



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE CHIEF RABBI OF ROME
DR RICCARDO DI SEGNI
FOR THE CENTENARY OF THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE OF ROME**

*To the most distinguished Dr Riccardo Di Segni
Chief Rabbi of Rome*

Shalom!

"Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!
Hinneh ma tov u-ma na'im, shevet akhim gam yakhad!" (Ps 133 [132]: 1).

1. With deep joy I join the Jewish Community of Rome which is celebrating the centenary of the Great Synagogue of Rome, a symbol and a reminder of the millennial presence in this city of the people of the Covenant of Sinai. For more than 2,000 years your community has been an integral part of life in the city; it can boast of being the most ancient Jewish Community in Western Europe and of having played an important role in spreading Judaism on this Continent. Today's commemoration, therefore, acquires a special significance for religious, cultural and social life in the capital and cannot but have a very special resonance in the heart of the Bishop of Rome! Since I am unable to attend in person, I have asked my Vicar General for the Diocese of Rome, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, to represent me; he is accompanied by Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Holy See's Commission for Relations with the Jews. They formally express my desire to be with you on this day.

In offering you my respectful greeting, distinguished Dr Riccardo Di Segni, I extend my cordial thoughts to all the Members of the Community, to their President, Mr Leone Elio Paserman, and to all who are gathered to witness once again to the importance and vigour of the religious patrimony that is celebrated every Saturday in the Great Synagogue of Rome. I would like to extend a special greeting to Professor Elio Toaff, Chief Rabbi emeritus; with his open and generous spirit,

he welcomed me to the Synagogue when I visited it on 13 April 1986. The event lives on, engraved in my mind and heart as a symbol of new developments in relations between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church in recent decades after periods that were at times difficult and troubled.

2. Today's celebration, in whose joy we all readily join, recalls the first century of this majestic Synagogue. It stands on the banks of the Tiber, witnessing with the harmony of its architectural lines to faith and to praise of the Almighty. The Christian Community of Rome, through the Successor of Peter, joins you in thanking the Lord for this happy occasion. As I said during the Visit I mentioned, we greet you as our "beloved brothers" in the faith of Abraham, our Patriarch, of Isaac and Jacob, of Sarah and Rebecca, Rachael and Leah. In writing to the Romans (cf. Rom 11: 16-18), St Paul was already speaking of the holy root of Israel on which pagans are grafted onto Christ, "for the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11: 29), and you continue to be the first-born people of the Covenant (Liturgy of Good Friday, General Intercessions, *For the Jewish People*).

You have been citizens of this City of Rome for more than 2,000 years, even before Peter the fisherman and Paul in chains came here sustained from within by the breath of the Spirit. Not only the Sacred Scriptures, in which to a large extent we share, not only the liturgy but also very ancient art forms witness to the Church's deep bond with the Synagogue; this is because of that spiritual heritage which without being divided or rejected has been made known to believers in Christ and constitutes an inseparable bond between us and you, the people of the Torah of Moses, the good olive tree onto which a new branch was grafted (cf. Rom 11: 17).

In the Middle Ages, some of your great thinkers, such as Yehuda ha-Levi and Moses Maimonides, sought to examine how it would be possible to worship the Lord and serve suffering humanity together, thereby paving the way to peace. The great philosopher and theologian, well known to St Thomas Aquinas, Maimonides of Cordoba (1138-1204), the eighth centenary of whose death we are commemorating this year, expressed the hope that better relations between Jews and Christians might lead "the whole world to unanimous adoration of God as has been said: "I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord" (Zep 3: 9)" (*Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhòt Melakhim XI, 4, ed. Jerusalem, Mossad Harav Kook).

3. We have covered much ground together since that 13 April 1986 when the Bishop of Rome - the first since the Apostle Peter - paid you a visit: it was the embrace of brothers who were meeting again after a long period fraught with misunderstanding, rejection and distress. With the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council inaugurated by Bl. Pope John XXIII, and especially after the publication of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (28 October 1965), the Catholic Church opened her arms wide to you, remembering that "Jesus was and will always remain a Jew" (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in*

preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church [1985]: III, 12). During the Second Vatican Council, the Church clearly and definitively reaffirmed her rejection of all expressions of anti-Semitism. However, the sincere deploration and condemnation of those hostilities directed against the Jewish people that have often marked history do not suffice; we must also develop friendship, esteem and brotherly relations with them. These friendly relations, reinforced and nurtured after the session of the Council in the last century, saw us united in commemorating the victims of the Shoah, especially those who were wrenched from their families and from your beloved Jewish Community in Rome in October 1943 and interned in Auschwitz. May their memory be blessed and induce us to work as brothers and sisters.

Moreover, it is only right to remember all those Christians, motivated by natural kindness and an upright conscience and sustained by their faith and the teaching of the Gospel, who reacted courageously also in this city of Rome and offered the persecuted Jews practical help in the form of solidarity and assistance, sometimes even at the risk of their own lives. May their blessed memory live on, together with the certainty that for them, as for all the "just of nations", the *tzaddiqim*, a place is prepared in the future world in the resurrection of the dead. Nor can we forget, in addition to the official pronouncements, the often hidden action of the Apostolic See which went to the aid of the Jews in danger in many ways, as has been recognized by authoritative representatives of it (cf. *We remember: A reflection on the "Shoah"*, 16 March 1998).

4. With help from Heaven, in taking this road to brotherhood, the Church has not hesitated to express deep sorrow at "the failures of her sons and daughters in every age" (*ibid.*) and, in an act of repentance (*teshuvà*), has asked forgiveness for their responsibility connected in any way with the scourges of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism (*ibid.*). During the Great Jubilee, we prayed for God's mercy in the Basilica sacred to the memory of Peter in Rome, and in Jerusalem, the city beloved by all Jews, the heart of that Land which is Holy for us all. The Successor of Peter went on pilgrimage to the hills of Judea and paid homage to the victims of the Shoah at Yad Vashem; he prayed beside you on Mount Zion at the foot of that Holy Place.

Unfortunately, the mere thought of the Holy Land gives rise in our hearts to anxiety and sorrow because of the violence that continues to stain that region and the excessive flow of innocent blood poured out by both Israelis and Palestinians that hinders peace in justice from dawning. Today, therefore, in faith and hope, we are addressing a fervent prayer to the Eternal One, to the God of *Shalom*, so that enmity and hatred may no longer overpower those who turn to our father, Abraham - Jews, Christians and Muslims - and may lead the way to a clear knowledge of the ties that bind them and the responsibilities that lie on each one's shoulders.

We still have a long way to go: the God of justice and peace, of mercy and of reconciliation calls us to collaborate without wavering in our world today which is scarred by disputes and hostilities. If we can join our hearts and hands to respond to the divine call, the light of the Eternal One will shine close to us to illumine all peoples and show us paths to peace, to *Shalom*. Let us walk them

with one heart.

5. Not only in Jerusalem and in the Land of Israel but also here in Rome, we can do many things together: for those close to us who are suffering marginalization, for immigrants and foreigners, for the weak and the poverty-stricken. Sharing the values of the defence of life and the dignity of every human person, we can increase our fraternal cooperation in concrete ways.

Our meeting today is, as it were, in preparation for your imminent solemnity of *Shavu"ot* and of our Pentecost which proclaim the fullness of our respective paschal celebrations. May these feasts see us united in praying David's paschal *Hallel*.

*"Hallelu et Adonay kol goim
shabbehuHu kol ha-ummim
ki gavar "alenu khasdo
we-emet Adonay le-"olam".*

*"Laudate Dominum, omnes gentes, collaudate Eum, omnes populi.
Quoniam confirmata est super nos misericordia eius,
et veritas Domini manet in aeternum" Hallelu-Yah (Ps 117[116]).*

From the Vatican, 22 May 2004

IOANNES PAULUS II