

**Speech by Jack Terpins, President Of the Latin American Jewish Congress
at the LAJC Meeting with Pope Benedict XVI**

Vatican City, May 10, 2012

Your Holiness,

First of all the Latin American Jewish Congress wishes to thank you for the opportunity to hold this very meaningful meeting, and it's historical dimension: it is the first time the members of the Latin American Jewish Congress Board have met with the Pope.

The President of the World Jewish Congress, the presidents of the Jewish communities of Latin America, and prominent Jewish leaders of our region are here today.

We live in countries with a clear majority of Catholic populations, where the Church plays an important religious and social role, but where our communities enjoy a vibrant Jewish life, and the relationship between Jews and Catholics is an example not only of positive coexistence, but of friendship and cooperation.

We bring to this meeting a message that describes our desire to further develop joint work by Jews and Catholics to achieve peace and foster inclusion.

The use of dialogue as a tool has helped develop models to get to know each other better and for the communities of faith to gain greater understanding on our road to peace. No doubt, agreement among religions is not the only prerequisite but certainly means a major step forward.

We know that together, as brothers, we can send out a strong message to society at large: i.e. working to help the neediest, and defending family, pluralism and democracy, under the umbrella of the common values revered by our religious traditions.

Working with the leadership of the Church is a priority for the Latin American Jewish Congress, especially in the context of the Latin American Episcopal Conference – CELAM, an organization with which it has established strong links. The Latin American Jewish Congress was invited to the CELAM General Assembly at Aparecida, Brazil, in 2008; was asked to organize a meeting between its leaders and CELAM in Mexico in 2009; invited to participate representing Latin America at the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee session in Paris in 2011, and this year, at the 50th

anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, which, with *Nostra Aetate*, changed the relations between our communities. Also for the first time a joint publication was produced on Jewish-Catholic relations over the past 40 years, and our organization invited a group of young priests from different countries to visit Israel.

This work lays the groundwork for the links established in each of the countries, the contact with the Episcopal Conferences, with bishops, priests and the laity; where the interpersonal relations of the leaders of both religions have helped transform reality, becoming examples of brotherhood. Many of those who are here today have been the architects of this reality that makes us so proud.

We strongly believe in a pluralistic society, that respects diversity, harbors no prejudice or discrimination, and rejects anti-Semitism and all forms of discrimination, because neither faith or religious tradition may be grounds for exclusion, nor any other aspects or dimensions of human beings.

We value and appreciate the major step the Church has taken in establishing diplomatic relations with the State of Israel, with which we as Jews have indissoluble spiritual bonds. A 64-year-old, young state, in a changing world in which the old anti-Semitism is disguised as anti-Zionism and seeks to undermine the moral foundations of the State of Israel.

As for the inclusion of the neediest, much remains to be done. Jewish tradition urges us to better our world, making it fairer and being more supportive. Poverty and marginalization affect substantial social sectors; uprooting those scourges is part of our common values, since our responsibility for others is inescapable.

Today, May 10, 18 Iyar in the Hebrew calendar, is the holiday of Lag B'Omer. We make this meeting our party and celebrate with His Holiness, among brothers. As the tradition of Israel mandates, we say: Blessed be God who has kept us alive and sustained us and brought us to this *historic* occasion.