

# World Jewish Congress

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**Marco Impagliazzo**  
**President of the community of Sant'Egidio**

## **Interfaith dialogue**

I thank the WJC for this invitation that honors not just me personally, but the whole of the Community of Sant'Egidio, a public association of the Catholic Church, that has been working for more than thirty years in the field of interreligious dialogue. The friendship with the Jewish communities in Israel and in many parts of the world is one of the aspects characterizing the dialogue of Sant'Egidio. I only quote some aspects of this friendship: the struggle against anti-Semitism, the memory of the deportation in all cities of Europe (and Argentina), moments of reflection and meeting on immigration, racism. But also the friendship with many Jews and many leaders of the Jewish world: I remember, one among them, the dear chief rabbi of Rome, Elio Toaff.

We are here to verify the power of dialogue. But what do we mean by dialogue? Speaking of dialogue, especially the dialogue between Jews and Christians, is first of all an opportunity for me to express gratitude to our Jewish brothers. We owe, in fact, to you the idea itself of dialogue. The concept of "dialogue" is a relatively new idea for the philosophy and even theology. Rooted in the personalist philosophy of the first half of the twentieth century, especially in the Jewish personalist philosophy of Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Emanuel Levinas and others.

The Second Vatican Council adopted this interpretation, which has become a key concept of the post-conciliar Church, which in its update understood that dialogue is the only way in which humankind can continue to live in peace and with humanity.

The dialogue between the Catholic Church and Judaism, carried out in these 50 years, since the Second Vatican Council and the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, is the best proof of the veracity of this statement. Our dialogue has radically changed the Jewish-Christian relations: it has brought a revolution in the perception of one another and can be considered -so we hope- an example of how, even after a long and complex history, reconciliation is possible together with a new beginning in the relations between Jews and Christians.

But what does dialogue involve? The Jewish concept of the concept itself of dialogue tells us that it has biblical roots, so wrote Walter Kasper. It is based on the biblical concept of the human person as a being that is basically in dialogue with God, or a being that is called by God and responds to his call. Dialogue with God is related to the dialogue among men. In fact, God did not create us as isolated individuals, but as men and women, that is, as social beings with a communal nature.

Not only we have the "dialogue" but we are "dialogue" because of our own nature.

The intuition of the philosophy of dialogue is therefore "I do not exist without you", we do not exist for ourselves, we exist for and with others. The other is not the limit of my being, but is a gift and enrichment for me. The human being, therefore, is never monological; as human

beings we exist within and through dialogue. Not only do we have the dialogue, we ourselves are dialogue, we are encounter.

Dialogue is a process essential for the creation of man. Each person is unique and has its gifts; only when we share these gifts through dialogue we can reach the fullness of our humanity.

For many centuries, Jews have lived in a state of minority when in the Christian world there was a true anti-Jewish theology. This phase ends with the Second Vatican Council when, on October 28th, 1965, the Council Fathers approved the *Nostra Aetate*. This extraordinary document was born in the new sensitivity of pope John who just after his election made a small gesture of great symbolic value, it was his first Eater as pope: he had removed from the Friday prayer the word *perfidis* that referred to the Jewish people. It was an important sign, caught by Jules Isaac, who in 1960 sought and obtained an audience with the new Pope.

In the meeting the Jewish scholar, who had lost his entire family in the death camps, reminded the pope the age-old "teaching of contempt" that the Church had helped fuel, recalling also that anti-Semitism is "in its essence, anti-Christian". And it was this consciousness that, for decades, had been slowly maturing in the Catholic world: for Christians anti-Semitism proved suicidal because of the close relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

It was the Nazi-Fascist anti-Semitism that had Pius XI in 1938 say: "Anti-Semitism is unacceptable. We are spiritually Semites!". While the Catholic intellectual Jacques Maritain a year before wrote his essay entitled *L'impossible antisémitisme*, and Roncalli, apostolic delegate in Istanbul, in 1943, during the Second World War, wrote in the Vatican "We are before one of the greatest mysteries in the history of humanity. Poor children of Israel [...]. They are relatives and fellow citizens of Jesus. May the Divine Savior come to their aid. "

In this slow maturation an important role was also played by the historical and theological reflections on the Letter to the Romans of Paul, where he strongly affirms the irrevocability of the covenant that had never been revoked, and the close relationships between First and Second Testament.

Essentially Catholics, looking in the mirror, began to see the features of their own face, that the anti-Jewish controversialist tradition had overshadowed. They began to see their own Semitic traits, rediscovering their Jewish roots. The innovations of John XXIII and the Council then fell on a ground that had been already partly plowed and was ready to welcome them. Consider that *Nostra Aetate* was adopted by 2221 placet (yes) and 88 non placet, that is only 3.8% of the Council fathers.

This legacy is revised and developed by John Paul II, who, as John XXIII, has gone through the tragedy of World War II in close contact with the tragedy of the Jews and the Holocaust, in his battered Poland. This seems to me important for the maturation of a new consciousness towards Judaism. The Polish pope is the architect of major changes: the visit to the Synagogue of Rome and the prayer for peace in Assisi in 1986, the establishment of diplomatic relations with the State of Israel and a visit to the Holy Land in 2000.

What may the Spirit of Assisi, that spirit that was born from the meeting that pope John Paul II called in 1986, suggest today, as we live particularly delicate moment in relations between peoples and religions?

We have entered a season when we live at the crossroad of messages, cultures, processes. It is that globalization much debated that is our reality. Changes take place so rapidly that they are difficult to register. It is also the experience of religious worlds. Sometimes the older generation lacks the agility to get in tune while the younger ones lack a sense of depth.

The spirit of Assisi, that is the friendly approach of the different religious worlds, emphasizes, once again, that the message of peace is something deeply inherent in most, if not all, of the great religious traditions of the world. It is amazing how, in the last few decades of the twentieth century, a century that appears the most secular in history, a century in which it the disappearance itself of religions, was theorized, just at the end of this century, religions, in some regions of the world, were propelled in a public space. It is a space sometimes linked to the renaissance of nations, sometimes connected to the protest of the excluded, other times to conflict or to redrawing of identity.

What do men and women of different religions want or are able to do today? Less and less they face their own homogeneous worlds: worlds of the faithful or the worlds of akin cultures.

Ours is a time when people of different ethnicity or religion live together more and more.

It is the experience of Europe in facing immigration, but also a new commonality between East and West. And 'the challenge of the African world where, especially in this difficult season, they are confronted with the fragility of the national states that ethnic, religious or other differences can easily upset. It is also the challenge of the rebirth of nations, the challenge of the relations between religions and nations, process of ethnic cleansing in some regions of the world. But it is also the challenge of the virtual world in which we enter more and more into contact with everyone. In the virtual world we increasingly live together and we are destined to cross path with those who are different from us. It is, finally, the challenge of a world in which everything can be seen and you see more and more the wealth of the few and the misery of the many.

The human condition is becoming that of living together, of coexistence. Living together, coexistence, is the reality of many peoples, many religions, many groups. It is not always easy. A coexistence with too many differences, with too broad horizons such as globalization, induces disturbing phenomena that are before our eyes: irresponsible individualism, defensive tribalism, new fundamentalisms. There are people who feel attacked and disoriented in front of new neighbors and too big a world.

Disoriented women and men fear the present and future; they ask religions to protect their fear, perhaps with the walls of distrust. This gives rise to fundamentalism of different kinds that become like ghosts. There is also the growth of ethnic or nationalist fundamentalisms, that can become terrorism. Fundamentalisms are simplifications that can be captivating for young, desperate, disoriented people for whom this world is too complex, inhospitable. But but may be of interest to unscrupulous politicians looking for short cuts to power.

And fundamentalism all have the brand of hatred, if not of the fight against the religiously or ethnically different.

Maybe in the past religious world could ignore each other. In a world of great distances and slow reactions, as was that of the past, ignoring was perhaps no less harmful, but easier. But today mutual ignorance quickly leads to exacerbation. Religious leaders are sometimes trapped in isolated horizons too nationalist.

The universality, which is proper to the various religious traditions, is released in the contact and dialogue.

Dialogue is the patient art of listening, to understand each other, to recognize the spiritual and human character of the other. From the heart of the religious traditions, capable of dialogue, emerges the art of living that is so necessary in a plural society like ours. It is the art of the maturity of cultures, personalities and groups.

Religions, live between in a particular national community, and the universal, they speak of God but live with men ... religions can be a school of coexistence and peace. The Christian scriptures remind us that "he is our peace". The teaching of the Popes of the twentieth century on peace echo them. The eye of Religion moves from the individual, considered a creature of God and a brother, to all peoples and the belief that war is poisoning the earth.

Religions do not have the political strength to impose peace but, they can transform man from within, inviting him to move away from evil, lead him to an attitude of peace of the heart.

Every religion has its way. Nothing is the same. In men and women of faith there is the conviction of a moral strength. Not all and not always, they are up to the task. But every religious community, made up of sinful men and women, shows a human and merciful face, which should distance itself from the terrible utopia of perfect societies, that ideologies and sectarianism have wanted to build with violence.

The moral force is deeply connected to the teaching of compassion and mercy of many religions. Piety and spirituality are lived in local and concrete religious communities and always have a window open to the universal. Think about the old religious rules on hospitality to foreigners.

Well, in today's world, the foreigner draw near. Or, dramatically, it turns out that the neighbor becomes a stranger. Today, in a globalized world, people of faith, ethnicity, different culture, live in the same city on the same scenarios, within the same national horizons.

While still people pursue designs of homogeneity through ethnic cleansing, different people live together without destroying national identities, but raising new problems.

Religions have a decisive responsibility in coexistence: their dialogue weaves a peaceful fabric, it rejects the temptation to tear the social structure, to exploit religious differences for political purposes. But this requires courage and faith from men and women of religion. It requires courage. It requires to break down walls with moral strength, with compassion, with dialogue.

Great may be the task of religions to educate to love to the art of living together. Great is also the task of religions in reminding that human destiny is beyond their earthly possessions - as many of them teach - that is part of a universal horizon, in the sense that all men and women are creatures of God. Their saints and their wise ones always contemplate a global horizon.

Writes Andrea Riccardi, founder of Sant'Egidio: "dialogue between Jews and Christians is not just a conversation between religious people, but it has a value that goes far beyond us, in a world of deep fractures. It is the appointment from which can come a reflection on contemporary humanism, which can not be separated from Israel and its faith "

Fifty years after the start of a new season of dialogue we are faced with a great heritage, that is still waiting to yield its fruits. It is the challenge that we accept today to not only be honest stewards of this heritage but to be creative interpreters of this spirit that leads us to discover one another as brothers.