



CONFERENCE OF PRESIDENTS

of Major American Jewish Organizations

Remarks by Pope Benedict XVI to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations February 12, 2009

Dear Friends,

I am pleased to welcome all of you today, and I thank Rabbi Arthur Schneier and Mr Alan Solow for the greetings they have addressed to me on your behalf. I well recall the various occasions, during my visit to the United States last year, when I was able to meet some of you in Washington D.C. and New York. Rabbi Schneier, you graciously received me at Park East Synagogue just hours before your celebration of *Pesah*. Now, I am glad to have this opportunity to offer you hospitality here in my own home. Such meetings as this enable us to demonstrate our respect for one another. I want you to know that you are all most welcome here today in the house of Peter, the home of the Pope.

I look back with gratitude to the various opportunities I have had over many years to spend time in the company of my Jewish friends. My visits to your communities in Washington and New York, though brief, were experiences of fraternal esteem and sincere friendship. So too was my visit to the Synagogue in Cologne, the first such visit in my Pontificate. It was very moving for me to spend those moments with the Jewish community in the city I know so well, the city which was home to the earliest Jewish settlement in Germany, its roots reaching back to the time of the Roman Empire.

A year later, in May 2006, I visited the extermination camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. What words can adequately convey that profoundly moving experience? As I walked through the entrance to that place of horror, the scene of such untold suffering, I meditated on the countless number of prisoners, so many of them Jews, who had trodden that same path into captivity at Auschwitz and in all the other prison camps. Those children of Abraham, grief-stricken and degraded, had little to sustain them beyond their faith in the God of their fathers, a faith that we Christians share with you, our brothers and sisters. How can we begin to grasp the enormity of what took place in those infamous prisons? The entire human race feels deep shame at the savage brutality shown to your people at that time. Allow me to recall what I said on that sombre occasion: "The rulers of the Third Reich wanted to crush the entire Jewish people, to cancel it from the register of the peoples of the earth. Thus the words of the Psalm, 'We are being killed, accounted as sheep for the slaughter', were fulfilled in a terrifying way."

Our meeting today occurs in the context of your visit to Italy in conjunction with your annual Leadership Mission to Israel. I too am preparing to visit Israel, a land which is holy for Christians as well as Jews, since the roots of our faith are to be found there. Indeed, the Church draws its sustenance

from the root of that good olive tree, the people of Israel, onto which have been grafted the wild olive branches of the Gentiles (cf. *Rom* 11: 17-24). From the earliest days of Christianity, our identity and every aspect of our life and worship have been intimately bound up with the ancient religion of our fathers in faith.

The two-thousand-year history of the relationship between Judaism and the Church has passed through many different phases, some of them painful to recall. Now that we are able to meet in a spirit of reconciliation, we must not allow past difficulties to hold us back from extending to one another the hand of friendship. Indeed, what family is there that has not been troubled by tensions of one kind or another? The Second Vatican Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate* marked a milestone in the journey towards reconciliation, and clearly outlined the principles that have governed the Church's approach to Christian-Jewish relations ever since. The Church is profoundly and irrevocably committed to reject all anti-Semitism and to continue to build good and lasting relations between our two communities. If there is one particular image which encapsulates this commitment, it is the moment when my beloved predecessor Pope John Paul II stood at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, pleading for God's forgiveness after all the injustice that the Jewish people have had to suffer. I now make his prayer my own: "God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your Name to the Nations: we are deeply saddened by the behaviour of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant" (26 March 2000).

The hatred and contempt for men, women and children that was manifested in the *Shoah* was a crime against God and against humanity. This should be clear to everyone, especially to those standing in the tradition of the Holy Scriptures, according to which every human being is created in the image and likeness of God (*Gen* 1:26-27). It is beyond question that any denial or minimization of this terrible crime is intolerable and altogether unacceptable. Recently, in a public audience, I reaffirmed that the *Shoah* must be "a warning for all against forgetfulness, denial or reductionism, because violence committed against one single human being is violence against all" (January 28, 2009).

This terrible chapter in our history must never be forgotten. Remembrance — it is rightly said — is *memoria futuri*, a warning to us for the future, and a summons to strive for reconciliation. To remember is to do everything in our power to prevent any recurrence of such a catastrophe within the human family by building bridges of lasting friendship. It is my fervent prayer that the memory of this appalling crime will strengthen our determination to heal the wounds that for too long have sullied relations between Christians and Jews. It is my heartfelt desire that the friendship we now enjoy will grow ever stronger, so that the Church's irrevocable commitment to respectful and harmonious relations with the people of the Covenant will bear fruit in abundance.