

The Catholic University of America
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JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE:
AFTER NOSTRA AETATE

As I thank Cardinal Hickey, a personal friend and a friend committed to interfaith amity, for his leadership in helping us to prepare for this program, I recall a grace we shared 25 years ago. Together we were witnesses to the moving Second Vatican Council discussions in the development of the document we celebrate in this colloquium, Nostra Aetate.

With my dear friend, Rabbi Klenicki, I share another grace, memories of several very intense days in 1987, when the long, hot summer in Jewish-Catholic relations came to a moment of cool refreshment at a noontime meeting at the papal summer residence at Castel Gandolfo. I remember something else: on the flight back to New York City the next day we built another bond, a spiritual one, as we prayed our psalms seven miles above the sea.

To the co-sponsors of the program must go a word of appreciation for their endeavor to lift up and to examine one of the threads of thought which the Second Vatican Council wove into Nostra Aetate, the significance of certain key passages in the letter to the Romans.

This discussion I leave to the scholars tomorrow. This evening I wish to talk about the dialogue as it has come to a wider public attention in the past three years of rapid developments, some of them painful, some pleasantly surprising, most symptomatic of questions and concerns which had existed before but now being addressed more publicly and with the active involvement of many more people of faith committed to the search for deeper understanding, dialogue and, where possible, cooperation.

This dialogue does go forward for Catholics in the context of the decisions taken during the Second Vatican Council.

At the invitation of Pope John XXIII, an invitation renewed by Pope Paul VI, the Catholic bishops of the world reviewed in the light of that Gospel both the internal operations of the Church and her relationships with the world today. They developed sixteen documents in which they charted the course of the Church's renewal.

Some of these documents dealt with doctrinal matters, one with worship and three with relationships looking beyond the inner life of the Church, namely, relationships with the world as a whole (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World Today), relationships with other Christians (the Decree on Ecumenism) and relationships with non-Christian religions.

The last document, entitled Nostra Aetate, was completed in 1965. In it, one chapter deals with the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people.

When Cardinal Bea introduced the first draft of what eventually became this document, at the request of Pope John XXIII he referred to what had occurred under Nazi rule in Europe in World War II. The Cardinal asserted 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 conciliar document reminds Catholics of these points:

- 1) That the Church draws nourishment from the revelation contained in the Hebrew scriptures. The Law, the Prophets, the Psalms and the Wisdom literature--all are part of a heritage given to that people with whom God made a covenant through Abraham. (Amplifying on this point, the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jews in 1985 underscored the Catholic belief that the covenant between God and the Jewish People continues to exist. John Paul II in Australia referred to "an irrevocable covenant"; in Warsaw, "that election to which God is faithful.")

2) The Church, as Saint Paul points out, is founded by Christ who, "according to the flesh," pertains to the Jewish people (cf. Romans 9:4-5). The Virgin Mary, the Apostles, indeed practically the entire infant Church could be correctly described as Jewish.

3) 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 common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred Synod (The Second Vatican Council) wishes to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit above all of biblical and theological studies and of brotherly dialogues."

4) With specific reference to texts of the Christian scriptures, the Council points out that what happened to Jesus in "his suffering cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today." What follows is the basis for catechetical instruction to ensure that neither Christian scriptures nor Christian teaching could be used in any way that would be an excuse for anti-Semitism.

In the years since the Second Vatican Council, we have tried to apply this document to preaching in our churches and to our teaching in seminaries, in universities, colleges and, perhaps most important of all, in the religious education classes for children of every age.

In addition to the international level meetings and the documents, work of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations and the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, there have been efforts at every other level to be sure that the text books we use and the teachers who actually teach the children are sensitive to this way of presenting the life and times of Jesus and our relationships with the Jewish people. Studies have shown very widespread positive results, even though often teachers are personally unaware of the technical steps which the Council and subsequent dialogues have inspired.

Recent steps at the national level in this direction have included the publication of the addresses of Pope John Paul II on Catholic-Jewish relations, including his historic address in the great Synagogue of Rome in 1986 and his September, 1987 talk in Miami, when he specifically commended our dialogue efforts in the United States and our commitment to introduce a formal curriculum on the Holocaust in our Catholic schools. (In addition, The Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations issued guidelines for the proper dramatization of the sufferings and death of Jesus, the passion play.

[published 1988]; and our Bishops' Committee for the Liturgy has published guidelines [1989] commenting on the sacred text during the Liturgy.)

When representatives of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations met with representatives of the Holy See in Rome two and a half years ago I saw and felt--and I know members of the Jewish delegation sensed this as well--an enormous will both to listen and then to speak, to speak out of deeply held conviction.

In dialogue truly we seek to see the other party's point of view as the other party sees and feels it. But we try to do so in a way which is faithful to our belief, to what the Lord calls us to be.

Our Jewish friends told us, "You cannot truly love us, until you understand what pains us, what hurts us." And we learned to say the same in return.

From this and other exchanges I have been helped to tell Catholic friends that, for Jews, the Holocaust with all its horrors was uniquely genocidal. It is for them like a sacrament is for us in our faith, a sacred sign--whatever detracts from its significance, whatever seems to obscure its evil or honor those who did the evil screams of sacrilege and there will be pain, and painful reaction.

Both Catholic and Jewish delegations reflected in the final communique

that the demonic Nazi ideology which spawned the Holocaust was indeed opposed to all religions, and that many Christians perished in the death camps.

We know what happened in Holland: The Catholic bishops there protested in 1942 against the roundup of the Jews. In retaliation, the Nazis then sent off to Auschwitz Catholics who had Jewish blood and hastened the deportation of all Jews. It is not clear, even to this day, how much good precise, public denunciation in other settings could have accomplished in the face of a dictatorship with total power in its hands. Even in the Jewish community at that time there existed a dilemma, with some Jews deciding not to speak out publicly, rather to work quietly and behind the scenes. Today both the Jewish and the Catholic communities need to grapple with the complexities of that tragic period, not in a judgmental way but constructively for the sake of the future.

Perceptions of the Holocaust continue to surface as points of difference-- witness the Auschwitz Carmel. The flashpoint of the Auschwitz Carmel, which was center stage in the world news last summer, was almost averted. News stories told us first of a February, 1987 meeting.

In February, 1987, Jewish leaders in Europe met with four cardinals, including Cardinal Macharski, the Archbishop of Krakow, to discuss their concerns regarding the presence of a Carmelite monastery adjacent to the death camp at Auschwitz/Birkenau.

The cardinals appreciated the sensitivity of the issue. They worked with the Jewish leaders toward a solution which would be positive and forward-looking. Together they committed themselves not simply to relocate the site of the convent--to characterize it in this way is to distort the thrust of the understanding reached--but to construct at a distance from the camp a center intended to foster Catholic-Jewish relations through study, dialogue, and prayer.

In the mission of prayer, a work, indeed a word not familiar to many contemporary ears, the Carmelite nuns, whose life is dedicated to prayer and contemplation, would have an honored role.

Then came complications. For at least a year the Polish government, it seems, did not issue necessary permits. This can be understood in the light of a report I heard that it is not uncommon to take seven years realistic time from for the construction of a new public building in Poland during recent years.

The rest is history: The violation of the cloister and clamorous demonstrations on convent grounds by Rabbi Weiss and his associates; the harsh physical reaction of some Polish workers on the scene; the escalation of demonstrations and reactions, involving finally church leaders in Poland and elsewhere.

On September 19 Cardinal Willebrands issued a statement on behalf of

the Holy See. He commended the stand of the Polish Bishops' Commission on Judaism made public earlier in the month--a stand committing itself to the new center--and he reaffirmed Pope John Paul II's commendation of the proposal, adding this time the pledge of financial help.

Within a few days Cardinal Glemp, following several meetings with Jewish leaders in Poland and England, announced his personal support of the project and the matter moved from the front pages. In February, work on the new center began at last, a step favored by the return of greater freedom from government control in Poland.

Toward the end of the public discussion many voices, Jewish, Catholic, and observers, were raised in favor of restraint and reason in dialogue. These voices helped establish a needed atmosphere.

Even as, through the discussion, Catholics were reminded afresh of deep Jewish sensitivities regarding the Holocaust, so I am hopeful that our Jewish partners in dialogue gained some new insights. They learned, for example, what may strike visitors to Yad Vashem in Israel: How numerous are the Catholic Poles on the list of "righteous gentiles" who risked their lives to help Jews escape.

Within the Catholic Church, there is now, as there always has been, a great deal of variety, flexibility, difference and disagreement. Even as Catholics

begin to appreciate that the American Jewish Congress, the World Jewish Congress, and the American Jewish Committee are three entirely separate organizations, so we invite our Jewish and other neighbors to realize that within the Catholic Church there are many different juridical entities, some of them possessing surprising autonomy as far as Canon Law is concerned.

The stage is set now for a meeting this fall between representatives of International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations and the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jews to begin a joint study of the facts relating to the Shoah. This world level undertaking will help us to view with greater objectivity the events of those tragic days and will help the Holy See's Commission prepare its own document on the Holocaust and its study on the history of anti-Semitism.

The State of Israel:

For a Catholic in the United States, there are certain puzzling aspects about the pressure on the Holy See to establish formal diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. You know that we American Catholics have been very supportive of Israel. But American Catholics also, to the extent that they are familiar with our own American history know that there were no formal diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the United States until about six years ago. At an early stage, when Presidents of the United States, like President Harry Truman, suggested a formal exchange of ambassadors, groups like the

American Jewish Congress joined with Protestant groups in opposing such a step.

As I have listened to concerns expressed to me in meetings in synagogues and with B'nai B'rith groups, I have the perception that there is a concern regarding a possible theological meaning of the non-establishment of formal diplomatic ties. Such a concern is based on a fundamental misconception, a point underscored by representatives of the Holy See and greeted with appreciation by the Jewish delegation in Rome in 1987.

The very clear recognition by Pope John Paul of the right of Israel to exist, the practical working relationships which have already been established, and the understanding which he has expressed of the State of Israel as a reality which means a great deal to Jews and is something rising out of the tragic ashes of the Holocaust should go a long way toward helping people in the United States, both Jews and Catholics, to see the situation in perspective.

In addition, and the news of the past two years and more of the uprising has underscored the situation, the Holy See referred to serious and unresolved problems in the region which, please God, will be addressed as steps are taken toward a permanent peace. For the same reasons, the Holy See does not exchange ambassadors with the Kingdom of Jordan so it is not, as one sometimes hears, a situation of a judgment uniquely directed toward Israel. You understand also there are concerns and fears regarding the situation of Catholic minorities

in Muslim countries and a concern and a hope for an international guarantee for the full religious rights of the major faith groups in Jerusalem.

Finally, both international Jewish leaders and representatives of the Israeli government have indicated that concern often presented to us in the United States by representatives of Jewish groups do not necessarily reflect the position or the priorities of the Government of Israel. In a sense, both Jews and Catholics in the United States, while we are interested spectators, are not part of the direct discussion of the relationships between the Government of Israel and the Holy See.

We do become involved emotionally and we do look at the area quite properly both as members of faith communities and as U.S. citizens.

Thus our National Conference of Catholic Bishops sought to make a contribution last November to the public policy discussion of the peace issues in the Middle East. In the wake of the Uprising in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza, many Catholics in the United States asked us bishops to make public statements about the situation there. At the same time, Christian leaders in the Middle East, whose peoples are suffering greatly both in the occupied territories and in Lebanon, appealed to our National Conference of Catholic Bishops for the moral support of a public statement on various issues requiring resolution so that peace can come to the region.

In response to this, the President of our National Conference appointed an Ad Hoc Committee, chaired by Archbishop Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, to develop a statement which would bring up-to-date our prior public positions of 1973 and 1978. The statement is meant to be our contribution from a moral and religious perspective to the public policy discussion in the United States as well as a word which would bring some guidance to our own people.

Our statement looks particularly at the long-standing conflict involving Israel, the Arab States, and the Palestinians. We have tried to set forth the fears and hopes of each party as each has described them to us. Then, working from our traditional teachings on peace and human dignity, we have sketched some first steps for negotiators to consider.

On the one side we have tried to reflect the concern of Israelis for their security and indeed their survival as a people and, on the other, the plight of the Palestinians and their hopes for a homeland where they could have a greater say in determining their own destiny. On both sides we found during our intensive days in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza people with a hunger for peace at last, a peace for families and for whole peoples which has proven so elusive. To this end we can pray that Israel, the Arab States, and the Palestinians can begin to take the steps which will build mutual trust. I can go further and say, we must pray thus--the alternative is to acquiesce to a situation which may become more unstable with passing time.

We are grateful for the assistance we received from Jewish, Arab, Muslim and Christian groups with roots in the area as well as from governments and private individuals in the region itself. We see our document as a beginning point for dialogue, indeed trialogue in local areas.

The news on Holy Thursday of the occupation of a building in the Christian sector of Jerusalem near the Holy Sepulchre came as a profound shock to Christian communities around the world.

The police handling of the demonstration, in which both Greek Orthodox Patriarch Diodoros and Latin Patriarch Michael Sabbah participated, further inflamed Christian feelings in the area and around the world. Public statements by Jerusalem Mayor Teddy Kollek, the Anti-Defamation League, and the American Jewish Committee have helped Christians to see that some Jews do understand how seriously Christians are reacting to this effort to change the neighborhood of our holiest shrine in the holiest of days.

Recent news reports of the secret government involvement in the purchase of the building further cloud the situation. Now the matter is before the Courts in Israel. A decision to return to the status quo ante in this neighborhood would benefit interreligious peace in Jerusalem and everywhere Jews and Christians live side by side.

Church-State Issues:

Another area of hurt and misunderstanding, this time for Catholics in our land, has come with the development of public policy regarding aid to non-public schools. Many Catholics do not appreciate that Orthodox Day Schools have sought the same kind of assistance through the years. But many Catholics are aware, as perhaps Jews are not, that some Jewish organizations in legal briefs and in public debate drew painfully on the classic, anti-Catholic rhetoric of the last century.

Jews and even younger Catholics are not aware, as Catholic educators are, of the history of anti-Catholicism in the United States, a history made very real to me when my mother told me of her first experience as a teacher in a suburban public school in the mid-West. Before classes even began the superintendent summoned her to his office, asked her what her religion was, and then told her simply, "Parents here do not want their children taught by a Catholic," and so, without teaching a day, she lost her job.

In the past two years I have begun to hear talk of Conservative Jews taking a new look at the day school concept, and within the past few weeks, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported on a conference on this topic, which included a presentation on considering seeking the limited government aid permitted under present constitutional interpretations.

Against this background I wish to make three additional observations regarding perceptions of educators and others in the Catholic Church:

1) Our Catholic schools have been the best instrument for the implementation of Nostra Aetate. Studies, including those by Professor James Coleman of Chicago, show that the students and graduates of Catholic schools have the most positive attitudes toward people of other religions and races, more so than students in public schools or in private schools.

2) For people close to the life of our Church today, the schools are part of our identity as people of faith. In a society where secular and consumerist values are now pushed so strongly, pastors, teachers and parents closely involved with the schools have a feeling for the schools akin to the feelings of many Jews for the State of Israel. Some of the emotional argumentation surrounding separation of Church and State echoes in the ears and hearts of our people the message sent again and again throughout the last century in the recurrent public manifestations of anti-Catholicism in this land.

Jews may not be aware of how convents were burned and Catholic people died in Boston and Philadelphia in the 1840's, and how demonstrations dogged the visit of a papal representative here in the 1850's.

3) In the most recent major Supreme Court decision (*Aguilar v. Felton*, 1985) on the school aid issue, carefully constructed federal legislation allowing assistance under Title I for remedial instruction to the underprivileged, mostly in the inner city, where many of the students in Catholic schools are not Catholics and many are members of minority groups, plaintiffs argued for and won a decision striking down aid that provided for instruction in secular subjects by public school teachers using public school materials simply because, it was made to appear, the walls of the classrooms in which the instruction was being given were somehow infected by the presence of symbols of religious faith.

Child Care Legislation:

Again, there is not a consensus within the Jewish community on how the government should properly intervene on this issue. Religious people of both faiths do affirm that religious faith and practice can help to undergird and strengthen the institutions of marriage and family life in our land. Much positive good is now being accomplished in church and synagogue-related child care programs.

I would invite all Americans to consider this an area where efforts to apply in a doctrinaire way the Church-State separation approach will do further harm to marriage and family, institutions vital to our moral life as citizens, institutions already under such assault in our contemporary culture.

Human Life Debate:

Then there is the current human life debate. Here Catholics need to know that Jews, as well as Catholics, are offended when generalizations, often made in the heat of public discussion, miss the mark. From years of dialogue, I know how deeply the Jewish community is divided on the issue of abortion, with Orthodox Jews, in particular, often participants in pro-life coalitions.

Besides explaining to each other where we stand on issues of substance, we must look for ways of speaking which promote civility of discourse and mutual understanding. Many of us look forward to working with the Jewish religious leadership in discussing and presenting such issues constructively, as together we demonstrate a will to collaborate for the common good of our local communities and our faith communities whenever possible.

Another area of current interest touches our faith communities in different ways--the massive changes in Eastern and Central Europe. In December 1987 I had the great grace of representing our Church at the marvelous, massive Rally for Soviet Jewry in Washington. To that vast crowd I spoke of a concern we had in common for the religious freedom of individuals--of the Jews throughout the Soviet Union, of Protestants, and of Catholics, especially in Ukraine and Lithuania. More recently, when I introduced Elie Wiesel in Baltimore, I noted that in his native Romania, freedom to worship was still denied to many.

Now all that is changing and with new freedoms come new challenges. Jews should realize that the Catholic Church is faced with the huge task of trying to rebuild a shattered infrastructure (churches, seminaries, schools) throughout the region. In Ukraine, there is great friction between Eastern Rite Catholics and the local Orthodox Christians to whom Stalin's government gave the Catholic churches in 1946. The Holy See and the Patriarchate of Moscow are seeking to resolve the differences peacefully through ecumenical dialogue. Many Ukrainians on both sides are unhappy with this approach, and Catholic and Orthodox leaders alike seek to avoid threatened violence at the popular level.

Catholics should understand a crisis the Jews feel intensely--the immense pain caused by the unleashing of anti-Semitism, especially in the Soviet Union, and the resultant exodus of Jews to the West.

Jews should know that Pope John Paul II is keenly sensitive to the dangers of anti-Semitism. Last September in two major statements widely publicized in Eastern Europe, he underscored the unique sufferings of the Jewish people in the genocidal Holocaust and showed his concern for Jewish people in the area today.

In Rome last month, I thanked him for his leadership specifically in confronting anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe, and he told me of his personal appreciation of a recent visit by American Jewish Committee officers. The

public record shows how they too thanked him for these initiatives and for his dedication to promoting interfaith sensitivity. Pope John Paul took the occasion to urge again worldwide Catholic efforts to combat anti-Semitism.

May the Lord of all mercies use this conference to help all who participate come closer to one another in mutual understanding. May the specific study of the text from Romans remind us of the religious perspective in which we are called to work, the perspective of our faith in a God whose wondrous mercy, loving providence, and transcendent goodness are beyond our fathoming and give us great hope even when we in our human weakness, falter. May God's blessing bring to this gathering gifts of wisdom and shalom, peace.

Most Reverend William H. Keeler
Archbishop of Baltimore