

## **Rabbi Freilich Shares his Experience of Attending the Historic World Convivence of Rabbis, Cardinals and Bishops Organised by the Neo-catechumenal Way of the Catholic Church, supported by the Vatican**

A few weeks ago I was invited by Fr Michael Moore of the Catholic Church in Perth to be one of the rabbinic participants in a conference of rabbis, cardinals and bishops organised by the Neo-catechumenal Way, which was held at the grand structure and which was consecrated by Pope John Paul II – the Domus Galilaeae - overlooking the Kineret in Israel. The Domus Galilaeae stands on the exact spot where Jesus gave his Sermon on the Mount.

### **Mincha & Mass**

I was a little wary of what this conference was all about.

It was explained to me that the spirit of this conference, that the Catholic Church through the Neo-catechumenal Way, was to show reconciliation with, as Pope John Paul II called the Jewish people, the 'older brother', and that atonement be made for the atrocities of the Holocaust when many in the world turned a blind eye. All the expenses, including the fares of this conference would be met by the Catholic Church. I, however, was honoured to be invited to such an occasion where unity is being promoted, did not wish to accept the expenses for the fare and told my hosts that I would be returning it in the form of a donation. I was accommodated at the Domus Galilaeae, along with around 180 invited rabbis of all persuasions from around the globe, but I was the only rabbinic representative from Australia. The participants from the Jewish community ranged from Charedim to Reconstructionist. Throughout the conference everybody, including the Catholic clergy, kept kosher with a shomer (rabbinic kashrut supervisor) being on site the whole time. The Catholic hosts had arranged a beit midrash to be set up with a sefer torah so that minyonim (prayer services) could be held by the participating rabbis three times a day, whilst the catholic hosts held their mass and communion in the church next door. It was a wonderful feeling of respect and unity.

### **In the Spirit of Reconciliation & Atonement**

I relaxed when I realised that this conference was about reinforcing the spirit of Pope John Paul II who was the first Pope who recognised the right of return of the Jewish people to their spiritual homeland. The Pope described anti-Semitism as a sin against G-d, he was the first pope to insist on the enduring validity of G-d's covenant with the Jewish people, the first to visit a synagogue, the first to describe the Jewish people as the elder brother of Christianity, the first to bring Holocaust commemoration to the Vatican, the first to routinely incorporate meetings with Jewish leaders in his pilgrimage around the world, the first to instruct the Vatican to establish diplomatic relations with the State of Israel, overriding concerns from some of the Vatican diplomats who feared an anti-Christian backlash as a result. In the year 2000, when visiting Jerusalem he put a note in the Western Wall which read "G-d of our fathers, we are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and ask for your forgiveness. We wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the covenant." Despite this I must point out, being true to Jewish tradition, there were a few of our co-religionists that complained that he didn't removed his cross at the Kotel. I raised this at the conference, by stating, "Why should he? He wasn't Jewish." No doubt we would be offended if we were asked to remove our yarmulke or Magen Dovid from around our neck if we were at a catholic gathering. But so respectful were the Catholic participants at this conference that they removed all crosses from the walls of the Domus and tucked their crosses, that usually rested outside their garments, inside so as not to offend the rabbis. I said that I felt saddened that they needed to do this as it was totally unnecessary.

### **Highlights of the Conference**

One of the highlights of the conference was when everybody attending- rabbis, cardinals and bishops sang together, accompanied by a full orchestra, Shema Yisrael. On the first day of the conference, everybody was welcomed by the Minister for Tourism for the Israeli government, Izi Landau, who pointed out that this was indeed an historic event in world history. On welcoming everybody, he also made the point that by coming to Israel, the holy land, they were visiting the safest country in the middle east.

The Israeli government's 'ambassador' to the Vatican, Rabbi David Rosen delivered a brilliant address as did Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, one of the heads of the conservative movement in America. Nobody pulled any punches as to the atrocities of the past, everything was open and transparent and discussed with great respect and in warm friendship.

One of the main cardinals, originally head of the Catholic Church in Australia, Cardinal George Pell, who is now in charge of the Vatican finances also delivered a powerful address, emphasising Pope John Paul II's legacy of love and respect between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people, as well as the last pope, Pope Benedict who referred to the Jewish's people as their father in faith. He also noted the closeness of the present Pope Francis to the Jewish Communities.

I raised the question of the whereabouts of the holy vestments and artefacts from the Second Temple taken away by Titus to Rome in the year 70 CE and was assured that the vestments are not in the Vatican vaults as everything in the Vatican vaults is microchipped and listed. It is believed that they were taken by other sources and melted down for the gold. In summary it won't be too long before the present Pope allows more access to the Vatican.

### **A Legacy of Love & Respect**

I believe that this conference should be advertised to the world as an example of what true religion is about ie. the respect, love and unity between all faiths without one trying to take over the other but working in harmony for the good and peace of humanity.