

NOSTRA AETATE

Fr. Joseph Donnelly at B'nai Israel Synagogue October 28, 2005

In 1959 Cardinal Angelo Joseph Roncalli became Pope John XXIII. This apparently “interim” choice to shepherd the Catholic Church set in motion a process which became the Second Vatican Council and which has come to define the life and ministry of the Catholic Church in our day. It is in fact that Council which forty years ago published the document “Nostra Aetate” which we celebrate this weekend at B'nai Israel and Sacred Heart. One day welcoming a Jewish delegation during the Council Pope John, referring to his given middle name, used the words of the lost son of Jacob in the Book of Genesis (45-3-4) and greeted them saying “I am Joseph, your brother.” I am so happy to be with you tonight not merely on my own but representing Sacred Heart Parish. And I too call upon that same text in the same spirit of Pope John for I too “am Joseph, your brother.”

Formal statements of large groups can take a long time in coming. By the time they are written the lived experience of individual members of the group has preceded the written text. Let me use a recent example at Sacred Heart to illustrate my point.

A few weeks ago at one of our Sunday Masses I had called all the children of the community to gather at the altar as I usually do before they leave our assembly for a nearby room to listen to the Scripture readings adapted for their age and understanding. And as usual I asked a question to help them get ready to hear God’s Word. That Sunday the Gospel was Jesus’ parable about the man who gave a wedding feast for his son and one of the guests who arrived for the feast without a proper wedding garment. My question for the children was “What are some times when you get especially dressed up?” They began to shout out their answers “My birthday!” said one. “When we go to Mass”, said another. “Thanksgiving” said a third. Then one youngster shouted out “For Rosh HaShanah!” He had most likely never heard of “Nostra Aetate”, but he obviously had had some experience of good relationship and celebration with his Jewish sisters and brothers.

There is dynamism and energy in this forty-year-old document and in the way our two congregations are celebrating it this year. I believe that dynamism has three dimensions:

- The document expresses what had been the lived personal experience of many Jews and Catholics long before it was published.
- The document expresses what has happened as a result of it being published.
- The document challenges all of us to the ongoing work needed to bring to fullness the document’s great vision for the relationship of our two sibling traditions.

First of all it catches up lived personal experience. I did not get a chance to ask the youngster who responded to my question what his experience of Rosh

HaShanah was, but I suspect it came through his family, school or neighborhood relationships. This great “melting pot” that we call the United States of America has a richness that comes from the diversity of those who come here from a multiplicity of other nations. We live and work side-by-side; we become friends; we take part in the same activities and entertainment. How many members of Sacred Heart accompany their B' nai Israel friends tonight? And how many B' nai Israel members will join their Sacred Heart friends at Mass on Saturday or Sunday? Those person-to-person relationships serve to break down the walls of ignorance and prejudice. For in personal relationships we get to know the real people who just happen to be of a different nationality, religion, sexual orientation or political preference. Real people break barriers as they get to know each other, seeing beyond the label that our society can often put on someone. The great richness and diversity of the children of God comes through and we are thus drawn more and more into God’s vision and love for all his children.

An incident from my own childhood comes to mind. I grew up in Waterbury, not far from Temple Beth Shalom, one of the founding congregations of B'nai Israel. At around age 9 or 10 I joined the YMCA and there I met a young man named Richard Baily. We became friends taking swim lessons and playing ball at the “Y”. I recall a conversation we had one day as we walked out of the “Y”. Richard told me he was Jewish. Living in an Irish Catholic ghetto I had never met a Jewish person before and so I asked him what God he believed in. And of course we discovered that we believed in the same God. I remember being surprised by that, but I also recall continuing to walk to the bus stop and continuing to be friends with the sense that we were somehow the same. Relationships break down ignorance and prejudice. The good hearts and good will of people reveal the oneness of all God’s people long before public proclamations of that fact. Another example may shed further light on my premise. Before he became Pope John XXIII, Cardinal Angelo Roncalli was the Vatican ambassador to Turkey and Bulgaria during the Shoah. He was as the world would come to know a man of great faith and great compassion. He had God’s vision. He worked diligently to save Jewish lives in Turkey at that time. Later as Pope he would convene the Second Vatican Council which would give rise to “Nostra Aetate” among other revolutionary teachings that still stretch and challenge our Catholic tradition today. But even before the Council Pope John XXIII did something truly revolutionary: he made the first change in the previously unalterable Catholic liturgy by unilaterally removing disparaging language about the Jewish people from what had been our Good Friday liturgy. Once again his lived experience and personal encounters predisposed him to the attitude and teaching that would only later be expressed in “Nostra Aetate”.

In “Nostra Aetate” the Church though went far beyond changes in language. The Church acknowledged and declared that the Jewish people remain covenanted with God, that Jews are not collectively responsible for the death of Jesus and it condemned all prejudice especially anti-Semitism. Moreover it encouraged mutual understanding and respect, further biblical and theological studies and

ongoing fraternal dialogues between us. And that has happened. Over the intervening years *Nostra Aetate* has been interpreted and implemented. It has given rise to mutual prayer, study and dialogue. It occasioned specific guidelines for Catholic preaching and teaching about Judaism and the Jewish people especially in relationship to the Passion of Jesus. In that regard we have seen its fruit locally in our ongoing interfaith relationships and prayer especially in our communal response to and study of the movie "The Passion of the Christ" almost 2 years ago. Our reading of the teaching of "Nostra Aetate" certainly shaped our mutually held concerns about the portrayal of the Jewish people in that movie and we stood side-by-side to express them here and at Sacred Heart. It is doubtful such mutual study and belief would have been possible without "Nostra Aetate". I was working in Rome at the time of Pope John Paul II's visit to the Roman synagogue in 1986 which was a moment of intense power given the shameful treatment of the Jewish people in that Eternal City. I clearly recall the sense of being part of something that involved much more than a perfunctory visit, but which spoke volumes about something that was in fact happening within and between two faith traditions that had formerly viewed each other with great mistrust.

But as we celebrate this fortieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* we realize, like the poet Robert Frost stopping in the woods on a snowy evening but not tarrying long, that we have promises to keep and miles to go before we sleep. Many good things have begun and greater understanding and mutual respect have grown, but our common faith in the God who has loved us all into existence and who has chosen us all as his own reminds us that there is still more to do. Pope John Paul II and our American bishops have challenged the Church specifically to remembrance and repentance, to further study and education and to greater collaboration in God's work.

REMEMBRANCE AND REPENTENCE

While we study our traditions and texts together, establish friendships and enjoy each other's company it is very important that we all remember the Shoah, what Professor Yehud Bauer of Hebrew University in Israel terms "the symbol of evil of our times." One of the most striking places I ever visited was the memorial at Dachau. As you leave the memorial overwhelmed by the evil that is recalled there the final wall you see bears the message "Never Again". That cry appears to have fallen on deaf ears in our modern world of Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and the Sudan. It appears that the human family has not learned the lessons of the Shoah. Films about it have been made, memoirs have been written, courses of studies have been created and memorials have been built, but that paradigm of evil in our time continues to be played out even to this day. Modern society caused the Shoah and it will continue to happen if we and all human society do not regularly remember it and confront our own history and involvement in it and repent for the role we have played in it. It would be easy to sweep it under the rug, but the progress we celebrate today warns us not to do so.

EDUCATION

Various Church teachings that resulted from “Nostra Aetate” urged Catholics to re-educate themselves on the integrity of the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus’ Jewish heritage, to delve deeper into the riches of the Hebrew Scriptures, to study the Jewish roots of Christianity, to grow in a greater awareness that the Jewish people remain a chosen people of God to this day and to explore the meaning and consequences for the Shoah. Our Jewish sisters and brothers are invited to similar reflection and education about the history and theology of Catholicism. In fact we will need to do it together in both casual and formal settings. As we learn about one another, about the roots of our common faith, about our respective and mutual history, about our kinship in faith and particularly as we explore together that paradigm of evil in the Shoah we will no doubt grow in greater understanding and mutual respect and be better prepared to confront the violence, war and terrorism that continues to plague us and the entire human family and in which we too often collude.

COLLABORATION IN GOD’S WORK

Since coming to Southbury I have enjoyed participating in the Southbury Interfaith Clergy Association which Rabbi Polokoff hosts and convenes here monthly. In little ways we have begun to intentionally collaborate in God’s work here. Southbury has great potential as a town in which people of our sibling faiths can take a strong role in speaking with one voice and in working together for justice, peace, respectful civil dialogue and the values that we share through our common roots in the faith of Abraham. Our Southbury Interfaith Social Concerns Committee has taken certain steps in this direction by annually sponsoring the Americares Day and the Thanksgiving Dinner. I envision even greater opportunities for us to collaborate as the faith communities of Southbury to further a more fully human and just society here. We may even join our voices in the prophetic tradition in the face of sinful social structures and situations that demean human dignity or neglect the needs of the poor and the oppressed.

In conclusion I would like to offer an image that I believe expresses where we are on this deepening journey in faith. It is a painting by Brother Michael O’Neill McGrath of the Oblates of St. Francis deSales that was commissioned by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College and by the Archdiocese of Boston to celebrate the same anniversary we gather to celebrate here tonight. The painting depicts the symbolic figure of Wisdom from the Hebrew Scriptures guiding two figures up Isaiah’s holy mountain: one is a bearded man in yarmulke and prayer shawl and carrying the Sacred Torah; the other is a woman of color carrying the Christian Scriptures. Together they are being lead to the new and eternal Jerusalem of the Age to Come. Recall the text: “In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be set over all other mountains, lifted high above the hills. All the nations shall come streaming to it and many people shall come and say, ‘Come let us climb the Lord’s mountain to the God of Jacob, that he may instruct us in his ways and we may walk in his paths.’” (Isaiah 2: 2-3).

On behalf of Sacred Heart Parish I will be presenting a rendering of that painting to your congregation to commemorate our shared celebration this weekend. As Joseph, your brother, I offer it with the prayerful hope that the message of the painting, the prophecy of Isaiah and the vision of Nostra Aetate will continue to be fulfilled in us together!