

Homily for Yom HaShoah

Boston College School of Theology & Ministry

April 16, 2015

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Our responsorial psalm proclaims: "When the just cry out, the Lord hears them..."
We know the Lord hears them! But, my brothers and sisters do we hear those cries?
Does the spirit open our ears?

Several years ago I was in Jerusalem on Yom HaShoah which is observed today as the Israeli remembrance of the murder of European Jewry. The wailing of sirens brings the entire country, all activity, all traffic, all conversation to a standstill. It is a solemn moment for Jews but also an occasion of reflection for us Christians. Rather than silence, however, let us recall some words that may cry out to us. The first is an excerpt from a letter from St. Edith Stein to Pope Pius XIth in early 1933, shortly after Hitler came to power.

"Holy Father! As a child of the Jewish people who, by the grace of God, for the past eleven years has also been a child of the Catholic Church, I dare to speak to the Father of Christianity about that which oppresses millions of Germans. For weeks we have seen deeds perpetrated in Germany which mock any sense of justice and humanity, not to mention love of neighbor. For years the leaders of National Socialism have been preaching hatred of the Jews. ...But the responsibility [for its deeds of hate] must also fall on those who keep silent in the face of such happenings. Everything that happened and continues to happen on a daily basis originates with a government that calls itself "Christian." For weeks not only Jews but also thousands

of faithful Catholics in Germany, and, I believe, all over the world, have been waiting and hoping for the Church of Christ to raise its voice to put a stop to this abuse of Christ's name. " There is no record of a reply to Stein's letter.

As you know, there are countless anguished cries to hear from that period but one that struck me in a particular way was from an Hungarian student of theology who was recorded in a video archive speaking about his chance encounter with a trainload of deported Jews. He witnessed the violent beating of someone who asked a guard for water:

"And then I ran away, I was so scared and I was so upset; I never saw anything like this in my life. I simply ran way." But he could not run away from what he had seen: "I see it personally as the greatest tragedy of my life that the Jewish people were deported all around me and I didn't do anything." In recalling the incident, he blames himself for fleeing and imagines a different response if he witnessed the scene today: "Maybe I would call out." "At that time I was immobilized." " I was utterly unprepared." "I wish I could live my life [over]. Today perhaps I would be ready." So many Christians at that time were unprepared to deal with the violence against the Jews.

Others were ready, however, and the exhibit in the library at the School of Theology and Ministry reminds us of the extraordinary Israeli program that aims to recognize those who risked or lost their lives trying to save Jewish life during the period of the Holocaust. There are twenty-five thousand of them and Israeli scholars believe that figure represents only ten per cent of those who deserve to be honored. I still find it difficult to absorb what the best informed of those scholars

told my class about these righteous, namely, that they were not Mother Therasas. He stressed that they were very ordinary people. Ordinary? Yes, they were but their human core echoed today's reading from "Acts": "We must obey God rather than men." How did we ever come to think otherwise if we have?

Perhaps one reason we are better prepared than that theology student is that we have begun to listen to Jewish voices on a different frequency than that of mere absence of Christian faith. A recent study has pointed out that, among the thousands of requests for what was proposed to be on the agenda of the Vatican Council, not a single European Bishop asked for a document on Jewish-Christian relations. How may we account for such deafness to the recent murderous rampage their continent? Fortunately Pope John XXIII and Cardinal Bea listened to the plea of Jules Isaac to denounce Christianity's teaching of contempt and it was a listening that led to the declaration "Nostra Aetate" which we celebrate the 50th anniversary of this October. But hearts and minds rarely get transformed by documents. And so we must continue to listen to Jewish voices as, for example, that of Rabbi Abraham Heschel who posed this question to his friend, Gustave Weigel: "Is it really the will of God that there be no more Judaism in the world? Would it really be the triumph of God if the scrolls of the Torah were no longer taken out of the Ark and the Torah no longer read in the synagogue, our ancient Hebrew prayers in which Jesus himself worshipped no more recited, the Passover Seder no longer celebrated in our lives, the Law of Moses no longer observed in our homes? Would it really be *ad Majorem Dei gloriam* to have a world without Jews?" The fact that Heschel used the very motto of the Society of Jesus—"For the greater Glory of God"—makes his question a

direct interrogation of Jesuit spirituality and institutions. What answers have and might be given by each of us is for another day. But let me close with a brief story and an invitation.

Saul Friedländer, the greatest living historian of the Holocaust, recalls a spiritual deed by a priest that should not be unknown. Friedländer had been hidden in a Catholic boarding school during the Nazi occupation of France and he regarded himself as a Christian. In his beautiful memoir, Friedländer writes of what he calls the “decisive day” in his life when, as a young boy, he learns from that priest that his parents had been killed at Auschwitz and that he himself was a Jew. The transforming knowledge of that definitive day came through that conversation. He writes: “The attitude of Father L. himself profoundly influenced me: to hear him speak of the lot of the Jews with so much emotion and respect must have been an important encouragement for me. “For the first time, I felt myself to be Jewish.” What a gift Friedländer received! How many of us would have done likewise?

My invitation will come next semester when the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning holds a ceremony to honor one of the righteous. His name is Jakob Raile and he is buried in the Jesuit cemetery in Weston, one of only four righteous who rest in American soil. He saved hundreds of Jewish lives in Budapest by dressing them in clerical garb and placing them throughout the Jesuit house and local convents. Israel honored him many years ago for his deed and Israelis have asked me, Why is he not better known? It is time for us Christians to honor him as well. I close with a verse of the “Kaddish”: “May a great peace from heaven—and Life!—Be upon us and upon all Israel, And say all Amen!”