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**A RESPONSE TO
RABBI ABRAHAM SKORKA**

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Rabbi Skorka has highlighted the remarkable cultural, socio-political and religious differences which make of the Americas a continental territory composed mainly by two major societal realities: the United States and Canada, on one side, and Southward from the border between the U.S.A. and Mexico, the Latin American peoples. Both sides of the Americas, at the time of the formation of their current social shape, were deeply influenced by the ideas and values of the European Enlightenment and the French revolution, but their respective processes of development were far from similar: the U.S.A. and Canada were molded according to the paradigms of the world-power which was England and its Anglican and Protestant faith, while the Latin American peoples, conquered by Spain and Portugal, were born under the influence of the Roman Catholic faith and remained marked by the significant presence of indigenous populations and substantial interbreeding.

The struggle about the conquer and protection of personal rights has shaped the history of the North American peoples, whose first settlers came in to stay permanently, looking forward to freely exercise their rights as human beings. In most Latin American peoples, the Europeans just came to make some money and then return back to Europe. Latin America has always fallen short from achieving the formation of true democratic countries, firmly established on the rule of law.

Concerning the presence of Jewish population in Latin American, Rabbi Skorka referred in particular to the case of his homeland, Argentina, where the German Jewish philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch (1831-1896) brought and helped settle thousands of Jewish persons from the Czarist Russia who were being persecuted in Europe throughout the second half of the XIX Century. It's interesting to note that the same Baron de Hirsch in 1891 established a New York fund to assist and help settle immigrants to the United States and later Canada.

The Jewish persons brought through the Baron de Hirsch to Argentina found there their own promised land and became prosperous through hard work, dedicating themselves mainly to agriculture and cattle raising. More waves of Jewish migration took place to Latin America during the first four decades of the XX Century. Solidarity among newcomers was often possible even between different ethnicities for those hard-working pioneers.

Anti-semitism was also present in Latin American during the first half of the XX Century, although not at the same scale as in Europe. Rabbi Skorka made reference to the horrible events of the «tragic week» (January 7-14, 1919) in Buenos Aires, when took place what has been defined as the very first and one pogrom against Jews in the history of Latin America. During the 1930s more violent episodes of anti-semitism occurred again in different Latin-American countries, echoing the heinous attacks which were being perpetrated in Europe at the same time. In general, during the 1930s and the first years of the 1940s Jews were really not welcome in most Latin American countries. A striking symbol of the climate promoted by the populist and dictatorial regimes of the time, often featuring strong anti-immigration policies, was the case of the ship St. Louis, which left Germany in May 1939 with 937 occupants: when it docked in Havana, Cuban authorities denied entry to most of its passengers, who were mainly Jewish refugees. The United States and Canada shamefully did the same. The St. Louis refugees ended-up having to return to Europe and tried to save their lives landing in Eastern Europe. 254 of them were killed in the Holocaust.

At this point, it would be interesting to say that the only exception to the chilly welcome given to Jewish refugees during those difficult years in most Latin American countries was the Dominican Republic. At the international Evian Conference on the refugee crisis, held at the French location on July 1938 after five years of relentless Jewish persecution in Germany, while (as mentioned by Rabbi Skorka) countries such as Argentina and almost all other nations represented at the conference refused to offer refuge to Jews fleeing from persecution in Europe, only the Dominican Republic agreed to accept

additional refugees, on condition that they had the means to «contribute to the country's enrichment.» This offer came as the then Dominican dictator Rafael L. Trujillo, perhaps the most sanguinary tyrant ever known in the history of Latin America, sought both to rehabilitate his reputation following the international uproar generated by his massacre of over 17,000 black Haitians in 1937 and to bring white wealth and white presence into his country. The Dominican government therefore donated the land to be dedicated to the creation of a Jewish settlement in Sosúa (Puerto Plata), a city on the island's northern coast.

Although the United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the American State Department offered a strong support to the Dominican government's plans to assist the Jews, and despite considerable financial backing by Jews in the United States, the Dominican Republic admitted only 645 Jews from 1938 to 1945 and the population of the Sosúa colony peaked at 476 residents in 1943. Nevertheless, the Dominican authorities issued around 5,000 visas to European Jews between 1938 and 1944, although a majority of the recipients never settled in the Dominican Republic. Still, these traveling documents remained instrumental to their ability to flee Nazi occupied Europe.¹

The current population of known Jews in the Dominican Republic is of about 3,000. To this day, no episodes of anti-semitism have ever been registered in the Dominican Republic.

¹ Cfr. UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM, "Refuge in Latin American," <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/refuge-in-latin-america> (accessed on 18 June 2019).

Anti-semitism remains today a threat to the respect owed to the dignity of the human person. I will make a quick parenthesis here to note that there were 55 hate crimes reported in New York City this year as of Feb. 17, an increase of 72 percent over the same period last year, the police said. Anti-Semitic crimes made up almost two-thirds of that, for a total of 36 crimes reported so far this year, compared with 21 last year. Anti-Semitic crimes in 2018 were up 22 percent compared with 2017. The Catholic Church remains committed to fight all forms of racism everywhere in the world. For instance, the U.S. bishops have recently issued a pastoral letter against racism, with the title «Open wide our hearts, the enduring call to love».

It's interesting also to note that hundreds of Jewish families led by their Rabbis were among the first protesters a year ago here in Manhattan against governmental orders of separating infants from their families as a widespread strategy of illegal immigration control. Their quick prophetic response of solidarity certainly helped provoking a major social reaction in opposition to separating children from their families (something that echoes in a horribly vivid manner the crimes of the Holocaust). In the end, I think that the intervention of the Jewish families, as well as other remarkable pronouncements (such as the one made about that matter by the former first lady Mrs. Laura Bush) helped the President to understand that such an approach was not appropriate to fight illegal immigration.

Rabbi Skorpa also noted how in the post-war era, Jewish presence across Latin American had evolved to become a remarkably influential ethnic minority, who has managed to

preserve its own identity while remaining actively engaged in the social complexities of the different countries, enjoying social appreciation and contributing to the creation of a society based on social justice and stronger democracy.

The Rabbi made reference to the impact of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate* (1965), in promoting Jewish-Catholic dialogue across Latin American. He single out the case of Argentinian Cardinal Jorge María Mejía, a pioneer leader in the Jewish-Catholic dialogue in Latin American context.

Rabbi Skorka offered a detailed account of the social impact of different scourges affecting the embattled realities of Latin American societies. In particular, he referred to the increasing number of people living in poverty as a consequence of a widespread corruption and inefficiency in most governments of the region. To this I would add that the recent suicide of Alan García, former president of Perú and probably one of the best-known Latin American leaders in the world, involved in the scandal connected to the Brazilian construction company Odebrecht (which is having repercussions throughout most Latin American governments), reminds us of the seriousness of the phenomenon of political corruption and its constant presence in the life of Latin American peoples.

Both Jewish and Catholic organizations have responded to the challenges of poverty in Latin America with a number of initiatives. Jewish have set special welfare commissions to help those in need. Catholics have put in place a number of initiatives. Rabbi Skorka

has made a special reference to the ministry of the then archbishop Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, concerning his denunciation of social injustice and political corruption. After having been elected Roman Pontiff, Pope Francis has made of the poor his most cherished option, always looking to provide support to millions of excluded people across the world and becoming a global source of inspiration on behalf of the poor and the oppressed.

It really struck me that towards the end of his intervention, Rabbi Skorka, while referring to Pope Francis' promotion of new evangelization, said that «this is very much needed to create the pivotal turning point to break the vicious circles of entrapment that impede the full development, in both the spiritual and material senses, of Latin Americans.»

Listening to a Rabbi talking about the goodness of the new evangelization and its aim of reenergizing the spreading of the Gospel message, certainly made my day...

With both his words at this encounter and specially the testimony of his life, Rabbi Abraham Skorka has demonstrated once more that the common spiritual heritage shared by Catholics and Jews is to be put at the service of the need of keep promoting the values of human dignity in Latin America and in the world, which will also keep the Judeo-Christian faith as an unreplaceable reference in the public sphere of today's societies.