



INTERWOVEN DNA OF CATHOLICS, JEWS

JOHN L. ALLEN, JR.

Editor's note: This interview originally appeared in the February 23, 2007 National Catholic Reporter. Dr. Fisher will receive this year's Initiative Award.

It's a staple of organizational management that "no one is indispensable," that institutions are always greater than the sum of their parts. In reality, however, some parts are much less replaceable than others: Think the Chicago Bulls, for example, post-Michael Jordan.

So it is in the world of relations between Judaism and the Catholic church. While the dialogue between the two faiths certainly will survive the impending departure of Eugene Fisher from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, many veterans say things won't ever be quite the same.

In a recent column for Religion News Service, Rabbi James Rudin wrote that Fisher's exit "creates a large void on the interreligious scene."

Servite Fr. John Pawlikowski, director of the Catholic-Jewish Studies Program at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, said of Fisher, "For the first time since Vatican II, American Catholicism will lack a person with primary responsibilities for Catholic-Jewish relations. This needs serious addressing by the bishops' conference."

Fisher, who will take early retirement July 31 as part of a general downsizing of the bishops' conference staff, has both symbolized and, in significant measure, engineered the revolution in Catholic-Jewish relations that fol-

lowed the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), and came to a crescendo under Pope John Paul II.

He was an important part of John Paul's outreach. When the pope met with Jewish leaders in Miami in 1987, for example, pledging to join the Jewish people in the cry "Never again!" with respect to the Holocaust, the speech he read that day had been drafted by Fisher.

Fisher, 63, grew up in Grosse Point, Mich., and became involved with the civil rights movement in Detroit while a seminarian at St. John's. Later, while pursuing a doctorate in the Hebrew Bible at New York University, Fisher breathed the air of 1970s-era Catholic radicalism. At one point he spent a weekend talking politics with the Berrigan brothers and the rest of the Cantonsville Nine, not long before their sentencing. In a kind of moral gymnastics typical of the era, Fisher was wrestling with how to justify staying out of jail himself. When he and his future wife, Cathie, became engaged in 1970, they bought matching rings bearing the peace symbol.

During the same stretch of time, Fisher was becoming steadily more intoxicated with scripture, a development he regarded as entirely natural.

"The Bible is essentially countercultural in any given period of history," he would later write, "measuring the present always to the yardstick of human and, indeed, cosmic perfection . . . a concept guaranteed to make the people of any generation uncomfortable with human institutions, whether political or religious."

In particular, Fisher was fascinated with both the continuities



Dr. Eugene J. Fisher

and the divergences in Jewish and Christian readings of their shared sacred texts. He was one of the first Catholics to do doctoral-level work in the Bible in a predominantly Jewish setting, and in 1977 his budding interest landed him a job with the U.S. bishops' conference as their expert on Catholic-Jewish relations, a position he has held for the ensuing 30 years.

At the time Fisher started, there was only one other person in the Roman Catholic Church who held a full-time job for Jewish relations—Father, now Cardinal, Jorge Mejia of Argentina, who staffed the Vatican's new desk for dialogue with Judaism. The two men became colleagues and worked together to enable the pope and other senior officials to advance the Jewish-Catholic relationship.

Fisher has been a member of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, the main vehicle for dialogue between the two faiths, for longer than anyone else now living on either side. He has written pioneering works on the Christian presentation of Judaism that have transformed the way textbooks and religious education materials are prepared in the United States and around the world. He's also writ-

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ten on how Jews present Christianity, an area in which Fisher says there is still tremendous need for improvement.

In 1985, when the Vatican announced there were “no theological barriers” to recognition of the state of Israel, thereby discrediting ancient prejudices that Jewish homelessness was a form of divine punishment for the death of Jesus, it was Fisher who coined the phrase. Fisher has been at the side of Cardinal William Henry Keeler, longtime head of the U.S. bishops’ committee on dialogue with Judaism, as he navigated controversies such as Jewish reaction to the visit of ex-Nazi Austrian President Kurt Waldheim to the Vatican in 1987, which happened to coincide with John Paul’s visit to Miami. In 1999, when a panel of Jewish and Catholic scholars was assembled to study an 11-volume set of documents from the Vatican archives concerning the World War II period, Fisher assembled the Catholic team. (That project did not end happily, though Fisher hopes to see such joint endeavors get back on track.)

One could go on, but suffice it to say that it’s almost impossible to name a turning point in Catholic-Jewish relations over the last 30 years, for good or ill, in which Fisher has not

played a central role. He believes that most media coverage, by concentrating on momentary ups and downs, has missed the overwhelmingly positive long-term trajectory.

Fisher has been praised and honored in many ways over the years, but perhaps the best index of his impact is that he was twice nominated by a pair of Jewish professors at Hebrew University in Jerusalem for the Nobel Peace Prize. Fisher sat down on Feb. 2 in his office at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for an interview with NCR.

What does the downsizing of the conference mean for dialogue with other faiths?

We will go from five professionals to three. That’s obviously a real difference, because in this work you have to get out there, you have to meet people. You have to be right there, face-to-face, to develop the level of trust to move into relationships, especially with Jews, given the history of the last couple of millennia, which haven’t always been happy. . . . It will mean that things that might have taken three years will take five. . . . One of the things we want to do in this transition is to assure Jews that there will be continuity in policy and interest, as much as the smaller staff is physi-

cally able to do it. It’s a physical limitation, not a spiritual one. It’s not a loss of interest by any means.

One of my fears over the years has been that when I left, Catholic-Jewish relations would just be lumped under “interreligious,” where theologically it doesn’t belong. Rome is right, this is the first schism in the history of the church. It’s the primordial relationship, and we can’t do without it. Augustine was right. We need to witness together with the Jewish people, which we can’t do in this sense with others because it is only with them that we share a common relation in scripture, in our DNA. My image for the relationship is a double helix. The two strands are separate, but they’re interwoven and linked all the way through.

For many Jews, you’ve come to incarnate an enlightened Catholic approach to Judaism, handling questions like proselytism with great sensitivity. How confident can they be that such an approach will continue?

My crystal ball fell off my desk last night and broke. But right now, what’s being articulated is that approach, and the signals we get from Pope Benedict are that he will continue the policies on Jews and Judaism of his predecessor. Within this conference, so far as I know this is not really a conservative versus liberal issue. We’ve got groups out there on both left and right, of course. . . . It’s a big church. But in the conference, they want what we’ve been doing to continue. With maybe a couple of exceptions, there really aren’t any bishops who want to set up programs to convert the Jews or anything like that. It’s a pretty stable group, which was put in place by John Paul II. They don’t have radically different views [from John Paul]. There is a consen-



sus in the Catholic church that the church's proclamation of Christ is universal. In terms of the Jews, any program specifically targeting Jews for conversion would, because of the history of the relationship, be disruptive. [Such programs would] cause panic. So, you don't do that.

We've seen Benedict XVI at work with Jews on a number of occasions, from his visit to the synagogue in Cologne in 2005, to several Jewish delegations he's received. What do you think so far?

I've seen him following through on what he said at the beginning, which is maintaining the policy of positive outreach to Jews of his predecessor. He also has a special sensitivity to the Holocaust. If you look at the pitfalls and the controversies between Catholics and Jews over the last 30 years, the large majority of them have been around the Holocaust. . . . Waldheim, the Auschwitz convict, Pius XII and so on. It's the obvious lightning rod. As a German, he's more sensitive than most to that set of issues. Unlike John Paul II, he didn't grow up with Jews, so there's not that personal rapport. But he comes from an anti-Nazi background in Germany, and as a teenager at the time he was old enough to know how terrible all this was. That's reflected in his writings over the years. That will continue. He's not going to all of a sudden become insensitive to that set of issues, which he as a German acknowledges publicly very much.

Who do you see among the younger generation of bishops who has a special passion for this relationship?

There are some. In our dialogue, for example, we have Archbishop Timothy Dolan [of Milwaukee]. I would also look to Boston, to

Cardinal Sean O'Malley, who has started very well in picking up the fine relationship Boston has had with Jews under a succession of cardinals. There are several others. Bishop John Nienstedt [of New Ulm, Minn.] is also in the group. . . . Plus, whoever [succeeds Cardinal William Henry Keeler of Baltimore] as episcopal moderator will have a range of friends whom he will draw in, just like Keeler did. The theological reason for the relationship is too deeply embedded. Today, you can't read two consecutive chapters in any Catholic religious education textbook without talking about Jews and Judaism. That is buttressed by the history of Catholics and Jews in the United States. . . . It was not incidental that the agenda of the American bishops going into the Second Vatican Council, as well as coming out of it, was religious liberty, ecumenism and Catholic-Jewish relations.

Do you feel it would be helpful to wait to canonize Pius XII until the archives from his era are entirely open?

Yes, that would make the whole thing calm down. To some extent, after World War II, and the fact that baptized people tried to kill all Jews, Jews still don't quite totally trust us. It's traumatic shock syn-

drome of an entire people. If I were Jewish, I wouldn't totally trust me either. But there is greater trust now than there was before, and the more open we are about that period and that history, the better off we will be. . . . Catholic-Jewish relations don't need an unnecessary hit of controversy that would make understanding harder for a while. It just doesn't need that. That's my professional opinion.

At the time of Vatican II, in popular Catholic psychology the basic religious "other" was the Jews. Today, post-9/11, when many Catholics think of interreligious dialogue, they think automatically of Muslims. What does that mean for Catholic-Jewish relations?

Both Jews and Catholics are interested in dialogue with Muslims. Jews and Catholics have a pretty good record and know how to dialogue with each other, so that the skills that we have in the one can be very helpful to the other. This is not an either/or, it's a both/and. One of the trends I would foresee, and that I would hope for, is more Abrahamic forum kinds of things, with Jews, Christians and Muslims working together. That can never replace direct Catholic/Jewish dialogue, however, because there is an

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Some Catholics who play leadership roles in Catholic-Muslim dialogue are instinctively pro-Arab, especially pro-Palestinian, and to some extent critical of Israel. For some involved in Catholic-Jewish dialogue, it's the other way around. Surely that can create tension?

Yes, it can, and I think in some cases in the church it's worked out that way. I don't think it happens much in this building, because we try to be very attentive to the need for balance. For example, any time the peace and justice people are going to put out a statement on the Middle East, it comes through this office, and over the years we've managed to avoid some train wrecks. Likewise, our stuff goes through them, so we're trying to take into account everybody's sensitivities. No doubt some people sort of lean one way and others go another, but in the end we have to recall the common bonds among the Abrahamic faiths, and try not to let the politics get in the way of that.

Catholics from Africa, Asia and Latin America often don't

feel a sense of personal responsibility for the Holocaust, which many regard as something that Europeans did. That sense of personal responsibility was a strong motivating force for the pioneers of Catholic/Jewish dialogue. As Southern voices grow more influential in the church, how will it affect the relationship?

First of all, geography isn't the only factor in determining what we are or are not responsible for. As Catholics, we're part of the one universal church. Just as the church has always felt a sort of collective glory in the holiness of our saints, we also have to acknowledge a collective responsibility for our sinfulness. Moreover, Christian anti-Jewish polemics were not a uniquely European phenomenon. It was as strong, if not stronger, in North Africa in the ancient period than in Europe. Just read Augustine and you'll see that it was there. So this is something with which the whole church has to come to terms. . . . I think the Holy See is very aware of [the transition from North to South], and it's not an accident that our last couple of meetings of the international dialogue have been in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and in South Africa. I was very impressed in both places with the deep com-

mitment I found among the people who took part.

In very general terms, what's the future of Catholic/Jewish dialogue?

Like I told you before, my crystal ball isn't working. However, one thing I can say is that in our most recent meetings, there's been an increased willingness on the part of Christian participants to talk about problems in education on the Jewish side. If you look at most Jewish textbooks, or Israeli textbooks, they say next to nothing about Christianity. Basically, it goes from Jesus to the Inquisition and pogroms, then the Holocaust, and that's it. The result is that many Jews have no idea about what the church is actually teaching today about Judaism, and that's a problem. We've been able to say in the dialogue, you've got to do better than that. We've also felt very free to say that Israel absolutely has to finally complete the Fundamental Agreement with the Vatican. What's it taken, 13 years? That must be brought to a conclusion.

Your point is that trust has developed on both sides so that Christians can push back a little more?

I think we've reached a point in the relationship where the trust is deep enough that we can speak very freely to one another. Before, I think we were sometimes a little hesitant, because things were so delicate. I think that's evolved over time, and it's for the good.

Will you still go to the meetings?

I would hope so, yes. I won't be doing the staffing, but I would very much hope to be present, as much as I can. ●