

Israeli rabbi speaks of interfaith cooperation in Vatican

By Lisa Palmieri, The Jerusalem Post, 17 October 2010



Vatican City - Rabbi David Rosen delivered a historic speech on Wednesday to Pope Benedict XVI as over 250 bishops gathered in the Vatican's Synod Hall for the Special Assembly on the Middle East. On Thursday, Sunni and Shi'ite representatives spoke.

These three religious leaders are the only non-Christian guests at the October 10- 24 synod. In different ways, they each painted a picture of a difficult but possible coexistence between the three monotheistic religions in the cradle of their birth, based on recent advances in interreligious dialogue and reciprocal respect for religious and cultural pluralism.

Rosen, adviser to Israel's Chief Rabbinate, and the American Jewish Committee's international director for interfaith affairs, was chosen as world Jewry's sole representative.

He is the second rabbi to have been thus honored, preceded at the 2008 Synod on the Bible by Haifa Chief Rabbi She'ar Yashuv Cohen.

After speaking, Rosen, accompanied by Israel's Ambassador to the Holy See Mordechai Lewy and this reporter, who is also the AJC's liaison to the Holy See, met privately with the pope.

Rabbi Rosen thanked Benedict for his continued commitment to the Catholic Church's respectful dialogue with Judaism, and the pope noted with appreciation Rosen's "empathy with suffering on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" and his "consideration for the importance and wellbeing of Christians 'as a barometer of the health or infirmity' of societies in the Middle East."

In his speech, Rosen paid tribute to the Israeli Christians' achievements in education and their outstanding role in "promoting interreligious understanding and cooperation in the country."

Rosen said that although he was "fully conscious of the carnage of the recent past in the streets of our cities" and the "ongoing threats... from those openly committed in the destruction and extermination of Israel..., we must strive to do all we can to

alleviate hardship..., especially as they pertain to the Christian communities in Jerusalem and environs.”

He went on to say that “for me personally as an Israeli Jerusalemite, the distressing situation in the Holy Land and the suffering of so many on the different sides of the political divide, is a source of pain...,” even though “it is used and abused to heighten various tensions that go well beyond the geographical context of the conflict itself.”

The speeches Thursday by the Shi’ite representative, Iranian Ayatollah Seyed Mostafa Mohaghegh Ahmadabadi (professor of law and a member of the Iranian Academy of Sciences), and the Sunni representative, Dr. Muhammad al-Sammak, political councillor to the mufti of Lebanon, revealed substantial differences between them.

While Ahmadabadi ostensibly embraced respect for cultural and religious diversity and the necessity for interreligious understanding, because “we share each other’s destinies,” Sammak took a realistic look at the lack of “equal citizenship” for Christians in many Middle East countries and the “misunderstanding of the spirit of Islamic teachings” that lead to “negative intellectual and political content” and “worrisome and harmful actions bad for us all” resulting in Christians emigrating and a “culture of extremism” for Islam.

In calling Christians “pioneers of modern Arabic renaissance,” Sammak made a brief reference to their also being in “the forefront to confront and resist occupation, defend violated national rights, especially in Jerusalem and in occupied Palestine in general.”

Chatting with the press before going to the synod, Ahmadabadi spoke of the Koranic teaching of respect for Christianity and Judaism, then proceeded to attribute the origin of contemporary Islamic and Christian fundamentalism to Israeli fundamentalist groups.

These were the only references to Israel made by the two Muslim representatives – aside from including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a long list of causes for unrest affecting Christian life in a context that largely condemned extremism and defended “true” Islamic teachings.

Regarding freedom of conscience, a difficult and recurring theme of the synod, both men pointed to the historic origins of negative attitudes by Muslim countries towards conversions from Islam. Due to past wars between Islam and Christianity, conversion was equated with treason.

“This concept must be changed,” Sammak said, pointing out that the Koran forbids the coercion of conscience and does not recognize coerced adherence to Islam.

Asked whether he agreed with Rosen’s statement that Christians could become “blessed peacemakers in the city whose name means peace,” the Lebanese political councillor replied, “I subscribe blindly to anything said by Rabbi David Rosen.”