

NCS-USCCB MEETING OCTOBER 15-16, 2012

The semi-annual consultation between the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Council of Synagogues took place at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore from October 15-16. The topic was; "Religion in the Public Square."

Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta chaired the first session which was addressed by the eminent Washington attorney, Nathan Lewin. Mr. Lewin reflected on the 28 cases he has argued before the US Supreme Court mostly on issues of church and state and the nature and role of religion in American society. Mr. Lewin distinguished between strictly legal questions of religion in the public square such as the right of an Orthodox Jew to wear a yarmulke while in military service, and the policy aspects of such cases, namely, whether we spread the word to other faith groups or only consider our own parochial interests in such matters. Mr. Lewin took a position that is not popular in the general Jewish community by defending the right of persons to display a Menorah or other religious symbols on public property provided the government does not endorse one religion over another. He wondered whether we have been too zealous in outlawing prayer in the public schools at the start of the day and he endorsed the idea of discussing religions dispassionately in public schools and other public venues. He further endorsed the notion of government payment to teachers in parochial schools who teach secular subjects. As to the government's latest attempts to dictate policies to hospital and other health providers under Catholic jurisdiction, Lewin opposed any government attempt to coerce religious institutions that violate the consciences of such institutions in order to receive federal grants

Dr. Stephen Colecchi of the USCCB'S Office of International Justice, Peace, and Human Development responded to Lewin's presentation citing Pope Benedict XVI who has warned of the twin dangers of creeping secularism and the concurrent danger of violent religion extremism. Colecchi cautioned all to be wary of the danger of the tyranny of the majority and he urged that religion's role in society is to appeal to and mobilize public conscience and inject reason in the public square. He reminded the listeners that religion played key roles in battling apartheid in South Africa as well as racism in America, but always via non-violent means. He endorsed the voucher system for schools while cautioning against proselytizing or engaging in religious activities in public schools. As to the role of bishops and priests in public elections, they may not endorse any candidates for office while at the same time it is their duty to seek to develop the consciences of public officials. We are impoverishing the public square, he argued, when we strip out our religious values entirely.

Rabbi David Straus of the Main Line Reform Temple in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, chaired the evening session. Professor Robert Destro of the Law School of Catholic University in Washington, DC, stated that religious freedom is the cornerstone of human rights. He noted that religion is mentioned only twice in the Constitution and that equal citizenship, irrespective of religious persuasion, is at the bottom of the Constitution. He noted James Madison's view about "tax payer standing," suggesting that the government should not reach into the tax payer's pocket to pay for services such as birth control because one's sex life is an individual's business and his or her right to privacy and should not be subject to governmental intrusion. He fears that this might just

be the beginning of government intrusions and that down the road, it might begin to dictate assisted suicide.

Richard Foltin, Director of the National and Legislative Affairs of the American Jewish Committee, responded arguing that there is no such thing as “the naked public square” and he drew a distinction between an “avowedly secular state” as opposed to a “secular state.” He praised the blessings of separation of church and state, noting that the state is not hostile to religion in America but that it is truly neutral. “There must be a line we cannot cross lest we impose our precepts on others.” He opposed the use of public dollars for private and parochial schools and warned that people may not use the power of the state to coerce others to their beliefs.

Bishop Dennis Madden of Baltimore chaired the Tuesday session which began with study sessions on the concept of covenant in Jewish and Catholic traditions. Rabbi David Sandmel, Crown Ryan Professor of Jewish Studies at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, and Professor Robert Miller, Professor of Old Testament at the Catholic University in Washington, taught pertinent texts on the subject and how each faith tradition interprets those key texts which are cornerstones of our respective faiths.

At the business session, Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal, director of the National Council of Synagogues, reported on the excellent progress in concluding the Fundamental Agreement between the State of Israel and the Vatican. He also reported on the efforts of the hate crimes unit of the Israeli police who are seeking to apprehend the few fanatical bigots who have perpetrated attacks on Christian churches and Muslim mosques and he expressed the group’s anguish over these painful episodes, expressing the hope that the perpetrators will be brought to justice and that the Ministry of Education will monitor and control curricula and textbooks in Israeli schools to eliminate the teaching of contempt for other faith groups.

Father Dennis McManus of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and Georgetown University noted that the Vatican Archives from the years of Pope Pius XII will shortly be opened with the assistance of scholars from Israel’s Yad Vashem Institute. He also reported that the talks between the Holy See and the Pope Pius X Society have proved fruitless because the Society refuses to accept the norms laid down in Vatican II including *Nostra Aetate*. No further talks are planned.