

# Presentation of the Knight Commander of St. Gregory the Great

It is a personal joy for me to represent His Holiness Pope John Paul II here today in presenting, in the name of Pope John Paul, the great honor of Knight Commander of St. Gregory the Great to Rabbi Mordecai Waxman in recognition of his extraordinary leadership over the past several decades in fostering improved relations between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church. I welcome with gratitude members of Rabbi Waxman's family and note that last November 2nd Rabbi Waxman marked his fiftieth year as rabbi of Temple Israel of Great Neck, New York. Many members of that Congregation have come to join Rabbi Waxman's family and friends from our National Catholic-Jewish Consultation and some of our distinguished leaders from Baltimore including Knight Commander of St. Gregory Richard Berndt and Dame Commander of St. Gregory Mary Elizabeth Sweeney. Rabbi Waxman has worked in various ways to foster greater understanding between Catholics and Jews. As editor of *Conservative Judaism*, the scholarly journal of the Rabbinical Assembly, he published articles on Christian-Jewish relations not only by leading Jewish scholars but also by Catholics active in the field. And his late wife, Ruth, editor of *Judaism*, published by the American Jewish Congress, walked in the same positive path. Their efforts helped to bring the news of advances in the relationship between our two communities to Jewish congregations across this land and internationally as well. Especially outstanding has been Rabbi Waxman's work with the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee as a member of the International Jewish Committee on International Consultation. He attended his first meeting of this group at Venice in 1975 and served as President of the Synagogue Council of America from 1983 to 1985. At that time the Synagogue Council was one of the major constituent groups of IJCIC and served as its Secretariat here in the United States. In 1985, Rabbi Waxman assumed the chairmanship of IJCIC and it was here that he gave extraordinarily strong leadership at a time of special strain and challenge. In 1987, I first met Rabbi Waxman and saw in action his statesman-like ability to offer leadership, when, over a period of several months, he played an extremely important

role in preparing the way for Pope John Paul's scheduled meeting with American-Jewish leaders in the United States. Appropriately, Rabbi Waxman delivered the address on the part of the Jewish community of this country at that meeting in Miami on September 11, 1987. Just a few weeks ago in Rome Pope John Paul recalled vividly their exchange on that day as he welcomed Rabbi Waxman and others of us at the conclusion of our pilgrimage to Israel and to Rome. In 1987, Rabbi Waxman and I, as chair at the time of our Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Committee concluded that an ongoing relationship between the Bishops' Conference and the Synagogue Council of America would be of great benefit to both. Since that time, bishops and rabbis have been meeting twice yearly to discuss common religious and social concerns. The role formerly played by the Synagogue Council of America has been assumed in recent years by the newly formed National Council of Synagogues. In fact, it is such a meeting, held for the first time here in Baltimore, which now offers the occasion for this public presentation of the Papal honor to Rabbi Waxman. Over the years Rabbi Waxman has been a consistent peacemaker and worked for reconciliation between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church. He has done so consistently and, at times, has spoken also in a critical role, voicing clearly personal concerns which he has felt, and which invariably reflect concerns widespread in the Jewish Community. In this sense he has been a firm yet fair teacher to all of us in the dialogue. Rabbi Mordecai Waxman, you have been and are a dear friend and one whose continued involvement in our work of improving Catholic-Jewish relations "in season and out