



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
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THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

"There's no relation that can't be transformed"

Interview with Rabbi David Rosen on the history and current reality of relations between Jews and Catholics



An "interreligious" exchange of smiles took place at the audience on Wednesday, October 28, in St. Peter's Square, in which Pope Francis addressed a special greeting to the participants of the conference in remembrance of the 50th anniversary of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*. Here we see him together with Rabbi Rosen and one of the Muslim representatives, Rasoul Rasoulipour from Iran.

Rabbi David Rosen – International Director of Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee and, among other charges, a member of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel's commission for interreligious relations and its representative on the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land – was frequently present in the Vatican for the many events marking the 50th anniversary of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*. In this interview traces the history of relations between Jews and Catholics.

What do you think have been the most important changes and steps that have been taken in recent years in Jewish-Catholic dialogue?

In terms of history, *Nostra Aetate* was issued just yesterday and it is a revolution. We have gone from a situation of where we were seen as rejected by God, as cursed and condemned to wander forever, to a situation where the Jewish people is described by Popes, in the words of Saint John Paul II, as "the beloved elder brother of the Church, of the original covenant never broken and never to be broken". This is a theological revolution.

Nostra Aetate was to some extent facilitated by the fact that there were contexts in which Jews and Catholics already had personal friendships and that made it easier to internalize the theological change when it came. Then of course there was the impact of the Shoah that led to a serious reassessment on the part of Catholic Church about its relations with the Jewish people. I don't think that any other transformation in human history has been as dramatic as this and that must be properly

appreciated. If such a relationship which was so chronic and negative can become so positive and constructive, there is no relation – no matter how bad – that cannot be transformed. This is important for Jews also in terms of relationship with the Muslim world today.

Another big aspect concerns Israel. The establishment of diplomatic relations at the end of 1993 was especially significant because it facilitated the visit of Pope John Paul II in 2000. That event had an enormous impact because not many people read now as they used to, and certainly people do not normally read documents. Most Jews would not know Catholic documents but people watch TV and they saw the Pope, the head of the Catholic Church, in tearful solidarity with Jewish suffering at the Yad Vashem, and at the Kotel, the Western Wall, putting there the text of the prayer he had composed for the liturgy of repentance in St. Peter's two weeks earlier, asking God's forgiveness for the sins committed against Jews through the ages. This was mind-blowing for many Israelis and made them realize that there was really a change, a different reality.

If you think about what steps are still to be made, above all in Israel, in Jewish-Catholic relations, what is the first one that comes to your mind?

The first thing that comes to my mind are the responsibilities of Israel, more so than responsibilities of the Holy See, because Israel has not yet fulfilled all the commitments she gave under the Fundamental Agreement concluded at the end of 1993 which established diplomatic relations. Things that have not been concluded are the legal internal structure of the Church under Israeli law and the fiscal and taxation status. There is an outstanding debt especially to the memory of Pope John Paul II to whom Israel's representatives promised we would resolve these matters within two years of the signing of the Fundamental Agreement.

From the Vatican side what needs to be addressed is the degree to which *Nostra Aetate* and the transformation in Catholic teaching is transmitted down to the grass roots. This depends naturally on the sociological context but if the Holy See was to decide to embark on a campaign in Latin America for example – especially now with a Latin American Pope – to ensure that teachings of the Magisterium on Jews and Judaism are a required part of seminary preparation and formation and of Catholic education, it could have an enormous effect.

What is your comment on the Comprehensive Agreement that the Holy See signed in June with the State of Palestine?

I understand, with regards to this Agreement the Holy See signed with the Palestinian Authority, that the Holy See referred to the State of Palestine because many countries in the world already do so. The government of Israel is not happy with that, but this is a political issue, so they can agree to differ on the political terminology. The substance however is that this is a very important agreement for the Holy See with the Palestinian Authority because it confirms the religious freedom and rights of the Church in a society which has already proclaimed itself to be essentially run by Islamic law, as formulated in the establishment document of the Palestinian Authority. To agree to a document which affirms the integrity of the Christian communities and their rights of freedom of worship, education and communications is therefore a great achievement.

And in fact, Israel should applaud this document because not only does it protect the Christian communities but, in affirming the principles of religious pluralism, Israel should be able to hold the Palestinian Authority to task also with regards to defamation of Judaism which happens regularly

in mosques and in Palestinian media. If it is agreed now that Christianity should be respected, we should ask that this happens with Judaism as well.

A little over a year ago, you were here in the Vatican Gardens praying with the Pope and other religious and political leaders for peace. To what extent can prayer play a role in this context?

One aspect of the question concerns what the value of prayer is in itself while the other is the value of Pope Francis' initiative.. Obviously, as a believing religious person, I believe in the power of prayer, above all, to transform the person who is praying. The Hebrew word for prayer is a reflexive use of the verb "to judge", hitpallel, which means "to judge oneself". This word may even come from a root which relates not so much to judgment as it does to wonder. In both cases it is reflexive: it means affecting oneself, to critique yourself, to reflect on your values and actions, above all to reflect on God's Creation physical and spiritual and to be full of wonder of God's presence. It is first and foremost something that you do in yourself, but like any other aspect of life, if you do something powerfully, it can affect others around you and it certainly can be an inspiration to others.

In the Jewish tradition, by praying we testify to God's presence and love in human society by the way we relate to each other, because if each human being is created in God's image – as both Judaism and Christianity teach – if we do not love our neighbor, we do not really love God. Therefore showing that we genuinely respect each other's diversity, and especially diverse religions, is a way of loving God and showing God that we love Him by bringing people together. From this point of view a prayer gathering is very important.

The idea of bringing Israelis and, not only Palestinians, but Arab Muslims and Christians together is one of the most important things that has to be done. If Jews, Christians and Muslims may be seen to live together in peace in the Holy Land, the global ramifications are enormous. Therefore I am delighted that Pope Francis focused specifically on this and that he invited Israeli leaders and religious representatives to come together. I hope that Pope Francis will not give up on this initiative, and that next time this will be done also with people who are currently in positions of political power or connected with the power structures and not those who are purely representative figures that have no impact on the political reality because, in that case, the initiative would have no political consequences.

Could you share with us a prayer for the Holy Land and its inhabitants?

I would take it from Psalm 122. There are two verses in that Psalm which are very interesting. One verse is very famous: "Seek the peace of Jerusalem, those who shall love you shall prosper", this verse seems rather counterintuitive because, if you look at the history of Jerusalem, those who have loved Jerusalem have not prospered. There has probably been no city of which there have been more tears shed and more blood spilled than Jerusalem. So what does it mean? There is a verse earlier on that explains it: "Jerusalem that is built up is as a city joint together." The Rabbis of the Talmud said that a city joint together means a city that joins people together. This was taken of course from the ancient image of the pilgrimage of which the Israelites of all different tribes would come up to Jerusalem as a symbol of unity in diversity. The true message of the peace of Jerusalem is unity in diversity.

Therefore when we will seek the peace of Jerusalem, unity between Jews, Christians and Muslims, or respect for each other's attachment to Jerusalem, then we shall truly prosper. Prayer needs to be for the true peace of Jerusalem.

Interview by Elena Dini

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