

**The International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee  
A Forty Year Retrospective**

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Paris, February 27 – March 2, 2011**

Cardinal Augustin Bea recalls in "The Church and the Jewish People" (London, Chapman, 1966) how on 18 September 1966 Pope John XXIII charged the newly formed Secretariat for Christian Unity with the task of addressing the relationship with the Jewish People.

As Cardinal Jorge Mejia has noted ("the Creation and Work of the Commission for Religions Relations with the Jews", in "The Catholic Church and the Jewish People", ed. Cunningham, Hofmann & Sievers; Fordham University Press, 2007), from that moment on, relations with Judaism were treated by the Catholic Church in a manner without parallel to any other religion. Placing the responsibility for relations with the Jewish People under the same authority dealing with relations with the rest of the Christian world affirmed the Church's unique relationship "with Judaism as distinct and separate from relations with other religions, despite the structure and thrust of the declaration *Nostra Aetate*".

It was that Office for Catholic-Jewish relations in the Secretariat for Christian Unity – to be succeeded in 1974 by the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews presided over by Cardinal Johannes Willebrands – which sought a representative Jewish body as an official interlocutor that would at least structurally unify the different Jewish bodies (competing for credit for the new emerging dialogue between the Church and the Jewish People) and would legitimately represent the diversity of contemporary Jewry.

Indeed establishing an umbrella agency brining the different Jewish organizations together in the form of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations was arguably one of the remarkable miracles that was initiated by the Catholic Church in modern times!

At the initial meeting that led to the formation of the International Catholic Jewish Liaison Committee, IJCIC was represented and made up of just five representatives – including the predominant persons of Gerhart Riegner, Marc Tannenbaum and Henry Siegman (the latter being the only participant of that meeting alive today).

This meeting in Rome produced a historic memorandum of understanding issued on December 23<sup>rd</sup> 1970, with a preamble which might well have difficulties if it were brought to IJCIC for approval today. It declares:-

"In the relationship between Catholics and Jews the concerns of both groups are religiously based but they extend over the whole complex of what people do wherever they live. A model of the practical development of this relationship must therefore be based on a structure which has religious faith as its premise. It must be so organized as to respect absolutely the integrity of both our faiths and it finds its justification in a shared responsibility based on biblical faith towards one another and towards the world."

The memorandum identified a major concern to be that of combating anti-Semitism through eliminating from educational materials and liturgy anything offensive and incompatible with the teachings of *Nostra Aetate*; and it committed the parties to promoting mutual understanding, in particular through education.

In this regard, the memorandum called for special attention to be given to the ways in which the relationship between religious community, people and land, are conceived in the Jewish and Christian traditions respectively.

In addition, the memorandum declared the focus of the ILC to be the promotion of justice and peace in the world, as well as of human freedom and dignity; the fight against poverty and racism and all forms of discrimination; the protection of human rights, both of individuals or groups; and in particular the promotion and safeguarding of religious liberty.

The ILC was also to focus on "ways in which Judaism and Christianity, as communities deriving from the biblical faith in one God as Creator, concerned with the fate of this world, can face together the problems besetting religion in the modern age." The memorandum suggested that "at a later stage studies might be undertaken of the common heritage of Jews and Christians in order to further the understanding both of each other and of their common responsibility to humanity and the world."

Not least of all, the memorandum declared that the purpose of the ILC was also to address Judaism and Christianity's relations with other world religions – especially Islam.

The preliminary meeting of the ILC recommended convening annually for the purpose of fostering mutual exchanges between the two faiths and encouraging exchange of information and advancing cooperation in areas of common concern and responsibility. Such annual meetings continued until 1985, but since 1990 have been held every two years..

The first actual meeting of the ILC accordingly took place the year after the preliminary meeting, and was held here in Paris in 1971.

Some of the goals of the memorandum of understanding were initially pursued vigorously. Despite the fact that the memorandum did not mention the State of Israel as such, the undertaking to explore "the ways in which the relationship between religious community and land are conceived" in the respective traditions, was the focus of the first substantive ILC thematic discussions that took place in Marseilles in 1972 and Antwerp in 1973. These set the stage for the repeated and ongoing call from IJCIC to the Holy See through the ILC, for official recognition of the State of Israel and for the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations.

Similarly the educational tasks were addressed in Madrid in 1978; in Regensburg in 1979; in Vatican City in 1998; and in New York in 2001.

While combating Antisemitism was a constant theme, it took a while before the ILC formally addressed the subject, which it did quite dramatically in 1990 in Prague. Cardinal Edward Cassidy's comment that the fact "that Antisemitism has found a

place in Christian thought and practice calls for an act of teshuvah (repentance) and of reconciliation on our part....." was not only contained in the concluding statement of the 13<sup>th</sup> ILC, but was also repeated by Pope John Paul II when he received ILC delegates later that year in Rome for a special celebratory meeting on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nostra Aetate. (Nevertheless interestingly, this phrase spoken by John Paul II, was omitted from the official published text of the Pope's remarks.) The subject of Antisemitism was pursued at the 1994 meeting in Jerusalem; and of course the subject featured prominently as well at the 1998 ILC in Rome which took place a week after the promulgation of "We Remember – A reflection on the Shoah".

Subjects that flowed from a shared ethical heritage and moral responsibility were addressed over the years including religious freedom; the challenges of secularism; the sanctity of life; human rights; youth and faith. The ILC also discussed and issued joint documents on the environment, the family, holy sites and education.

However a new stage developed in the 2004 and 2006 meetings in which ethical themes were not only addressed conceptually, but also were taken to a new dimension of joint cooperation. At the 2004 Buenos Aires meeting on Tzedek and Tzedakah, and at the Cape Town meeting on Dignifying the Divine Image – focusing on healthcare and the challenge of HIV/AIDS; Jewish and Catholic philanthropy and social services were brought together to become greater than the sum of their different parts and to cooperate in addressing the financial crisis in Latin America in the former; and at the latter, the challenges arising from the AIDS pandemic.

Interestingly enough, it was almost forty years before consideration was given to the recommendation of the 1970 memorandum of understanding that the ILC address Jewish and Christian relations with other religions – especially Islam. The trilateral meeting in Seville in December 2009 initiated by the ILC together with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, was the first step in this direction.

A critical dimension of the Jewish-Christian relationship, not specifically addressed in the memorandum of understanding, but courageously confronted at the 1977 ILC, was the subject of Mission and Witness – i.e. whether the Church should seek to proselytize among Jews.

The use of post factum editorial intervention to which I have made reference, perhaps reflecting some tension within the Vatican corridors themselves, was already evident in the wake of this meeting. The late Dr. Geoffrey Wigoder, a past-chairman of IJCIC noted that the remarkable presentation of Professor Tommaso Frederici had been endorsed by Cardinal Willebrands. However Fredericci's bottom line that the logical conclusion of Nostra Aetate must be to reject any attempt to call on Jews to accept the Christian faith, as they were already in a covenantal relationship with God – a position subsequently reiterated by the third President of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Cardinal Walter Kasper – was omitted from the official Vatican publication of Fredericci's text.

As we know, this question of the exact meaning of Nostra Aetate for Christology let alone for an understanding of the nature of the Divine Covenant with the Jewish People itself, remains a key debate within the Church with naturally profound

bearing on the bilateral relationship. Indeed it has been germane to a number of issues that have preoccupied the ILC over the years, not least of all and most recently in the matter of the prayer for the Jews in the Tridentine Latin liturgy for the Triduum.

This then brings me to some of the controversies and difficulties both in the bilateral relationship and within our respective bodies that have challenged the ILC over the years. The most heated of these have not surprisingly related directly or indirectly to the Shoah and the Second World War period.

I will not review all of these, but if I am not mistaken there have been two particularly difficult periods – in the late 1980's and the late 1990's.

Arguably the principle source of tension in the late eighties stemmed from the establishment of the Carmelite convent in Auschwitz and the reactions to it. This was compounded by the papal reception of Kurt Waldheim. The consequences of these tensions were both a hiatus in the meetings of the ILC, but also the Papal commitment to produce a document on the Church and the Shoah.

However these issues and the question of how most appropriately to address them also led to tensions within IJCIC. These compounded what some of the constituent members felt were unnecessary restrictions by the U.S. Orthodox members on the scope of the ILC's deliberations.

As a result, two of IJCIC's principal members – AJC and ADL – resigned from the consortium in 1989, and together with the American Jewish Congress formed the Council for International Interreligious Relations that declared its intention to partner with the Holy See in addressing all issues of mutual concern in a respectful manner, and also to pursue serious theological dialogue as well.

It was a mark of the standing that Dr. Gerhart Riegner had in Rome, that he – and arguably only he – was able to persuade the Holy See's Commission to abandon its intention to work with this new body and to affirm that IJCIC was and would remain the Vatican's only official Jewish partner, thus eventually leading to the return to IJCIC of AJC and ADL.

The eventual papal intervention in the Carmelite convent controversy, led to the wind down in that controversy and the ILC sought to overcome the negative fallout and misunderstandings by initiating the first ever ILC travel mission in 1991, specifically to central/eastern Europe, to Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary to meet with the leadership of both Catholic and Jewish Communities. The meetings in Poland included a memorial visit to Auschwitz/Birkenau.

However this visit was not simply born out of the desire to repair damaged bridges, but far more out of a recognition – highlighted by the Carmelite convent affair – of the widespread ignorance in Central and Eastern Europe of the work of the ILC and the achievements in Catholic-Jewish reconciliation over the preceding decades.

It was this same concern that led the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews to recommend holding the twentieth ILC in Budapest,

Hungary, in 2008, sensing a need to reinvigorate Catholic-Jewish relations in central and eastern Europe.

The second hiatus in the late eighties was attributed by Cardinal Cassidy, the then-president of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews – to what he described as "a bitter campaign of serious accusations against Pius XII" that he identified as coming from within the World Jewish Congress and determining IJCIC's approach which he described as "aggressive". The canonization of Edith Stein in 1998 further compounded the crisis. The Vatican's unwillingness to cooperate with a body that it saw as confrontational had an inevitable impact, and in late 1998 Cardinal Cassidy reported that the bilateral relationship with IJCIC had ceased, declaring the latter to no longer exist.

However IJCIC was reconstituted in November 2000 (now a body of some twelve members following on from the dissolution of the Synagogue Council of America some years beforehand), and under the leadership of Seymour Reich (who had also served some years previously as chairman) sought a way out of the confrontational impasse with the Holy See through the establishment together with the CRRJ of an International Catholic-Jewish Historical Commission. This promising initiative which started well, ended in dissolution and acrimony, with accusations and counter accusations. It became evident that there had been expectations that in the end could not be delivered. While these focused on the technicalities of access to the Vatican secret archives, they probably reflected the unbridgeable differences with regards to perceptions pertaining to the period of the Shoah. Nevertheless the ILC survived this crisis.

Of course the essence of this controversy remains and retains its combustibility for the bilateral relationship and the future of the ILC itself. While IJCIC has continued to call for open scholarly access to the Holy See's secret archives from the Shoah period; reassurances have come from Rome that ultimately this will be forthcoming. Nevertheless, it seems clear to me that this issue will remain one in which very different perspectives are maintained on each side and that the best we will be able to achieve is to agree to disagree.

In the meantime, in the early nineties, other dramatic developments in Catholic-Jewish relations occurred that fundamentally affected IJCIC's role and purpose and inevitably impacted on the ILC.

While both IJCIC and the CRRJ, in keeping with the original memorandum of understanding, had seen the challenge of combating Antisemitism as being central to the mandate of the ILC; IJCIC viewed the commitment to mutual respect as inextricably related to the State of Israel and saw it as its responsibility to lead the call for the establishment of bilateral relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel, using, as I have mentioned, the ILC meetings as a platform for this call. While the CRRJ reiterated that this matter was outside the purview of its competence – i.e. its mandate; it nevertheless agreed in due course to include this call in ILC concluding declarations.

The negotiations between the Holy See and the State of Israel following the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991 and the eventual signing of the Fundamental Agreement between the two at the end of 1993 leading to full bilateral relations, eliminated this matter from the ILC agenda; and naturally meant that there was no

longer any need for IJCIC to continue its previous role as advocate for the State of Israel which could now fully do this for itself. However the fact that the Fundamental Agreement included a joint commitment of the Holy See and the State of Israel to work together to combat Antisemitism and other forms of racism and intolerance, as well as to promote mutual understanding among nations, respect for human life and dignity, and to promote peaceful conflict resolution; meant that this bilateral relationship inevitably encroached on areas defined by the ILC as within its own purview and mandate.

Moreover with the historic visit of Pope John Paul II to Israel as part of his pilgrimage in the year 2000 – a visit substantially facilitated by the establishment of full bilateral relations – a formal interreligious dialogue was initiated by the Holy See with the Chief Rabbinate of Israel which was also conducted by the Vatican under the auspices of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.

This is not the place to dwell on the significance, limitations, strengths and weaknesses of this bilateral commission which I have addressed elsewhere. However regardless of people's likes or dislikes, there is no question that not only are the friendships between the members remarkable, but that the Vatican holds this bilateral commission in very high regard. (As reflected in Pope Benedict XVI's speeches during his papal visit to Israel in 2009 and on his visit to the Rome synagogue the following year.) Moreover this bilateral commission has also proved to be a most valuable channel for communication and advocacy as was evidenced in particular in the clarifications received both concerning the Latin Mass referred to before and the brief crisis in relations with the Vatican over the affair with Bishop Williamson and the Society of St. Pius X.

In addition, John Paul II's visit to Jerusalem highlighted the remarkable contribution of his pontificate to confronting the evil and challenge of renascent Antisemitism. Besides his designation of this bigotry as "a sin against God and man"; his liturgy of seeking forgiveness which became far more widely known as a result of the placing of his prayer at the Kotel during his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, both enshrined the commitment of the Holy See to combating Antisemitism all the more profoundly into the fabric of the Church and made this profoundly evident to the world at large.

All this meant that some prominent past aspects of the focus of the ILC (and especially for IJCIC) have lost their relevance to greater or lesser degrees.

This has made the field of social ethical cooperation; the expansion of engagement to other faith communities; and the development of Jewish and Catholic Emerging Leadership with its integration into the ILC that began in Budapest in 2008 leading to the gathering in Castelgondolfo in June 2009 and continuing now here in Paris; all the more critical to the métier of the ILC, which continues as a remarkable testament to the blessed transformation in our times of relations between the Catholic Church and the Jewish People.