

## Vatican by Augustinus

### The Pope at the Synagogue

*John Paul evokes the common roots of Jews and Christians in the injunction of Genesis to subdue the Earth.*

On Sunday, April 13, John Paul II went to the Synagogue of Rome and celebrated, together with the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Elio Toaff, a solemn religious ceremony. It was the first time that a Pope had crossed the threshold of a synagogue. After an affectionate embrace, greeted by long and hearty applause by the assembled crowd, the Pope and Rabbi Toaff went up to the altar, the Tevah, and gave their speeches.

First, the president of the Israelite Community of Rome, Giacomo Saban, recounted the history of the Roman Jewish community. His speech was not without a critical accent, in particular toward Pius XII, for his "alleged" failure to speak out against extermination of the Jews during World War II. Rabbi Toaff was very conciliatory, speaking of "common roots" between the two great religions.

Then came the speech by the Pope, who addressed the Jews as "our beloved brothers and, in a certain sense, one could say our older brothers."

John Paul II condemned the persecution of the Jews. "Any pretended theological justification for discriminatory measures, or worse yet, persecution, is unfounded. . . . The consideration of centuries-long cultural conditioning could not prevent recognition of the fact that acts of discrimination, of unjustified limits on religious freedom, of oppression even on the level of civil liberties, toward the Jews, are objectively, seriously deplorable manifestations." Further,

"I would like once more to express outrage over the genocide decreed during the last war against the Jewish people, which led to the holocaust of millions of innocent victims."

Explaining the meaning of the visit of the highest Catholic authority to a Jewish temple, the Pope stressed that the two religions' common roots should be sought: "Today's visit," he said, "is intended to make a decisive contribution to consolidating good relations between our two communities, so that old prejudices may be overcome and space created for the fuller and fuller recognition of the 'tie' and the 'common spiritual heritage' which exist between Jews and Christians."

Ecumenical collaboration between the two religions is required by the present situation, the Pope said: "There is the moral problem, the great way of individual and social ethics. We are all aware of how acute the crisis is at this point of time in which we live. In a society which has often strayed into agnosticism and individualism, Jews and Christians are the repository and witnesses of an ethic laid out in the Ten Commandments, in whose observance man finds his truth and freedom."

Just as the apostle Peter and the great Jewish thinker Philo of Alexandria joined forces to defeat the evil Gnostic practices spread by Simon Magus in Rome right after the death of Christ, today the Pope proposes collaboration between the two great religions joined in the Old Testament and repositories of the teaching of

Genesis which enjoins men to grow and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. "We want to recall above all," the Pope said, "a collaboration in favor of mankind, of his life from conception until natural death, his dignity, his freedom, his rights, his self-development in a society which is not hostile, but friendly and favorable, where justice reigns, and where, in this nation, on the continents, and throughout the world, peace may rule, the *shalom* invoked by the lawgivers, the prophets and the sages of Israel."

The reactions of those present were enthusiastic. The Pope was interrupted seven times by applause. Many people had tears of emotion on their faces. It is perhaps too early to draw conclusions from this important religious event; commentators limited themselves to describe in luxuriant detail the solemn choreography of the encounter in the Synagogue. It is clear that the key to the reading of this event falls into the philosophical and epistemological sphere. Are we looking at a new ecumenical design, in the tradition of the Christian humanism developed by the great Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa?

Will the meeting between all religions convened by the Pope for Oct. 27 in Assisi be a step in this great ecumenical project? One thing is clear: The frenetic activities of the friends of the pro-Marxist "Theology of Liberation" to turn the Assisi meeting into an encounter between "pacifists" on the model of the mass meetings run by the Russian Orthodox Church, seems to be a futile waste of breath. The Pope sent a message of invitation to the Muslims and Hindus during his trip to India, and to the Jews in his Synagogue visit, in which the influence of the Theology of Liberation—at least, of the kind linked to the Russian Orthodox Church—is non-existent.