

**THE CATHOLIC-JEWISH SCHOLARS DIALOGUE OF CHICAGO:  
A MODEL OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE**

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presented at a conference on  
Nostra Aetate Today:  
Reflections 40 Years after Its Call for a New Era of Interreligious Relationships  
at  
The Institute for the Study of Religions and Cultures  
Pontifical Gregorian University  
Rome, Italy  
September 26, 2005

Issued by the Second Vatican Council 40 years ago, the document known as Nostra Aetate declares: “Since Christians and Jews have a common spiritual heritage, this Sacred Council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation. This can be achieved, especially, by way of biblical and theological inquiry and through friendly discussions.” For over 20 years, the Catholic-Jewish Scholars Dialogue of Chicago has dedicated itself to fulfilling those goals.

In March of 1983, eight months after Joseph Bernardin arrived in Chicago as Archbishop and one month after he was created Cardinal, he addressed the Chicago Board of Rabbis and the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, declaring that he came “as your brother, Joseph.” Attributing significance to the fact that this first meeting with Chicago’s Jewish community took place during the twentieth anniversary year of the convening of the Second Vatican Council, which produced Nostra Aetate, Bernardin said: “I wish to personally endorse the efforts to promote better Jewish-Christian relations, and I pray that there might be a greater level of interaction here in the Chicago area.”

“We teach in a number of ways,” Bernardin was later to write, one of them being “by the programs and institutions we create.” Among the several structures for furthering the goals of Nostra Aetate that were created in the Chicago area under his auspices was the Catholic-Jewish Scholars Dialogue. It grew out of a committee of six Catholics and six Jews that first met on July 20, 1983, after the Board of Rabbis responded to his speech by asking him to establish a formal framework to realize his vision of interfaith encounter. (Though the Archdiocese declared an intent to begin without publicity, the committee’s first meeting was reported on by the *Chicago Sun-Times*, which labeled it “historic.”)

Partnering with the Archdiocese in establishing and sponsoring the Scholars Dialogue as it ultimately took shape were those two local Jewish communal entities the Cardinal had addressed, the Board of Rabbis and the Jewish Federation. They and the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies have continued to appoint the Jewish participants in the Dialogue, while the Catholic participants have been named by the Archdiocese.

The Dialogue is made up of institutional officials and academics, parish priests and congregational rabbis. From its early years it has been strengthened by the involvement of a number of longtime practitioners of interfaith outreach, including Rabbis Herman Schaalman, Herbert Bronstein, and the late Hayim Perelmuter, and Father John Pawlikowski, Sister Carol Frances Jegen, and Professor Jon Nilson, and it has benefited from the local presence of academic institutions like Mundelein College, Loyola University, the Catholic Theological Union and the Spertus Institute for Jewish Studies.

The Scholars Dialogue has been administered by the Federation's community relations arm, the Jewish Community Relations Council, working in concert with the Archdiocese Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, with Sister Joan McGuire, Father Don Montalbano, and Father Tom Baima playing important roles out of that office. The director of the JCRC when the Dialogue was established was Peggy Norton.

The earliest record of the group's activities in the JCRC files appears in a memorandum dated December 1985 that summarizes the subjects treated by the group in the previous year. The topics are instructive. They included similarities and differences in the two faith traditions and speeches given by Cardinal Bernardin and statements issued by the Vatican. The group also focused on such matters of current concern as the Vatican's failure to recognize the State of Israel, the anti-Semitism then being circulated in Chicago by Rev. Louis Farrakhan, and issues surrounding public displays of crèches and menorahs. Topics raised for the coming year included consideration of the film "Shoah" and the view of salvation for Jews in the Christian scheme of things.

A look at the topics addressed by the group in its subsequent years reveals a similar pattern. With sessions often introduced by papers presented by members of the group or guests, meetings have examined parallel and differentiating approaches of the two faith traditions to subjects such as prayer, the role of women, messianism, euthanasia, illness and faith, mysticism, spirituality, repentance and forgiveness, and Shavuot, Pentecost and revelation. We have explored the contrasting ways the two traditions read the same biblical texts (with our joint exploration of opening passages from Genesis including a presentation by Sister Dianne Bergant of CTU, who had just appeared in a multi-part program on the Bible carried on national public television). In advancing an understanding of Jews as we regard ourselves, the group has discussed the nature of Jewish peoplehood and ties to the land of Israel, and has contrasted that with the Christian view of the land. We have looked closely at Catholic-Jewish relations themselves and have jointly examined texts relevant to those relations ranging from Vatican statements to "Dabru Emet."

These various topics have often evoked rich conversations, sometimes carried over to subsequent meetings. In tune with the goals and spirit of *Nostra Aetate*, they have enabled us to not only better understand the beliefs and practices of the "other," but also to better understand our own traditions, sometimes profoundly so. And they have enabled us to develop close personal connections based on familiarity and respect.

The deepening of the relationships has enabled us to have frank and open conversations about other sets of topics that have been addressed by our group as well. These have included consideration of subjects stimulated by events of the day and pertinent to one or

the other of our groups or to Catholic-Jewish relations overall. In its early years the group talked about a visit to Israel by New York's Cardinal O'Connor that sparked controversy and a visit of the Pope to Miami. It considered the implications of developments at the close of the Cold War in Europe for religious life there. With the outbreak of the Persian Gulf War in 1991, it discussed the views of war and violence held by our two faiths, then convened a public program on that topic. That subject was revisited at the time of the second Gulf War ten years later, when we discussed "Theological and Religious Ideas Regarding Armies, Power and Powerlessness, and Nationhood."

When the Parliament of the World's Religions convened a meeting in Chicago commemorating the previous time it had done that, one hundred years before, members of the group considered the ways their two traditions look at non-Jewish and non-Christian religions. This was followed by a session on Christianity and Islam and another on Islam's roots in Judaism and Christianity. At the time of the conflict in Bosnia, the group discussed that event's meaning to each of their faiths and subsequently devoted a session to focusing on the role of communities of faith in international affairs overall. More recently, the group has discussed topics ranging from breakthroughs in stem cell research to Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ."

Two areas of consideration have been of special interest to the group -- ones revolving around the Holocaust and ones dealing with the State of Israel. In 1988 the group reflected on a program held in Chicago on the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht, and then, one year later, the controversy surrounding the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz triggered intense concerns. Related to that was a proposed visit to Chicago by Poland's Cardinal Glemp in 1989 and visits that he did pay in 1991 and 1998. The latter year was also notable for the Vatican's issuing of "We Remember," which evoked extensive consideration by the group. One year later the group went en masse to Washington for a day-long visit to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum that included a Dialogue meeting in situ where it considered the subject of "The Holocaust as Crux in Catholic-Jewish Relations." At a session there addressed by Eugene Fisher, Associate Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, it reviewed "Christian-Jewish Relations in America Today."

As for Israel, it too has been approached in a number of ways, including via discussions first about the Vatican's non-recognition of Israel then later about the significance of the recognition. Other sessions have focused on Jerusalem in Jewish history and on the meaning of Jerusalem to the two faith traditions, and the group reacted to a statement on the significance of Jerusalem to Christians issued by the Patriarchs and heads of Christian communities in Jerusalem. A trip to Israel led by Cardinal Bernardin in which many members of the Dialogue participated, about which more later, was discussed by the Dialogue group, as was a talk given in Chicago by Michel Sabah, the Latin Patriarch, and later, the dramatic visit to Israel of Pope John Paul II. The group has repeatedly held discussions revolving around whatever have been the latest developments in Israel, often with reference to positions taken by the Church and other Christian bodies. Over the past few years, we have also talked about the rise of a new form of anti-Semitism in this context -- one that uses traditional tropes but is greatly generated in the Arab and Muslim worlds and has an anti-Israel and anti-Zionist thrust at its core.

Besides contributing significantly to the subject matter addressed at Dialogue meetings and advancing understanding of the meaning of Israel to the Jewish community, visits to Israel have had a strong effect in deepening relations between members of the group, especially when that has involved joint travel. The Federation has long organized and sponsored visits to Israel for non-Jewish community leaders, and it maintained a travel program for Christian leadership with the American Jewish Committee through the 1990s. A majority of the Catholic participants in the Dialogue have gone on such trips to Israel with Federation officials, some of them for their first time. The success of those visits was helpful in planning the 1995 trip in which Cardinal Bernardin himself led a joint delegation of Chicago Catholics and Jews to Israel, the first time a Cardinal of the Church had visited Israel with such a delegation.

The trip was planned by representatives of the Federation, the American Jewish Committee, and the Archdiocese, and the delegation accompanying the Cardinal consisted of representatives of those three institutions plus the Chicago Board of Rabbis and the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies. It marked a high point for the Dialogue and represented a fulfillment of the various programs maintained by the Archdiocese in conjunction with each of these Jewish communal organizations.

The Bernardin-led group traveled to Israel shortly after formal ties had been established between the Holy See and Israel, with that source of tension off the table, and at a time when the Oslo Process seemed to offer the possibility of peace and reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians. Spirits were high. The visit included a moving lunch with the Papal Nuncio who had negotiated the agreement between the Vatican and Israel and meetings with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in Jerusalem and Chairman Yasser Arafat in Gaza. Highlights included a visit to Yad Vashem and religious experiences for one or the other of the groups at the Western Wall, the Via Dolorosa, and the Mount of Beatitudes. The delegation was accompanied by reporters and cameramen representing both of Chicago's newspapers and all of the city's major television stations. That helped make the trip an unequalled opportunity for modeling the positive interfaith relations that had developed out of our Dialogue group and out of other programs back home.

The cornerstone of the visit was the address that Bernardin delivered at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem on the subject: "Antisemitism: The Historical Legacy and the Continuing Challenge for Christians." Not long after returning from the trip Cardinal Bernardin learned of the cancer that was ultimately to take his life. The disease was in remission at the time the Federation held its annual meeting the following fall, when, as guest speaker, he announced his intention to further advance the goals of the trip and to extend the impact of his Hebrew University address by establishing an annual lectureship on Catholic-Jewish relations in Chicago. Named the Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Jerusalem Lecture, it has been maintained on an annual basis, alternating between Catholic and Jewish speakers.

Second in the series was Professor Emil Fackenheim, with whom the group had met in Israel, whose topic was: "Jewish-Christian Relations after the Holocaust: Toward Post-Holocaust Theological Thought." The following year Edward Cardinal Cassidy, then

President of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, came to speak on "Catholic-Jewish Relations: A New Agenda?" While he was in Chicago, he met with the Scholars Dialogue and he closed the session by saying that he wasn't sure how much he had to teach the group. He followed his visit with a letter to the Dialogue saying: "We are greatly encouraged by the way Jewish-Catholic relations have developed in Chicago and trust that you will continue to be an example that others can fruitfully follow."

The most recent address in the Jerusalem Lecture series, commemorating the tenth anniversary of the program, was delivered this past February by Francis Cardinal George. In succeeding Cardinal Bernardin as the Archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal George has maintained strong support for Catholic-Jewish relations, and he has spoken out forcefully on issues that have engaged the Dialogue group. When Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" threatened to revive the deicide charge discredited by *Nostra Aetate*, he met with a Jewish and Catholic delegation, then used his regular column in the newspaper of the Archdiocese to say: "Popular presentations of Christ's Passion over the centuries have been the occasion for outbreaks of verbal and physical violence to Jews, and these incidents are part of the memory of the Jewish people. We should, I believe, not only honor these memories but also try to see the film itself with them in mind. As Christian believers, we must be moved to our very depths in seeing the Passion of Jesus presented so graphically; but as Christian believers who share this society with Jews, we should also be moved by their concerns. As Christian believers, we condemn anti-Semitism as a sin; the sin of hatred for the Jewish people is therefore part of the history of human sinfulness which brought Jesus to the cross."

The Cardinal's address in the Jerusalem Lecture series, which was heard by 700 members of Chicago's Catholic and Jewish communities, was called "Catholics, Jews, and American Culture." In it he proposed "that we commit ourselves to a new engagement in Interreligious dialogue." He subsequently made an excerpt from the talk, headed "Four 'Rules' for Interreligious Engagement," available to the Catholic-Jewish Scholars dialogue for its March meeting. Those four rules -- calling for "a commitment to faith," "a commitment to the common," "a commitment to the truth," and "a commitment to action" -- reflect principles valued by the group.

As much as the Dialogue has been an assembly of "scholars," in anticipating the fourth of the Cardinal's rules, its activities have not been merely academic. It has entered the public arena on a number of occasions, at times with significant impact while gaining local and even national attention.

Probably the most important public action the group has taken was through a 1989 statement that grew out of Dialogue sessions about the controversy surrounding the Carmelite convent then being built at Auschwitz. The statement declared that "the controversy threatens to engulf constructive work towards Christian-Jewish reconciliation throughout the world." Members of the Dialogue urged "that the necessary steps be taken to expedite the movement of the convent from the camp site." They went on to say: "We deem it imperative for leaders in both faith communities to take immediate, positive steps to diffuse some of the present tensions and rebuild confidence."

The statement appeared simultaneously in the community newspapers published by the Archdiocese and Federation, and a delegation from the Jewish community led by the Chairman of the Dialogue group met with Cardinal Bernardin and Archdiocese officials as this crisis was unfolding. At that meeting, the Cardinal endorsed the Dialogue's statement; his support was subsequently reported on publicly and had definite impact. In a speech he gave to the Board of Rabbis shortly afterwards, Bernardin said: "I have little doubt that this statement -- which attracted national coverage -- and the support it received from our summer meeting contributed to the ultimate resolution of the conflict."

As the convent controversy was playing out, it was exacerbated by an inflammatory homily delivered by Jozef Cardinal Glemp, the Primate of Poland, that expressed traditional anti-Semitic notions. Glemp was scheduled to visit Chicago, and concerns about that visit were also expressed at the aforementioned meeting with Cardinal Bernardin, who indicated that he had written to Glemp. One day later, Glemp's secretary announced that he was postponing his visit "because of circumstances unfavorable for the pastoral good."

After the controversy was settled, Glemp did visit Chicago as part of a trip to the U.S. in 1991, when he made a private appearance to which several members of the Dialogue were invited at the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies. Not long before a seminar on Judaism for Polish priests and seminary professors had been hosted there. In 1998, Cardinal Glemp was in Chicago again, and this time there was a special meeting of the entire Dialogue group with him on the Loyola University campus. He wished to talk with the group about the establishment of a "Day of Judaism" in Poland and about related developments, and the group used the opportunity to express itself about recent manifestations of anti-Semitism in Poland.

The Dialogue has expressed itself publicly on other subjects as well. In 1991, it spoke out as steps were being taken to beatify Queen Isabella I of Spain, a possibility which was ultimately averted by a resolution from the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, a body on which Cardinal Bernardin served. On this matter too, the Cardinal was in contact with representatives of the Dialogue, and the Dialogue's action on this subject was also reported on nationally.

On another matter, in 1992, following a Dialogue session where the differing positions of the two faith traditions on abortion were carefully examined, the group issued a statement released at a press conference at the Archdiocese and printed simultaneously by the communal newspapers published by the Archdiocese and the Jewish Federation respectively. This statement expressed concern about the way in which "the public debate on abortion . . . has harmfully polarized our society," and it condemned the "stereotyping of religious traditions and attacks upon the integrity of those who hold different views." Describing the issue as involving "a complex ethical dilemma about which honest and thoughtful people can and do differ," the group's members said they "call upon all to proceed with sensitivity and dignity in their public discourse and action on this subject." They closed by saying: "As Catholics and as Jews, we call upon all to proceed with compassion, caring, and charity, in our joint calling to build a more just and more holy world for all." This statement received widespread local and national media attention and was welcomed by other communities interested in taking a similar stance.

The group also issued a statement of concern regarding anti-foreigner violence in Germany in 1992 and applauded the establishment of Vatican-Israel relations in 1993. In 1998, the group sent a detailed four-page letter to Cardinal Cassidy, in his capacity as President of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, following the release of "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah." This letter, meant for his consideration and not public distribution, noted what it described as a "sea change within the Church and in its relation to Judaism and the Jewish people" and pointed to several positive aspects of the statement, then conveyed several concerns about it. The letter expressed the view that "the document does not go far enough in reckoning with the complete experience of the Jewish people and Judaism with the Church over the past 2,000 years," and it noted a number of historic details that the members of the Dialogue thought merited greater scrutiny. It also expressed the view that "though Nazism was not merely the final and most gruesome chapter in the long history of Christian anti-Semitism, neither was it totally disconnected from that tradition." Finally, the letter supported a call issued by Cardinal Bernardin in his Jerusalem Lecture "urging the Church to submit its World War II record to a thorough scrutinizing by respected scholars" as a means of clarifying the wartime practices and policies of Pope Pius XII. In sum, the letter, with regret, expressed the view that "We Remember" was "an incomplete statement." In his reply, Cardinal Cassidy conveyed appreciation for the letter and the hope that its ideas "will contribute to a continued dialogue between Christians and Jews."

The group has also frequently corresponded with Cardinal Keeler, the lead American cardinal regarding Catholic-Jewish relations. When it wrote him in 2001 expressing concerns regarding remarks made by President Bashar L. Assad of Syria in the presence of Pope John Paul II, he responded by observing that "combating the deicide charge on all levels of Christian life where its vestiges may linger is as urgent as any task facing the Church today, 36 years after *Nostra Aetate* just as it was in 1965."

Looking forward, it is likely that the Dialogue group will continue to devote considerable attention to Israel-related matters, reflecting the centrality of Israel to contemporary Jewish identity and life and also given the fact that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians remains unresolved, with some Christian circles providing sympathetic hearings to individuals and groups that implicitly challenge Israel's very legitimacy. Difficulties between Jerusalem and Rome may arise from time to time, and the fundamental agreement between Israel and the Holy See is yet to be fully resolved. And yet, with formal recognition and normal relations in place, with the theological implications of that recognition implicit, and with channels open for resolving differences, the relationship between Israel and the Holy See is essentially friendly, and that positive tone permeates the discussions that transpire within our Dialogue group.

Much the same can be said about our group's conversations surrounding ongoing manifestations of anti-Semitism, where the concerns raised by Jewish participants are noted with understanding by their Catholic counterparts. When it comes to the Holocaust, however, though our own group is generally of one mind regarding the subject, the kinds of conversations we continue to have demonstrate that, despite *Nostra Aetate* and the years that have gone by since its adoption, some serious issues

surrounding the Shoah and the way it has been addressed by the Church remain unresolved.

Now over twenty years old, Chicago's Catholic-Jewish Scholars Dialogue has taken shape in the framework of the principles of *Nostra Aetate*, but with a number of other influences coming into play as well. Many of its members remember an earlier era of Christian-Jewish relations, when Church teachings and the Church played a very different role. Indeed, some of the early members of the group themselves came from and recollected conditions in Nazi Europe. The late Rabbi William Frankel, for example, from time to time would recall seeing the Archbishop of Vienna publicly welcoming the Nazis into that city. A veteran member of the group, Maynard Wishner, has spoken of his experiences growing up in Chicago and facing neighborhood bullies accusing him being a "Christ killer." Catholic members have remembered the anti-Semitic radio broadcasts of Father Coughlin. Others of us, though we may not have had such experiences ourselves, know of that past from parents and other relatives. But it is apparent and significant that our Dialogue group meets at a time and in a place when Jews are seen not as those who killed Christ and rejected his teachings, nor as practitioners of a fossilized religion, but as a people from whom Jesus himself came, and as proponents of a faith with a continuing vitality.

And there is something else. *Nostra Aetate* grew out of the European experience, and many of our communal memories come out of that context as well. The American experience, in contrast, has been a much more benign and tolerant one, embracing pluralism, and a Dialogue like our own has greatly benefited from that reality. Finally, the Dialogue has taken root in Chicago, and that factor merits recognition as well. The ancestors of many of the Catholics and Jews in Chicago came there a century ago, establishing an urban center where the two communities lived side by side, not always without animosity, not always free of Old World prejudices, but still getting to know one another as neighbors and learning to live together and to find common ground. A Dialogue like ours benefits greatly from the environment that that shared experience created.

In that overall context, and grounded in an institutionally mandated wish to work to make things better, the Catholic-Jewish encounter in Chicago has emerged as the city's leading example of positive intergroup relations. And the Catholic-Jewish Scholars Dialogue has been the epitome of that. All the same, though, and despite attempts to give visibility to our work and to project ourselves as a model in the general population, within that realm wounds continue to fester and memories of the past continue to impact on many people's sense of the current state of affairs. Most in the Jewish community have limited knowledge of how far things have come, and some are inclined to talk about what has happened as too little and too late. At the same time, on the Catholic side there are those inclined to think, haven't we done enough, and why do we have to continue to be the ones to make the overtures, to hear the complaints, to be told about the steps that we need to take. Even as Cardinal George and others talk of strengthening the Dialogue, one can't help wondering how many people there are out there of a generation formed in the post-*Nostra Aetate* era who recognize and appreciate the nature and the importance of sustaining such work.



Finally, one more set of observations and questions needs to be considered, I believe, and though this is the focus of other sessions at this conference, I raise it here in the context of this paper. I am referring to relations involving the third of the Abrahamic faiths, Islam.

Over the past number of years, and in the U.S. especially since September 11, 2001, there has been increasing outreach to the Muslim community, sometimes in the bilateral framework of Catholics and Muslims or Jews and Muslims, sometimes in a trilateral framework revolving around all three groups. In reflecting a desire to advance interfaith understanding and respect, such outreach certainly is desirable, and as I have mentioned, our Dialogue group has engaged in sessions where we have together attempted to learn more about Islam. The caution I would raise is that as positive and even necessary as dialogue with Islam may be in today's world, it cannot simply be overlaid on the Catholic-Jewish dialogue template and must not take the place of Catholic-Jewish dialogue. The relationships between Christianity and Judaism on the one hand, and Christianity and Islam on the other, have very different historic and theological contents, and if that is lost sight of or distorted, the Catholic-Jewish encounter which has been of such value since *Nostra Aetate* will lose an essential aspect of its meaning.

Jewish-Christian history, particularly in Europe, provides a complex context for the Jewish-Catholic encounter, and the development of our dialogic relationship has reflected decades of effort and evolution. To lose sight of that and imagine that either of us could at once have the same kind of relationship with the Muslim world, or that we could quickly establish the same levels of trust, is to set up ourselves, and them, for disappointment. There is much to do in recognizing our common humanity, in strengthening the bonds of communities of faith, in unburdening ourselves of stereotypes about the other, and in modeling positive relationships in this area, where they are especially needed. And yet, as far as interfaith dialogue goes, there needs, I believe, to be caution. And so, even as outreach to the Islamic world and Muslim community is pursued, let that not be in the framework of a structure that might lead to the weakening or abandonment of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue set in motion by *Nostra Aetate*.

With the symbolism of Pope Benedict XVI's Cologne synagogue visit setting the tone, there is good reason to consider ourselves living in an era during which Catholic-Jewish relations are likely to continue to evolve, an era when a Dialogue group like the one that has been maintained in Chicago can continue to thrive, enriching its participants, benefiting their communities, and serving as a model for interfaith relations in Chicago and beyond.