

# World & Nation

## Papal meeting with Jewish leaders termed 'unprecedented'

### Exchange raises hopes for consultative process

By Agostino Bono

Vatican City (NC) — Although Pope John Paul II's June meeting with Austrian President Kurt Waldheim caused initial outrage among world Jewish groups, it led two months later to important breakthroughs in Catholic-Jewish relations.

On the personal level, it produced what Jewish leaders described as an unprecedented give-and-take session with the pope, during which there were no prepared speeches, only spontaneous questions and answers focusing on Jewish complaints.

On an institutional level, Vatican officials pledged to develop ongoing contacts between Jewish groups and the powerful Vatican Secretariat of State, which is responsible for formulating Vatican policy on Israel and other international issues of Jewish concern.

One Jewish participant said the talks, significantly, dropped the distinction the Vatican had previously made between political and religious issues in Jewish affairs.

These breakthroughs were symbolized by separate meetings Sept. 1 of nine Jewish leaders with the pope and Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, papal secretary of state and the most powerful Vatican figure after the pope.

Jewish leaders had threatened to boycott a Sept. 11 papal meeting in Miami over the Waldheim issue and had asked for substan-

tive meetings to discuss the situation.

Jewish leaders interviewed after the meetings called the sessions positive, candid and friendly — although they said the talks did not resolve disagreements over the Waldheim visit.

These meetings "raise the relationship to a new plateau" and set in motion a consultation process which can avoid future Waldheim-type controversies, said Rabbi Mordecai Waxman, chairman of the International Jewish Committee for Inter-religious Consultations.

The committee is an umbrella group for Jewish organizations engaged in official dialogue with the Catholic Church.

The tone was set by the 65-minute private meeting with the pope.

"I've met him five times. This was the first dialogue," said Rabbi Leon Klenicki, director of interfaith affairs of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. "Anybody could say what he wanted."

At previous meetings with Jewish groups, the pope and Jewish representatives exchanged prepared speeches, the normal procedure when the pontiff meets with groups.

Jewish leaders said the pope did not directly answer their criticisms of his decision to meet Waldheim, who is accused by Jewish groups of committing war crimes as an officer in the German army during World War II. Waldheim has denied the charges.

But the Jewish delegation praised him for

recognizing "the awesome evil of the Shoah" and the importance of the modern state of Israel in Jewish religious life.

Shoah is the Hebrew word for the Holocaust, the killing of 6 million Jews by the Nazis during World War II.

The papal meeting was preceded by a 30-minute meeting with Cardinal Casaroli, the man chiefly responsible for formulating and applying Vatican policies on diplomatic and international issues.

Meeting with Cardinal Casaroli as part of an official Catholic-Jewish dialogue was "unprecedented because we have not met with the secretary of state in the past," said Rabbi Waxman.

This opens the door for Jewish leaders to raise such issues as Vatican diplomatic recognition of Israel as part of dialogue agendas. Israel is a political and a religious issue for Jews because the nation is seen as the "promised land" of God's ongoing covenant with his chosen people.

In the past, the Catholic dialogue team has operated under the auspices of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. But the Vatican considers the Israeli question as a political issue, and thus under the jurisdiction of the Secretariat of State and its sister organization, the Council for the Public Affairs of the Church. Both Vatican agencies are headed by Cardinal Casaroli.

Thus Vatican dialogue teams have not been officially authorized to deal with the issue.

"We were told in the past by the commission that this is not our problem. It has to be referred to the political department," said Rabbi Waxman.

The meeting with Cardinal Casaroli, however, produced a Catholic pledge to develop a "special mechanism" for the dialogue which will allow contacts between Jewish groups and the Secretariat of State.

"In addition, Cardinal Casaroli announced that he is ready from time to time to receive representatives of world Jewry," said Gerhart M. Riegner, co-chairman of the World Jewish Congress.

Jewish leaders said such contacts will allow them to raise other political-religious issues such as the problems Jewish populations face in various parts of the world.

"The dropping of the difference between the religious and the political in relation to Jewish affairs is in itself a very significant element," said Rabbi Waxman.

This "makes it possible to intertwine religious and political considerations with reference to the Jewish people," he said.


After the meetings, the Jewish leaders also pledged to join Catholics in opposing anti-Catholic activities.

The decision was welcomed by Bishop William H. Keeler of Harrisburg, Pa., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and a participant in the Sept. 1 meetings. He said he looked forward to working with U.S. Jewish groups.

"One of the lingering forms of religious prejudice in the United States is anti-Catholicism," said Bishop Keeler.

"There are political cartoons, remarks on television situation stories related to Catholic themes which if they were related to Jewish or other racial groups would evoke enormous cooperative protest," he said.

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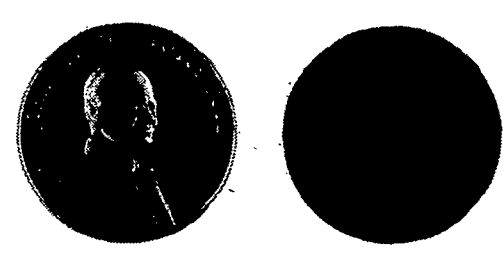
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