

MEETING BETWEEN THE US CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
ECUMENICAL AND INTERFAITH COMMITTEE AND THE NATIONAL
COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES

ST. MARY'S SEMINARY, BALTIMORE MD OCTOBER 21-22

Twenty-one Catholic priests and rabbis attended the semi-annual meeting between the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Council of Synagogues at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, Maryland from October 21-22. The topic was: "What do we Teach About Other faiths in our Seminaries." Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta presided over the Monday session. The two presenters were Rabbi Michael J. Cook, professor of Judeo-Christian studies at the Hebrew Union College and Father John Crossin, executive director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Professor Cook reported that Hebrew Union College is the only seminary requiring all its students to take at least one course in technical competence in the New Testament. He indicated that four other courses are offered as electives. The goals are to enable the students to be familiar with the New Testament; to understand the homiletical implications of Christian beliefs and history; to preach and teach out of a knowledge of the Christian faith and beliefs; to be equipped to speak publically and in the various media on issues of importance to both faith; and to handle interfaith issues and conflicts that might crop up. He noted that many of the students at the Hebrew Union College seeking a Ph.D. degree are Christians and this is a positive development in interreligious relations. He stressed that it is "an absurdity" that Jews and especially rabbis are ignorant of the New Testament and he also expressed concern that not enough Christians and Jews are as familiar with *Nostra Aetate* and other recent Church pronouncements on the Jews as they ought to be.

Father Crossin reported on a survey conducted by CARA—Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. The question was: "Do you have a program on ecumenism in your parish? Do you have any outreach to our Jewish sisters and brothers?" This is sent yearly and 80% indicated that they do offer some courses in Catholic-Jewish relations—all as a result of *Nostra Aetate* and the teachings of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. In the wake of *Nostra Aetate*, seminaries are much more aware of the Jewishness of Jesus. Professors of homiletics are explicitly cautioned to instruct students to speak respectfully of Jews and avoid any anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic sentiments. Over 40% of seminaries teach ecumenism and dealings with other faiths such as Judaism, but the rest do not require such courses. The websites contain the relevant documents that emerged from Vatican II and the latest Catechism of the Catholic Faith as well as the volume, *Preaching the Faith*, make it clear that respectful preaching and teaching about Judaism is expected of Catholics. Some seminaries report that they make regular visits to nearby synagogues, participate in Holocaust memorial programs, and maintain individual contact with other seminary leaders. But not enough seminaries require their student to go and visit other religious institutions as part of their training. There is great need in South America and Africa for materials on other faiths. On the other hand, there are about 40

Catholic-Jewish Centers in Catholic Universities throughout the nation and deacons do meet with rabbis and Jewish leaders.

The evening was filled with breakout sessions designed to deepen the reactions to the two presentations followed by reports of those sessions to the plenum. Several reported that their groups stressed the need to require all seminarians to learn about other faiths and to visit the various houses of worship. We need to talk to the heads or rectors of such seminaries about these courses. It would be worth approaching major donors to fund such courses or seminars in the seminaries. Another possibility is to take advantage of nearby university course in other religions. A guest seminarian from JTS noted that the seminary students do get together with students at other seminaries. A social hour followed.

Rabbi David Straus of The Mainline Reform Temple in Philadelphia chaired the Tuesday session. The first hours were devoted to the study of sacred texts on repentance. Father David Michael of St. Joseph's Parish in Needham, Massachusetts, taught texts from the Gospels on the power of repentance: *metanoia*, as the Greek puts it. Conversion means turning away from sin and the acceptance of the way of the Gospels. The Church is the means of conversion via prayers, sacraments, fasting and alms-giving. This is the way to a change of heart—repentance. He noted that Pope Francis I is trying to turn the Church around to become more accessible to the people, in accord with his personal style of leadership. He seeks a radical reshaping of the workings of the Church so that it is a Church for the poor, that it places greater emphasis on the person with greater emphasis on the pronouncements and proclamations of Jesus, that it devotes itself to healing the wounds and growing nearer to the people while entering dialogue with the world.

Rabbi A. Nathan Abramowitz, lecturer in Jewish Studies at Georgetown University, taught classical texts on *teshuvah*, literally, turning, returning, repentance, from the Bible, and especially from Maimonides *Code of Jewish Law* in the section dealing with repentance. He discussed the six steps Maimonides prescribed for proper and effective *teshuvah*. He noted that Solomon Schechter, the famous Jewish theologian of the early 20th century, had stressed that *teshuvah* is critical to Jewish theology because when we sin, we deny personal responsibility and that is unacceptable in Judaism.

A business session followed. Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal reported on progress in negotiations over the Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Vatican. He also noted that the new bias crime squad of Israeli police had apprehended four teenagers in a Christian cemetery in Jerusalem and 14 other teens who are members of the so-called "price tag gang" and have been responsible for defacing and painting slogans on Christian churches and monasteries. They will be charged as teenagers but there is not yet adequate legislation in Israel to punish teens who have committed property hate crimes.

Rabbi Alvin Berkun reported on the recent IJCIC meeting in Madrid. It was very fruitful and worthwhile. He also noted that Rabbi Skorka of Buenos Aires (a good friend of Pope Francis I) will be visiting a number of Jewish institution in America.

Archbishop Gregory announced that he will be stepping down as co-chair of the joint NCS-USCCB committee after five years. He indicated that New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan will be returning to the post as the Catholic chairman.

We need to set a date for a May meeting, presumably in New York City. Among the suggested topics were: Persecution of Christians; the rise of antisemitism in Europe. Also, Bishop Denis Madden and others suggested that we might set up an ongoing practical project that fosters joint understanding between the faith groups. Several noted that we might consider plans for celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*. There will be a conference on that subject at Catholic University in May of 2015, noted Father John Crossin. Rabbi Rosenthal added that he is editing a new volume to mark the 50th of *Nostra Aetate* and that 18 contributions are already in hand including some from those present at our meeting. Finally, a suggestion was made that we help formulate a curriculum for teaching *Nostra Aetate* and that we could use some bibliography of yesterday's and today's presentations.