

# Friendship in Our Time

## The strength of Jewish-Catholic relations

*Editor's note: In honor of Pope Francis' visit to the U.S., we invited Professor Lawrence Schiffman, a regular contributor to this newspaper, and Bishop William Murphy of the diocese of Rockville Centre, to share their thoughts on Jewish-Catholic relations.*

By LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN

The upcoming visit to the U.S. by Pope Francis is an occasion to step back and evaluate the state of Jewish-Catholic relations. To do that in a column appearing with an

### PERSPECTIVE

article by Bishop William Murphy of the diocese of Rockville Centre is both a privilege and a sign of the amazing changes that have happened. I am proud to count Bishop Murphy as a friend who maintains an ongoing close friendship with the Jewish people and Israel.

The initial steps toward reconciliation were taken during the Second Vatican Council, which took place between 1962 and 1965. This council yielded *Nostra Aetate*, Latin for "In Our Time," better defined as the Declaration of the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions. This document laid to rest the anti-Jewish theological principles that were inherent in earlier Catholic doctrine. Documents issued in 1974 and 1985 deepened the Church's commitment to eradicate anti-Semitism and greatly encouraged the development of closer relations between the Catholic Church and the Jewish community. The recognition of the State of Israel by the Holy See and the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1993 was a logical result of the new Catholic attitude. The relationship has flourished despite the fact that certain of the sub-agreements are still under negotiation more than 20 years later.

There are various explanations for what brought about these fundamental changes. Clearly, the recognition of the Catholic Church that anti-Semitism had prepared the ground for the Holocaust was a major factor. However, even before World War II American Jews and Catholics were moving towards a closer relationship. During Vatican II some American cardinals were extremely influential. Interestingly, some of them came from families of Jewish extraction. At the same time, the close relationship of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the famed theologian, with Cardinal Augustin Bea, a leading biblical scholar, made a

major contribution as both worked tirelessly to bring about a reconciliation. The Cardinal's contribution is commemorated in the naming of the Cardinal Bea Center for Judaic Studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, where I had the opportunity years ago to serve as a visiting professor. This center has taught numerous Catholic students — clergy and lay people — advanced courses in various fields of Judaic Studies ranging from the ancient to the modern, including religion, theology and history. More importantly, its presence in a pontifical university reinforces the message of Catholic respect for Judaism.

The 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* was just celebrated this year, and I was able to attend a formal conference to commemorate this anniversary sponsored by Catholic University of America and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). The mood was justifiably celebratory. On the other hand, Catholic and Jewish speakers did not hesitate to speak about ongoing problems on our collective agenda.

Previous to the Second Vatican Council Jews faced the problem that Catholic doctrines encouraged the placing of collective guilt on the Jewish people for the death of Jesus

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and Catholics felt obligated to recruit Jews to the Catholic Church. Beneath all this was the concept of supersessionism that understood Christianity to have replaced Judaism, a fossil kept alive only to show God's displeasure for His erstwhile people. In fact, these beliefs were held widely by Christians throughout the world. The firm and outright repudiation of these beliefs by the Catholic Church led other Christian groups, at a slower pace, to reframe their understanding of the Jews and Judaism. Many have followed the Catholics in reaching an understanding that Jews, as a group from which Christianity originated, maintain a special relationship with God. In the case of the Catholic Church, there seems to be an unstated belief that for Jews salvation is



Schiffman (left) with Pope Francis.

attainable through belief and practice of Judaism. Thus, the religious and theological obstacles to close relations have been totally removed.

Let me explain a bit about how Jewish-Catholic relations function from a formal point of view. Although relationships are built and sustained by individuals working together for common goals, there are several formal channels that have been established between the Church and the Jewish people. The organizations that have been created for increased formal contact function against the backdrop of the very dif-

ferent nature of the Catholic Church and the Jewish people. The Catholic Church is a centralized body while the Jewish people is decentralized, communally organized outside Israel and with a national identity in the State of Israel. In addition, many national and local organizations try to advance our friendship or to smooth over difficulties that occur on a more local level. Thus, several types of Jewish organizations have arisen to address the many issues concerning Catholicism. In the aftermath of *Nostra Aetate*, the Jewish community created an organization known as IJCIC, the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, with representation from the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox rabbinic and synagogue organizations as well as the Jewish defense agencies, designed to represent Jews throughout the world. IJCIC represents the Jewish people in official dialogue and cooperation with the Catholic Church as a whole, centered at the Vatican, and with other international religious organizations such as the World Council of Churches. IJCIC, of which I am a past chair and represent the Orthodox Union, sponsors biennial meetings organized together with its opposite number at the Vatican, the Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews. These meetings have done much to develop Jewish-Catholic relations in a variety of ways and have been held throughout the world to demonstrate the new friendship between Catholic and Jewish believers. In addition, these organization sponsor meetings of Emerging Leaders — that is, younger clergy and lay people — in order to advance our common goals. Finally, IJCIC officers and representatives of the various organizations meet with Vatican officials and are in regular contact both regarding ongoing cooperative activities and when difficulties arise.

Over time, and especially with the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Israel, two other bodies have joined in the effort to foster Jewish-Catholic relations. The Ambassador of the State of Israel to the Holy See deals specifically with political rather than religious issues, but the reality is that these political relations are a very important part of Jewish Catholic-relations. They symbolize the new Catholic understanding of the role of the Land of Israel in Jewish faith as well as of the unbreakable bonds that connect Jews throughout the world with Israel. While not all Vatican positions on world affairs are in accord with those

of Israel, as can be seen by the recent Vatican recognition of the Palestinian State, the work of the different ambassadors over the years has always contributed to better political and interreligious relations. Finally, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel maintains a dialogue with the Catholic Church pertaining to religious matters that both symbolically and substantively has made an important contribution. While these three Jewish entities might easily be stepping on each other's toes, the reality is that interlocking leadership and collegiality has created a situation in which IJCIC, the Chief Rabbinate and the Israeli Ambassador to the Vatican, working in concert, have effectively represented the Jewish people.

Various local bodies also exist to foster Jewish-Catholic relations. Especially important in our country are the efforts of two specific dialogue groups. The National Council of Synagogues, representing Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative congregations, meets regularly with the Catholic Bishops (USCCB). This group deals with both communal and theological matters. Also meeting regularly is a Catholic-Jewish Orthodox dialogue sponsored by the USCCB, the Rabbinical Council of America and the Orthodox Union. This group deals with issues of communal and intergroup relations, with special attention to the problems of parochial schools. (The Catholic co-chair of this group is Bishop Murphy and I have the privilege of working with him there.)

Both of these ongoing dialogues, like the international meetings described earlier, are significant not only for their content but for their symbolism. They represent to a wider public that Jews and Catholics are now united in a friendship that, while not without its occasional disagreements, points to a future ahead in which religious groups with both shared values and theological differences can live together and work together in an atmosphere of friendship and tolerance.

*Lawrence H. Schiffman serves as Judge Abraham Lieberman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies and Director of the Global Network for Advanced Research in Jewish Studies at New York University. He is a past chair of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC).*