

A CONFERENCE MARKING THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF *NOSTRA AETATE* AT THE GREGORIAN PONTIFICAL UNIVERSITY IN ROME OCTOBER 26-28, 2015

Over 350 delegates from some 35 countries representing various religions including Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Judaism, Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism and others attended a remarkable conference at the Gregorian University in Rome, the Vatican's Institute, from October 26-28, 2015. Speakers from all over the world described the impact of the historic document, *Nostra Aetate*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965, as the great achievement of the historic Ecumenical Council Vatican II from 1962-1965. The three Jewish speakers were Rabbi David Rosen of the American Jewish Committee, Professor Daniel Sperber of Bar-Ilan University, and Roman Chief Rabbi Riccardo Di Segni.

I shall try to summarize some of the highlights of the various presentations I was privileged to hear.

The Conference opened on Monday with welcomes from leaders of the Gregorian and Cardinals Kurt Koch and Jean-Louis Tauran, followed by a film on the achievements of the Second Vatican Council. A reception for the delegates followed.

Rev. Fr. Paul Gilbert cautioned that when technology seeks to dominate science, it destroys science and religion. Religion seeks to stimulate discernment. Professor Bruno Costacura observed that in the Bible, the human being is presented in dialogue. Justice should always accompany dialogue and dialogue allows for signs of hope in this world. Weapons of love will ultimately win out, for peace is the goal of human dialogue.

Imam Izzeddine Elzir stressed Islam's emphasis on peace for without peace we have chaos and hatred. Islam, he argued, prohibits terrorism and insists we must protect and honor life and protect against arrogance and power, seek to curb the causes of conflict and overcome extremism. Rabbi David Rosen decried the fact that religion seems to be the chief source of violence these days. He argued that interfaith relations can play a central role in fostering hospitality to the "other." We must be open to diversity and see the Divine in other peoples. *Nostra Aetate* represents a radical reversal of the past and an example of how no relationship is beyond repair. We need to cultivate a "theology of partnership" to promote social welfare, an end to religious-based violence and foster peace.

Dr. Alberto Quattrucci insisted that religion must reckon with world violence, stressing that "no war is a holy war." The spirit of the interfaith prayer meetings at Assisi encouraged by Pope John Paul II is the answer to religious violence. Social justice cannot be achieved through violence (Pope John Paul II). Religion itself is not violent; it is corrupted by a small group of religious extremists found in all religions. Religious leaders should utilize publicity and social media (e.g., Facebook) to expose the fraud of religious extremism and to offer the correct interpretation of religious traditions that refute violent means.

Rev. Fr. Christian Rutishauser stressed that *Nostra Aetate* was the first positive approach to other religions in history. Judaism was always part of Christianity but Pope John Paul II stressed that Judaism is intrinsic to Christianity. When some challenged whether Vatican II's pronouncements were legitimate continuities with Christian teachings, Pope Benedict XVI replied affirmatively: they are part of the Christian faith. Among the challenges to today's religions are: Foster personal excellence and human rights and foster interreligious competence; battle secularism; foster human rights; create a new political philosophy and develop a theology of religion. Professor Daniel Sperber called for "face- to- face relationships rather than "side- by- side relationships." He defined our most existential challenge to be *tikkun ha-olam*—the repair of the world and improvement of society, recognizing that we seek the Divine via different paths.

Dr. Rasoul Rasoulipour of Iran enumerated five great challenges to religion: Literalism, fear of losing identity, fear of secularism, selfishness and the politicization of religion and proselytizing. We need freedom of conscience, he insisted, and the implementation of the Quran's call for no

compulsion in religion (Quran 2:256). We can no longer follow the view of Shariah law that apostasy is a capital offense. Swami Chidananda urged, "Truth is one: we can learn of it and speak of it in many ways." Likewise, God is one—but there are many versions of how to approach the Divine. Hinduism has always fostered freedom of expression. Religion must awaken all organizations to battle terrorism and he expressed he hope that the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* will maintain good fellowship among the nations.

On Tuesday morning, Pope Francis welcomed the delegates in an impressive and memorable public reception on the plaza in front of St. Peter's in the Vatican before thousands of ecstatic pilgrims. He extolled the blessings brought by *Nostra Aetate* and welcomed each delegate personally, shaking their hands and blessing their efforts. I said a few words in Italian and presented him with a special white leather bound copy of my recent book, *A Jubilee for All Time: The Copernican Revolution in Christian-Jewish Relations*, which he accepted, and said simply to me, "Pray for me." It was a moving and memorable moment we shall all cherish, I am certain.

In the session that followed the audience, Dr. Gurmohan Singh Walia noted that "education begins at conception." Dr. Nayla Tabbara stressed that education must teach, "What does the other think of me? Where do we see the other?" Rabbi Di Segni noted that in Judaism, education is a fundamental religious duty. Samoan Pratibha Pragya recorded the fact that *Nostra Aetate* has brought us all together: in listening we assimilate truths.

The closing session on Wednesday afternoon was addressed by Cardinal Pietro Parolin who analyzed the meaning of shalom. Peace, he stated is the duty of the Church and all lovers of peace. Education for peace is more urgent than ever these days and depends on the deep involvement of human conscience (Jacques Maritain). Pope John Paul II instituted Assisi Day (1986) that allowed all to experience the spirit of God from various religious vantages. It became an icon of peace between faiths and still brings us the fruits of peace today. Also, we must abolish all sources of discord and war. We must defend the freedom of conscience, respect the rights of all to exist, honor justice and freedom, and allow the minorities to be bridges between ethnic majorities. No political community has the right to use force or create tyranny. The best policy is to allow people to become themselves. Peace resides in the force of moral law. *Pacem in terris* articulated this position and the popes, including John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI as well as Pope Francis have all stressed the importance of education for peace for if "the of the heart is dedicated to peace, this will lead to peace." We must promote texts and education for peace and universal rights and the spirit of brotherhood for all: men and women, poor and illiterate. We must recover the centrality of the human being; customize training for young and old; recover the community responsibility for education for all; accept diversity and freedom of expression; expand our horizon of brotherhood; educate in parochial schools for peace and humanistic values. Peace requires "struggle, suffering, and sacrifice"—it is a hard goal to reach, "but you can never reach it unless you take the first steps," he concluded.

It was a privilege and an honor to have participated in this remarkable event of such universal importance for all faith groups and my wife and I shall not forget the enriching experience.

Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal