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Audience with the delegation of the “American Jewish Committee”

At 11.40 this morning, in the Consistory Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience a delegation of the American Jewish Committee.

The following is the Pope’s address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear friends,

I offer you a warm welcome to the Vatican. Your organization has had close contacts with the successors of Peter since the beginning of the official dialogue between the Catholic Church and Judaism. Already at the Second Vatican Council, when a new direction in our relations took place, among the Jewish observers was the distinguished Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel of the *American Jewish Committee*. Your commitment to Jewish-Catholic dialogue goes back to the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, a milestone in our journey of fraternal rediscovery. I am pleased that throughout this time we have been able to maintain good relations and enhance them further.

Cultivating good fraternal relations is a gift and at the same time a call from God. In this context, I would like to share with you an event that occurred in your part of the world. A young Catholic was sent to the front-line and experienced first-hand the horrors of the Second World War. On returning to the United States, he began to start a family. After much work, he was finally able to buy a bigger house. He bought it from a Jewish family. At the entrance was the *mezuzah* and this father did not want it removed during the renovations of the house: it had to remain exactly there, at the entrance. He passed on to his children the importance of that sign. He told them, one of whom was a priest, that this little “box” beside the door should be looked at each time when entering and leaving the house, because it held the secret for making a family strong and making humanity a family.

Written there was what every generation must never forget: to love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (cf *Deut* 6:4). Dear friends, we are called together to create a homely and familial

environment, and to choose divine love with all our strength which will inspire respect and appreciation for the religion of others. This is no mere sentiment, it is our future.

Today, 8 March, I would also like to say a few words about the irreplaceable contribution of women in building a world that can be a home for all. Women make the world beautiful, they protect it and keep it alive. They bring the grace of renewal, the embrace of inclusion, and the courage to give of oneself. Peace, then, is born of women, it arises and is rekindled by the tenderness of mothers. Thus the dream of peace becomes a reality when we look towards women. It is not by chance that in the account of Genesis the woman comes from the side of the man while he is sleeping (cf *Gen 2:21*). Women, that is, have their origins close to a heart and a dream. They therefore bring the dream of love into the world. If we take to heart the importance of the future, if we dream of a future peace, we need to give space to women.

At present, however, a source of great concern to me is the spread, in many places, of a climate of wickedness and fury, in which an excessive and depraved hatred is taking root. I think especially of the outbreak of anti-Semitic attacks in various countries. Today I also wish to reiterate that it is necessary to be vigilant about such a phenomenon: "History teaches us where even the slightest perceptible forms of anti-Semitism can lead: the human tragedy of the Shoah in which two-thirds of European Jewry were annihilated" (Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable*, 47). I stress that for a Christian any form of antisemitism is a rejection of one's own origins, a complete contradiction. We have to do as that father did, who witnessed many tragic things, yet did not tire of transmitting to his children the foundations of love and respect. And we must look at the world with the eyes of a mother, with the gaze of peace.

In the fight against hatred and antisemitism, an important tool is interreligious dialogue, aimed at promoting a commitment to peace, mutual respect, the protection of life, religious freedom, and the care of creation. Jews and Christians, moreover, share a rich spiritual heritage, which allows us to do much good together. At a time when the West is exposed to a depersonalizing secularism, it falls to believers to seek out each other and to cooperate in making divine love more visible for humanity; and to carry out concrete gestures of closeness to counter the growth of indifference. In Genesis, Cain, after having killed Abel, says: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (*Gen 4:9*). Before the murder that takes life, there was the indifference that cancels out the truth: yes, Cain, you really were your brother's keeper! You, like all of us, by God's will. In a world where the distance between the many who have little and the few who have much grows every day, we are called to take care of the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters: the poor, the weak, the sick, children, and the elderly.

In serving humanity, as in our dialogue, young people are waiting to be involved more fully; they want to dream and are open to discovering new ideals. I want to emphasize, therefore, the importance of the formation of future generations in Jewish-Christian dialogue. The shared commitment in the area of educating the young is also an effective means of countering violence and opening new paths of peace with all.

Dear friends, in thanking you for your visit, I extend my best wishes for your commitment to promoting dialogue, enabling a fruitful exchange between religions and cultures, which is so precious for our future, and for peace.
Shalom!
