

**MEETING BETWEEN THE US CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS AND
THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES**
JUNE 25, 2014, CATHOLIC CENTER, NEW YORK CITY

Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan welcomed all and offered an opening prayer. The morning topic was: “Pope Francis I—A Preliminary Evaluation.”

Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of the Religion Action Center, called the new pope an “extraordinary Pope” whose openness and tone speak beyond the Catholic community. He has changed the mood of engagement when he speaks of “the feminine perspective” and when he wondered, “Who am I to judge the gay and lesbian community?” He has stressed the commitment to global religious freedom and has insisted that religion teaches the infinite dignity of all and the rights of all to worship freely. Christians have felt the need for these rules these days most keenly as they are more persecuted today than in ancient times and there are more martyrs now than in the Roman era. He has also remarked several times of his concern over the new rise of anti-Semitism in the world, stressing that “one cannot be a Christian or a Catholic and an anti-Semite.”.

Pope Francis I had reached out to the Jewish community early on during his tenure in Argentina. He is deeply respected in the Jewish community of that nation and never before has there been a pope with so many dynamic interactions with Jews and the Jewish community. The Pope reminds his flock that “we cannot ignore our Jewish roots” because “inside every Christian is a Jew.” He is a warm supporter of the State of Israel, calling for shalom between the Arabs and Israelis and he reminds certain elements that Holocaust denial is “madness.” He is most anxious to lift up the teachings of *Nostra Aetate* and urges more to study its principles, especially in other lands.

Additionally, Pope Francis I calls on all to serve the poor and downtrodden because that is a true “religious obligation.” His words in this regard have entered American political discussions and his critique of unbridled capitalism (much of which is built on the teachings of Pope Leo XIII) and denunciation of global inequality as well as his efforts to inject the teachings of religion into the economic system have engendered a lively discussion in various quarters. It will be interesting to see his impact on the bishops and their flock.

Pope Francis I sets an example of humility and simplicity as evidenced by his choice of life-style in the Vatican. He has also challenged us to protect the environment, a goal of the US Catholic bishops for some time. We cannot make the same mistakes made by our ancestors, he reminds us, if we are to protect God’s creation. We need both moral vision and the will to advance the struggle against poverty, ignorance and disease. All of these priorities resound in the Jewish community which shares the Pope’s concerns and passion.

Father Drew Christiansen, SJ, former editor of America Magazine and currently a professor at Georgetown University, analyzed the models and careers on whom Pope Francis I is patterning his papacy. Francis is an admirer of St. Francis of Assisi, as we all know. But he also clearly admires St. Francis Loyola. He noted that “there is much Jewry in Jesuitry” and in fact. Ignatius Loyola was accused of being a Judeophile and even a secret Jew or Marrano. Father Christiansen noted the close relationship the Pope has with the Argentinean Jewish community and Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Buenos Aires. He also

indicated that the Pope's favorite painting is Mark Chagall's "Crucifixion." Moreover, Francis was quick to denounce the terrible bombing of the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires. He also is sympathetic to the Jewish people's deep attachment to the land of Israel.

Father Christiansen noted five elements in Pope Francis I career that emulate those of St. Ignatius Loyola. The love of Israel and the Holy land; the love of conversation and encounter with all types; the progress of humans souls; the need to grow in virtues such as holiness; and pastoral care of those in need; and love for and service to the poor.

Francis' warm personality and approachability is rooted in Loyola's stress on the value of conversation as basic to human encounter. Loyola talked of the growth or progress of the humans souls and he urged modesty and politeness, especially in dealing with the Protestants. To understand Francis' stress on serving the poor, we should study Loyola's career of concern for the poor, the homeless, and the lowliest of society. In this regard, Loyola tried to emulate St. Francis of Assisi by staying close to the poor, sharing meals with them and such. This is the way Pope Francis conducted his ministry in Argentina. Pope Francis has visited impoverished folks in the lowest depths of poverty in Calabria, and exemplifies by actions his love of the poor and forsaken of society. Moreover, he stresses the need for forgiveness of sins rather than condemnation of sinners.

A discussion of the presentations followed. Rabbi Berkun noted that Pope Francis I exemplifies the ideals of *Nostra Aetate* and that was apparent at the IJCIC meeting he attended in Buenos Aires. Father George observed that it is interesting that the new Pope is from South America and the principles of *Nostra Aetate* are most needed to be taught there. Cardinal Dolan observed that Italian clergy say Francis reminds them of St. Pope John XXIII who was known for his warmth, humanity and natural spontaneous humanity. And this has increased his credibility.

Rabbi Franklin asked if there are international plans to mark the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* spearheaded by the Holy See or if IJCIC has some plans in the works. Rabbi Eron urged that we stress how we have walked together through history and supplemented each other's faith. Love of the poor is a perfect theme and he urged that we issue plans for programming the observance for the 50th anniversary. Msgr. Massie noted that Francis is the first Pope to serve as a clergyman after *Nostra Aetate* and he urged that we consider making a TV documentary. He also suggested that the study of *Nostra Aetate* should be required of all seminarians.

Cardinal Dolan noted the shift for Roman Catholics to learn from Jesus' ministry by inviting people to follow him, get them to love and then serve God. There are some interesting changes in approaching the catechism, e.g., in Chicago.

Fr. Christensen observed that the Pope has stressed the liberation of the poor rather than Liberation Theology. True, some ideas flow from Marx (viz. the tragic exploitation of the poor) but he is definitely not a Marxist. Msgr. Stern stressed that the Pope's background in South America influenced him greatly. He is like "a breath of fresh air" in his challenging and disturbing influence on the hierarchy and is revitalizing the Church based on his youthful early experiences as a priest. Rabbi Marans noted that despite the politicization of the Pope's Israel visit, a directive was issued to all Israeli schools to study Christian-Jewish relations for the first time.

Rabbi Saperstein recorded the growing awareness in the Jewish community of the need to help embattled Christian communities especially in the Middle East and he stressed

that Jews want to be of help to them. He rejects the Liberation theology view that changes concerning poverty cannot be made from within and he applauded the Pope's call to address the poverty issue as well as the climate problems. Fr. Frizzell wondered if we can all work together on the problem of climate change.

Rabbi David Straus presided at the business session.