

MEETING BETWEEN THE NCS AND THE USCCB
DECEMBER 14, 2015 AT HEBREW UNION COLLEGE, NEW YORK CITY

Thirty-one delegates attended the semi-annual meeting between the National Council of Synagogues and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops on December 14 at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City. The sessions were chaired by Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan and Rabbi David Straus.

Rabbi Aaron Panken, President of HUC-JIR, welcomed the delegates and discussed the meaning of the phrase, “the arc of history bends towards justice” and the significance of Hanukkah as both the festival of lights as well as the festival marking the successful struggle of the Maccabees for religious freedom.

The morning presentation, chaired by Rabbi Straus, featured Rabbi Steven Gutow, who heads the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. Rabbi Gutow described the structure of American Judaism, analyzing the various religious movements and their development, as well as a brief description of the secular organizations. He described briefly how the Talmud records the open debates of varied and often contradictory schools of thought, the developments of Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewry in America, the impact of the Emancipation era on Judaism and the development of the liberal branches of Judaism, including Reform, Conservative Judaism and Reconstructionism. He noted that all American synagogues were originally Orthodox until 1824 when, in Charleston, S.C., the first Reform Temple opened its doors. The movement really began to flourish after the 1840s and then formally organized in the 1870s, much as a result of the influx of German Jews to these shores, and founded its seminary, the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. The Reform movement was open to modern thought and critical thinking, changes in liturgy and rituals, (e.g., the deletion of kosher laws, the discarding of a *talit* and head covering at worship, etc.) and other radical steps. But Reform Judaism has in more recent days restored many of those discarded rituals as it is once more reforming itself. It is the first Jewish group to ordain female rabbis and today it is the largest of the religious Jewish groups in America (over 35%) with 1.5 million members and 900 congregations.

Conservative Judaism is a more traditional and moderate school of thought. In 1886 it established its first seminary, The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City and its United Synagogue in 1903. Heavily influenced by the East European immigration, it accepted the rule of Jewish law while at the same time affirming the need to adjust and reinterpret as the modern times required. It was the largest movement in religious Jewry (40% by 1990) but has been declining of late and according to the Pew study, now encompass 18% of American Jewry.

Orthodox Judaism was present in America from the very beginnings and all synagogues were Orthodox until 1824. The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations was founded in 1898 and in its heyday, numbered almost 1,000 congregations. Orthodoxy officially espouses the view that no change in Jewish law (*halakhah*) is permitted and no adjustments to comport with the liberal American spirit. After the second World War, a large influx of ultra-Orthodox to America changed the face of American Orthodoxy and hasidic groups such as Satmar and Lubavitch made their presence felt and strengthened a sense of isolation of the Orthodox from other streams as well as the mainstream of America. They are deeply committed to the entire written and oral Torah. Orthodoxy makes up about 10% of American Jewry.

The Reconstructionist movement split off from the Conservative movement and is the creation of Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, who taught for many years at the Jewish Theological Seminary. It propounds a naturalistic notion of God, endorses the idea of individual autonomy in observance of *mitzvot*, and stresses that the past has a vote but not a veto. Beginning in the 1920s, it created the Bat Mitzvah ceremony for girls and has ordained female and gay and lesbian rabbis. Today, there are about 100 Reconstructionist congregations in America.

Rabbi Gutow briefly mentioned other minor religious groups as well as the major secular organizations including the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League. But a

large percentage of American Jews (perhaps 20%) do not believe in God and many of the young cohort are not affiliated with synagogues (so-called, “nones”) who nevertheless see themselves a part of the Jewish people. At the same time, the Orthodox are growing due to their high birthrate. The fact that Jews do not have a pope explains the wide varieties of Judaism these days. Monsignor Robert Stern rejoined that Catholicism is not as monolithic as one might believe and Christianity is really very varied.

At the second morning session, Bishop James Massa described the recent visit of Pope Francis to New York City on September 25. The meeting at the September 11 Memorial was deeply moving and various religious bodies participated. The model for multi-faith prayers set by Saint Pope John Paul II at Assisi was emulated and all present were deeply affected by the prayers and songs. Rabbi David Sandmel reported that while the Pope’s visit was not focused on the Jewish community, he actually quoted from the Yom Kippur liturgy. In his address to Congress, he referred to Moses and made positive mention of the importance of the Mosaic law. His visit to St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia included the highly significant gesture of the visit to the new statue of Synagogue and Church commissioned by the University. Rabbi Noam Marans added his observation at how moving and emotional was the impact of his visit on various religious and political groups. Rabbi Wayne Franklin agreed that the interfaith prayer for all faiths was deeply impressive.

Professor Adam Gregerman of St. Joseph’s University showed pictures of the classical anti-Jewish motifs in the statuary *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga* of the Strasbourg and Notre Dame Cathedrals. He then displayed the new statue executed for St. Joseph’s by sculptor Josh Kaufman depicting the two faiths studying the Torah and the New Testament respectively. The sight of Pope Francis blessing the new statue was particularly powerful.

Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal reported on the Conference he and his wife attended at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome from October 26-28 to mark the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*. He reported that almost 400 people from some 35 different countries and every religious faith groups attended. The lectures were delivered by scholars from all over the world. The audience with Pope Francis at the St. Peter’s Basilica on October 27 was both moving and spiritually elevating. He had the privilege of presenting his recent volume, *A Jubilee for All Time* to the Pontiff who responded simply and movingly, “Pray for me.”

After lunch, Cardinal Dolan chaired the session and welcomed the several new members including several bishops. He then introduced Ilan Sztulman, Minister for Public Diplomacy, of the Israeli Embassy in Washington, and congratulated him at his new appointment as Ambassador of Israel to Argentina. Minister Sztulman observed that since the Vatican recognized Palestine as a state, the discussions on the Fundamental Agreement between the Vatican and Israel have been suspended since Israel does not recognize a Palestinian state, although teams are meeting privately. Remaining problems including taxation of hotels owned by the Church; the parking lot near David’s Tomb; and other complications that affect other religious groups such as the Cremisan Monastery and the Beit Jala legal suit to tear down the security fence. He described the wave of terrorist attacks (2,000 instances in 2015 thus far). At the same time, there have been 14 attacks by Jewish terrorists against Arabs. The Prime Minister and President have severely condemned these actions. In the last few months, 30 Jews and five Arabs have fallen victim to terrorist acts. Who are these few Jewish terrorists? They are a small group of young school dropouts, and Kahane followers who refuse to talk to the police, who have even attacked Jewish military positions and soldiers, and are disaffected outcasts who actually oppose the existence of the State of Israel. Sixty Jews are in jail now under “administrative detention.” Two are in jail, convicted for attacks on churches and 54 are forbidden from visiting the West Bank. It is a very difficult problem and the few who are causing these unfortunate episodes are stubbornly refusing to confess. Still, the Christian community in Israel is the only Christian group in the Middle East that is growing in numbers.

The second half of the afternoon sessions was devoted to a description of three new documents on Jewish-Christian relations. Rabbi David Sandmel discussed a new French document which, he noted, resembles *Dabru Emet*, Rabbi Noam Marans analyzed a new document prepared by a group of left-wing, liberal Orthodox rabbis spearheaded by Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg. But they are not representative of the bulk of Orthodox rabbis, some of whom have already criticized the new statement which celebrates *Nostra Aetate* and the new positive relationship between Catholics and Jews. Father Dennis McManus praised a new 19-page document issued by the Vatican, "The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable," which essentially reviews the 50 years that have elapsed since *Nostra Aetate* was issued as well as summarizes the documents that followed and places them in a new context. The document shows how remarkably the Catholic Church has changed in its attitude to Judaism. Both sides must ask: "What now?" It is stunning that Jews now refer to us as "Christian friends," he noted. Several seminal points emerge from this new document: 1) It is up to Jews, not Christians, to define themselves; 2) Dialogue with Jews is essential; 3) Salvation is granted to both Jews and Christians for God speaks to all of us; 4) Supersessionism is rejected; 5) Jews participate in salvation without belief in Jesus in a mysterious way; 6) There is no need for Jews to convert to Christianity and the Church does not support proselytizing; 7) The first goal of dialogue is to deepen the exchanger between the faiths.

A brief discussion of possible topics for the future ensued. One suggestion was to hear a discussion of the structure of contemporary American Catholicism, similar to the morning talk by Rabbi Gutow. Another suggestion was a full analysis of the new Vatican document described by Father McManus and perhaps the other two documents that were briefly discussed. Future meeting dates are June 20 and November 7, 2016.

The final moments were devoted to a tribute to Rabbi Gil Rosenthal who is retiring after 15 years as director of the National Council of Synagogues. Cardinal Dolan and Father Crossin presented him with a beautiful plaque and a papal medal from the recent visit of Pope Francis to Philadelphia. Rabbi Rosenthal replied that it has been a privilege, pleasure and honor to have served in his post and he reflected with joy and gratitude on how far we have come in dialogue and understanding between the faiths in the wake of Vatican II and *Nostra Aetate*. He expressed the hope that we will continue to shine the light of understanding and trust on one another and on all humanity in the future.