



Catholic Bishops of Italy | 30.03.1998

Letter to the Jewish Community of Italy

by the Catholic Bishops of Italy

March 1998

(The Italian Bishops' statement came in the form of a letter delivered to Prof. Elio Toaff, the chief rabbi of Rome, and Dr. Tullia Zevi, the president of the Jewish Community of Italy.)

We have come to this place (the Great Synagogue of Rome), representatives of the Secretariat for Ecumenism and Dialogue of the Episcopal Conference of Italy. We wish our presence here to be a sign of friendship and hope: of our friendship toward you our "elder brothers," firstborn in the faith who have so much to tell us of the centuries-old treasure of biblical tradition; and of the hope that the maleficent plant of antisemitism will be extinguished forever from history, beginning with our cultural and linguistic habits.

In these days, we remember that one hundred and fifty years ago civil liberty was given by Carlo Alberto to the Waldensians and the Jews in his kingdom. It is a joyous memory in which we participate. But we also remember that sixty years ago racial laws were enacted against the Jews in Italy. This is a most painful memory that questions and disquiets us. "Antisemitism has no justification and is absolutely condemnable," John Paul II repeated for all with firmness and clarity on November 1, 1997, in his speech to the participants of the Vatican Symposium on the Relationship Between Christians and Jews.

From our common biblical font we are fond of remembering in this regard two imperatives frequently used: *shema*, listen, and *zechor*, remember; and one word without any equivocation, *teshuvah*, repentance.

It is true, as you have said, Rabbi Toaff, that "in Italy we had antisemitism of the state not of the populace." But this does not take away from the fact that we deal with a dark page in the recent history of our country (the *Shoah*). Christian clergy for long centuries had cultivated "erroneous and unjust interpretations of scripture" (John Paul II, November 1, 1997). Because of this, we did not know how to muster energies capable of denouncing or to oppose with the necessary force and timeliness the iniquity that struck you.

However, spontaneous human charity and Christian solidarity with the Jewish people, and in particular of many priests and religious, did come to mitigate in some manner the lack of prophetic action when the situation passed from the violence of words to violence against persons. Yet such individual deeds were not sufficient to stop the catastrophe.

We recall these events with dismay and also with a profound and conscientious *teshuvah*. We do not want to, nor can we, forget the victims. We remember them to learn and to hearken even more to the Eternal who loves life, the one Lord of all who knows our thoughts and acts. We resolve to be open to the full biblical truth, beginning with the eminent dignity of humankind, upon which we reflected on this year's "Day of Solidarity with Judaism," January 17, 1998.

We recall with pleasure the initiative launched ten years ago by our secretariat to develop guidelines

for the correct presentation of Judaism in preaching and catechesis. It has been received even on the European level. We proposed it in fact to the Ecumenical Assembly of Gratz last June before all the churches of Europe, achieving complete acceptance. On that occasion many were impressed by our firm position, as was stated of Professor René Samuel Sirat, chief rabbi of France, who was present. After unspeakable sufferings, truth has won over falsehood. Such a victory, however, is always fragile. It requires continual vigilance and permanent realization.

For its part, the Catholic Church, beginning with the Second Vatican Council — and thanks to the meeting of two men of faith, Jules Isaac and John XXIII, whose memory is a blessing — decisively turned in another direction, removing every pseudo-theological justification for the accusation of deicide and perfidy and also the theory of substitution with its consequent “teaching of contempt,” the foundation for all antisemitism. The Church recognizes with St. Paul that the gifts of God are irrevocable and that even today Israel has a proper mission to fulfill: to witness to the absolute lordship of the Most High, before whom the heart of every person must open.

In our times, what does our past ask of us? To recognize the truth, however painful, of the facts and of our responsibility. The Catholic Church in Italy shows clearly that it does not intend to exempt itself from this duty in spite of the delay, and despite some incautious voices still lingering over prejudices that have been hard to die out.

We leave to the historians the task of doing their best to reconstruct the truth of facts still drenched with emotion. As for you, only the Eternal knows through what iniquity and inhuman tribulation you have passed, remaining heroically faithful to your vocation as witnesses to God’s name. For us it is asked to accelerate the removal of prejudices and injustices and to encourage esteem and respect; opening the mind and heart to the fraternity that unites us in the love of the one Lord and Father. It is a path of purification of remembrance for which we ask trust and good will. We ask as well the pardon of the Lord who is “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Ps 103:8).

It is a sign of reconciliation that we want to share. We are called to bear witness together in this our time, still so discordant and lacerated, to collaborate in the defense of liberty and justice and to secure civil and religious rights for all, beginning with our own country and everywhere among all peoples.

With these sentiments we are here to render homage, dear chief rabbi and president, to you, to your associates, to the rabbis, and to the members of the Italian Jewish community. We hope that our more positive relationship in the renewed context of civil and religious liberty will lead us to cooperate for the good of all in the anticipation of the kingdom.