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CATHOLIC-JEWISH RELATIONS: Promises and Problems

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When I was a boy growing up in Baltimore, attending a Jewish parochial school, the expression "Catholic-Jewish relations" had little contemporary meaning for me. If someone had asked me what it meant, my reflexes would have turned my thoughts to the past: -- the long and bitter history of my people, enduring persecution and humiliation at the hands of "the Church." As for the Catholic neighbors who were customers in my parents' grocery store, or in the factory down the block, well, they seemed nice enough. It wasn't their youngsters who threw stones and called us "Christ-killers." Our relations were cordial but superficial. We lived in different worlds. Mrs. Sullivan had her ladies' Sodality; my mother had her Synagogue sisterhood. What did we have to say to one another? What could we possibly do together?

I suspect it must have been the same for Catholic children of my age. The term "Catholic-Jewish " relations had no meaning in the present, although it might have called up associations regarding the persecution of early Christians by Jewish religious authorities in Palestine.

In recent years, however, Catholics and Jews have discovered that there is much they can say to one another and learn from one another, and perhaps more important, that there is much they can do together. And in our mutual dialogue and joint social action, there is great promise -- promise to fulfill the ideals of American democracy by working together to secure equal rights for all our citizens, promise to achieve the goal put forward by Pope Paul VI as a common

conviction for men of good will: "loyal, frank and ready understanding which can unite men in mutual and sincere respect."

I do not mean to imply that Catholic-Jewish relations started in this country only within recent years. As immigrant groups struggling to achieve security and rise out of the slums, factories and sweatshops of our large cities, Catholics and Jews shared much in common and worked side by side for many years. Certainly, "Abie's Irish Rose" is a humorous, if perhaps tasteless, reminder of that shared past. But there is no denying that in the last decade, our religious communities have opened to one another as never before. There is a new warm breeze blowing in our institutional corridors, and it has already begun to thaw some of the time-hardened misconceptions and stereotypes Catholics and Jews have had about each other.

Item: Ten years ago, regular, ongoing communication between representatives of Jewish religious or communal organizations and the officials of the local Catholic diocese was rare. Today it is common.

Item: A few years ago, five Catholic and five Jewish married couples in Cleveland, Ohio, decided to launch a simple, informal dialogue, meeting in their own homes on a rotating basis, and frankly discussing whatever came to mind, from their religious beliefs and values to such "hot" issues as birth control and social discrimination. This community dialogue, held "without benefit of clergy," was so successful that it is currently being enlarged. Similar dialogue groups, involving Catholics and members of the American Jewish Committee (as well as Protestants) are going on in other communities: St. Louis, Los Angeles, and Atlanta, to name a few.

Item: Just two years ago, the first national conference ever

jointly convened by the official coordinating bodies of the three major faiths was held in America. This was the National Conference on Religion and Race, which called together our nation's religious leaders to face up to the enormous challenge of racial justice. Since then, state and local conferences on religion and race have allowed for joint planning and education in communities throughout the country, with Protestants, Catholics and Jews working together. (It is not insignificant that the Conference grew out of a "dialogue" between a Catholic layman, Matthew Ahmann, and myself, and then involved Dr. Oscar Lee of the National Council of Churches.)

Item: In Little Rock, Arkansas, a group of students at St. John's Seminary, an institution for the training of priests, celebrated the Jewish Passover ritual to dramatize the historical and religious link between Judaism and Christianity. The service was dedicated to the local rabbi, a long-time friend of the Seminary's rector, and was attended by more than 200 people.

Item: Last year, I was honored to address the Sister Formation Conference, the coordinating organization for America's teaching nuns. Since then I have received requests to speak at some twenty Catholic universities and seminaries. Similarly, at last year's annual conference of my own organization, the American Jewish Committee, we invited a prominent Catholic layman and editor, Mr. James O'Gara of Commonweal (and an Episcopalian priest) to discuss, candidly and openly, their views of Christian-Jewish relations. At this year's meeting we were privileged to hear Francis Cardinal Spellman declare: "By every means at our disposal we must wage war on the old suspicions and prejudices and bigotry which have set brother against brother and have spawned a brood of

evils threatening the very existence of our society. Definitely we must win that war."

But for many Jews the world over, the supreme example of Catholic action to achieve understanding and mutual esteem was the introduction during the second session of Vatican Council II of a draft declaration on Catholic Attitudes Toward Jews and Judaism. This historic document pointed to the Church's Jewish heritage, condemned anti-Semitism in the strongest terms, and perhaps most important of all in the view of most Jews, authoritatively rejected the slanderous charge of "deicide" (God-killer) against the Jewish people. This frightful accusation, which has been the excuse for so much persecution and brutality against Jews throughout centuries, is not, we have been assured, part of Catholic dogma, but a terrible distortion of it. Nevertheless, the charge that the Jews are a cursed people, condemned to wander over the face of the earth in subjugation because their ancestors were responsible for the Crucifixion and death of Jesus, is found in the polemic writings of some of the early Church Fathers, and still crops up from time to time in textbooks and sermons. Its repudiation by the Ecumenical Council would put this slander to rest, and vastly aid the process of self-examination and purification of teaching about Jews and Judaism that is even now going on in Catholic educational circles.

I must say, frankly, that while the document was introduced at the Council, many Jews were greatly disappointed and distressed that the second session did not find the time to discuss it or to vote on it. We are encouraged by the realization that it has the support of the American hierarchy, and we are hopeful that it will be acted

on affirmatively at the forthcoming session. If the question is passed over, there is bound to be a measure of disillusionment in the Jewish community, although those of us, Catholic and Jew, who work in the area of interreligious understanding, will continue, of course, to strive for the same goals.

While the deliberations of the Ecumenical Council and the resolutions of national bodies such as NCCM and NCCW can have great impact on Catholic-Jewish relations, the local community and the neighborhood are the final tests of all our efforts. This is, truly, the "home front" where all our mutual plans and programs will either be translated into effective action and improved communication, or they will atrophy.

On a practical level, what can a local NCCW group do to advance Catholic-Jewish relations? Many things, ranging from study to joint action. Here are a few suggestions:

--Plan a study program on Judaism: its range of beliefs and practices, its holidays, customs and ceremonies. (Many Catholics believe the Jewish religion stopped dead in its tracks at the end of the First Century.)

--Interested in an informal dialogue? Find out whether one exists in your community, and if not, organizations like my own, the American Jewish Committee, may be helpful in setting one up.

--Planning some action project of service to the general community, such as working with school dropouts? Perhaps the local AJC Chapter women, or the Temple sisterhood, would like to help. (And why not seek out Protestants?) Service projects are made-to-order for cooperation across religious lines.

What is needed, more than any list of suggestions, recommended readings, or program outlines, (although these are indeed helpful) is simply an attitude of open-heartedness, a willingness to reach out beyond the convenient image of the "other" and to confront one another, deeply and honestly, unembarrassed by our differences and willing to strive together for the values we share. Cooperation between Catholics and Jews is, fortunately, encouraged by the American experience of pluralism and democratic interaction. But its ultimate roots go much deeper, to the cherished patrimony of a religious tradition which both our faith communities can claim-- in the words of Pope Paul VI, who recently told a delegation of American Jewish Committee leaders: "...the Jewish religious tradition, with which Christianity is so intimately linked, and from which it derives hope, for trusting relations and for a happy future."