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INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOG - During the visit that featured welcome speeches by prominent members of Rome's Jewish community and a speech by the Pope, Francis greeted a number of people including several Holocaust survivors.

Pope Francis recalled the tragedy of the Holocaust and paid tribute to the over 2000 Jews who were deported by the Nazis from Rome in October 1943.

He said the past must serve as a lesson for the present and for the future and said the Holocaust teaches us that utmost vigilance is always needed to be able to take prompt action in defense of human dignity and peace.

The visit follows that of Pope Benedict XVI in January 2010 and the historic encounter of Pope Saint John Paul II with former Rabbi Elio Toaff in 1986.

It also comes on the heels of the publication, last December, of an important new document from the Vatican's Commission for religious relations with Jews, exploring the theological developments during the past half century of dialogue between Catholics and Jews.

During his speech to those present Pope Francis highlighted how Catholic–Jewish relations are very close to his heart. He spoke of how a spiritual bond has been created between the two communities favouring the growth of a genuine friendship and giving life to a shared commitment.

We share a unique and special bond thanks to the Jewish roots of Christianity, he said, and we must feel like brothers, united by the same God and by a rich common spiritual patrimony upon which to build the future.

Pope Francis referred to the Second Vatican Council's Declaration "Nostra Aetate" which made possible the systematic dialogue between the Catholic Church and Judaism and which set the ground for Jewish-Catholic dialogue. He encouraged all those involved in this dialogue to continue in this direction with discernment and perseverance.

The Pope also said that, along with theological issues, we must not lose sight of the big challenges facing the world today. He said Christians and Jews can and must offer humanity the message of the Bible regarding the care of creation as well as always promote and defend human life.

We must pray with insistence to help us put into practice the logic of peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, life, in Europe, the Holy Land, the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere in the world. He concluded saying we have to be thankful for all that has been realized in the last fifty years of Catholic-Jewish dialogue because between us mutual understanding, mutual trust and friendship have grown and deepened.

Source: Vatican Radio