

SACRED HEART CHURCH, NOSTRA AETATE WEEKEND

Rabbi Eric Polokoff, October 29-30, 2005; Tisrhi 5766

Thank you Father Joe. It is a distinct blessing to have you as a colleague – and a greater blessing still, as a good friend.

Friends, peace be with you...or as we say in Hebrew, *shalom aleichem*. B'nai Israel and Sacred Heart, as two distinct gatherings of peoples of faith, we are not strangers. We live, we work close to one another. I need look no further than my own home to confirm this reality as my wife Ellen is a surgeon affiliated with St. Mary's Hospital. Our houses of worship collaborate through the Southbury Interfaith Social Concerns Committee; and our clergy meets through the Southbury Clergy Association. During your church's renovations, Sacred Heart's bi-weekly sandwich making crew will meet in B'nai Israel's social hall. Nor is this my first time I am with you at this church. In recent years I have spoken in this sanctuary at interfaith services and interfaith forums. This past Lent, as part of a special study day, Father Joe and I even co-led a presentation in the chapel, discussing the Eucharist and the Passover Seder. (I explained to my board, I was going to church for Lent.)

All is a fitting prelude to today, to this extraordinary moment, as new ground is broken: a rabbi addressing four masses – Southbury's full Catholic community – affirming the significance of a document, *Nostra Aetate* and its commitment to the pathway of reconciliation. (Father Joe, who only had to speak on Friday night, inquired whether I'd be discomfited by all the repetition. I assured him it was okay. "I repeat myself all the time – just ask my congregants," I advised.)

Catholics and Jews, we are not complete strangers. In January of 2003 Ellen and I set up a type of hospice in our home, as Ellen's dad lay dying with cancer. As the end neared Ellen's dad, a Roman Catholic, asked that I his son-in-law call a priest. I phoned my friend Father Bob Kwiatowski of Saint Teresa's in Woodbury. The secretary took the urgent message: "A priest must go to the rabbi's house for last rites." A few week's later Father Bob administered last rites to the father of an Orthodox Christian colleague. Afterwards, Father Bob called me, "What's with you guys..." "America." I replied. Not strangers, we are often very close.

Genesis tells us:

⁷When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them.

In contrast, we take pride in mutual understanding, mutual recognition – in knowing and identifying one another. Through efforts such as those by brother Joseph Donnelly, we welcome respectful if not increasingly cordial and familiar dialogue. Another biblical passage, from Malachi, read during mass today, speaks of approaching God with integrity. Let the same be said of our encounter. Hence

it is with candor that I speak here, gently but firmly; not just as a friend, but as the representative of a faith tradition that was unrecognized and a people that were treated harshly for many centuries.

Indeed, it was only in the aftermath of the Holocaust that a reappraisal occurred. By the early 1960s the Pope was John XXIII. During the *Shoah* as the Vatican representative in Istanbul, he had ignored papal orders and repeatedly intervened to save Jewish lives. John XXIII called together a gathering of the world's Catholic bishops – Vatican II – that utterly transformed your church's teaching about Jews and Judaism. What emerged on October 28, 1965 by a vote of 2,221 bishops to 88 was *Nostra Aetate*. For us, key provisions included Catholic statements that:

- 1) Jews remain covenanted to God;
- 2) Jews were not and are not collectively responsible for Jesus' death; and
- 3) The church rejects anti-Semitism.

Nostra Aetate says:

... the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews... decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.

In lieu of proselytism – efforts for conversion – *Nostra Aetate* calls for interfaith encounter.

Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.

Such conversation bespeaks your lesson from Matthew as Jesus quotes Leviticus: “*Veahavta l'reicha kamocha* – Love your neighbor as yourself.” Rabbi Akiva, a preeminent Jewish sage, also liked that verse. He said: “Love your neighbor as yourself, *K'lal gadol baTorah*: This is the grand principle of the Torah.” History has taught us to interpret the word *reicha*, neighbor, not as fellow Christian, nor fellow Jew, but as each of us. “Love” means grasp our similarities and celebrate our differences. I conceive of it this way: were there only one faith tradition, or only one flavor of ice cream or bread, the world would be diminished.

In the Bible, 40 years signifies a full generation. *Nostra Aetate* helped to usher-in Vatican recognition of the State of Israel, and historic visits to a synagogue and the Western Wall by the late pope John Paul II. At the wall, in keeping with a Jewish tradition, the Pope left a small *kvitl*, a note to God in its crevice. The *kvitl* read:

We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer. We ask for your forgiveness and we commit ourselves to true harmony and peace with the Jewish People.

John Paul II is the first non-Jewish religious leader and one of only a handful of non-Jews to appear on a postage stamp in Israel. Pope Benedict XVI, following in his predecessor's footsteps and the guidance of *Nostra Aetate*, has likewise made the strengthening of Catholic-Jewish ties a top priority.

Amidst these developments – and our weekend pulpit exchange – we nonetheless remain, in the words of Cardinal Walter Kasper, chairman of the Vatican Commission on Relations with Judaism, “Only at the beginning of the beginning.” Assuredly, much remains undone – but that's where we come in. Through both personal and institutional relationships, through joint study and joint advocacy, we, too, can help to deepen mutual understanding and reconciliation, thereby furthering the Bible's command to love others as ourselves.

As part of that process, a dialogue between the adherents of two great faith traditions, conversation will inevitably turn to past history, including its saddest chapter. Let us frame this discussion not to be trapped by what was, but in order to honor awareness and remembrance. For we have a sacred oath. Each *Yom haShoah* Holocaust Remembrance Day, congregation B'nai Israel avows these words, saying:

Wherever you may be, whenever that may be, I shall be there with you, the last survivor. Because you will be the last survivor, I shall be there, I promise you. I promise to be the memory of your memory. I promise that what you have endured will not be erased from the human conscience. I promise you this ultimate justice, that neither your name nor your suffering shall be permitted to vanish from world history. You were one man, one woman. But it is as if you had been one suffering humanity. And because you will be the last, it will be my duty to take over your martyrdom as one takes over in a relay, not in order to re-live it, but to relate it for all time, to bear witness before history in order that criminals shall no longer be absolved, to teach children that, having become adults, they may build a society conscious of its past and resolutely turned towards a future of justice, love and peace. (Siddur Lev Chadash)

Friends, to truly recognize B'nai Israel, to really know us, you must appreciate the inspirations and the distinct witness that drive us. For a world without Jews – like a world without justice or memory – would insult God's plan and give Hitler a posthumous victory. Could there be a greater wrong?

Thus our dismay this very week, as more than a million people joined Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to swear “Death to Israel” and to declare that Israel must be “wiped off the face of the earth.” (This from a nation feverishly intent on procuring nuclear weapons.) Those hateful words, a call to genocide,

were condemned by many, including the Vatican. Recall the words of *Nostra Aetate*: ... *the church decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.*

Still, we must honestly admit that have yet to build a world, let alone a society, where strangers become neighbors, or neighbors are as loved as ourselves. Aye, far from absolving criminals, genocide continues to rage. Countless thousands have been killed or raped and millions are displaced in the Darfur region of Sudan. Meanwhile, most turn a blind eye, already erasing the memory of their memory.

It is amazing, it's appalling, it's shameful... but it's not hopeless. Indeed, Catholics and Jews, sibling co-religionists, we can have an impact. Speaking at B'nai Israel, Father Joe called for heightened interfaith advocacy. Speaking at Sacred Heart, I do the same. We can be partners in perpetuating remembrance, promoting justice, and increasing compassion. We can and we must. Precisely because we are not strangers it behooves us to work closer together, and with other peoples of faith.

Returning to today's passage from the Book of Matthew, notice how the commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself," was coupled with another "Love God with all your heart and soul and being." Note well the message: love for God is expressed when we reach out, respectfully, to other people.

This insight was recently underscored for me in an unlikely place, in an ad I saw in *The New York Times* for jeans at Henri Bendel's costing \$468 in python, \$278 in felt. (I didn't share the ad with any of the Polokoff women.) What surprised me was the brand's name; it is called "True Religion." I discovered other clothing labels had similar names, such as "Religion" and "Sanctuary." More than their sacrilege, what struck me about all of this were the brands' honest admissions – for in the absence of the sacred, in the absence of God, in the absence of concern for others, one's true religion may readily devolve into nothing more than the material or superficial; something indifferent, if not harsh.

In the absence of recognition that we are all created in God's image, we are ever-more-apt to dismiss one another as casual acquaintances or mere strangers. That is why Leviticus specifically stipulates, "*Veahavta l'reicha kamocho, Ani Adonai* – You shall love your neighbor as yourself, *I am the Lord.*"

Jews and Catholics, amidst all of our particularity, on this of all days let us affirm the truths of *Nostra Aetate*: we are linked to one another; and God links us. No wonder this weekend's anniversary – and its milestones here in Southbury, at B'nai Israel and Sacred Heart – are so very precious to us both.

Shalom aleichem. Peace be with you.