

JERUSALEM LETTER

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

JL:88 21 Tammuz 5746 / 28 July 1986

ITALIAN PRESS REACTION TO THE POPE'S SYNAGOGUE VISIT

Jaaqov Andrea Lattes

Front Page Coverage in Italy / The Pope Condemns Anti-Semitism / Will the Visit Affect the Pope's Attitude Towards Israel? / A Victory for the Jews of Italy

Pope John Paul II's recent visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome sparked worldwide interest. Public responses to the visit ranged from respect for the Pontiff's attempt to end the institutionalized enmity between Catholics and Jews to skepticism stemming from the Vatican's 38 year old refusal to recognize the State of Israel. Still, the front-page stories and headline reports that dotted the international media did not give an inkling of the tremendous excitement this event created in Italy itself.

Front Page Coverage in Italy

The Italian press viewed the Pope's visit as an historic political and religious event of both universal import and special Italian — particularly Roman — significance. The entire press gave high priority to the

meeting and covered it fully. All of the Italian newspapers gave the meeting front page coverage, and most reported it in a positive light. Thus, on the day of the event, the official Vatican daily *Osservatore Romano* wrote that the synagogue meeting had Roman significance as a friendly visit of the Bishop of Rome with the local Jewish community.

While this could be interpreted as an effort to reduce the Pope's visit to a merely local rather than a universal event, the newspaper repeated several times that the Pope's visit was included in the general framework of the *Nostra Aetate* Declaration — the proclamation of the Second Vatican Council dealing with non-Christian religions — and that it was additional proof of the change of the attitude of the Catholic

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; David Clayman and Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editors.
21 Arlozorov St. Jerusalem, 92181, Israel; Tel. 02-639281. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN: 0334-4096

Church toward the Jews and Judaism. The same newspaper published a headline on its front page the day after the visit, declaring, "Let us thank God for the renewed brotherhood and deeper understanding between the Church and the Jews." After this lead, the paper printed the texts of the speeches of the Pope, the Chief Rabbi Toaff and the President of the Roman Jewish community, G. Saban.

The Pope Condemns Anti-Semitism

In his speech, the Pope announced that the Church, "Condemns the hatred, persecutions, and other anti-Semitic manifestations directed against the Jews throughout history by everyone," repeating the phrase "by everyone." The Pope also condemned the Holocaust and mentioned his last visit to Auschwitz, when he prayed opposite the monument written in Hebrew. The Synagogue visit was concluded beside the Italian monument in memory of the Roman Jews who died in the Holocaust.

On the other side of the political fence, *L'Unita*, mouthpiece of the Italian Communist Party (which, incidentally, refers to the Pope by his pre-papal Polish name only), wrote on its front page on the day following the event: "All of us, believers and non-believers, felt ourselves involved, since a tremendous amount of emotional, cultural and intellectual energy has been focused on the issue of Jewish-Christian relations." There was an additional reason for that involvement: "It is the paradox of both Europeans and Americans that no one, atheist or religious, can with certainty call himself a non-Christian, for everything has been affected by hundreds of years of Christian influence. And if no one can call himself a non-Christian, it is equally true that no one can call himself a non-Jew, for the mutual roots are deep." The article continued: "The fact that the creators, descendants and inheritors of such a religious and cultural treasure have been so persecuted by their 'younger brothers' (as the Pope called the Christians) was indeed an insanity of history Believers and non-believers, we are all people and are therefore interested in reconciliation between these two human communities and then everything will be easier, peace between Jews and Arabs, a new era

of calm between East and West. . . ." This article appeared a day after the same newspaper had published an article surveying papal persecutions against the Jews throughout history.

Corriere Della Sera, a newspaper considered one of the most important in all of Italy, printed on the front page of its Sunday April 13 edition that the the Chief Rabbi of Britain, Sir Emmanuel Jacobowitz, sent a message to Rabbi Toaff in which he stated, *inter alia*, "Had this happened one thousand years ago, millions of lives would have been saved from persecution." The paper also noted that Arab embassies in Rome made public their appreciation for "the noble emotions which motivated the Pope to make this visit, while at the same time they requested that the Vatican not change its attitude towards the Arab-Israeli conflict."

The same newspaper published several additional articles about the visit including one by the Cardinal Vicario, who serves as the acting Bishop of Rome, one by Ugo Poletti, and one written by Rabbi Toaff, who claimed that the Pope's visit: "marks the end of a long and painful history, and begins the first page of a new volume, inscribed with equality between the Jews and Christians." Finally, Giulio Andreotti, the Italian foreign minister, wrote that: "The Second Vatican Council arrived at a conclusion which is natural from a religious perspective, that there is a need for renewed understanding. And rightfully they wished to separate the issue of religion from the political issue, which is the new reality of the existence of the State of Israel — not for the purpose of not recognizing its existence or need for security, but only because of the exclusivity of the two issues." Therefore, "the Pope's visit to the Synagogue closes an era of hundreds of years of conflict and intolerance, and is a warning to all those who still cling to the old racism." On the following day the paper reported that the president of the Roman Jewish community, G. Saban, requested in his speech that the Pope recognize the State of Israel, but that the Pope did not mention Israel at all.

Il Messaggero, the most popular newspaper in Rome, published another article by Rabbi Toaff on April 12, in which he pointed out that this is the first Pope to visit a synagogue in all of history.

He added that the visit should be viewed an actualization of the ideals of Pope John XXIII, that it signifies a war against anti-Semitism, and, in an optimistic vein, that "the recognition of Israel by the Catholic Church will express the official erasure of all prejudice."

Will the Visit Affect the Pope's Attitude Towards Israel?

On April 13 the paper quoted the message sent to Rabbi Toaff by Prime Minister Craxi: "This has great significance which goes beyond our country. I think that brotherhood and peace between all religions could contribute to justice and brotherhood in the world." The paper mentions that it took the Church 2,000 years to cover the distance of one kilometer. An editorial noted: "Two aspects can be presented: the new direction of Christian education, with extremely important implications for anti-semitism and the issue of the murder of Christ, and the recognition of the large spiritual heritage shared by the two faiths." Later the article asks whether the visit will affect the Vatican's attitude toward Jerusalem and the holy places, and it noted that the Holy Throne: "has moved from the refusal to place Christianity on the same plane with the two other monotheistic religions to a gradual acceptance of equal rights and the status between Christianity and the other two religions."

Il Giornale, a Conservative paper considered to be pro-Israel, in an article appearing on Friday April 11, reported an interview granted to a private television station in Rome by the Cardinal Willebrands, the president of the Council for Christian Unity - which also handles the issue of relations with Jews - in which he claimed that there were already diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Israel, though not on the highest level and that the difference between what exists today and official *de jure* recognition is not great.

On Saturday, April 14 and Sunday, April 15, the paper attempted to analyze the event from a broad and multiple perspective. In an editorial, it noted that from the religious perspective, the meeting in the Synagogue proved that one must recognize the individual identity of another, even if he is from a different religion, and that: "Whoever was not formerly a good Jew cannot be a good Christian," implying a recognition that the

roots of Christian belief lie in Judaism. The inequality of the two religions, stemming from both theological differences and the imbalance of political power between them, lead to the historical conflict between the two, exacerbated when the church usurped the "birthright" which belonged to Israel.

When this issue was repeated in the present Pope's recent speeches, it seemed to signal a return to the positions prior to the Second Vatican Council. The editorial, therefore, asks if it is possible to erase a past so full of conflict, even with such a dramatic act. From yet another perspective, the meeting certainly denotes a return to the roots of Western culture. With reference to the political perspective, the article points out that the Vatican's refusal to recognize Israel causes skepticism among the Jews about the Church's intentions. They do, however, recognize the shift that has occurred in the attitude of the Church to Jerusalem, which has gone from the demand for *Corpus Separatum* (a separate body) of 1947, to the idea of the internationalization of the city in the 1960s, to current willingness to be satisfied with free passage to the holy places. "There is no doubt, however, that the problem of relations between the Vatican State and the State of Israel is a central factor in the relations between the Church and the Jews." The paper also tells of the developments in relations between the Holy See and the Zionist representatives prior to and following the establishment of the State of Israel, up to the meeting between Shimon Peres and John Paul one year ago.

A Victory for the Jews of Italy

The paper wrote on Monday that the meeting was a victory for the Jews of Italy, and also noted that the Pope announced himself to be the heir of John XXIII, described the Jews as beloved "brothers" and said that there is no theological justification for discrimination against Jews. Saban contrasted this attitude with the silence of Pius XII during the Holocaust, when, Saban claimed, he ignored what was happening on the other side of the Tiber.

Another paper published in Rome, *La Repubblica*, wrote, "The Pope did not hesitate to take upon himself and upon his Church, the guilt for discriminations and persecutions hundreds of

years old."

L'Avvenire wrote that the Arabs as well as the Jews must understand the Pope's message of peace: "but the process is long, for it is hard to describe what would happen to Christians, and Catholics in particular, in Arab lands if the Holy Throne were to suddenly recognize the State of Israel."

It is worth noting that the Italian Jewish monthly paper *Shalom*, in its end-of-April issue, devoted more than half of its space to the Pope's visit. It noted that very few Christians, even Catholic priests, had acknowledged the twenty year old declarations of the Vatican Council which dealt with the Jews -- until television screens all over Europe showed the Pope entering a synagogue for the first time. The paper reported a public opinion survey held on the eve of the event in Italy, in which 80 percent of those interviewed were in favor of the Pope's visit, while only 27 percent thought the Church guilty vis-a-vis the Jews; 60 percent responded that the Jews were not responsible for the death of Jesus. The paper also asked a number of Jews for their reactions to the event; only one thought that the organization was bad, and that the visit had no positive

significance.

To summarize, most of the newspapers surveyed, both Jewish and general, related positively if not enthusiastically to the encounter which took place on April 13. In the various articles published, all aspects of the event were analyzed. One can hope that this act of the head of the Catholic Church will indeed lead to the reduction of anti-Semitism, at least to that variety of hostility based on religious beliefs. The visit has already influenced the historic attitude of the world's largest church toward the Jews, and perhaps in the end will lead to official recognition of the Jewish state and to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the world's largest religious power, which rules over its 800 million believers, and the State of Israel.

* * * *

Jaakov Andrea Lattes is an Italian student currently studying in Israel. Mr. Lattes was in Italy during the period of the Pope's visit and compiled a collection of newspaper clippings from the Italian, Israeli and International press.