

IJCIR

המועצה היהודית הישראלית ליחסים בינדתיים Israel Jewish Council for Interreligious Relations

The following remarks were written by Daniel Rossing who consented to be ready to take the place of Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein if his health prevented his participation. IJCIR is happy that Alon is with us and also appreciative of Daniel's efforts. We thought that his remarks would be of interest to the audience as well.

PUBLIC SYMPOSIUM WITH CARDINAL WALTER KASPER

“THE JEWISH PEOPLE AND THEIR SCRIPTURES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT”

31 October 2007

Remarks of Daniel Rossing

Director, Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations (JCJCR.)

Your Eminence Cardinal Kasper; Rabbi Piron, Father Manns and Dr. Weissman, Rabbi Kronish, friends and colleagues.

I have been asked as Dr. Weismann indicated to say something briefly about the local scene, which is the exclusive focus of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations (JCJCR) and its efforts to promote peace through a wide range of programs designed to overcome ignorance and prejudice, not least among Jews in Israel, and to foster understanding and sincere empathy between Jews and Christians in Holy Land. Many of our activities are conducted in close cooperation with the local Catholic Church, such a major youth encounter project involving some 300 teachers and pupils from Christian schools associated with the National Office of Catholic Schools in Israel and Jewish schools associated with the TALI Education Fund. Over 100 meetings of Israeli Jews and local Christians will take place this year in the framework of this project alone.

Debbie rightly noted that ground-breaking documents, whether a major official study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on behalf of the world-wide Catholic Church or an unofficial statement of a small group of Jews, must filter down to the local level and become the backbone of both Catholic and Jewish education, from the elementary level

ת"ד 8771, ירושלים, 91086 טל' 972-2-561-1899 פקס' 972-2-563-4148
POB 8771, Jerusalem, ISRAEL Fax. 972-2-563-4148 Tel. 972-2-561-1899

IJCIR is an affiliate of ICCI, The Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel - המועצה בין-דתית מתאמת בישראל
and a member of IJCIC International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations - היא חברה

to the seminary and yeshiva. My own experience confirms Debbie's observation that different regions and groups have been differentially affected by the changes in attitude manifest in such documents. For example, in the work of JCJCR we find that the average Catholic in the Holy Land is far more engaged today by the pressing issue of his or her relationship with the Jewish people and their Scriptures than the average Jew in Israel grapples in any way with his or her relationship with the Christian minority in this land, let alone its Scriptures.

The local Church has labored to produce for use in its catechetical work a number of important documents that deal with the relationship between Catholics and the Jewish people and their Scriptures. Special mention should be made of the 33-page pastoral letter (1993) entitled "Reading the Bible Today in the Land of the Bible," the 200-page "General Pastoral Plan" published in 2000, the formulation of which also involved Catholic laity and section 13.2 of which deals with "Our Relationship with Jews," and the 2003 document "Reflections on the Presence of the Church in the Holy Land, paragraphs 8-12 of which deals with "Jews, Judaism and State of Israel."

Before we Jews rush to scrutinize these documents as to whether they are sympathetic to Jews and Judaism we need first to be empathetically mindful of the specific local context in which they have been formulated. I will point briefly to four aspects of this local context.

1. Although the local Catholic Church is composed largely of Palestinian Arab Christians, it also includes Hebrew speaking Catholics who are intimately linked with Israeli Jewish society, as well as a significant number of expatriate Christians from throughout the Catholic world who are fully part of the local Church. In the context, documents published by the local Church inevitably present a kind of compromise, or perhaps, in good Talmud fashion, a creative compilation of differing views in which minority opinions and outlooks are given clear respect and a true voice, and thus the documents are not necessarily the final and unchangeable word but rather reveal an ongoing open-ended dialogue within the Church.

2. The documents clearly reflect the struggles of a local Catholic community that has a very different history than that of the Catholic Church in the West. To quote from the 2003 document:

We seek to apply and live the teaching of the worldwide Catholic Church within our own particular context. Unlike our Christian brothers and sisters in Europe, in the Holy Land, our history as Christians has been the history of a minority community (a status that we shared with the Jews in the Middle East) in the midst of a civilization that is predominantly Muslim. For many centuries, we have not been a dominant majority in relation to the Jewish people as was the case in the West.

In the context, the documents do warn against supersessionism, but their concern in addressing the faithful is not solely with the danger they might adopt a later-day Marcionism or the theological supersessionism that in the past characterized attitudes towards Judaism and Jews in the Western Church, but most especially with the danger that they might fall victim to the moral supersessionism that often infects the attitudes of persecuted minorities in their relationship with a dominant majority.

3. The documents cannot overlook the fact that the local Catholic Church struggles with the issue of its relationship with the Jewish people and their Scriptures in the midst of a conflict between the Jewish State and the Arab world, and in particular between Israelis and Palestinians, in which the national identity of the majority of the faithful of the Church is locked in conflict with the national identity of the majority of Jews. In the context, violence in the Bible that at times appears to be divinely sanctioned and of course the promise and possession of the land, become burning issues for local Christians as they read the Bible and thus the documents wrestle with these issues also.

4. Finally, it is important to recall that these documents are first and foremost pastoral in nature and are intended to be used, as they are, in the catechetical life of the Church. In the context, in their language and emphases the documents have to meet the faithful where they are in their often difficult reality and consequent confusion, in order to make the Bible accessible and available to them not as a theological, moral or political weapon

but as the Word of God that will help them “to come out of the darkness and to surpass all difficulties” and to see in the Word of God “the one and only God, who commands all believers despite their different religions to practice justice, love, forgiveness and reconciliation.”

When properly read and studied in their context I believe that Jews too can appreciate these documents and even draw inspiration, not so much from their particular conclusions, but from the valiant and honest struggle of another suffering minority “to rise above all human conflict” and, as the 2003 document stresses, to remain steadfast as “a community of reconciliation.”