside in Tel Aviv, Israel: Monsignor di Montezemolo. On the other hand, Rabbi David Rosen could represent the Jewish State in the Vatican. Forty-six years after the creation of the State of Israel, the Holy See at last agreed to grant to it official and diplomatic recognition.

On December 30, 1993, a “fundamental agreement” was signed in Jerusalem between the representatives of the two States as a result of efforts undertaken by a bilateral commission delegated on July 29, 1992. The fifteen articles drafted are just a first step, but constitute for both parties “a solid and durable foundation for the continued development of their present and future ties” (foreword to the agreement).

For years, the Vatican has walked a fine line, on the one hand, supporting Palestinians, which count 170,000 Christians, while at the same time granting audience to Israeli prime ministers. In actual fact, the State of Israel was recognized, but no official statement confirmed the tacit consensus. History has caught up with the Vatican’s ramified meandering, and the tidal wave caused by the Arafat and Rabin accord (September 13, 1993) has reached even those diplomats nested in the Holy See.

The Vatican is, nonetheless, cautious. The agreements with Israel are bilateral and solely administrative. They address the issue of Catholic interest and property in the Holy Land. But the political thorn of the status of Israel and the question of occupied territories are kept at bay. Rome is intent upon reiterating “its solemn commitment to stay uninvolved in regards to all temporal conflicts, particularly in matters of territorial and frontier dis-

putes” (article 11 of the agreement).

Such an agreement between the Jewish and the Catholic entities is primarily religious. A 2000-year-old conflict may be on the verge of resolution. The anti-Semitic tendency of the Church goes back to its very foundation even if, ironically, all its founders as well as the Lord whom it worships were Jews. Catholic nations have persecuted Jews, and have expelled them (from France in 1394, from Spain in 1492). As late as 1904, Pope Pie X refused to support Zionism: “We cannot prevent the Jews from settling in Palestine but we cannot approve it. The soil of Jerusalem has been sanctified by the blood of Jesus Christ. Jews have not acknowledged our Lord, therefore I cannot acknowledge the Jewish people.”

The Christian hatred of the “decide people” climaxed fifty years ago. It would take the ashes of six million Jews before the Council of Vatican II finally “condemns the hatred and the persecutions towards the Jews” (Nostra Aetate, 1965). And one would have to wait another twenty years before a pope (Jean-Paul II, April 13, 1986) would enter, for the first time, the Roman Synagogue.

The December agreement officially dismisses any ambiguity and speaks of “the unique quality of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish People, of the historical process of reconciliation and of the mutual and growing understanding and friendship between Catholics and Jews” (foreword to the Agreement). Article 2 is even more precise: “The Holy See takes this opportunity to reiterate its condemnation of hatred, of persecution, and of any other form of anti-Semitism aimed at the Jewish people, against any Jew, wherever, whenever and by whomever.” Even

if such words can in no way erase the tragedies of the past, they may, at least, serve to prevent them from happening again.

Corinne Egasse

The First International Jewish-Christian Conference

In February, the first International Jewish-Christian Conference was held in Jerusalem. About 500 religious leaders from 97 different countries met to discuss challenges and hopes facing our secular and technical society. Among the personalities noted as present were Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger; the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Monsignor Michel Sebah; and the representative of the Orthodox Patriarch, His Eminence Damaskines. On the Jewish side participated the French Chief Rabbi René-Samuel Sirat, president of the European Conference of Rabbis, who opened the Conference; Chief Rabbis Melchior from Denmark and Cyril Harris from South Africa; as well as the rabbi and eminent American Professor Irvis Greenberg.

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A New Step Towards Religious Liberty in Israel

The Supreme Court in Israel has canceled the decision of the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv courts concerning the composition of the religious councils. Previously, admission to this council was exclusively reserved for Jews from the Orthodox movement. Now the council will also be open to other Jewish groups. The Rabbi Uri Regev, who represented the non-Orthodox cause before the Supreme Court, commented, “This is a historic decision, a great step towards religious liberty in Israel.”

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