

November 7, 2005 – 7:00 p.m.
Mainline Reform Temple – Beth Elohim
Wynnewood, Pennsylvania

Nostra Aetate After Forty Years

At the outset, I wish to express my gratitude to Rabbi David Straus, the President of the Board of Rabbis, for his gracious words of welcome and to Father Gregory J. Fairbanks, Director of the Archdiocesan Office for Ecumenical and Religious Affairs, for his kind words of introduction.

It is good to be present with an old friend, Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor, a companion in dialogue since our meeting in Prague in 1990. That meeting of the International Liaison Committee between Jews and Catholics at the world level produced the Prague declaration, with the famous sentence “anti-Semitism is a sin against God and humanity.”

Pope John Paul II took that sentence a couple of months later and used it in an address to drive home the seriousness of anti-Semitism.

We live in an extraordinary period, especially for the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish Community.

It seems like yesterday when Cardinal Augustin Bea addressed the Second Vatican Council at the direction of Pope John XXIII, after the latter's death. It was November 19, 1963, and the Cardinal, a noted

German scripture scholar who had headed the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, stated: "God Himself through St. Paul assures us that He in no way has rejected His chosen and beloved people. For the Apostle writes to the Romans: 'I say then: has God cast off His people? By no means...God has not cast off His people whom he foreknew.' (Romans 11, 1s.) And a little below this he gives a reason: "For the gift and the call of God are irrevocable." (ebid., v.29), that is, God does not revoke a choice once made nor does He reject the people of Israel."

What Cardinal Bea presented on that day evolved to become the decree *Nostra Aetate*, which authorizes today Catholic efforts in outreach to all non-Christian religions.

In 1987, a rabbi friend of mine told me about the action of a Polish priest in the days not long after the Second World War. A Catholic couple had brought a child to him to be baptized. He asked why the child had not been baptized before. The response was, he is not our child, but was born of another set of parents. He said, "Of what religion were those parents?" Their response, "Jewish." Then, he said, "I cannot baptize the child." The parents' implied wish must be respected. That Jewish child has grown to adulthood and now lives here in the United States. The story is a true one. The priest, as many of you already know, was Father Karol Wojtyla, who became in time Pope John Paul II. One of the Chief Rabbis of Israel repeated the story to me in 1994 and said that the Pope, in response to a question, related that the gentleman is still alive and in 1994 lived in Brooklyn, in the United States.

There is also the story of Edith Stein, who received a great deal of attention in October, 1999, when Pope John Paul II canonized her as Saint Benedict of the Cross. I want to tell this story, because it illustrates both the complexity and horror of the Shoah. Edith Stein came from Breslau, in Silesia, then in Germany, and now known as Wroclaw in Poland. She grew up in a Jewish family, but, by the time she was fifteen years old, she lost all religious faith. She was a brilliant student and went on to achieve a doctorate in philosophy and aspire to a prominent teaching position in the German University.

When she was about twenty-five years old, she read the life of St. Teresa of Avila, who founded the reform of the Carmelite Nuns in the Catholic Church in Spain in the 16th century. Edith Stein was deeply impressed by what she read. She was moved by the spiritual insights of Teresa of Avila and began a pilgrimage of the heart that lead her to become a Catholic and then a cloistered Carmelite nun.

In the latter part of the 1930's in Germany, the situation became such for Jews that the religious community of St. Benedict of the Cross, as Edith Stein was now known, had her transferred to a monastery in Holland. Then the Nazis invaded Holland and carried out a terrible roundup of the Jews in the Spring of 1942. Christian leaders protested the roundup and were told that, if they made their protest public, their own people with Jewish blood would be subject to similar treatment.

In fact, the Catholic bishops did raise their voices to protest what the Nazis had done to the Jewish people of Holland. In consequence,

the Nazis retaliated, and Catholics of Jewish blood, including Sister Benedict of the Cross, were taken prisoner and sentenced to Auschwitz. One of the most touching stories I have read is the detailed account which has been pieced together of Edith Stein's trip from Holland to Southern Germany and to Poland, and eventually to Auschwitz, documented day by day with the contacts she had with people in railroad stations on the way.

In August, 1942, Edith Stein was gassed with thousands of others at Auschwitz.

This valiant woman stands as a remarkable witness to the intensity and the reality of the Shoah. As I have pointed out in many different settings, including an official statement, her canonization serves to remind Catholics of the reality of the Holocaust and of the reality of human holiness and dedication to God and God's ways in a world of confusion and contradiction. It may well be that history will show that Edith Stein, Sister Benedict of the Cross, was one of the most insightful and powerful spiritual writers of the last century.

My assigned and blessed task in promoting positive relationships and deeper understanding between the Catholic Church and the Jewish community in the United States has been made so much easier because of the personal commitment and examples of Pope John Paul and Pope Benedict in the work of reconciliation. Let me say a bit about both of them.

It strikes me that it would be useful this evening to reflect on Pope John Paul's visit to the Middle East in March of the year 2000. What was a personal spiritual pilgrimage for Pope John Paul II, one of which I heard him speak on several occasions as he looked forward to it with anticipation, also had meanings for others, many others.

The Pope helped Catholics, and Christians generally, to see through his eyes places already familiar from frequently recounted Bible stories. On his first day in Jordan, he recalled how Moses looked over to the Promised Land from Mount Nebo. The next day he referred to the nearby hometown of Isaiah, the prophet, and to what the cousin of Jesus, John the Baptist, had done in the land beyond the Jordan River.

In Jordan also he greeted Orthodox and Protestant Christians encouraging them in the role all Christians must continue to play in the birthplace of our faith.

When Pope John Paul crossed over into Israel, his words and actions had meaning also for Jews and for Muslims, for whom the region is also a holy land. I arrived in Jerusalem the Friday before the Pope's Tuesday evening coming. This was my eighth visit to the city, and I had never seen spirits higher. The flags of Israel and the Holy See fluttered along the main streets, and conversation everywhere turned on the coming visit.

From the outset of his preparations for the Year of the Great Jubilee 2000, Pope John Paul drew inspiration from the Book of Leviticus

and the prescriptions for the observance of the ancient jubilee. It was to be a time of forgiveness, with debts pardoned and burdens lifted. He undertook his pilgrimage in the penitential season of Lent, when the official prayers of the Catholic Church call our people to attitudes of repentance. Before he left Rome he led a service in which he prayed for God's pardon for sins committed by Christian believers through the centuries including the use of violence in the cause of religion. The Pope thus demonstrated how seriously the Catholic Church has proceeded in internalizing the teaching on religious freedom from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

Some seventy journalists, mostly from the United States, but with Canadians and others as well had been attending the conference I was invited to join. Through their voices, questions from around the world could be heard.

What Pope John Paul taught Catholics while in Israel, besides reminding us of key events in the life and work of Jesus, helped us to complete our understanding of the Holocaust.

From the time of his first visit as Pope to Poland in 1979, he has pointed out to Catholic audience, beginning with his visit to the death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the uniquely genocidal horror of the Holocaust for Jews. Now, in his visit to Israel, at Yad Vasscm, standing in the somber memorial chamber, he dramatized the sad truth for Catholics, wherever they lived, whether in Poland or in the United States.

At Yad Vasscm, the Pope also saw the remembrances of the righteous Gentiles who had saved some from the Nazis. And there he met someone from Philadelphia, Doctor Lena Allen-Shore, a Polish survivor of the years of the Holocaust, who became his dear friend.

The Pope's visit, while primarily a personal spiritual pilgrimage, meant something also to all those interested in the peace process for the region. For years, he followed through on our Church's consistent teaching about war and peace and the importance of a just peace, so that families and children can live and grow preserved from an atmosphere poisoned by threat and fear.

Pope John Paul's coming offered fresh encouragement to the parties of the region to work together to resolve differences peacefully. The day must come when Israel can be secure within its established borders, the Palestinians can know that their heritage and homeland are acknowledged, and neighboring Arab countries can see the merit of working and trading with the democratic State of Israel. Also, for those who live in Jerusalem, the Holy City par excellence, there is hope for the guarantee that their religious and civil rights will be acknowledged and protected in a way upheld by the international community.

And yet another, highly significant motif, of the pilgrimage was the inter-religious dimension, involving Jews and Muslims in dialogue with Christians. What Pope John Paul said to those gathered for the inter-faith service will be a great legacy of his pilgrimage of peace, "Each of our religions knows, in some form or another, the golden rule: 'do unto others

as you would have them do unto you.’ Precious as this rule is as a guide, true love of neighbor goes much further. It is based on the conviction that when we love our neighbor, we are showing love for God, and when we hurt our neighbor, we offend God. This means that religion is the enemy of exclusion and discrimination, of hatred and rivalry, of violence and conflict. Religion is not, and must not become, an excuse for violence, particularly when religious identity coincides with cultural and ethnic identity. Religion and peace go together! Religious belief and practice cannot be separated from the defense of the image of God in every human being.

“Drawing upon the riches of our respective religious traditions, we must spread awareness that today’s problems will not be solved if we remain ignorant of one another and isolated from one another. We are all aware of past misunderstandings and conflicts, and these still weigh heavily upon relationships between Jews, Christians and Muslims. We must do all we can to turn awareness of past offenses and sins into a firm resolve to build a new future in which there will be nothing but respectful and fruitful cooperation among us.

“The Catholic Church wishes to pursue a sincere and fruitful inter-religious dialogue with the members of the Jewish Faith and the followers of Islam. Such a dialogue is not an attempt to impose our views upon others. What it demands of all of us is that, holding to what we believe, we listen respectfully to one another, seek to discern all that is good and holy in each other’s teaching, and cooperate in supporting everything that favors mutual understanding and peace.

“If the various religious communities in the Holy City and in the Holy Land succeed in living and working together in friendship and harmony, this will be an enormous benefit not only to themselves but to the whole cause of peace in this region. Jerusalem will truly be a City of Peace for all peoples. Then we will all repeat the words of the Prophet: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord...that He may teach us His ways and that we may walk in His paths.’ (Isaiah 2:3)”

There have already been several meetings demonstrating the kind of dialogue to which Pope John Paul II referred.

I think especially of a meeting in Washington two years ago in which we studied the place of the Hebrew Scriptures in Catholic thinking, with the aid of Jewish scholars. This dialogue session was based on a publication of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, which was introduced by a preface written by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the present Pope Benedict XVI.

Cardinal Ratzinger’s long time interest in our dialogue and especially his scholarship have made him a wonderful force now in leading our dialogue in new directions.

Also, what I have seen in our dialogue sessions is a frankness that reveals areas of difference as well as highlighting the ingredients of successful dialogue and the obstacles which can block understanding and progress. For example Catholics speak the language in which our official Church documents are written. It is a sweet language, written for

translation locally for some billion people around the world. It is a gentle style, quite different from the direct, sometimes, I must say strident approach more common in New York City; it is a style that tends to be subdued and peaceful, and not polemical.

But words, in whatever style they are written, do not accomplish as much as deeds in advancing relationships between our faith communities. Let me site three instances, two involving Pope John Paul II and the third, Pope Benedict XVI.

When Pope John Paul II visited Jerusalem, he met with the two Chief Rabbis of Israel. Doctor Eugene Fisher, Director for our Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations in Washington, has commented, "This...defies virtually all expectations based on tradition: The successor of the Apostle Peter, the 'Chief' as it were of the Apostles, meeting with respect, dignity and due deference, the heirs of the Pharisees. It was a meeting of dialogue, not diatribe, a meeting of reconciliation after centuries of alienation. It was a meeting neither the Pope's nor the Chief Rabbis' parents could have dreamed to be possible in their wildest imaginations."

The other moment came when the Pope went to the Western Wall and placed in a crevice there the prayer he had written begging God's forgiveness for the sins of Christians against Jews. Several at our meeting in Washington reflected that most moving was the Holy Father's pause for prayer, his hands spread out upon the wall, as though he were in contact with all the Jewish suffering and all the Jewish hopes of the centuries.

The third instance I would offer is that of Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Cologne.

Let me say a word about the election of Pope Benedict XVI, especially against the background of the work of Pope John Paul II.

Before I left for the Conclave in Rome, I wanted to pay a proper tribute to the memory of Pope John Paul II, and so an Inter-faith Service was scheduled in the Cathedral in Baltimore. By then, I had offered for our Catholic people three Masses in which a great number were able to participate, two in the Cathedral and one in the principal Polish parish in our city.

But at the Inter-faith Service, we had not only Catholic Christians and other Christians, but also representatives of the Jewish and Muslim communities.

Rabbi Joel Zaiman, co-chair with me of our National Dialogue, took an active part, as did Imam Eric el Amin. Both of these I had introduced to Pope John Paul II in Rome and in Baltimore.

The participants in the ceremony told me that they would be praying for us when we Cardinals assembled in Rome. For the reason that we had so many praying for us around the world, I had enormous confidence and peace as we went into the Conclave.

Pope John Paul II made sure that the Cardinals got to know each other well. Several times he assembled us for Consistories, in which we would exchange ideas on a variety of topics.

And we traveled. Last year, for example, I went to Brazil where I spoke in the largest Synagogue of Sao Paolo, with Cardinal Hummes also speaking, and then went to Sao Salvador da Bahia and Cardinal Agnelo to address Jewish-Catholic audiences there. Also, travels took me to Buenos Aires and Cardinal Borgoglio for a series of meetings of the International Liaison Committee Between Catholics and Jews.

When we got to Rome, we found and made many opportunities to get to know each other better. When I reviewed the list of electors, after arriving in Rome, I discovered that 94 or the 115 were well known to me. By the time the Conclave began, we all knew each other.

We Americans invited others in for a meal, and we accepted invitations to get to know them better. One was to the Irish College where a good number of English-speaking Cardinals were in attendance, coming from the British Isles, Africa, North America, Australis, and New Zealand.

In what were known as the General Congregations, we had an opportunity to speak from our own perspectives. We spoke initially in Italian, with Cardinal Ratzinger, Dean of the Sacred College, very ably recognizing speakers and moving the discussions along.

To the election, the experience of the Sistine Chapel was one of great peace and amazing beauty. I could look up and see opposite me frescos by Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, and Perugino. Overhead was the Creation and Fall of our First Parents by Michelangelo and to my left, the Last Judgment, painted by the same artist. Pope John Paul II in his last public poem, visualized the Cardinals assembling in the Sistine Chapel to elect his successor and mused, "Between Creation and Judgment they meet, to be guided by Him to him who they are to choose."

After the election, before he went out on the Balcony of St. Peter's, the new Holy Father met each of us in the Sistine Chapel. I brought the love of the Archdiocese of Baltimore and he said, "We must keep praying for each other."

At his Inaugural Mass, attended by hundreds of thousands, and watched by millions around the world, he affirmed his intention to follow in the path of Pope John Paul II and continue the implementation of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. This included also continuing Pope John Paul II's outreach to the youth, to other Christians, and to Jews and Muslims and the world. More recently, our weekly Catholic newspaper in the Archdiocese of Baltimore carried a column reporting on a moving talk given by Cardinal Ratzinger in February, 1994, in Israel, affirming the critical and religious importance of our on-going relationship with the Jewish People.

I have know Pope Benedict for twenty-two years, and especially from 1989 on, when my brother bishops elected me vice-president of our

National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Like my mother, a school teacher, the new Pope is clear and sweet. As vice-president and then president of our Bishops' Conference, from 1989 to 1995, he was very perceptive and helpful, especially on the issue of inclusive language, which is one peculiar to our English tongue among the modern languages.

Another historic step was taken when Pope Benedict XVI went to Cologne for World Youth Day and there, spoke in the Synagogue of Cologne about issues of interest to both our faith families.

Among other things he said: "...I would encourage sincere and trustful dialogue between Jews and Christians, for only in this way will it be possible to arrive at a shared interpretation of disputed historical questions, and, above all, to make progress towards a theological evaluation of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

"This dialogue, if it is to be sincere, must not gloss over or underestimate the existing differences: in those areas in which, due to our profound convictions and faith, we diverge and indeed, precisely in those areas, we need to show respect and love for one another.

"Finally, our gaze should not only be directed to the past, but should also look forward to the tasks that await us today and tomorrow. Our rich common heritage and our fraternally and more trusting relations, call upon us to join in giving an ever-more harmonious witness and to work together in the practical level for the defense and promotion of human

rights and the sacredness of human life, for family values, for justice and for peace in the world.

God grant that this hope may be fulfilled and that the Lord's gifts of peace and health be with you.

**Cardinal William H. Keeler
Archbishop of Baltimore**