

COMMUNIQUE OF MEETING BETWEEN THE USCCB COMMITTEE ON
ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS
AND THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES
May 7, 2013 at the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York City

The semi-annual meeting of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (BCEIA) and the National Council of Synagogues was held at the Jewish theological Seminary in New York City on May 7. It addressed the topic: “Covenant and the Holy Land.” Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta, BCEIA dialogue chairman, presided at the morning session. Professor Burton Visotzky, Ph.D. of the Jewish Theological Seminary presented a paper on sources in the Bible and rabbinic literature that extol the Land of Israel as the optimal place to fulfill the covenant with God. He reported that love of the Holy Land and the centrality of Jerusalem are frequent themes in those classic sources but that rhetoric has often obscured this reality. Nevertheless, nostalgia for return to an idealized Holy Land, Eretz Yisrael, lasted for 2,000 years. The tales the sages told helped Jews to form a covenantal reality with a deep attachment to the Land of Israel.

Professor Phillip Cunningham, Ph.D. of St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia responded to Prof. Visotzky and noted that there is no Catholic theology per se of “the Land of Israel” because the concept of “the land” is significant in Catholic thinking principally in its eschatology or religious understanding of the end of days. Because Catholics emphasize the universality of God and his call to holiness for all peoples, the notion of universalism overrides that of nationalism in Catholic theology. Still, throughout the centuries, many have made their pilgrimages to the Holy Lands—the land of Jesus and his early followers. Subsequently, supersessionist Christian theologians taught that the Jews had forfeited their right to the land of Israel when they supposedly rejected Jesus and were consigned to eternal homelessness and wandering. But since Vatican Council II and its historic pronouncement, *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church has clarified its own view that Jews are not to be thought of as forsaken by God or without an eternally valid covenant with him. Catholic thought has only begun to explore reaction to the 1948 creation of the State of Israel, while distinguishing it from the theological notion of the “Holy Land” as only those sites in Israel sacred to Christians. Exploring the relationship of biblical texts about the “Holy Land” with the modern State of Israel is a major part of that effort.

Rabbi David Straus of the Main Line Reform Temple in Philadelphia presided over the afternoon business session. Father Dennis McManus, Ph.D., USCCB Consultant for Jewish Affairs described the new-elected Pope Francis, the first Jesuit ever to assume papal office, as a very able man, with a simple, direct and kind manner, deeply concerned about the poor. He is above all a practical pastor who likes to get things done and will probably reform the Roman Curia. He has enjoyed a warm and cordial relationship with the Jews of Buenos Aires in Argentina; he has visited their synagogues and spoken from their pulpits, fostering close relations there between the Jewish and Catholic communities.

Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal of the National Council of Synagogues gave a report on the slow but steady progress in concluding the fundamental Agreement between the

Vatican and the State of Israel. He noted that President Shimon Peres of Israel held a cordial meeting with the new Pope who has accepted his invitation to visit Israel in the near future. The President also reported on the new hate crimes department of the Israeli police that is dealing with the spreading crimes against Christian and Muslim properties and holy places. So far, 165 cases have been investigated and 58 people have been arrested for hate crimes with 31 indictments.

Three theological students from different Jewish seminaries were special guests at this meeting and all expressed their gratitude and pleasure at attending the session. Additional seminarians and graduate students in religion will be invited to future meetings in order to engage the younger generation in interreligious work.

Archbishop Gregory, Rabbi Alvin Berkun of Pittsburgh, Father Professor Lawrence Frizzell of Seton Hall University and others then described some of the programs and educational projects designed to encourage warmer relations between local Jewish and Catholic religious communities. Additionally, possible plans for a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the historic document on relations with the Jews, *Nostra Aetate*, were offered for further consideration. Final discussion was held regarding the date, place and topics for the next joint meeting of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue group in the fall of 2013. Rabbi Straus and Archbishop Gregory then adjourned the meeting.