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Reflection and dialogue with Judaism

The 24TH Annual Celebration of the Catholic Church's day. Well attended study sessions in cities all over Italy: an established tradition, an enthusiastic attendance

Lisa Palmieri Billig

Rome

The inestimable contributions and commitments of individuals in transforming history are often forgotten when the newness of events become ordinary routine and are taken for granted. Yet the steps that led to our present reality are an essential component for understanding the subject matter before us.

We must therefore express due gratitude to the inspired vision of the late Auxiliary Bishop of Rome, monsignor Clemente Riva, who led the Italian Bishops Conference (CEI) in 1989 to adopt an annual "Day for Reflection and Dialogue with Judaism" 1990 was its first national edition, and in 1991 upon monsignor Riva's proposal to the special assembly of the European Synod of Bishops, several European countries followed suite.

The date of January 17 was chosen because it introduces a week of ecumenical prayer for the Unity of Christians - a vision of Judaism as the ineradicable root of the Christian faith, as expressed in the structural organization of many Church bodies, first and foremost of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews which is housed within the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Clemente Riva, who was also a key figure in the invention and planning of John Paul II's historic visit to Rome's Grand Synagogue, put it this way. "Judaism is Revelation for Christians too. The sacred history of the Hebrew Bible is sacred history for us too. Above all it is a living relationship with the living, contemporary Jewish People – a relationship that permits us, Jews and Christians together, to delve ever deeper into the meaning of Revelation, of the Oneness of God, of the values and messages contained in the Hebrew Bible."

Another shining light (faro) of the original pioneers who totally transformed relations between the Catholic Church and the Jewish People is Prof. Maria Vingiani, the Catholic theologian who arranged the famous encounter between Holocaust survivor Jules Isaac and John XXIII, igniting the spark that gave substance to the vision of an Ecumenical Council that would produce the historical document, "Nostra Aetate" (referred to, before the Council, as "the document on the Jews"). In a telephone interview with Adelina Bartolomei on the 30th anniversary of the foundation of the Jewish – Christian Friendship Association of Rome last November, Prof. Vingiani recalled that before his passing, Pope John XXIII left a note for his bishops to review Catholic doctrine on Jews and Judaism in order to "res-establish the truth". She said, "It is absolutely necessary that the basis of dialogue amongst Christians be the rediscovery of the Jewish foundation. First comes roots, second comes Christ. Christians alone are nothing. Christ is first and foremost entirely Jewish. 2000 years of errors have been a tragedy for Israel but also a tragedy for all of humanity."

This year, after six consecutive years devoted to the Ten Commandments, the 24th annual Day for Dialogue with Judaism is tackling with "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (La settima parola, non commettere adulterio). In large and small cities and towns all over Italy, rabbis and priests

are sharing platforms with their respectful, respective interpretations of the deeper meaning and application of this Commandment. Rome, Milan, Turin, Assisi, Perugia, Trani, Palermo, Siracusa, Savona, Faenza – to name but those that advertised most profusely – are all hosting well-attended study sessions organized by the Italian Bishops Conference (CEI), local dioceses, Pontifical universities, Jewish-Christian Friendship associations and Catholic community centers. Worth noting, is that cities such as Trani, Palermo, Siracusa have small but growing and flourishing Jewish communities for the first time since the Inquisition.

As usual, authoritative Guidelines for study of the topic have been provided by the President of the Italian Rabbinical Assembly, Elia Enrico Richetti and the President of the Episcopal Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue of the CEI, Mansueto Bianchi (and can be found on Internet).

The key to the Jewish interpretation which stresses holiness is described thus by Rabbi Richetti. Referring to the story of the Creation of humankind in the beginning of the Hebrew Bible, he continues "...the holiness of the Wedding Agreement and the consequently unique and exclusive relationship – expressed by the perfect sexual intimacy between bride and groom -- finds a more universal, noble and elevated parallel in the action of the One God, Lord and Creator, and reaches its apex in the vocation of holiness requested of his People by God, the Savior of Israel, whose salvation is extended from generation to generation. Therefore, also the other blessings are often interpreted symbolically in terms of marriage, as in the case of the Sabbath, greeted as a bride according to the Jewish liturgy of the mystic hymn 'Lechà Dodi' by Salomone Alkabez: 'Come my beloved, let us go towards the Bride, let us greet the arrival of the Sabbath'. Creation, the Wedding Agreement, the Covenant of Salvation and liturgic celebration are united from the beginning, in the first page of the Bible."

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In addition to dialogue, common pathways

Amicizia ebraico-cristiana

The Day of the Catholic Church's Dialogue with Judaism . The 23rd year of a nationwide event that has rooted itself within the Italian tradition

Lisa Palmieri Billig

Rome

Since 1990, on January 17 of every year, Catholic churches, theological institutes and Jewish-Catholic Friendship associations all over Italy program events pertaining to the Jewish-Catholic religious dialogue. This date immediately precedes the annual week of ecumenical prayer for Christian Unity.

The temporal proximity is no accident. Ever since the promulgation of the Vatican II document, "Nostra Aetate", Judaism has been recognized as containing the roots of Christianity, a living and contemporary "elder brother" in faith, vital to Christianity. For these identical reasons the "Commission for Religious Relations with Jews" is housed within the Pontifical Council for promoting Christian Unity – plus, of course, the historical role of the Council's first president, Cardinal Agostino Bea, in promoting "the document on the Jews" during the Council.

This temporal, physical, historical closeness may slip into the terrain of ambiguity, when, on the Jewish side, fears of the return of Catholic proselytism arise and interfere temporarily with the

flow of dialogue. This happened in 2009 when the Italian rabbinate annulled its participation in the January 17 encounters in protest over the rewritten Latin Good Friday “Prayer for the Conversion of the Jews” published as part of the resuscitated Tridentine mass missal. Peace was restored between leaders of the two religions after letters between the Vatican Secretariat of State and Israel’s Chief Rabbinate were exchanged, and the “Osservatore Romano” published explanatory articles by Cardinal Walter Kasper and Fr. Norbert Hofmann, respectively President and Secretary of the Commission, specifying that Catholic “hopes” for Jewish conversion to Christianity are “eschatological”, and regard only the end of times rather than the here and now.

Since the first brotherly colloquium in 1990 by the Italian Bishops Conference (Cei) at the Campitelli Parish Church near Rome’s ancient ghetto, where Rome’s former Chief Rabbi, Elio Toaff, and the former Auxiliary Bishop of Rome, Msgr. Clemente Riva (of blessed memory), met to discuss commonalities and concerns, attempting to forge a new, creative relationship between Judaism and Christianity, this “Day of Dialogue” has spread all over Italy. Today the leaders and participants in the dialogue together confront serious theological discussions, often touching on important issues of the times.

After covering the first five of the ten commandments in the past five years, the theme this year is “Thou shalt not kill” (or “Thou shalt not murder”, which perhaps better expresses the Hebrew word) – the sixth commandment.

Guidelines for the contents are the result of a cooperative effort between Mansueto Bianchi, President of the Italian Bishops Conference’s Episcopal Commission for Ecumenism and Elia Enrico Richetti, President of the Assembly of Italian Rabbis, and can be consulted on the internet site of the Cei.

To give a brief panorama of some of the highlights of the day without listing the numerous other encounters across the country: in Rome, at the Pontifical Lateran University Rome’s Chief Rabbi, Dr. Riccardo Di Segni, will speak together with Prof. Mauro Cozzoli. The discussion will be presided over by The President of the Diocese’s Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue, Bishop Benedetto Tuzia; in Viterbo at the St. Peter’s Theological Institute, Marco Cossuto Morelli, Vice President of the Rome Jewish-Christian Friendship Association, will speak together with Professor Maria Brutti; In San Vito dei Normanni the Benedictine Oblate Sisters Community together with the Diocese’s Office for Ecumenism and Dialogue will welcome the presentations of Prof. Daniela Piattelli and Don Lorenzo Elia, moderated by Dr. Giovanni Morelli; in Assisi, the historic center for interreligious relations a dialogue will take place in the Bishop’s Residence (Vescovado) between Fr. Giulio Michelini (ofm) and Lisa Palmieri-Billig (AJC Liaison to the Holy See).

The Naples Christian-Jewish Friendship Association instead, will turn to the common and universal language of music to celebrate the day by inviting a traditional Klezmer band to entertain (and inspire) its members.

The Benedictine Camaldoli sisters in Rome had a head start on the celebrations by holding a colloquium in their beautiful convent in the Aventine section of Rome on Sunday, January 15, organized by the Rome Jewish Christian Friendship Association (Adelina Bartolomei, President) and the SIAE Ecumenical Society (Stefano Ercole, President). Professor Joseph Sievers of the Pontifical Biblical Institute and Rabbi Roberto Colombo, on common agreement presented an in-depth, scholarly and morally moving interpretation of scriptural texts on a basic premise – the prohibition of murder pertains not only to physical annihilation, but applies to the murder of

man's freedom as well. The sixth commandment, said Rabbi Colombo, is a mirror image of the first commandment of the Jewish Bible: "I am the Lord they God" is at the top of the first five, while "Thou shalt not kill" is at the top of the second five. The divine spirit in every human being can be killed, is killed today, by suppressing the Word, by authoritarian impediments to free expression of the soul.

Rabbi Colombo used Talmudic commentaries to interpret Biblical texts that forbid the violence committed by suffocating the words of others, or by using words to harm the good name of others through offensive gossip, or by not using words to save the lives of others ("failing to use words can kill"). Prof. Sievers recalled that the ancient Hebrew Pirke Avot text ("Sayings of the Fathers") states that whoever shames another in public ("makes his face turn white") has no place in the world to come. He spoke about the harm done by ire, which can lead to murder (as in Cain and Abel, the Bible's first fratricide). "Verbal aggressiveness by parents, Prof. Siever noted, causes even more permanent harm to children than physical punishment, while verbal defamation (racism, anti-Semitism) is the first step towards physical annihilation."

In just ten days, another commemoration will follow as a kind of unplanned sequence to the Church's Day of Dialogue with Judaism. January 27, the Day of Memory, marks the liberation of Auschwitz. What more poignant – and tragic – illustration of the consequences of not heeding the Sixth Commandment: "Thou shalt not kill"?