



May 10, 2006 - Cardinal O'Malley's Speech on Catholic-Jewish relations

Thank you very much everyone, I'm very moved and privileged to be invited here tonight and I'm grateful to all of those who have sponsored this event; the Anti-Defamation League, the Jewish Community Relations Council, the American Jewish Committee, and the Jewish Community Centers of Greater Boston. I'm very privileged to be able to speak to all of you, especially to the members of the local Rabbinate.

Many people might describe the relationships between the Catholic Church in the Jewish community as a terrible car crash. But we have survived and God does want us to be friends. And that's what *Nostra Aetate* is about. As we read and reflect, 40 years later, what must be uppermost in our minds is not the limitations of this document, but its value in light of the previous attitudes, both practical and theoretical that prevailed in church. We Catholics must see how this document conforms with the deeper strand of our tradition, and indeed with the word of God in both testaments.

It is most significant that this document was approved by an ecumenical council. Council documents are held in church teaching to come ultimately from the Holy Spirit, who is assisting, illuminating, and if need be correcting, the human process of reflection and decision. It is therefore the Spirit of God behind the text of *Nostra Aetate*, and cannot be changed. It is not a question of a practical decision, however noble or lofty our motivations may be for that. It is for Catholics a question of fidelity to our own vocation, a part of our response to God. Hence there can never be a question of retreating from *Nostra Aetate*, there can only be a question about going forwards.

Jewish-Christian relations in the Catholic Church are here to stay, grounded as they are not on some passing phenomenon, a fad or a guilt complex, but rather grounded on a renewed consciousness of the mystery of the Church, as *Nostra Aetate* starts by saying. Our relationship is grounded in theological convictions, which for the Catholic Church, is essential. We do not withdraw from such convictions. Our identity would be at stake. I believe too that what has transpired in the last 40 years is proof of the firmness of our resolve, and the coherence of our decision. We have seen the constant engagement of the Holy See and of the Pope himself, in reaching out to the Jewish community on the one hand and in trying to make the Catholic Community always more aware of the consequences of *Nostra Aetate*.

I have been Bishop in four different dioceses, the Virgin Islands, Fall River, Palm Beach, and Boston. In each of these local churches I experienced the great warmth and the cordiality, the solidarity that united the Catholic and Jewish communities. In the Virgin Islands we organized a Holocaust memorial in our cathedral. Many of the Jewish people in our community had never been in the cathedral in their lives, even though they had lived their whole lives on the island. They were dumbfounded to hear our black West Indian choir singing the Jewish hymns. I used to have lunch with the Rabbi once a month.

In Fall River, we had wonderful relationships with the Jewish community. I was invited once to address a convention of Rabbis. That was very intimidating. We also organized a *Kristallnacht* service. There was a great sense of affection and solidarity, and when I left to go to Palm Beach, the Jewish community organized an official farewell at their Synagogue. Palm Beach is where I was the shortest amount of time, but probably had the largest percentage of Jewish people in the local population. And there too, there was a wonderful relationship between our communities. And now I'm in Boston, where our communities enjoy a lasting and a close relationship from the time of Cardinal Cushing. This is a blessing that must be celebrated and nurtured.

Certainly Catholic-Jewish relations took a giant step forward in the ministry of John Paul II, a man from Poland, from a heavily Jewish town, who experienced the joy of cherished friendships with Jews and the horror of anti-Semitism. In March of 2000, Pope John Paul II walked across the plaza of the Western Wall, reaching out a trembling hand to touch its stones, and in the custom of Jewish visitors, tucked a note to God into the crevice. His written prayer, which was later removed and placed in Yad Vashem, is a prayer I make my own here tonight, as we celebrate the 40th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*.

God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your name to the nations. We are deeply sad-



dened by the behavior of those, who in the course of history have caused these children to suffer. And asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.

John Paul called the twentieth century the century of the Shoah. He sees the Holocaust as something more than yet another atrocity. The Holy Father has stated that Catholics are called to stand with the Jewish people in preserving the memory of the Holocaust. The church can only approach the Shoah in the spirit of repentance for the evil that so many of its baptized members perpetuated, and so many failed to stop. Those Catholics who risked their lives to help Jews escape from Nazi terror are some consolation. We only regret is that they were not greater in number. Many of them were martyrs themselves, many will remain unknown. Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, has honored more than 11,000 rescuers and more cases await their consideration.

These realities were brought home to me during World Youth Day in Rome, when I went there with many young people from Massachusetts. Over 2 million youth from around the world assembled with the Holy Father to mark the millennium. We went to Assisi and visited the basilica of Saint Francis, where the tomb of the saint is located. I had been there many times, but I'd never heard until that moment when the guide was showing us around that there is a huge hidden vault between the floors of the basilica, and there the friars hid many Jews during the war. In fact the patio outside the basilica was donated by the state of Israel in recognition of the many religious and laity of the town of Assisi, who risked their lives to help hide large numbers of Jews from the Nazis.

Likewise, in the church in Rome where I was invited to preach to a contingent of youth. The priest invited me to have lunch and the parish house, and while I was there they explained to me that hidden there, in that monastery during the war, were many Jews. And one night a group of Nazi soldiers broke the door down, came in, and began to search the building. The priests were all horrified because they knew what the consequences would be. A young German soldier went up to the top floor, moved a bookcase, and found the passageway and saw the Jewish families that were there. The soldier then went to the steps and called down to the other officers saying that there was no need to come up, because there was no one there. The soldiers withdrew and the Jews and their rescuers were spared, because one German soldier had a conscience.

Sadly, too many Christians did not have the courage of their convictions. Sadder still, too many became seduced by racism and nationalism that unleashed the violence of the Holocaust. Looking to our future, with an ardent desire to achieve a sense of solidarity between Jews and Catholics, we urge all Catholics to have a deepened awareness of our Hebrew roots. Jesus Christ was a Jew, a descendant of King David's. Mary and the apostles were Jews. Jesus Christ made the God of Israel the God of the nations. We claim Abraham as our spiritual father. We venerate the Jewish scriptures. Our theology and liturgy, indeed our history, our weekly Sabbath observance of the Lord's Day, are all inexorably linked to the Jewish religion.

The deeper our awareness of this reality, the more we will contribute to the shalom that we all long for. I ask my people to heed the words of Saint Paul, in the letter to the Romans, where he writes, "If the root is holy, so are the branches. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place and have come to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. If you do boast, consider that you do not support the root, the root supports you." The Church is the daughter of the Synagogue. Too many Catholics do not advert to our Jewish roots, to our connectedness, to the history of the Hebrew people.

Let me share with you an experience I have many years ago working with immigrants in Washington D.C. I was visited in my rather dingy offices on Mount Pleasant Street by two gentlemen from the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, who came to speak to me about anti-Semitism in the Hispanic community. I felt completely blindsided. I said to the gentlemen, "Most of our people are from very remote, rural villages in El Salvador and other central American countries. Most of them have never met a Jew, and probably don't know who you are. The only exceptions would be, those whom we placed in Jewish homes and businesses, through our employment agency, and they were unanimous in their praise and affection for their Jewish employers, who universally treated them with generosity and respect."

I assured the men that they were barking up the wrong tree, and sent them off with that "don't call me, I'll call you" complimentary close. A couple of days later, at a meeting with my parishioners to plan Holy Week, one of the people



said, "Padre, this year on the Sábado de Gloria, let's have a burning of the Jew."

I was horrified. I thought I didn't understand what he was saying, and in disbelief, I asked him again and again to repeat. I finally realized that in many of the villages where he'd come from, Holy Saturday was like a Catholic Guy Fawkes Day. As the English say, "Remember, remember, the Fifth of November," and then they burn the pope in effigy on the anniversary of the Guy Fawkes gunpowder plot. The scriptures describe the suicide of Judas, who sold Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. It says that he hanged himself, and his body burst open. Accordingly the folkloric custom arose of hanging Judas in effigy and filling the dummy with fireworks. The atrocious practice was dubbed, "la quema del judío." The burning of the Jew.

I ran back to my office, rifled through my desk, looking for the business card of the gentlemen from the Anti-Defamation League; luckily, I found nothing. I was very embarrassed, but I explained what happened, and asked for their help to educate my parishioners. They came up with the idea of a Seder meal, and produced a wonderful Argentine Rabbi, Leon Klenicki, who came and conducted a Seder meal in Spanish. We had it on Holy Thursday, the night of the last supper, the night when Jesus celebrated his Seder meal. The whole community was fascinated to see the connection between the Seder meal and Eucharistic celebration of the mass. After that no one asked to burn any Jews.

The whole affair reminded me that Cervantes had dealt with anti-Semitism in one of his famous works. In the Spain of Alfonso el Sabio, Jews, Moors and Christians lived in peace. But that peace was shattered, and there was much persecution of those who were not Christians. Cervantes, who was very possibly from a conversos family himself, wrote a book called, *El Retablo de las Maravillas*, sort of a Spanish version of *The Emperor's New Clothes*. And in the work, he describes a group of actors who traveled from village to village and put on plays in the public square. And when they would assemble the whole crowd, people would come. They would announce the name of the play and then tell them that this was a magical play and the only ones who would be able to see it, were those who had pure blood. There was great obsession with what the Spanish call, "limpia de sangre." In other words, no Moorish or Jewish blood, only old Christians could see the play. And then they pulled back the curtain and began the music. The people would laugh and applaud and cheer, and of course there was nothing on the stage.

Once and for all, we too must expose racism and anti-Semitism for what it is - a fraud, a lie, an affront to humanity.

We understand the concern in the Jewish community because of the upsurge in anti-Semitism, the violent threats against the state of Israel. In the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* we pledge ourselves to work to eliminate the poison of anti-Semitism, and to do all we can to promote a peaceful solution to the crisis in the Middle East, which jeopardizes the peace and security of people throughout the whole world. If in the past we've been part of the problem, in the future we as Catholics must be part of the solution; by being faithful to the gospel of Christ, which is not one of hatred and bigotry, but one of love and forgiveness.

I was so pleased to read that Jewish statement that came out in the year 2000 on the eve of Yom Kippur, the statement entitled, *Dabru Emet*, which means, "Speak the truth." It was a helpful statement authored by 170 Jewish scholars. It offers eight brief statements about how Jews and Christians may relate to one another. It begins by acknowledging that Jews and Christians worship the same God, seek authority from the same scriptures, and accept the moral principles of the Torah.

But one of the statements that I would like to read tonight is that about Nazism and Christianity. The Rabbis and Jewish scholars write:

Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon, but without the long history of Christian anti-Judaism and Christian violence against Jews, Nazi ideology could not have taken a whole nor could it have been carried out. Too many Christians participated in, and were sympathetic to, Nazi atrocities against Jews. Other Christians did not protest sufficiently against those atrocities. But Nazism itself was not an inevitable outcome of Christianity. If the Nazi extermination of the Jews had been fully successful it would have turned its murderous rage more directly to Christians. We recognize with gratitude those Christians who risked or sacrificed their lives to save Jews during the Nazi regime. With that in mind we encourage the continuation of recent efforts of Christian theology to repudiate unequivocally contempt of Ju-



daism and the Jewish people. We applaud those Christians who reject this teaching of contempt and we do not blame them for the sins committed by their ancestors.

The same document challenges Jews and Christians to work together for justice and peace.

These very sentiments are echoed by Pope Benedict XVI in his words at the synagogue in Cologne last summer. Pope Benedict says:

Finally our gaze should not only be directed to the past, but we should also look forward to the tasks that await us today and tomorrow. Our rich common heritage and our fraternal and more trusting relations call upon us to join in giving an ever more harmonious witness and to work together on the practical level for the defense and promotion of human rights, the sacredness of human life, for family values, for social justice, and for peace in the world. The Decalogue is for us a shared legacy and commitment. The Ten Commandments are not a burden, but a signpost, showing the path leading to a successful life. This is particularly the case for the young people who I am meeting with on these days, and who are so dear to me. But my wish is that they may be able to recognize in the Decalogue our common foundation, a lamp for their steps and a light for their path. Adults have the responsibility of handing down to young people the torch of hope that God has given to Jews and Christians so that never again will the forces of evil come to power and that future generations with God's help may be able to build a more just and peaceful world in which all people have equal rights and are equally at home.

I have always loved the Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam, Repairing the World. As Catholics, we speak of repairing the world in terms of the social gospel, of building a civilization of love. I hope that we can do this together. Working together we can address the social problems of our community and the world. Illiteracy, hunger, war, must be eliminated. Such goals can be achieved only if we are working together to repair the world.

Martin Buber once addressed a group of theologians. There were Jewish theologians and Christian theologians there. And he said to them, "My good friends, what is the difference between you and me? Both of us, all of us, believe, because we are religious, in the coming of the messiah. You believe that the messiah came, went back, and that you are waiting for him to come for a second coming. We Jews believe he hasn't come yet, but that he will come. In other words, we are all waiting. You for the second coming, we for the first. Let's wait together." After a pause, he said, "And when he comes back, we will ask me him, 'Have you been here before?'" And then Buber said, "I hope I will be behind him, and I will whisper in his ear, 'Please don't answer that.'"

I'm sure the Rabbi did not wish to trivialize our differences. Rabbi Heschel put it so well when he said, "We honestly and profoundly disagree in matters of creed and the messiahship of Jesus, but across the chasm, we can extend our hand to one another." We realize that there are great differences between Christians and Jews, but tonight, thanks to Nostra Aetate, I stand here to say that we have much in common and we will be judged by the same God. We are all waiting for the messiah - you are waiting for the coming of the messiah, we are waiting for him to come back. Let us prepare for that day by working together to repair the world, to build a civilization of love. Our God will be pleased.

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