

## ***BETWEEN JERUSALEM AND ROME***

*Some Reflections from a Catholic Point of View about the Declaration adopted in March 2016  
by the Conference of European Rabbis, the Rabbinical Council of America and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel  
(University Angelicum, Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> April 2022)*

by

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*1. A statement of historical significance.* The declaration “Between Jerusalem and Rome” is an important contemporary Jewish Orthodox reflection on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, prepared in the context of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the declaration of Vatican II which transformed the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards other world religions, and particularly towards Judaism. Dated on Rosh Chodesh Adar I, 5776 (10 February 2016), this document was adopted in March 2016 by the Conference of European Rabbis and the Executive Committee of the Rabbinical Council of America and presented to Pope Francis on 31 August 2017 by a delegation of the three most relevant Rabbinic international institutions, namely the Conference of European Rabbis, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Rabbinical Council of America.<sup>1</sup> It is with every good reason that the approval of the text and its presentation to the Bishop of Rome can be defined as an historical event: for the first time the international Orthodox Rabbinate has provided a unified reflection on the theme of dialogue with the Catholic Church (not only in reference to the Conciliar text *Nostra Aetate*, but also to the entire development of relations with the Jewish world, which the text had itself initiated and promoted), and has wanted to present the document to the Pope, in the spirit that the Declaration itself affirms: “Despite the irreconcilable theological differences, we Jews view Catholics as our partners, close allies, friends and brothers in our mutual quest for a better world blessed with peace, social justice and security”. While undoubtedly Pope Francis has also recognized that the “the Statement *Between Jerusalem and Rome* does not hide the theological differences that exist between our faith tradition”, he has nonetheless highlighted that “it expresses a firm resolve to collaborate more closely, now and in the future”. In brief, the Declaration represents a step forward from which we cannot retreat; rather, we can only go forward with renewed momentum in our shared search and our relations based on mutual respect and fraternal closeness in obedience to the love of the Eternal One for all his children.

*2. Biblical-theological contents of the Declaration.* The Declaration comprises a preamble and three parts. The *Preamble* recalls the biblical foundations of the particular mission of the Jewish people with respect to humanity. Starting from the biblical narrative of creation, according to which “God fashions a single human being as the progenitor of all humanity”, the Declaration sustains the fundamental principles underlying all possible forms of encounter and dialogue between individuals and human groups: “The Bible’s unmistakable message is that all human beings are members of a single family. And after the deluge of Noah, this message is reinforced when the new phase of history is once again inaugurated by a single family. In the beginning, God’s providence is exercised over a universal, undifferentiated humanity”. It is within this universal design of divine

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<sup>1</sup> See also the Orthodox Rabbinic Statement on Christianity published by the Center for Jewish–Christian Understanding and Cooperation (CJCUC) in 2015, *To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians*, initially signed by over 25 prominent Orthodox rabbis in Israel, United States, and Europe, and that now has over 60 signatories.

Providence that we locate the election of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to whom the Eternal One entrusts the mission “to found the nation of Israel that would inherit, settle and establish a model society in the holy, promised land of Israel, all while serving as a source of light for all mankind”. Through innumerable trials, the Eternal One always manifested His fidelity to Israel, at the time of the exile as well as throughout the succession of innumerable persecutions, until the darkest moment - defined by John Paul II when referring to Nazism as the “absolute evil” - “when six million of our brethren were viciously murdered and the embers of their bones were smoldering in the shadows of the Nazi crematoria”. Yet, at that very same time, “God’s eternal covenant was once again manifest, as the remnants of Israel gathered their strength and enacted a miraculous reawakening of Jewish consciousness. Communities were reestablished throughout the Diaspora, and many Jews responded to the clarion call to return to Eretz Yisrael, where a sovereign Jewish state arose”. It is in this very context of rebirth that the two duties of the Jewish people towards humanity have emerged more clearly: “to be a light unto the nations” (Is 49:6) and “to secure its own future despite the world’s hatred and violence”. As a confirmation of this dual task, the Declaration recalls that “the Jewish nation has bequeathed many blessings upon mankind, both in the realms of the sciences, culture, philosophy, literature, technology and commerce, as well as in the realms of faith, spirituality, ethics and morality”, recognizing in this “a manifestation of God’s eternal covenant with the Jewish people”.

The Shoah undoubtedly represents the historical “nadir” of the sufferings of the Jewish people. In this regard, the Declaration makes a series of affirmations that come very close to what the Catholic Church sustained in the document *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*, issued by the International Theological Commission to accompany the request for pardon made by Pope John Paul II on the occasion of the Jubilee of the Year 2000, recognizing without hesitation the responsibility of Christians in history: “The Shoah - this Document states - was certainly the result of the pagan ideology that was Nazism, animated by a merciless anti-Semitism that not only despised the faith of the Jewish people, but also denied their very human dignity. Nevertheless, ‘it may be asked whether the Nazi persecution of the Jews was not made easier by the anti-Jewish prejudices imbedded in some Christian minds and hearts... Did Christians give every possible assistance to those being persecuted, and in particular to the persecuted Jews?’<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt that there were many Christians who risked their lives to save and to help their Jewish neighbors. It seems, however, also true that ‘alongside such courageous men and women, the spiritual resistance and concrete action of other Christians was not that which might have been expected from Christ’s followers’. This fact constitutes a call to the consciences of all Christians today, so as to require ‘an act of repentance (*teshuva*)’, and to be a stimulus to increase efforts to be ‘transformed by renewal of your mind’ (Rom 12:2), as well as to keep a ‘moral and religious memory’ of the injury inflicted on the Jews”.<sup>3</sup>

3. A “turnaround”. The Declaration recognizes *Nostra Aetate* as a genuine “turnaround”: “Fifty years ago, twenty years after the Shoah, with its declaration *Nostra Aetate* (no. 4), the Catholic Church began a process of introspection that increasingly led to any hostility toward Jews being expurgated from Church doctrine, enabling trust and confidence to grow between our respective faith communities”. In this context “the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. the document by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, Vatican City, 16 March 1998, no.5.

<sup>3</sup> The document, entitled *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past* was discussed and approved in its definitive form during the session of the Commission held from 29 November-3 December 1999: Multilingual edition, Vatican City 2000. The cited text is at point 5.4.

courageous role” played by Pope John XXIII is acknowledged, not only “in rescuing Jews during the Holocaust”, but also in overcoming that “teaching of contempt” that had caused so much harm in the relationship of Christians with their Jewish brothers. The Declaration makes a decisive affirmation in this regard of the value of the contribution of the Second Vatican Council: “In its most focused, concrete, and, for the Church, most dramatic assertion, *Nostra Aetate* recognized that any Jew who was not directly and personally involved in the Crucifixion did not bear any responsibility for it”. Rightly, then, and with a refined understanding of the developments in Catholic theology on the matter, the Declaration mentions that which for believers in Christ is the foundation of the irrevocable uniqueness of the Jewish people in the history of salvation: “Basing itself on Christian Scriptures, *Nostra Aetate* asserted that the Divine election of Israel, which it calls the gift of God, will not be revoked, stating, God... does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues”. There is then a citation from a text of Pope Francis - a great friend of the Jewish people - in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*: “God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant and to bring forth treasures of wisdom which flow from their encounter with his word” (no. 249). Thus it follows that the bond that the Church recognizes with Israel on the basis of divine election is unique, and so strong, that the document of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews published on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration *Nostra aetate* (10 December 2015) does not hesitate to affirm: “The dialogue with Judaism occupies a unique position for Christians; Christianity is by its roots connected with Judaism as with no other religion. Therefore the Jewish–Christian dialogue can only with reservations be termed ‘interreligious dialogue’ in the true sense of the expression; one could however speak of a kind of ‘intra–religious’ or ‘intra–familial’ dialogue *sui generis*”.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, “the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews”,<sup>5</sup> towards whom instead it is possible and dutiful to seek a *shared path towards full reconciliation*, recognizing that this will pertain to a time that the God of the promise has reserved for us all. This clarification immediately frees us of reckless expectations: leaving aside any possible individual spiritual journeys, which correspond to the particular designs of the Eternal One for each of us, Israel and the Church are called to walk unmingled, even if inseparable, towards the final wholeness to be undertaken by the Lord, in that eschatological ‘shalom’ which is the object of the messianic hope of both peoples. The idea of ‘reconciliation along the way’ thus definitively overcomes any theory of substitution, according to which the Church had taken the place of Israel in the divine plan of salvation: it is Paul himself who alerts us to the risk of thwarting what he terms the “mystery” (Rom 11:25), upon which basis Israel remains the witness of the election and the promises of God and with its faith constitutes for the Church “the holy root” (cf. Rom 11:16 and 18) upon which it is grafted and from which it will never be possible to be separated. Therefore, for Christian theology, in the unity of the economy of salvation there is Israel, the people of the covenant that has never been revoked, and there is the Church, the people established by the covenant of Christ’s blood: there is a single salvific design, but different covenants, from that with Noah to that with Abraham and the patriarchs, from the Mosaic covenant to that established by the death and resurrection of Lord Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> The document is entitled *The Gifts and the Call of God Are Irrevocable* (Rom 11:29): the cited text is at no. 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 40.

4. *The “Land”*: a relevant theme, only hinted at. The theme of the “land” is almost absent from the Declaration<sup>6</sup>, despite its relevance for the faith and history of Israel, as well as for the Christian faith. The Hebrew term “*eretz*” - “land” is so important that it occupies the fourth place in order of recurrence in the First Testament (2504 times). Its meanings are many: if the land is in general a gift from the Creator to the creature, the land of Israel is the one promised to Abraham together with his descendants (cf. Gen 12: 1-2; cf. Dt 26, 1-3). Marked by the touch of God, the promised land will bear the traces of His passage, as Jacob observes: “Certainly, the Lord is in this place and I did not know it” (Gn 28,6). It is a land where milk and honey flow (cf. Ex 3,8), a land promised to the fathers (cf. Ex 6:41), a condition of free life and fully realized in obedience to the Most High: not just a land free from a foreign dominion, but the land on which the chosen people will have to live free from the bonds of sin and firm in fidelity to the covenant that binds them to God. Symbol of the Lord’s generous and free gift, this land is also a constant reminder of a task to be lived: it is inseparably promise, grace and vocation! Ownership of the land itself will be conditioned on fidelity to the covenant (cf. Dt 4: 1-2; 8: 9-18), so that Israel may be effectively the people of God (4:20). In this sense, the promised land is an objective to be conquered over and over again, and this will happen if the people are docile to the will of God (cf. Jos 1: 6-9). Precisely so, the promised land is kept in the *memory* and *desire* of the chosen people, it becomes the *symbol and the seal of the covenant* with God and represents *the deposit of the hope* of Israel. *Eretz Israel* is, above all, the object of the yearning of the people chosen from among the peoples, as these beautiful verses by Yehudah Ha-Lewi, Jewish poet of the eleventh century, make clear: “If I had wings, I could fly to you, O Jerusalem, when I grow up distance ... Your stones give me pleasure, your dust I honor. The air of your country is real life for our soul”<sup>7</sup>.

The Holy Land is, then, *the symbol and the seal of Israel’s covenant with God*, as André Neher writes: “The Zohar wants *Eretz* to be the *ketubah*, the marriage contract of God and Israel, and we feel how much this image tends to make the presence of the land material and immutable in the Jewish religious economy”<sup>8</sup>. Finally, the promised land is for the people chosen by God the *deposit of their hope*: as Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, “the Jew in whose heart the love of Zion is extinguished is condemned to lose his faith in the God of Abraham, who gave the earth as a pledge for the redemption of all men”<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, “for the Jews the land of Israel represents their home, their hope, everything they have. It is not only the memory or our past that bind us to the earth: it is our hope and our future”<sup>10</sup>. The faith of Israel considers the Holy Land “the place where the divine plan of history can reveal its original and unique meaning. It was sanctified by the words of the prophets, by the sufferings of an entire people, by the tears and supplications of millennia of history, by the toil and dedication of the pioneers. This holiness is precious in the eyes of God, vital for the people, light for

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<sup>6</sup> There is a hint in the *Preamble*: “When God chose Abraham, and, subsequently, Isaac and Jacob, he entrusted them with a double mission: to found the nation of Israel which would inherit, settle and establish a model of society in the holy promised land of Israel, and at the same time serve as a source of light for all humanity”. At the end of the same *Preamble* it is stated: “After the Shoah, finally, Jewish emancipation in the diaspora, as well as the right of the Jewish people to live as a sovereign nation in their own land, have been accepted as obvious and natural facts”.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by A. J. Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1996, Chapter 5.

<sup>8</sup> A. Neher, *Chiavi per l’ebraismo*, Marietti, Genova 1988, 67. On this theme of the “land” according to the Jewish understanding see the very good work book of A. Marchadour and D. Neuhaus, *La Terra, la Bibbia e la storia*, Jaca Book, Milano 2007.

<sup>9</sup> See A. J. Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, *ib.*

<sup>10</sup> A. J. Heschel, *Israele eco di eternità*, Queriniana, Brescia 1977, 61 (English: *Israel: an Echo of Eternity*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1967).

history”<sup>11</sup>. This “theology of the land” is founded in the memory of the wonders accomplished by God in the history of the salvation of His people: thus, for example, as happened when they came out of slavery in Egypt, even the entrance into the promised Land is the fruit of the divine initiative and the crossing of the Jordan near Jericho traces the events of the Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea. Once reached and inhabited, then, the Promised Land will have to be defended by faith: thus, the walls of Jericho will collapse not by the strength of military art, but by a solemn liturgy lasting for seven days, in which the protagonist will be the Ark of the covenant (Jos 3: 1). If therefore it was faith that brought down the walls of the city of Jericho (cf. Heb 11:30), it will be the lack of faith that creates an impediment to the conquest and lasting possession of the land. This is why enjoying the Promised Land will be inseparable from the “new heart” with which the people will inhabit it, and the tragedy of exile will be a consequence of infidelity to the gift received. Moreover, the bitter experience of slavery experienced will push the Chosen People to a new and richer understanding of the meaning of the Promised Land. The land in which God wants to live will be recognized in the human heart renewed by the breath of the Spirit: “I will give you a new heart, I will put a new spirit within you, I will take away from you the heart of stone and I will give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and I will make you live according to my statutes and I will make you observe and put my laws into practice. You shall live in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be my people and I will be your God” (Ez 36,26-28).

In this light, the return to the land of Israel will become a sign and an anticipation of the return to the land that the prophets see taking place in the distant future and which will affect the whole of humanity. From this perspective, the announcement of the Beatitudes will move, according to which it will be the meek who “will inherit the earth” (Mt 5: 5). Moreover, Jesus will flee from any attempt to reduce the hope of the Kingdom to a political and military expectation: those who are sent by him must be witnesses of His resurrection to the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1,6-8). The eschatological gathering, predicted by the Prophets, is not for Jesus only the gathering of Israel in the land of the Fathers, because all the children of God will be gathered in the unity of the Father and the Son through His redemptive death on the cross and new life at Easter. With the ascension into heaven, the Son of Man will abandon the present earth to lead the new people to the definitive land, which will no longer have any differentiation from heaven. Thus, in the perspective of the Christian faith, the journey of human beings together with God in this world will be welded in the fulfilment of the eschatological promise with the journey of God, who from heaven will descend to earth and from this will return to heaven, opening the way to the last exodus. Also for Christians, therefore, the Holy Land will have a particular value and meaning: land of the Patriarchs and Prophets, land of the chosen people which - according to Paul - is the “holy root” of the Christian tree (cf. Rom 11,16 -18), it is the privileged land where the history of salvation for all has been realized. It is in the Holy Land that Jesus was born, lived and worked, and it was from there that His disciples left to announce His Resurrection to the world. Faith in him is not addressed to an abstract God, far from human events, but to the God who entered history, who spoke to the saints and prophets and became flesh in the fullness of time. Christianity is not the religion of salvation from history, but of the salvation of history, of a salvation, that is, which passes through the intimately connected events and words in which divine self-communication took place. This is why the Land where the history of revelation took place is of absolute importance for the faith of Christ’s disciples: it is precisely this Land that make us understand in the richest and most profound way what God wanted to tell us about himself, helping us to enter His language and to savour in depth words and events of His revelation. The stones of the Holy Land nourish the faith of the children of God:

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<sup>11</sup> *Ib.*, 111.

evoking the similarity that runs in Hebrew between the terms *eben* = stone and *ben* = son, Jesus will not hesitate to affirm: “I tell you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Mt 3,9).

5. *Towards a new future.* It is in the light of these premises that the Declaration delineates an “evaluation and reevaluation” of the state of relations between Judaism and Christianity. Acknowledging honestly a certain initial skepticism, “due to the long history of Christian anti-Judaism”, the text observes that “over time, it has become clear that the transformations in the Church’s attitudes and teachings are not only sincere but also increasingly profound”. Particular attention is reserved for the work of the Bilateral Commission between the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See: over the course of thirteen meetings, with the venue alternating yearly between Rome and Jerusalem, it has been able to effectively highlight shared values while respecting differences. An evaluation of the journey undertaken is expressed in these terms: “We, both Catholics and Jews, acknowledge that this fraternity cannot sweep away our doctrinal differences; it does, rather, reinforce genuine mutual positive dispositions towards fundamental values that we share, including but not limited to reverence of the Hebrew Bible”. The theological differences are stated with honesty, and could be summarized in the formula - coined by Shalom Ben Chorin - “The faith of Jesus unites us, but the faith in Jesus separates us”. Notwithstanding this profound difference, the Declaration observes that “some of Judaism’s highest authorities have asserted that Christians maintain a special status because they worship the Creator of Heaven and Earth Who liberated the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage and Who exercises providence over all creation”.

The Declaration then continues with a decisive affirmation also for the future: “However, doctrinal differences and our inability to truly understand the meaning and mysteries of each other’s faiths do not and may not stand in the way of our peaceful collaboration for the betterment of our shared world and the lives of the children of Noah. To further this end, it is crucial that our faith communities continue to encounter, grow acquainted with, and earn each other’s trust”. The “road forward” is traced thus: the text recognizes that the great mission of the Jewish people “to be a light unto the nations to include contributing to humanity’s appreciation for holiness, morality and piety” offers an antidote to rising secularization, often not exempt from forms of ideological secularism. In this light, one can perceive how Christians and Jews share the task of taking their distance from both secularism and religious extremism: “We therefore - states the Document - seek the partnership of the Catholic community in particular, and other faith communities in general, to assure the future of religious freedom, to foster the moral principles of our faiths, particularly the sanctity of life and the significance of the traditional family, and to cultivate the moral and religious conscience of society”. In brief, both Jews and Christians have the common duty to bear witness to the Eternal One before humanity against any negation or false appropriation of His name, which is holy and blessed.

The reference to the violence inspired today by forms of insane religious fundamentalism, “facing many Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere they are persecuted and menaced by violence and death at the hands of those who invoke God’s Name in vain through violence and terror”, is translated into an appeal of Orthodox Judaism to the Catholic Church “to join us in deepening our combat against our generation’s new barbarism, namely the radical offshoots of Islam, which endanger our global society and does not spare the very numerous moderate Muslims. It threatens world peace in general and the Christian and Jewish communities in particular. We call on all people of good will to join forces to fight this evil”. The patrimony of faith, shared by Catholics and Jews, is well capable of sustaining this common commitment at the service of all humanity: in offering an example of this shared patrimony, the text cites the recognition of the divine origin of

the Torah, the idea of final redemption, “the affirmation that religions must use moral behaviour and religious education - not war, coercion, or social pressure - to influence and inspire”. Purifying consciousness from every form of anti-Semitism thus offers a contribution to progress in the quality of life of all humanity: and it is precisely here that the Declaration makes a profound and significant acknowledgement to the Catholic Church: “We call upon all Christian denominations that have not yet done so to follow the example of the Catholic Church and excise anti-Semitism from their liturgy and doctrines, to end the active mission to Jews, and to work towards a better world hand-in-hand with us, the Jewish people”. The final aspiration is moreover poignant as it evokes the calls of the biblical prophets, yet no less Jesus’ words on the mount, “We seek to deepen our dialogue and partnership with the Church in order to foster our mutual understanding and to advance the goals outlined above. We seek to find additional ways that will enable us, together, to improve the world: to go in God's ways, feed the hungry and dress the naked, give joy to widows and orphans, refuge to the persecuted and the oppressed, and thus merit His blessings”. Obedience to the Eternal One and love for all His creatures are thus the ultimate reason for which the journey in dialogue between Jerusalem and Rome must go ahead, open to the surprises of the Eternal One and nurtured by the sincere yearning for the faithful obedience of Jews and Christians to His will. In this way too, both Jews and Christians will together obey the command of the Eternal One: “Shemà Israel, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad”.