

Eugene Mr. Fisher honored for Catholic-Jewish work

WASHINGTON - The Anti-Defamation League and a variety of Catholic and Jewish leaders honored Eugene J. Fisher as he approached retirement after 30 years as one of the world's leading advocates of better Catholic-Jewish relations.

Since 1977 Mr. Fisher has been associate director for Catholic-Jewish relations at the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

In awarding him the ADL's Dr. Joseph L. Lichten Award in Catholic-Jewish relations April 29, ADL National Director Abraham H. Foxman called Mr. Fisher a "central figure" in implementing changed Catholic understandings of and relations with Jews following the Second Vatican Council.

"Gene was an important part of Pope John Paul II's program to revolutionize Catholic-Jewish relations," Mr. Foxman said.

He added that it was Mr. Fisher who drafted Pope John Paul's famous 1987 speech to American Jewish leaders in Miami, in which the pope "pledged to join the Jewish people in the cry 'never again' regarding the Holocaust."

Two years earlier, when the Vatican declared that there were "no theological barriers" to recognizing the state of Israel, "it was Gene Mr. Fisher who coined that phrase," he said.

Mr. Foxman described the words as "a profound declaration that dismissed the ancient canard that Jews had no homeland as divine punishment in the death of Jesus."

On May 2 Mr. Fisher was honored again at a testimonial dinner sponsored by the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. Mr. Fisher is retiring from his post at the secretariat at the end of June.

Rabbi Leon Klenicki, who directed Catholic-Jewish relations for the ADL from 1973 to 2001 and collaborated with Mr. Fisher on many projects, was unable to attend the dinner for health reasons but sent a message praising Mr. Fisher. He said they shared the same life's work and vision - to change the attitudes of the Catholic and Jewish communities from viewing one another as "an object of contempt" to raising in each community "an awareness of the other as a subject of faith, living faith."

Rabbi Klenicki said an interfaith Holocaust memorial service that he and Mr. Fisher developed together has been translated into numerous languages and "is used around the world."

Judith Banki, program director of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding in New York, also recalled decades of collaboration with Mr. Fisher, including co-editing an anthology of the writings of the late Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, a leading figure in Catholic-Jewish relations in the decades following Vatican II.

"I've always said that Eugene Fisher had one of the hardest jobs on earth," she said. "He has interpreted - and usually defended - the positions of Jewish spokespersons to the leaders of his church, and he has interpreted and defended positions and policies of the church to the Jewish community."

In a statement before the testimonial dinner, Father James Massa, executive director of the USCCB secretariat, said, "As part of the post-Vatican II generation that forged lasting bonds of friendship between Catholics and Jews, Gene proved to be an outstanding advisor to the American bishops as well as to the Holy See."

John Carr, USCCB secretary for social development and world peace, joked at the dinner that not only do most Catholics think Mr. Fisher is Jewish, but most Jews think so too. He said he once asked Mr. Fisher if he wanted to set the record straight and Mr. Fisher replied, "Jesus was Jewish, and he never corrected the record."

Mr. Carr predicted that when future histories of the USCCB are written, Mr. Fisher will be ranked with people like the late Monsignors John A. Ryan and George G. Higgins as one of the "giants" of the conference.

Despite having visited doctors earlier in the day for an illness, Cardinal William H.

Keeler of Baltimore, longtime U.S. episcopal moderator of Catholic-Jewish relations, traveled to Washington for the dinner and gave the blessing before the meal and brief remarks after.

Rabbi A. James Rudin, retired director of interreligious relations for the American Jewish Committee and another longtime collaborator with Mr. Fisher, said Mr. Fisher and Cardinal Keeler were “two heroes of the generation” in Catholic-Jewish relations.