

Zionist Brandeis Award Event

As Neil Rubin of the Jewish Times can attest, when people come to my office to see me, they may be asked to wait opposite the one photograph mounted beside the doors to the elevators. It shows Pope John Paul II, as he placed his prayer into the Western Wall in Jerusalem, a prayer which reads as follows, “God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your Name to the Nations: we are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.”

As the Pope moved his hand across the wall, all who watched saw his sadness. He seemed to be in touch with all the sufferings of the Jewish people down through the centuries. It was a moment that moved hearts, as I learned at a meeting with rabbis in Washington a couple of years ago.

Before I came to Baltimore, I served as co-chair, with Rabbi Joel Zaiman, of the dialogue between Jewish religious leaders in the Synagogue Council of America and the Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Committee of our National Conference of Catholic Bishops. We developed a close friendship, which became stronger here in the City. Now the Jewish partner to the dialogue is the National Council of Synagogues.

When I first arrived in Baltimore, a number of rabbis came from New York to attend the installation service, a kindness I will never forget. [I moved into the Basilica rectory—the Basilica was described by Pope John Paul II as architecturally the worldwide symbol of religious freedom. Maryland was the first place in the English-Speaking world with religious freedom.] And the Jewish community tendered a reception for me, at which I met Rabbi Herman Neuberger, head of the Ner Israel Rabbinical College, who suggested that we collaborate on moral and governmental issues, which we did. I extend sympathy to the local and national communities who mourn the passing of Rabbi Neuberger.

When Karol Wotyla was growing up, his best friend was Jewish, a man who eventually ended up in Rome, before Karol was elected to become Pope John Paul II

in 1978. (When I went to Rome in 1988 for meetings with the Pope and officials of his staff in Rome, he spent so much time talking to me about his friend in Rome, that I had to interrupt him and say, "Holy Father, if I do not tell you something about my diocese, I will be in trouble back home.")

In fact some 30% of his schoolmates were Jewish, which led the Pope to speak to us in Castel Gandolfo about his experience in returning to his home town Wadowice after the Second World War. He said to us that "they were all gone, casualties to the Nazi effort to annihilate the Jewish people."

He told us that he had meditated that morning on the Exodus, and that this helped him to understand the high value Jewish people placed on the State of Israel, a fulfillment of the ancient biblical prophecy of a place of safety and refuge.

Now Pope Benedict XVI is following in the footsteps of John Paul II. The first telephone call I had when I returned to the office from the Conclave in Rome was from Abe Foxman, the head of the Anti-Defamation League. He wanted to congratulate me on our choice of popes. (As Cardinal Ratzinger, Benedict had been in Israel on several occasions and made speeches in which he acknowledged the importance of the State. And he had written personally and signed the preface to the document on the key place of the Hebrew Scriptures for Catholics - a scholarly work.)

Incidentally, at the press conference immediately following the Conclave, I was happy to point out the presence of Rabbi Jack Bemporad and have him stand for recognition. He had helped arrange the meeting with the rabbis at which we discussed the Hebrew Bible and its importance for Catholics. We do hold that the First Covenant is the revealed word of God and that