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Va'era
January 11, 1975

THE VATICAN COMMISSION AND ITS OMISSION

Last week, the Catholic Church released the report of the "Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews," in implementation of the decision of the Second Vatican Council of 1965. Just yesterday, in a meeting between the Pope and a number of Jewish leaders, this document was given further, oral confirmation.

The reactions to the documents were more or less predictable. In Catholic and more assimilationist Jewish quarters, there was an expression of great satisfaction. The Orthodox "establishment" in Israel responded with outrage. IJCIC (the International Jewish Committee for Inter-religious Consultations) came out with a more balanced but, somewhat surprisingly, sharply annoyed reaction.

There are three major areas that ought to be discussed with regard to this development: anti-Semitism, the State of Israel, and purely religious relationships.

In considering the Vatican statement, which clearly and unambiguously rejects anti-Semitism, one must look at it, as it were, bifocally: from both a historical and a contemporary perspective.

Historically, this is unquestionably a most welcome development. The Church is clear, humane, and sympathetic in its attitude to Jews and in its contrition for the long history of anti-Semitism which has afflicted it. Compare it to close to 2000 years of religiously inspired anti-Semitism, and you appreciate that this kind of statement is indeed a water-shed. Who would have thought, a mere forty or fifty years ago, that the same church whose priests were regularly preaching anti-Semitic sermons at Easter and other occasions, would now disavow the same teaching of hatred?

And yet, history does not stop at any point; it includes contemporary life as well. And if we view this statement from a contemporary vantage, then we must remember that 35 to 30 years ago there occurred the most disgraceful and horrendous episode in the history of mankind, the Holocaust. From this Holocaust, no matter what the present Pope says about his former chief, Pope Pius, the Church emerged tainted and morally compromised. Maybe Pius did help save a few individual Jews here or there. But only Heaven knows how many thousands upon thousands of Jews owe their death to his passivity and indifference. No whitewash can ever make us forget or forgive the Pope of Silence.

Therefore, the statement against anti-Semitism by itself, as mere words, is no longer adequate. It is too late for that! At this stage of history, no statement can do, because the abhorrence of anti-Semitism by those historically guilty of it must now be expressed in the form of compensation.

What compensation do I have in mind? Simply this: to affirm forthrightly the right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel! Why specifically this form of "compensation?" Because of the rational and reasonable Jewish doctrine of מדה כנגד מדה, the principle of moral equivalence: the punishment must fit the crime, and the repentance must be appropriate to the sin. For the last eighteen centuries, the Church has pointed to the People of Israel as prodigals, as renegades, as deicides. They "proved" our "guilt" by pointing to us as "the wandering Jews," by our exile from the Land of Israel. They seized upon our separation from the Land to intensify their anti-Semitism. Hence, if they wish to atone for this heinous, age-old sin, then they must, once and for all, acknowledge our unquestioned right to return to that land.

And this, indeed, is one of the two points for which the Jewish groups have faulted the Vatican Commission: one, and error of commission, and the other, an error of omission.

The error of omission was: there was no mention of the State of Israel in the document. It is a most grievous and deplorable failure.

If I could overlook the role of the Church in World War II, I would be willing to dismiss the angry statements of Minister Raphael and Chief Rabbi Goren as extravagant over-reactions. But not now.

It is true, the Church has thorny political problems because of the pressure of the Arab countries, and the need for it not to antagonize them. I might add, as a member IJCIC who dealt with the Protestant groups, the World Council of Churches, that the Protestants are far worse in this respect. They are much more willing to "sell out" their relationship with Jews, and to forget their participation in the Holocaust, in order to win a few souls and make inroads in the Middle East.

But with all our sympathetic understanding for the Church's political problems, and they are many, simple justice cries out in the words with which God challenged Abel, the first fratricide in history, קול דמי אחיך צועקים אלי מן האדמה, "The voice of the blood of your brother calls out to me from the earth on which it was spilled." Oceans of Jewish blood call

out to the Catholic Church to atone for its sins in the only way open to it. And there is no answer...

The second area concerns an error of commission, its statement on religious relationships. The report asks for dialogue in the fullest sense. Yet the Church will not renounce its conversionist goals. It disguises it in a number of euphemisms: it calls upon the Church to continue to "preach," "witness," "teach." True, it insists that this be done with "the strictest respect for the religious liberty" of Jews. But still, the missionary element is not given up.

Moreover, with all its demands that it purge itself of the vicious distortions of the Humash (which it calls the "Old Testament"), the document implies that it, and by extrapolation all of Judaism, is inadequate without the "New Testament."

Jewish groups in the United States have responded rather petulantly: How is dialogue possible if one partner of the dialogue does not renounce his intention to convert the other?

I agree and I disagree with these Jewish groups. More precisely, because I agree, I disagree.

Yes, genuine dialogue is impossible if any one side seeks not to understand but to convert the other. But in this I disagree with my Jewish friends: they are upset, and I am not. I am not disturbed because I never approved of theological dialogue with other faiths!

Frankly, if the Catholic would ask me for my advice, I would tell them that they are wasting time and effort in trying to convert Jews. First of all, their success is extremely limited. The real danger of conversion to Jews comes from the evangelistic fundamentalist Protestant sects, from the Ashrams of various Oriental religions, and the heartless and soulless secularism which swallows up so many Jews. Furthermore, the Catholics have so much of a job to do in converting Christians to Christianity, thay they ought not to spend any more time and effort in trying to convert Jews to Christianity..... I have the same argument against Jews who constantly counsel us to undertake drives to proselytize non-Jews to Judaism: We have enough of a task in making Jews Jewish, that we have little time or energy or effort left for making non-Jews Jewish.

But, if the Catholic Church is evangelical, and if the belief of Catholics calls upon them to attempt to convert Jews -- without inquisitions and force and bribery and the exploitation of human misery -- that is their prerogative. We have no right to demand that they change their theology to accommodate us, even as we have every right and obligation to resist and to counter them on the same level as they make their efforts.

Similarly, they have a right to think whatever they want about the "Old Testament" -- and we assuredly shall deny any relationship between their scriptures and ours. We shall never "negotiate" towards a belief that the "Old Testament" is either illuminated, cancelled, or fulfilled by the "New Testament!"

Does this preclude religious dialogue? Yes, it does. But it does not preclude reciprocal human relations, respect, mutual efforts,

towards the goal of a humane society which will be based on the dignity of man, on justice, on compassion, on morality.

It is fascinating that the two major points we have been discussing, the Land of Israel and the Torah of Israel, are related to each other by a מסורה or tradition which applies to this morning's reading.

We read that in bringing the message of divine redemption to his enslaved brothers, Moses said on behalf of the Lord:
והבאתי אתכם אל הארץ ... ונתתי אותה לכם מורשה אני ה׳
"And I shall bring you to the Land.... And I shall give it to you as an inheritance, I am the Lord."

An old tradition relates the word מורשה, inheritance or heritage, in the verse just quoted, to the same word in the verse at the end of Deuteronomy: תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה קהילת יעקב
"Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob."

The same word מורשה appears in both verses. The two heritages, the Land of Israel and the Torah of Israel, are inextricably linked to each other.

Deny one, and most assuredly the other will be denied to you. Reject the relationship of the people to the Land, and there can be no Jewish religion -- Jews in the Diaspora must remember this. Reject the Torah of Israel, and the People will never remain in the Land -- and this is something the Jews in the State of Israel must understand.

Each of them, Land and Torah, is an inheritance of Israel and Israel alone. Non-Jews may visit and live in Israel, they may read and believe words of the Torah, but both the Land and the Torah give themselves wholely only to the People of Israel.

Interestingly, the Church too accepts this linkage that is implied in the tradition or מסורה. As I said before, the Church interpreted the loss of the Land of Israel, the end of independence, as the loss of that other "inheritance," the Torah and the chosenness of Israel. It interpreted exile from the Land as rejection by G-d. In our days, the equation reads as well in the other direction: the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, the return to the "inheritance" of the Land in our days, has created enormous theological problems for the Church, as their age-old attack on that other מורשה, the Torah, has begun to crumble!

So, despite the many welcome features of this Vatican statement, the old confrontation of Judaism and Chrisitianity remains unresolved.

We will not compromise our מורשה (inheritance) of the Land of Israel by surrendering the State which we won in blood and tears -- blood and tears necessitated to such a great extent by the stance of the Church. And we will never compromise the integrity of our other מורשה, that of the Torah. We are not interested in internationalizing Jerusalem, which the Vatican has long demanded.

And we are not interested in the common spiritual patrimony of our faiths, the "Judeo-Christian heritage," whether in prayer or in any other cultic experience, which the Vatican now suggests.

When the Pope asks for a dialogue between Judaism and Christianity, we must respectfully but firmly decline. When he asks for a dialogue between Jews and Christians, we can respond that for the purpose of social goals, we accept with alacrity. Jews and Christians can and should have civilized and humane relations. They should work side by side to correct the ills of the world, to build a good society -- without blurring profound religious differences and distinctions.

We affirm that our twin heritage, our double מורשה, will retain our undiminished commitment. What we receive from the past, we will pass on to our children and children's chidren -- to the end of time.

It is our confidence that the Christian world, which challenges our right to either or both of these "inheritances," will eventually concede our unimpeachable claim to both -- when the exile will have come to an end, when the redemption will have come, through משיח צדקנו our righteous Messiah.