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Dialogue

For Catholics, the Second Vatican Council gave great impulse to dialogue with other churches and other faiths. This dialogue entails personal discussions among committed individuals who are qualified to speak because of their knowledge of issues and their official positions within the faith groups they represent. Such dialogue draws on personal experience as well as our knowledge of scripture, tradition (for Catholics this tradition is expressed in conciliar and papal teaching through the centuries) and theology, and depends also and especially for success in the character and integrity of the participants.

Of this kind of dialogue Cardinal John J. O'Connor is an outstanding practitioner. In regular meetings with Jewish leaders in New York, on trips to the Middle East, in guiding official dialogue between U.S. Catholic groups, in conversation with Jewish counterparts, in public speaking and writing, and in a generous willingness to serve as a consultant to others, he makes an exceptional contribution to the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Jewish community.

In honoring Cardinal O'Connor's distinguished role, this essay relates some Catholics perspectives in the development of the dialogue between our Church and Jewish leaders.

The foundations for our approach were laid at the Second Vatican Council, a meeting of the world's Catholic bishops convened by Pope John XXIII in October 1962 and continued by Pope Paul VI in three periods, each of about three months' duration, during the fall months of 1963, 1964, and 1965. In this setting Cardinal Augustin Bea, the German scripture scholar who had been a close advisor of Pope Pius XII and became the key figure in developing the Council's program for Catholic outreach to other religions, oversaw the drafting of a statement on Catholic-Jewish relations. His presentation of this theme to the Council on November 19, 1963, remains vividly in my memory as one of the great moments of those years.

Cardinal Bea recalled how Pope John XXIII personally directed the Council to take up the issue and why it was "so necessary" to treat of it: he cited the Holocaust and how Nazi propaganda used arguments "drawn from the New Testament and from the history of the Church." "It was a question," he continued, "of rooting out from the minds of Catholics any ideas which perhaps remain fixed there through the influence of that propaganda." (Council Day Book, Sessions 1 and 2, Vatican 2, Ed. Floyd Anderson, National Catholic Welfare Conference, Washington, 1965)

Thus began the legislative history of what was to become Nostra Aetate, the Council's Declaration on the Relationship between the Catholic Church and non-Christian Religions. Solemnly enacted by the Council on October 28, 1965, its third

chapter presented the relationship between Church and Synagogue in terms which responded to Pope John XXIII's original directive.

The Declaration made these principal points:

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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)."
- 3) 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. (Addressing this point further, 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. Pope John Paul II in Australia referred to "an irrevocable covenant"; in Warsaw, to "that election to which God is faithful.")

- 4) "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."
- 5) 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 or pretext for anti-Semitism.

Implementation of the document has been measured in different ways. I must emphasize that much of it happened quietly, as the major theological, liturgical, and pastoral shifts directed by the Council were effected rapidly in university and seminary teaching, with repercussions in every level of religious education as well as catechetical materials prepared over a period of time.

Three successive doctoral dissertations (the most recent, in 1991, by Philip Cunningham) have demonstrated a remarkable increase in both accuracy and positive treatment in Catholic educational materials with respect to Jews and Judaism. Often, it should be noted, teachers themselves were unaware of the shift in emphasis insofar as these affected Catholic-Jewish relations; the changes were part of a larger re-ordering of our teaching which included a greater stress on understanding biblical passages in the context of the times in which they were written and the goals of the sacred writers.

In the mid-1980's the Holy See asked the Bishops of the United States to conduct a visitation of our seminaries regarding the implementation of Vatican II teachings. The visitation, undertaken by teams of bishops and educators, offered us an opportunity to remind and to challenge theological faculties to be sure that the principles of Nostra Aetate were being taught the future clergy. We learned that the scriptural courses, for example, already reflected the sensitivities to the ancient writings and the Jewish context of the Christian canon of scriptures called for by Nostra Aetate. Where direct experience of interfaith dialogue was lacking, the visitation team made recommendations, so that the students could gain a better sense of the practical possibilities and limitations of such dialogues.

In many dioceses, also, in-service workshops for teachers in Catholic schools and religious education programs have enabled them to understand better

such issues as Holocaust studies. Of course, not every preacher or teacher has necessarily learned the conciliar approach to this and other concerns, but the progress has been truly phenomenal.

The Holocaust: The harrowing crucible of the Holocaust was also the beginning of dialogue for some people of faith. Even as its memory helped motivate the Second Vatican Council to address the Church's relationship to the Synagogue, so also did the shared experiences of some Catholic survivors help other Catholics appreciate the ongoing vitality of Jewish spirituality. I remember a chance conversation from the 1960's with a Polish priest, a concentration camp survivor. He related how some believing Jews and Christians offered extraordinary mutual support by their witness to faith in God and by their spirit of prayer. He told me, "Those without such faith lost also their sense of dignity in the degrading setting of the death camp."

But in the half-century since the end of Nazi terror, there has been relatively little dialogue among survivors across faith lines. As Dr. Stanislaw Krajewski, a Jewish scholar who lives in Poland, described the problem to a joint Jewish-Catholic group of us from the United States in these words: "In the U.S., most Holocaust survivors are Jewish; in Poland, most are Catholics." Each group has its own set of memories, preserved and perhaps modified a bit through the years, with hardly any exchange with the other set of memories.

This dichotomy came home vividly to Catholics in the summer of 1987, when Pope John Paul II received President Kurt Waldheim of Austria.

The strong Jewish reaction to the meeting between the Holy Father and President Waldheim offered an occasion for us to explain to Catholics the feelings of Jewish people regarding the Holocaust. In my presentations, I found that the analogy of sacrament is most helpful. Accordingly, anything which might seem to tarnish the memory of the Holocaust is seen by Jews as a sacrilege. Waldheim had become for many a symbol of trying to sweep under the carpet memories of the Holocaust.

To Jews, it was necessary to explain the feelings of Catholics. The Pope, as the Successor of St. Peter, has an office with great spiritual significance for our people. We Catholics see the role of the Pope, whom we call with meaning our Holy Father, in the context of our faith and devotional life. Many times during the discussions of June and July of 1987, a number of our Jewish partners in dialogue tried to reassure us that they had good relationships with American Catholics but not with the Pope. As I explained the feelings which this kind of remark automatically triggered in a Catholic, one rabbi said, "I think I understand. Many of our people feel that when one attacks the State of Israel, that person is also attacking basic Jewish identity."

In this context, I invited the Jewish listeners to try to see Pope John Paul II as we who are members of the Church see and know him: He is the one who, from a hospital bed, forgave the man who had shot him. He is one who, like his predecessors, has met and shook hands with heads of state who were actually persecuting Catholics. It is no wonder that Catholics and many of their neighbors thought that, in the Waldheim case, Pope John Paul was being asked to do something not in his job description. In an America where the ACLU and other groups have taught us not to try a person in the mass media, it seemed that some were asking the Pope to act as a civil judge and jury, to pronounce a sentence of guilt on an individual who had not yet had his day in court.

In the course of two visits to Poland, I saw the deep imprint of the Holocaust on that nation and the wisdom of the proposal made in 1992 by the American Jewish Committee to begin a program whereby Catholic seminary students in Poland could hear lectures by Jewish scholars from the United States and Jewish rabbinical students here attend lectures by Polish Catholic scholars. This program was launched in 1993 with the full support of the Polish bishops.

In 1987, the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jews announced its intention of preparing a document on the Holocaust as a teaching resource for Catholics. From the outset, the process leading to the document has been one of dialogue, arranged through the International Liaison Committee (in

which the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jews and the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Dialogue collaborate) and involving both Jewish and Catholic scholars in a series of consultations. At Prague in 1990, at Baltimore in 1992, and, less substantively at Jerusalem in 1994, progress was made, and it is anticipated that the next ILC meeting in 1995 will bring the commission closer to its goal, a document which will promote a worldwide Catholic understanding of the Holocaust and offer tools for combating anti-Semitism.

This formal dialogue about the Shoah has offered a look at painful years, of hearing witnesses describe days of unspeakable horror, devilish betrayal and undreamed-of heroism. We considered together episodes of human courage and of human weakness, not fearing to listen to descriptions of the failure of Christians and others in one setting or another, nor failing to give credit to those whose courage saved lives, often at the risk, even the cost, of their own.

Besides preparing the way for a teaching document of the Holy See and encouraging a greater sensitivity to the realities of the Holocaust for Catholics, these studies furnish materials helpful for those who, with an interfaith sensitivity, speak publicly for Jewish concerns. For example, while there is no question that some Christian leaders failed, nor is there a question that others acted heroically, it is very clear that the policies of the Holy See during those difficult days made possible the rescue of many Jews.

Through these discussions on the Holocaust, Catholics have been helped to understand how, for Jews, the Holocaust with all its horrors was uniquely genocidal. From the special 1987 International Liaison Committee came a statement, to which both Jews and Catholics subscribed, acknowledging 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, but 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.

Dialogue also was and must remain an essential tool in helping both sides understand both the flashpoint issue of the Auschwitz Carmel and the continuing significance of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps. In a sense, the Carmelite

Monastery question was first defined by dialogue at a February 1987 meeting involving Cardinal Franciszek Macharski, Archbishop of Krakow, three other European cardinals, and some European Jesuit leaders.

The cardinals 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 more than a year the Polish government did not issue necessary building permits. This could be understood in the light of the fact that it was not uncommon to take seven years for the construction of a new public use in Poland during those years.

The rest is history: The violation of the cloister and clamorous demonstrations on convent grounds by Rabbi Avi Weiss and his associates; the harsh physical reaction of some Polish workers on the scene; the escalation of

demonstrations and reactions, involving finally Cardinal Jozef Glemp and other church leaders in Poland and elsewhere.

On September 19 Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, President of the Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, issued a statement on behalf of the Holy See. He commended the stand of the Polish Bishops' Commission for Dialogue with 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. 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 they 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 invited our Jewish and other neighbors to realize that within the Catholic Church there are many different juridical entities, some of them, like monasteries of nuns, possess surprising autonomy as far as Church law is concerned.

In this context we can better understand how the Carmelites, who had not been part of the negotiations regarding the construction of a new convent and their relocation to it, were reluctant to leave their home next to the Auschwitz camp. When the convent was completed, Pope John Paul II wrote an extraordinary, personal letter to the nuns, inviting them either to go to the monastery built at the new center

or to return to the community from which Auschwitz Carmel had been established, and the sisters finally moved, was the issue finally resolved.

Our 1992 Catholic-Jewish pilgrimage to Auschwitz and Birkenau was marked by a tender reunion which throws a special light on the significance of the death camps: two Jewish survivors who were part of our group met a Catholic Polish survivor. As they embraced and exchanged their stories, the Jewish woman revealed that her life was saved by a Catholic Pole, who was in fact a friend of their new-found friend, the survivor they met that morning.

This story also helps us understand why, as Archbishop Henryk Muszynski has pointed out repeatedly, the cross near the convent, outside the former death camp, has a special symbolism for Catholic Poles. Within two months of the Nazi invasion in 1939, Polish Catholic leaders, including more than half the priests in some dioceses, were arrested. Some were summarily executed and the others sent to concentration and extermination camps, including Auschwitz, where most subsequently died.

Another critical issue much addressed in the dialogue has been the State of Israel, the theme of another paper in this volume.

From the perspective of the United States, where our national history has been clouded by recurring episodes of anti-Semitism and of anti-Catholicism, I believe that our dialogue in coming years can usefully deal with issues identified as neuralgic by the consultation co-sponsored by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Synagogue Council of America from 1987 through 1994, when the latter group elected to dissolve. These include: the restoration of teaching basic moral values in America's public schools, combating pornography, dealing with new manifestations of discrimination, affirming the right of people of faith to address issues in the public policy arena (where anti-religious prejudice is too frequently injected, often as recently as in the right-to-life debate), and news media unfairness in reporting on religion (Rabbi Mordecai Waxman, then Chairman of IJCIC, and I addressed one 1988 forum in which this was a sub-theme: both of us together addressed a series of inaccuracies in the New York Times reporting of the previous year.)

An old issue commanding fresh attention is that of government aid to students in non-public schools, a concern of Catholics, of Orthodox and now of many Conservative Jews who recognize the importance of religious schools.

This issue is framed in the context of interreligious dialogue. For instance, aid or relief for students and their parents would have to pass constitutional muster. Several such approaches are now under discussion, with the emphasis on aid to the needy, not to specific institutions, whether religious or secular.

A number of arguments from the common good can be considered in such a rethinking. These range from an acknowledgment of the primacy of parental responsibility for their children's education and the consequent necessity of respecting and supporting their freedom of choice, to the affirmation of pluralism as opposed to governmental monopoly of education.

There are approximately 9,500 Catholic primary and secondary schools serving about three million students. Surveys have shown that graduates of Catholic high schools in this country are not only more positive toward Jews and Judaism than other Catholics, but far more positive than the general population, which is to say, graduates of public schools.

If one is serious about the full implementation of Nostra Aetate and other Church documents on Catholic-Jewish relations in this country, one has to acknowledge the key role that must be played by our schools in the process. Thus, a reconsideration of this issue has the potential for greatly enhancing the common good of the nation, of the children, and all of our efforts at interreligious amity as well.

In addition, many studies, and our experience in Baltimore underscores this, show that Catholic schools offer minority children a way to receive an education,

to graduate from high school, go on to college--a way not available to them otherwise--a way now imperiled by rising costs.

It is appropriate here to express appreciation to the State of Israel, which underwrites up to 85% of operating costs of religious schools, including Catholic schools, in that land. The amount of allocation is correlated to the observance of certain quality criteria. The equivalent of more than eleven million American dollars was given in direct aid to Catholic schools by the Government of Israel in 1993. Israel, like most other democratic countries, has concluded that aid to students actually benefits the total good of the country rather than detracting from it.

So many complex issues are already being addressed, so many bridges of understanding are already built, always, it seems, opening the way to new perspectives and challenges. With people of good will, so much more good can be accomplished in these new moments. Whether it be in understanding the Shoah, building peace for Israel and her neighbors, or promoting dialogue here on issues close to home, we should proceed as people of faith, relying on and praying for the blessing of the Lord of all mercies.

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