

The Catholic Church and the Jewish People

For me, it is a source of enormous joy to come here to Seton Hall to celebrate the 50 years of studies, under the aegis of Seton Hall, of the relationships between Jews and Christians.

Monsignor John M. Oesterreicher was a gifted and able consultant to the then-Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity during the Second Vatican Council. It was then that I first met him and saw his enormous abilities for pointing a way that should be followed around the world.

We gather now to mark the 50th Anniversary of the Institute of Judaean-Christian Studies. The history of this Institute is closely related to what has happened at the universal level in the Catholic Church.

Monsignor Oesterreicher experienced acutely the challenges faced by one who knows at first hand what Judaism implies and then made a choice that took him into the heart of the Christian community (guided by Cardinal John Henry Neuman).

He saw, early on, relationships between the attacks of the Nazis on the Jewish people and what they would do in their effort to destroy Christendom.

Even as Monsignor Oesterreicher began to help Christians in general and Catholics in particular to understand the special place of Judaism, the Second Vatican Council took place and Pope John XXIII asked Cardinal Bea to lead a secretariat which would, in the hopes of Pope John XXIII, put an end to attitudes of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism within the Catholic community.

Father Lawrence Frizzell has carried on in a wonderful and scholarly fashion the work begun by Monsignor Oesterreicher. I first met Father Frizzell in Prague in 1990, when we met there, as part of the International Liaison Committee between those working with the Catholic Church's Commission for Relations with the Jewish People and the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations. (IJCIC)

In Prague, Father Frizzell, Father Morley and I visited on our own time a number of the Roman Catholic shrines. But, during the days of our meetings, we were completely absorbed in how we might help our Church respond to the new challenges which came with the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

You are already familiar with many of the very significant and positive developments that have taken place in the relationships between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people in the last four decades. My intention is to review some of them with a special emphasis on Pope John Paul II, who has been so personally dedicated to efforts to build bridges between church and synagogue.

Pope John Paul has done this in the context of his commitment to making the teachings of the Second Vatican Council come alive for Catholic people around the world.

At that Council, Cardinal Augustin Bea introduced in 1963 the first draft of what eventually became the Declaration on the Relationship Between the Catholic Church and Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate). It seems to me like yesterday when he stood before us at the Council to speak with persuasive logic of the request of Pope John XXIII, before he died, that the Council take up this issue.

Cardinal Bea referred to what had occurred under Nazi rule in Europe during World War II. He repeated the injunction of Pope John XXIII, that the Council should take

whatever steps were necessary to be sure that never again would the Christian scriptures or the teachings of the Church be misused in a way that might contribute to anti-Semitism.

The Council document (Nostra Aetate, Chapter Four) reminds Catholics of several points, but I will mention two of these now as bases for our reflection:

1. Although some Jews opposed the spread of the gospel of Jesus, “nevertheless, according to the Apostle, the Jews still remain most dear to God because of their fathers, for he does not repent of the gifts he makes nor of the calls he issues (cf. Romans 11:28-29).”
“Since the spiritual patrimony com