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Rome's Chief Rabbi: Jews and Catholics Are Brothers

Interview With Riccardo Di Segni

By Giancarlo Giojelli

ROME, JAN. 18, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The 22nd annual Jewish-Christian dialogue day was held in Italy on Monday. The religious leaders continued with a program that began in 2005 to focus on the Ten Commandments.

The annual Jan. 17 event began in 1990 sponsored by the Italian bishops' conference and Jewish leaders.

This year, the discussion turned to the Commandment: Honor your father and your mother.

For the occasion, ZENIT is publishing an Italian Radio and Television (RAI) interview with the chief rabbi of Rome, Riccardo Di Segni.

Q: Honor your father and your mother, but whose children are we?

Di Segni: According to our tradition, we have two biological parents and tradition tells us that in reality the co-participants [in creation] are three: There is the divine part and the biological part. Then there can also be the educational parts, which are not reserved to parents. Sometimes even the parents can be foreign and negative in an educational process. Hence, "paternity and maternity " is a concept that is broader. Many commentators say that from the commandment "honor your father and your mother," all the other Commandments stem.

Q: What does it mean to honor one's father and mother?

Di Segni: According to tradition, there is a relationship of respect that is configured in important formalities, by which one must recognize in the parent an authority to respect in everything. And then there is also a relationship that can become a relationship of sustenance, material sustenance and wider in the course of the years, when the relationships are inverted: when one is small, one depends absolutely on one's parents and when the years go by it is the parents that in some way depend on the children. Now, at this time, respect for one's parents is transformed into an even more important commitment.

In the Semitic languages the word merciful, which describes the Omnipotent, has the same root, "rachem" in Hebrew, "rahim" in Arabic, as the word uterus, and indicates the attitude of the mother who receives the child in the womb. In the Bible, God is compared to a mother who does not forget her children, and John Paul II also spoke of him in this way

Q: Therefore maternity describes divine mercy?

Di Segni: We say that in a schematic representation there is -- in the image that we have of the Divine -- a part of justice, of severity, and a part of love. In this opposition, or perhaps synthesis, of different aspects one could practically say that the masculine part represents love. There is also this linguistic support that confirms it. However, it is the Bible itself that uses the expression that God has mercy on us as the Father "Rachem aw alwalim," as the Father has mercy on the children. Hence, there are no exclusivities in Mercy, as there are no exclusivities in Justice.

Q: Then, what does it mean to be brothers? Do Christians and Jews have a common Father and Mother?

Di Segni: The whole of humanity has a father and a mother in common if there is meaning in the story of the Bible that the whole of humanity derives from Adam and then from Noah, all of us must acknowledge we have a common predecessor so no one can say -- our texts say this -- he is superior to another, because we have a common origin. In this sense, the whole of humanity is brotherhood. Then there are three human groups linked more closely and undoubtedly the link that exists between Jews and Christians is a link of particular closeness, which can be represented under the image of brotherhood, with all the ups and downs that can exist in brotherhood.

Q: The word dialogue can have a strong or weak meaning. There can be, let us say, a diplomatic dialogue, which does not affect life, and a dialogue that involves and changes the person. The relationship between man and God in the Bible is often a dramatic dialogue. Hence, what is the dialogue between Christians and Jews?

Di Segni: I would say that it is a necessity that we cannot avoid, even if, as experience shows, it is a difficult experience because it must overcome a whole series of obstacles placed by history, by theology and by everyday life. The fact that it is difficult, however, must not exempt one from addressing it, having also a minimum of hope and a minimum of serenity that something good will come out of it.

Q: You lived John Paul II's visits to the synagogue and last year you received Benedict XVI. What do you make of those meetings?

Di Segni: They were different visits. Different because of the time and the personality. The first was an epochal event, which marked a turn in history, symbolically. The second was an event of confirmation of a line. It is in these events ... but the last was not an event in which everything went peacefully, there was a whole backdrop of controversies and I insisted much that in any case it take place because I believe that what it leaves is the sensation that beyond that which divides there are common elements and common obligations, above all the common obligation to walk together, which we cannot shun. Arriving at the synagogue, Benedict XVI paused before the stone that remembers the deported Roman Jews.

Q: Is the Day of Remembrance only a dutiful remembrance or a timely warning?

Di Segni: Both things necessarily. The Day of Remembrance means that it is necessary to pause and reflect, to understand what happened, to remember and then -- as all the days of remembrance should be -- not to stay in the past but to project things in the future and as this is a problem that affects the health of the society, it is absolutely necessary to pause to reflect.

Q: Do you think religious liberty is a danger, the life of believers threatened because of the faith?

Di Segni: Yes, absolutely.

Q: From whence comes the danger?

Di Segni: It comes from every possible form of intolerance, which can be political intolerance, intolerance of dictatorial regimes or even religious intolerance.

Q: In your judgment, are religions a motive or a pretext for war and violence?

Di Segni: Ah! It can be both. Sometimes it can be an easy excuse but at times it is, in fact, the religious structure itself that is intolerant. Why speak of religion as if it was a beautiful thing by definition ... religions must be discussed, suffered, seen and also improved in some way.

Q: How do Italians who are in contact with other cultures, who live in other parts of the world, live the relationship between the great monotheistic religions?

Di Segni: To go around the world is a great lesson to understand the differences. Today, Italy is free from provincialism, the human landscape we see walking through the streets of any Italian city is very changed from what it was 20 years ago. It is essential to know the differences to understand that humanity does not stop with someone who has a face like mine but that we must understand, above all, that there are these differences, and then learn to live together.

Q: Is diversity a danger or a richness?

Di Segni: Difference must be a richness.

Q: Differences are being seen also in Israel. Do you have a message for Italian Jews who have returned to the land of Israel?

Di Segni: They are close brothers and we share hopes and experiences, to which we always return with affection.

Q: The prophet Zechariah and also Isaiah, if I'm not mistaken, speaks of a day in which Jews and Gentiles will eat together on the feast of Sukkot, which recalls the pilgrimage in the desert. Is this common table only a utopia or a prophecy that in some way already operates in the present?

Di Segni: Judaism lives from utopia and hence the fact that it is a utopia does not mean that it won't take place but that instead it must take place and in our prayers we confirm the concept that nothing that has been said by the mouth of the prophets has failed and therefore sooner or later it must be fulfilled. In some way some little thing is happening but it is still a long way away.

Q: The desert is still long?

Di Segni: Yes. However, the situation of the desert could be an ideal situation.

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