

Boston, Massachusetts  
November 18, 1990, 2:00 p.m.

NOSTRA AETATE; TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER

I am grateful to Cardinal Law for his endorsement of this afternoon of dialogue. To His Eminence the Church in our country is deeply indebted for his leadership in our early days of interfaith and ecumenical work. In recent years, it was Cardinal Law's initiative which prepared the way for Catholic-Jewish dialogue in Poland and thus set in place a framework which helped those in Poland find their way out of the delicate situation created by the Carmelite Monastery near the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp.

It is a joy to share the platform again with Rabbi James Rudin, whose friendliness, sense of fairness, and vision for the future have done so much to advance interreligious understanding in the United States.

Between the time that the invitation to come to Boston was extended and this date, Catholic-Jewish relationships (to an extent also, Christian-Jewish relationships) have been touched by several developments at the world level:

- the occupation by Jewish settlers with the secret participation of an Israeli government agency of the Greek Orthodox-owned St. John

Hospice in Jerusalem during the final days of Holy Week, and the subsequent use of force on Good Friday by police against peaceful demonstrators, including the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, who was thrown to the ground.

- the perceived threat of war in the Persian Gulf area together with an apparent growing ugliness of mood on the part of all parties in Israel and the Occupied Territories. This occurs against a background of with the continued questions of Palestinian rights and the hope for a peaceful settlement to end the long-standing differences involving Israel, the Arab States and the Palestinians.
- the extraordinary meeting at Prague of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee in September.

My intention is to pick up on some words that Rabbi Mordecai Waxman spoke to us in Rome in 1987, at the end of what some have called "a long, hot summer in Jewish-Catholic relations." "If you truly wish to be our friends, you must know what causes us pain."

When Cardinal Bea introduced at the Second Vatican Council the first draft of what eventually became the declaration on the relationship between the Catholic Church and non-Christian religions (Nostra Aetate), he did so at the request of Pope John XXIII. Cardinal Bea referred to what had occurred under Nazi rule in Europe in World War II. He 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. You have already reviewed the basic points of that document.

By way of background to the St. John Hospice incident, may I recall the Auschwitz convent saga:

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, 1989, 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 of this year, 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: Most numerous of all on the list of "righteous gentiles" who risked their lives to help Jews escape are the Catholic Poles.

They learned that the death camp at Auschwitz was built to handle first the Polish intellectual elite, including clergy, and the army officers who still survived. These selected Poles were being exterminated at Auschwitz a full year and more before the horrifying decision was taken at Wannsee to try to eliminate the Jews.

And perhaps our Jewish friends have learned also that, 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.

St. John's Hospice and the Middle East Situation:

The news on Holy Thursday of the occupation of St. John's Hospice, of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, 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 further inflamed Christian feelings in the area and around the world. The Christian leaders in Jerusalem, participants in a peaceful demonstration in the neighborhood, experienced very rough handling from the police. Their anguished voice of protest reflected a fear about the security of their people which had been building up for years. Public statements by Jerusalem Mayor Teddy Kollek, the Anti-Defamation League, and the American Jewish Committee and the Rabbinical Assembly have helped Christians to see that many Jews do understand how seriously Christians react to an effort to change the neighborhood of our holiest shrine at the holiest of times.

As I understand it, the matter is before the Courts in Israel. A decision to return to the status quo in this neighborhood would benefit interreligious peace in Jerusalem and everywhere Jews and Christians live side by side.

We can rightfully be anxious about the danger of bloodshed and war. Catholics should understand the concern of Jews for Israel, which as a nation symbolizes for them the fulfillment of ancient Biblical promise and represents as

well a place of refuge and of hope in the shadow of the horrors of the Shoah, the Holocaust.

But how does this tie in with our Catholic-Jewish Relations here? Often it takes the form of public Jewish demands that the Holy See establish full diplomatic relations with Israel. For a Catholic in the United States, this request has puzzling aspects.

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 1984. 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 triologue in local areas.

Incidentally, the visits last year with Christians and with Arab government leaders throughout the area gave me an opportunity to assess the position of the Holy See vis-a-vis Israel and Jordan from yet another perspective.

Given the recent intractability of the peace process there, for the Holy See at this juncture to exchange ambassadors with Israel and Jordan would have

these negative consequences:

- 1) The Holy See would lose the ability to have any impact, exercise any leverage at all, on the Arab States in trying to nudge them into the peace process;
- 2) For Christians living in Israel and in the Occupied Territories (the West Bank and Gaza), the move would be seen as a betrayal -- they have perceived pressure exerted on them as minority citizens in Israel on the one hand and, in the territories, they have seen themselves as people deprived of human rights, including their right to a homeland.

I wish to close on a note of common challenge and hope.

In September representatives of the International Jewish Committee on Inter-religious Consultations met in Prague with representatives of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.

In four intense days of listening to overviews of the history of anti-Semitism and of the Shoah, of hearing witnesses to the latter describe days of unspeakable horror, devilish betrayal and undreamed of heroism, the delegates moved towards some practical conclusions.

Representatives of the Holy See received the observations of qualified

Jewish scholars which they wished to have as they begin to prepare an official Catholic document or documents on anti-Semitism and on the Shoah.

Jews and Catholics made a commitment to new common efforts to head off expressions of anti-Semitism, especially in those parts of Central and Eastern Europe where Catholics are numerous. The group heard with satisfaction of steps already taken by the Catholic Bishops' Conferences in Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Strongly praised by Jewish representatives at the meetings were Catholic efforts in the United States. A fresh example of this came just last month when our Catholic-Ukrainian Bishop of Stamford, Bishop Losten, took 500,000 copies of Nostra Aetate in Ukrainian with him to Ukraine for distribution to the Catholics there, as they try to get their church bearings after some 45 years underground, with little contact with the outside world.

We concluded our communique with these words:

"After two millenia of estrangement and hostility, we have a sacred duty as Catholics and Jews to strive to create a genuine culture of mutual esteem and reciprocal caring.

" Catholic-Jewish dialogue can become a sign of hope and inspiration to other religions, races, and ethnic groups to turn away from contempt, toward realizing authentic human fraternity.

This new spirit of friendship and caring for one another may be the most important symbol that we have to offer to our troubled world."