

## **Reflections on the Millennium**

### **A Statement by Delegates of the National Council of Synagogues and the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops**

**May 5, 1998**

The turn of the millennium in the year 2000 is increasingly the focus of social and religious currents in virtually every facet of contemporary culture. From the most secular to the most religiously serious, themes of introspection, intergroup reconciliation, and idealistic aspirations for peace, justice, and environmental concern are manifest, and are to be encouraged.

We speak as Jews and Christians who have benefited from the dialogue that has marked the last thirty years since the Second Vatican Council. We speak at the end of a Century that Pope John Paul II has called "the Century of the Shoah." Because of our dialogue and commitment to continuing it, we can look forward to the next century with greater hope and confidence than might have been thought possible just a generation ago.

We speak as religious leaders of our communities, rabbis, bishops, clergy and lay leaders dedicated to the path of reconciliation between our peoples. We note the expressions of teshuvah ("repentance") that have been uttered by Conferences of Catholic Bishops in Europe with regard to the Holocaust and the too often tragic centuries that went before it, as well as the recent statement by the Holy See, We Remember: Reflections on the Shoah.

We also note the consistent teaching of the Holy See since the Second Vatican Council acknowledging the permanent validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people. In place of past efforts of religious groups to proselytize one another, we share a mutual respect for our two faith traditions, each of which, in the words of Pope John Paul II, "carry with them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God."

We are united in our concern to overcome the spread of religious indifference. This represents "one of the outstanding phenomena of our times, especially in the Euro-American culture. Many people live as if God did not exist." We remain conscious of the distinctiveness of each of our faith traditions. We seek to avoid the inauthenticity of syncretism. We are committed to work together to bring a positive collective image of religious affiliation to the American public. In this regard, we plan to assess the portrayal of the religious community in the secular media and in other modes of contemporary communication.

In this country, blessed with an ongoing dialogue between Catholics and Jews of depth and substance, we have the opportunity to apply our institutional and academic resources to the task it mandates to look anew at the long history our peoples share, and to seek by joint studies a healing of memory in order to frame a common understanding upon which to base educational programming for future generations. While much work remains to be done in this regard, we note as well that a solid beginning has been made since the Second Vatican Council, a record of achievement which offers hope for further progress toward mutual understanding.

At the end of a century which has seen in the Shoah the ultimate form of dehumanization of a whole people, we wish to affirm and proclaim together the sacredness of the human person. Joint reflection on our Shared Scripture, in particular the Creation accounts of Genesis, teach us that humanity is made in the image of God. Here, we would recommend to dialogue groups around the country two documents issued by the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee. These documents draw out for consideration shared themes drawn from our common understanding of Creation. The first, *On the Sanctity of Marriage and the Family* was issued in Jerusalem in 1994. The second, *Care for the Environment: A Religious Act* was issued in Rome in 1998. Together, these statements can enrich local events related to the millennium.

The year 2000 has been proclaimed by the Catholic Church as a *Jubilee Year*. The Hebrew Scriptures in Leviticus 25 define the meaning of the Jubilee. Both in this chapter of the Bible and in Papal reflections upon this theme, one can see a three-fold obligation placed on the People of God as a mandate for national reflection. These obligations have significance, we believe, not only for Catholics and Jews working together in joint study and action but also for the renewal of our American society as a whole.

1. **The Liberation of Slaves – Human Liberation.** Consideration of this theme (Lev. 25:39) can involve local communities in confronting the inhuman conditions of bigotry, exploitation and violence that enslave such a large part of America's inhabitants to this day, and in planning and implementing educational programs and social activities to address the problems jointly studied.
2. **Return of Property – Economic Liberation.** This legislation (Lev. 25:13) was revolutionary in introducing moral guidance into economics. It sought to prevent the permanent accumulation of land in the hands of the few, to alleviate poverty, and to give people another chance for achieving economic fulfillment. Its underlying principles challenge our discussions today with regard to welfare, tax reform and other issues within our country.
3. **Resting the Land – Ecological Liberation.** Respect for the land (Lev. 25:11) and the seas can be stressed here, as well as humanity's role as a steward (Genesis 2:15) responsible to God for nurturing and caring for all forms of life.

Finally, as we approach the millennium, we can develop channels to work together to witness to that which is shared in our spiritual heritage. Not only do we bring to bear on the profound problems of our day the riches of our separate yet related traditions, but we work together to prepare the way for the coming of the Reign ("kingdom") of God, for which we both pray, as a task of *Tikkun Olam* ("perfecting" or "repairing" the world).

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