

John Cardinal O'Connor: An Appreciation

CHAIM HERZOG

John Cardinal O'Connor played an important part, both on stage and above all behind the scenes, in the developments that led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Vatican. The main channel for contact and negotiations was directly with the Vatican, in which such important personalities as Cardinal Casserolli played a major part over the years. However, undoubtedly, Cardinal O'Connor with his seat in New York was more conscious of the anomaly of the lack of existence of relations between Israel and the Vatican than other Catholic leaders throughout the world. He certainly would have been aware of the problems created by the allegations against the Vatican's behavior towards the Nazi oppression of the Jewish people during World War II. The

debate on this issue continues as an historic debate, but somebody in the position of Cardinal O'Connor would have felt the intensity of feeling amongst the public in the largest Jewish community in the world.

I had occasion to meet Cardinal O'Connor three times in the course of my terms of office as President of the State of Israel.

A small political storm blew up early in 1987 in connection with the visit of the Cardinal to Jerusalem. He was obviously visiting on the instructions of the Vatican, which was aware of the importance of his constituency in New York. However, it was clear that the hard-liners in the Vatican had made conditions which placed obstacles in the way of Cardinal O'Connor visiting leaders in Israel, and thus in fact of recognizing the State. The Apostolic Delegate had been calling on me in the Presidency, and therefore it seemed strange that Cardinal O'Connor would not call on me. The proposal was that Cardinal O'Connor would visit me "at my home" in Jerusalem and the next day would call on Foreign Minister Peres at his apartment. In fact, my office was in Beit Hanassi, the Presidential Residence, and our home was in the upper floor above the offices.

Cardinal O'Connor arrived in a clerical day suit but not in his official robes. I received him in my office, and no mention was made during the meeting about the debate whether or not he would visit me. I gave him a rundown about the situation, about Israel's relations with the Arab world, and the relations between the Jews of Israel and the Arabs of Israel.

Our second encounter took place on the occasion of my State Visit to the United States of America in November 1987 — indeed the first State Visit made by a President of Israel to the United States.

In the evening, after the Sabbath, Cardinal O'Connor called on me at his request. He told me that he was due very soon to

visit Castro in Cuba, at his invitation. The Pope was planning a visit the next year to the Soviet Union to mark 1,000 years of Christianity in Russia. The main problem was the Pope's desire to visit Lithuania, about which the Russians were not too keen.

Then in a very matter-of-fact manner he said that the Pope could decide to come one day to Israel. My reaction was that this would be a very important development. The previous visit by a Pope had taken place in 1964 during the Presidency of President Shazar, when Pope Paul VI had visited. We were very unhappy at that time about his visit, because he had not in fact visited the State of Israel officially, and had entered Israel from the West Bank in the area of Megiddo. We would be very happy to welcome the Pope and accord him all the honors due to his exalted position, on condition that his visit to Israel was in accordance with the requirements of a visit by a Head of State to a sovereign state. We would not agree to his entering by any side door, and would insist that all the mutual courtesies and honors normal on such occasions would be maintained. The Cardinal's reply was that this was understood. He said he would be seeing the Pope the following month, as a member of a special public advisory body of fifteen Cardinals, and that the Pope's visit would be part of the historic reconciliation which was taking place between the Vatican and Israel.

He was sorry to note that the Pope's speech to a Jewish delegation in Miami had not been understood. In all previous references to Israel, the Vatican had emphasized three points: one, the Palestinian homeland; two, the special status of Jerusalem; three, the position of the Christian church in the Middle East. In his remarks in Miami, the Pope had omitted any reference to the second point, namely, the status of Jerusalem. Furthermore, for the first time the Pope had referred to "the State of Israel" and "the Israeli nation." This all our experts, according to him, had overlooked and ignored.

Our third meeting took place in 1992, when Cardinal O'Connor visited Israel and called on me. At this stage negotiations were already afoot between the Vatican and the government of Israel. The Apostolic Delegate was already becoming more involved in the life of the diplomatic corps in Israel and was attending events in the Presidential Residence.

Cardinal O'Connor called on me, and this time as opposed to the previous time, he came dressed in full canonicals, with a delegation, having made it quite clear that he was coming on an official visit. He told me that he had come from the Pope, and on his way to us he had visited in Egypt and Jordan. His message was that the Vatican wanted to improve relations with us. I reiterated what I told him years ago, that we would be very happy if the Pope would visit Israel, but it must be understood that it would be on the basis of Head of State to Head of State, and there would be no more crossing the border at some unofficial point like Megiddo, as had occurred during the visit of Pope Paul VI in 1964. The head of the Vatican State would have to arrive at Beit Hanassi in Jerusalem and be received by the Head of the State of Israel. He indicated that this was understood.

I gave him an upbeat evaluation of the current peace process, and talked at length about the greatest danger facing us, namely, Islamic Fundamentalism. In my view, Islamic Fundamentalism constituted a common danger for Jews and Christians alike, and it seemed to me that because of prejudices of the past, the Vatican was not enough aware of this. His reaction was that I was echoing the words of the Pope to him a few days ago. It was as if we had coordinated. The Pope was in full agreement with me on this issue.

He advised me that the Vatican had changed its policy as far as Jerusalem was concerned. They no longer expressed political reservations about Israel's control of the city, but they wanted to insure the safety and freedom of Christians and

Christian institutions in the city, and also the freedom of religion and freedom of access. I told him that such conditions had always been acceptable to Israel and would continue to be so. His statement represented a major policy change on the part of the Vatican.

Cardinal O'Connor suggested that I introduce the Apostolic Delegate to the public and diplomatic life of the country. He affirmed to me that from now on, the Apostolic Delegate would appear at every event to which I invited him.

Later, our Ambassador in Rome, Avi Pazner, called on me to confirm the opening of a dialogue with the Vatican. There was definitely a desire in the Vatican to open up negotiations for the improvement of relations on the basis of the new policy enunciated by them, namely, that they had no political demands on Jerusalem. All that they required was freedom for the Christians to live in Jerusalem, freedom of access to the holy places, and freedom of worship, to all of which Israel had always been agreeable.

It was clear to me all along that Cardinal O'Connor's input on the issue of Israel-Vatican relations was a positive one, and he undoubtedly was one of the group in the Vatican who led to the final establishment of relations and exchange of Ambassadors between the Holy See and the State of Israel. A major anomaly had been removed from the world of diplomacy and a more healthy approach characterized now the dialogue between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church. The important decisions made in this respect were those made by His Holiness Pope John Paul II, and to him must go the credit for the historic advance in this respect. However, in defining the approach to Israel and giving the necessary input for the Pope's consideration, it is quite clear to me that Cardinal O'Connor's views were of great importance and influence. He may be said to have been an important element in bringing the Vatican to the decision that was finally made by the Pope.

