

## YOM HASHOAH

During this last year we have been shocked with the devastating news of Tuesday, September 11<sup>th</sup> via TV, radio, newspaper reports and the web.

**Terrorism**, experienced by many countries especially in Israel, reached our shores and destroyed not only the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon but also over 3000 people. Violence and death were heaped upon innocent people and done in God's name.

Questions flooded our hearts and souls. Have we learned any lessons from the Holocaust?

Please do not misunderstand me; I'm not making a comparison of this destruction with the Shoah when eleven million Jews of Europe were destined for extermination by the Nazi controlled government. By 1945 six million Jews had been annihilated only because they were born Jewish; Jews were not accepted anywhere; there was total abandonment as described so well in David Wyman's book *The Abandonment of the Jews*.

Nevertheless, the scenes of the horrible devastation in New York and Washington did remind us of the massacres of Jews during World War II. There was a burning, a holocaust. We recall the long lines of Jews driven out by Germany, Austria, Poland, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Slovakia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Rumania, Greece, Hungary sent to be burned in the death camps by Nazi government orders

The SS St. Louis filled with 906 abandoned Jews was not allowed to embark on the shores of the United States or anywhere else. The entire world had abandoned Jews.

Tonight we gather to remember.

Fifty-seven years have passed since the end of World War II, or more correctly stated: The war against the Jews which ended in 1945. Twenty-five years ago (1975) we were here in South Orange and Maplewood gathered to remember. We have not succumbed to the critics who constantly ask that Jews repress their memories of victimization, oppression and the attempts of a final solution, a total annihilation of Jews. We remember to remember each year and do so “for a purpose” as Pope John Paul II requested when he visited the Holocaust Memorial in Israel in 2000.

With the Second Vatican Council (convened in 1962 by Pope John XXIII) we of the Catholic faith began to face our history of anti-Judaism, theological supersessionism and anti-Semitism. Thirty-seven years have passed since the ground-breaking document *Nostra aetate* of 1965 indicated a critical shift in Catholic official teachings regarding Judaism and the Jewish people. It began the Renaissance—the re-birth—of positive relations with God’s People—the Jews. The 1965 document stands as the first official acknowledgement of the theological anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism that shaped our self-understanding and practice. Through it we began to reclaim the power of our religious heritage by publicly condemning anti-Semitism and explicitly denouncing the falsehood that held Jews collectively responsible for the death of Jews.

*Nostra aetate*, in 15 Latin lines, changed forever the negative-false relationship held for thousands of years by Catholicism to a positive one. Briefly this new teaching articulated basic truths:

1. It recognized Christianity’s rootedness in Judaism mentioning the Patriarchs, Prophets of the First Testament, the Hebrew scriptures, the Tanach.
2. It noted Christianity’s membership in Judaism by adoption
  - a. by speaking of the fact we have been grafted onto the root of Judaism,

- b. by speaking of our commonalities of personhood, each person is created in God's image and likeness,
  - c. both Jews and Christians are a covenanted people
  - d. both Jews and Christians are guided by God's law given on Mt. Sinai.
3. *Nostra aetate* condemned anti-Semitism in every shape and form.
  4. The document laid to rest forever the deicide charge. Never again may Catholic teaching hold that Jews killed Christ.
  5. The document recognized God's enduring love and covenant with God's People—Jews.

This was the beginning in my Church. So again, I repeat, Thank God for Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. The teachings within this declaration are indeed being implemented within most of our Catholic institutions of higher learning—seminaries, ecumenical commissions, secondary and elementary schools. To ascertain this, I have done research in 1975 and in 1985. The results indicated that efforts are on-going.

In 1975, the Vatican issued another strong teaching, which helped implement the 1965 document called, "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing *Nostra Aetate*." It condemned, again, the sin of anti-Semitism, reiterating the teaching that Christians cannot place the blame for Jesus' death on Jews. Jesus chose to die for us. That is the one, the only correct theological stand to be had by Christians at the foot of the Cross. The U.S. Catholic Bishops' 1975 document on Christian-Jewish relations spoke of the State of Israel and asked Catholics to understand what Israel means to Jews and Judaism. It asked us to understand Jews as they understand themselves. How can Catholics do this? Only through study and dialogue. This led to the 1993 Vatican-Israel Diplomatic Relations. In 1982, the Vatican issued a document on "The Church and Racism in

the Church” and pointed out clearly that when Catholics are anti-Zionist they are basically being anti-Semitic and this is sinful.

The 1985 document, “Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church,” clearly indicated that teachers of religion **must respect Judaism** and **teach this** to their constituencies.

Pope John Paul II in 1994 gave an example that we Catholics must ever remember. On April 7, 1994, he invited survivors of the *Shoah* to the Vatican for *Yom Hashoah*- A Day of Holocaust Remembrance. Within the concert, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, directed by Gilbert Levine, in music and song, after 50 years, the Pope remembered that the “contempt teaching” of the past led to the *Shoah*-Holocaust. In the Vatican, the orchestra played, *Kol Nidre*, the prayer chanted in synagogues throughout the world on *Yom Kippur*- The Day of Atonement. To the world and to me this was an open plea for forgiveness, for reconciliation. During the ceremony, Pope John Paul II asked all for a moment of silence that, “all might listen to the six million voices of our Jewish brothers and sisters who were slaughtered by the Nazis.” I thank God that this plea for forgiveness/reconciliation was part of Pope John Paul’s prayer already in 1994.

In March 1996, the German bishops issued a public statement admitting their guilt in the Holocaust by the Church’s “**contempt teaching**.” The Polish Bishops also issued their own document noting their failure to speak out for the Jews during the Shoah.

However, the French Bishops’ statement, published in Rome, September 1997, as a “Declaration of Repentance” is the most honest declaration, stating, “The Church of France **failed** in her mission as teacher of conscience in the face of the Nazi plan to exterminate Jews.” The French Bishops did issue an apology; they did ask forgiveness. The document continued, “. . . today we confess that silence

was a mistake. We beg the pardon of God and we ask the Jewish people to hear **our record of repentance**. We beg God's forgiveness and ask the Jewish people to hear our words of repentance." Only now can **true** healing begin.

But speakers pointed out in a recent Rome International Symposium there is still much work to be done. Father Johann B. Metz, a theologian from Germany, commented, "despite its monuments and memorials to the Holocaust, modern society is suffering from 'cultural amnesia' about the *Shoah*. The attempt to annihilate the Jewish people was in fact an unprecedented attack on the cultural memory of humanity as the murder of memory in the scale of millions." We must continually resist this form of amnesia.

We need to remember for a purpose! We **must teach** this dark period of history. Christians must have the courage to care. This concern must be present today when the State of Israel is being pushed to give up more land; when Jews/Israelis are being slaughtered anew in suicide bomb attacks in Haderas, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Suicide bombs via terrorists have blown up cafes, buses, pizzerias, bus terminals, malls on Ben Yehuda and Jaffa Streets. Men, women and children have been destroyed. Emil Fackenheim recently asked the conference participants to speak out, to protest; in fact, he asked: "Where were you during those bus attacks? If we care about the Holocaust we need to speak out! Where are we now when Israel is being pushed to give up her homeland/ to give up Jerusalem?"

Looking to the future, renowned scholar Dr. Maureen Fritz argued that the Church must adopt a more "Theo-centric" and less "Christo-centric" concept of Salvation. She asked, "**When will Christians consider Jews as having a true path to God as Christians do themselves?**" This is **the** question as we enter the new millennium.

Finally on March 12, 1998 the long awaited Shoah document, “We Remember: Reflections on the Shoah” was issued by the Vatican. All of us waited over eleven years. This document will forever be a lesson for Catholics. We in our Catholic grade schools, high schools, institutions of higher learning, seminaries and adult religions classes must teach this sad history of the Holocaust. We read in the document, “The church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Jesus and his teachings.” When we speak of “Church” this includes all of us—those who served or serve as Popes/Cardinals/Archbishops et al, since “Church” is the people of God as was defined at the Second Vatican Council.

Indeed, the “*Shoah*” still concerns us today. We must never forget. Christians and Jews have a special relationship; “there is no future for us without memory.” We must never forget! And since the publication of the Vatican document on the *Shoah*, all Catholics have a mandate to “Remember.”

My doctoral research completed in 1961—an examination of the most widely used Catholic religion texts—indicated that we did teach a false doctrine about Jews, Judaism. It would be too painful for me to recall these teachings now; let me just say that indeed, we taught that when Jesus came, the Covenant was no more with God’s people, with Jews; it was abrogated! There was the “deicide” charge and furthermore these books I examined had a *Nihil obstat* (all has been examined) and an *imprimatur* (let it be printed.) The church authorities had approved these false teachings. A copy of my dissertation was taken to Cardinal Bea during the Vatican Council It was he who worked diligently to have *Nostra Aetate* passed.

Yes, thank God that the Vatican removed these false teachings in 1965. But sometime, the teaching of yesterday by which we were formed or informed continues to stay with us, even today.

True, perhaps the anti Judaism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century took on a more socio-political emphasis rather than religious. But, there was the religious underpinning that helped Christians believe and accept Hitler's racist ideology.

Indeed, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of the National Socialism of Germany with the racial theory of the superior Nordic-Aryan race. There were a few Bishops of Germany who condemned the Nazi teaching, including Msgr. John M. Oesterreicher. There was Father Bernhard Lichtenberg of the Berlin Cathedral who courageously condemned the Nazis and dared use the word "Jew" in his homily asking parishioners to speak out against the persecution. He prayed for the persecuted Jews. Nazis, of his parish, reported him; he was beaten and killed at *Dachau*. Pope John Paul II canonized him in 1998.

Permit me to comment on Part IV of the recent *Shoah* document:

I question if the *Shoah's* anti-Semitism had its roots "outside of Christianity." Indeed, the Nazi persecution of Jews was made easier by the anti-Jewish prejudice embedded in most Christian minds and hearts. The document carefully asks, " Did anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians make them less sensitive and even indifferent to the persecutions launched against the Jews by National Socialism when it reached power?" My response is: Yes! Yes! Yes!

But the Vatican statement offers these responses:

- 1) "People did not know!" (They did indeed!) People could smell burning flesh. Local peoples helped the Nazis *Einstazgruppen* round up Jews into trucks, etc. to take them to the woods, where they were told to undress, dig their ditches (graves) and then were shot!-7,000 were shot in one day! One and a half million Jews were killed by shooting before the passage of the Final Solution in 1942. You cannot kill that many people and keep it a secret. People did know.

- 2) Another reason for non-action by Christians the Vatican document states is ‘fear’ for themselves and their families. This is true. But Jesus tells us “that which you do to the least of your brethren you do unto me.” So, Christians can ask themselves: “What would we have done had we been in there?” Rose Thering, what would you have done?
- 3) The document asks, “Did Christians give every possible assistance to those being persecuted and in particular to persecuted Jews?” I would only hope that their response of “many” is correct. We know “some” Christians (non-Jews) did save Jews.

*(Yad Vashem research continues to this day).*

- a) The number is about 12,000 documented names- individuals who saved Jews.
- b) Trees have been planted, each tree bears the name of non-Jews who saved Jews.
- c) It is called “The Avenue of Righteous among the Nations.”
- d) Mr. Paldiel indicates that behind every saved Jew-survivor-there was a non-Jew, since Jews had absolutely no way out of Hitler’s Final Solution.
- e) He said that number could go as high as 100,000. If 100,000 Christians did help to save Jews, the figure still amounts to less than .1% of the Christian population in Europe.

The Vatican Document rightly reminds us of lessons we should have learned from the massacre of the Armenians, the genocide of the Romanie’s (gypsies-one million) tragedies in Cambodia, Africa, the Balkans. The lesson is still unlearned by too many.

Part V of the Vatican Statement looks together to a common future. The document contains some beautiful statements and points out **why** we need to be concerned about our relations with Jews/Judaism. It states:

A. 1) Remember our roots are in Judaism.

1) We are grafted onto the Root of Judaism.

2) Jews are our elder brothers and sisters.

B. The Vatican document asks each of us:

1) To express deep sorrow for our past failures of every age vis-à-vis Jews and Judaism.

2) This means an act of repentance (*teshuva*) since as members of the Church we are linked to the sins as well as to the merits of all her children.

We pray that our sorrow for the tragedy which the Jewish people have suffered in our century will lead to a new relationship with the Jewish people.

**We wish to turn awareness of past sins to a firm resolve to build a new future in which there will be no more anti-Judaism among Christians,** but rather a shared mutual respect, as befits those who adore the one Creator and Lord and have a common father in faith, Abraham. To make this happen will be a true Renaissance—a true re-birth.

Finally, we invite all men and women of good will to reflect deeply on the significance of the *Shoah*. The victims from their graves, and the survivors through vivid testimony of what they have suffered, have become a loud voice calling the attention of all of humanity.

C. To remember this terrible experience is to become fully conscious of the salutary warning it entails; we remember for a purpose that the spoiled seed

of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism must never again be allowed to take root in any human heart.

Pope John Paul II has called the twentieth century the, “century of the *Shoah*.” William Cardinal Keeler has called Catholics to, “sincere, contrite reflection and meditation on the Holocaust, especially with our Jewish sisters and brothers so this can embed our commemorations and lead to the turning of this new millennium into a realistic awareness of the nature of evil and impel us to stand together with Jewish People to witness to the one God who calls to us.”

Tonight, in closing, I wish to reiterate what Archbishop Weakland of Milwaukee said on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1999. It is his message that must resonate in the hearts and souls of every Catholic/every Christian in this new millennium. These are his words; I make them my own as I address you tonight.

“Mindful of the admonition that only the victims can impart absolution, I feel a need publicly to ask God for forgiveness at this our 25<sup>th</sup> commemorative service. I do so personally and, if you wish you may join me in your hearts and souls.

O God, forgive us for all the hurtful and harmful statements by Catholics against the Jewish people throughout the centuries.

O god, forgive us for all the statements that implied that the Jewish people were no longer loved by God.

O God forgive us for all the statements that reduced the Jewish people to “non-people,” that created contempt for them, that reduced their human dignity.

O God forgive us for all the teaching and preaching in Catholic churches that may have led up to the Holocaust and that may have contributed to the horrors of that attempt at the Final Solution: total annihilation.

O God forgive me if I or others contributed in the past or in the present to those movements that denigrate Jews and threaten their well-being in our midst.

My prayer is that the one God who loves us all and in whose image we are all created keeps this spirit of unity among us alive and fruitful into the future. I pray for courage for all of us. I do so in the name of the God who loves us all equally, that God in whose image and likeness we are all created. I pray in God's name. Amen.”

*Archbishop Rembert Weakland/Jubilee Year*

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