

The Jewish Theological Seminary

May 6, 2015

Pope St. John Paul II Center Lecture:

The Dream of *Nostra Aetate* Becomes Reality

Rabbi Vistozky, Chancellor Eisen, Friends one and all:

I gladly accept the title *ben bayit*, grateful to be considered “a regular member of the household” of *The Jewish Theological Seminary*. Yes, I’ve been coming here for nearly 15 years for meetings of the National Jewish-Catholic Dialogue, and have especially felt at home here in my half-dozen happy years as archbishop.

As grateful as I am to be “a member of the household” here at *The Jewish Theological Seminary*, I am a bit apprehensive acknowledging it, since now I’ll probably get a pledge card to contribute to your annual appeal!

To deliver the *John Paul II Center Lecture* here, sponsored by the *Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue of The Jewish Theological Seminary*, is a very high honor. It is good to be with you. Thank you!

Our gathering is particularly providential as we celebrate the golden jubilee of the inspired document of the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, a teaching that dramatically transformed Jewish-Catholic relations. We Catholics sometimes quip that our Jewish neighbors pay more attention to Vatican statements than we do! Both of us have paid attention to *Nostra Aetate*, thank God, and friendship between us has never been stronger.

The Pontiff for over 50 percent of the half-century since that inspired document was Pope —now saint —John Paul II, for whom the worldwide Jewish community has a deep reverence.

Four months after his death in 2005, I travelled with four other bishops and about a half-dozen rabbis on a very moving trip to Poland and Rome. In the Eternal City we were running late, and our guide announced that, because we were going to be tardy for our appointment at the Synagogue in Rome, we would have to skip our prayer at the tomb of John Paul II. “The hell we are”—and I quote —protested the six rabbis. To stand before his tomb in St. Peter’s Basilica, bishops and rabbis hands joined, was a pinnacle of our journey.

Taking my cue from the title of this series —“The John Paul II Lecture” —I propose to speak on “Pope St. John Paul II: The Dream of *Nostra Aetate* Becomes Reality.”

Now I admit that what immediately come to mind would be two things: one, the *theological* advances in Jewish-Catholic understanding under John Paul II, and, two, the candid dialogue over the *neuralgic* issues that arose during his 26-year pontificate.

This prestigious center of Jewish theology would be well-aware of John Paul's proposition that we Jews and Christians now return to the conversation rudely interrupted in 70 A.D., when Roman soldiers leveled Jerusalem, scattering both Jews and Christians in a *Diaspora* still with us, and take-up again such profound questions as covenant, election, Israel's special and unique place in God's revelation, the Law, and how the two of us are to relate as children of Abraham and people of the Book. The acceptance of that invitation from John Paul has resulted in a promising flourishing of Jewish-Catholic scholarship.

Likewise are we all cognizant of the radioactive issues the Polish Pope never dodged, tender topics such as the Good Friday Prayers, the somber and tragic legacy of Christian anti-Semitism, the role of the Holy See during the *Shoah*, Vatican diplomatic recognition of the State of Israel, or even flashy episodes like the proposed cross and convent at Auschwitz, the movie “The Passion of the Christ,” and the visit of Kurt Waldheim to Rome.

Instead of elaborating on those two admittedly worthwhile areas, I would dare suggest that Pope John Paul II realized the dream of *Nostra Aetate* in a much more substantive and innovative way: by trusting the Jewish community enough to invite them into what was indeed the number one priority of his pontificate: *to recover the primacy of the spiritual*.

Simply put, John Paul II believed that the most mortal toxin infecting the human project was the denial of God’s sovereignty, even existence, and that the Church’s most natural ally in facing this challenge was the Jews. Humanity’s preference of late to “get along just fine without God”—to use Rabbi Jonathan Sax’s definition of secularism—

was deadly, and must be reversed. The Pope believed that the Jewish community would share his sense of urgency.

Let me try to explain . . . John Paul II took literally the dictum of the psalmist that “only in God is my soul at rest,” and that, as our scriptures reveal unremittingly, any attempt to seek absolute peace, meaning, and purpose in anyone or anything else besides God was a recipe for chaos and frustration.

It was Billy Graham who would observe that the revival of humanity’s empty and exhausted soul became John Paul’s mission, and this pontiff was convinced our “elder brothers and sisters,” as he called you, were our most valued partners in this endeavor.

He came upon this drive to recover the primacy of the spiritual in the human enterprise very naturally. The high-octane Catholicism of his beloved Poland saw God’s design and presence everywhere. Poland’s own tragic history taught Karol Wojtyla that faith alone would never fail. His Poland had literally been erased from maps in the late 19th century, and, while its status may have been restored after World War I, it was left in the dirt. So young Karol Wojtyla turned to your psalms: “Whoever trusts in God is like Mount Zion, unshakeable, it stands forever.” He himself lost everything —his mother,

his sister, his brother —a physician who succumbed to an epidemic while treating others —and his father, by the time he was in his early twenties. With the rest of Poland he cried as he watched the *Luftwaffe* swarm over his country on September 1, 1939, and lived in daily danger for six bleak years, watching Jewish friends and his own classmates in the secret seminary in Krakow disappear nightly. Early one morning, coming home from work in the chemical factory, he was hit by a truckload of Nazi soldiers and left for dead on the side of the road.

Things did not get better, as Poland lost the war twice, when the jackboots of Hitler's thugs were replaced by those of Stalin's, as the climate of enforced, oppressive "living without God" continued to smother Poland. What got the people of Poland through? The faith of Jewish and Christian wisdom: "Only in God is my soul at rest."

Is it any wonder that his first words on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica were those repeated so often by the God of Israel, and by His Son, Jesus, "Be not afraid!"

Here's the best illustration of John Paul's strategy to recover the primacy of faith, coming during what has been called "nine days that changed the world," when he returned to Poland at the beginning of June 1979. Henry Kissinger would claim he then

did for Poland what Churchill had done for England; Mikhail Gorbachev would conclude that those days were “the beginning of the end” of Communist hegemony, a hammer and sickle which had especially been used against Catholics and Jews.

On the final day of that historic visit, in Victory Square in Warsaw, before two million Poles, he began to deliver what all somberly felt would probably be his last public address ever in Poland. He had only spoken a few moments when the three-word-chant began; it started in a corner, and soon “tsunamied” over the throng, as two million Poles shouted the same three words.

What were they? “Down with Communism?” No! “Russia, go home?” No!

The three words were: “We want God!”

It went on for two minutes, five minutes, ten minutes: “We want God!” His nervous attendant whispered, “Holy Father, perhaps you might hush the crowd so you can finish your sermon,” only to have John Paul smile as if to say, “Are you crazy? This is why I came!”

“We want God!” The primitive cry of faith, of belief, of humanity’s innate longing for the Divine, a thirst denied, ignored, ridiculed, outlawed, and reasoned away for too long by the lies of a society and culture that had vainly sought purpose in systems and mentalities that forgot God. It was as if John Paul’s visit to his beloved homeland had put on the lips of his people the pining of the Hebrew psalmist, “Like a deer that thirsts for living water, so my soul longs for you, my God!”

“We want God!” That, of course, is the quintessential cry of Israel, and John Paul II saw today’s children of Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, David and the Prophets as essential to the recovery of the primacy of the Divine in a world drugged to forget the Lord.

John Henry Newman had worried a century prior to that shout in Warsaw that we now live in a “world that is simply irreligious.”

The leading *peritus* on John Paul II, George Weigel, will tell us that the Pope looked right into the eyes of this deformation of the great humanistic project in which the God of the Hebrew and Christian Bible came to be regarded as the enemy of human maturation and liberation, and did not blink. Observes Weigel:

“In the pervasive worldview of atheistic humanism, created by such thinkers as Comte, Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche, biblical religion . . . was the enemy, for it impeded the progress of humanity. Thus, moderns . . . must free themselves from the constraints of faith that it might march boldly into a bright, humane future, freed from the shackles imposed on it by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

No wonder Solzhenitsyn could conclude that the horrors of World War I and II could have only happened because man had forgotten God.

John Paul II's cause, then, was to rally Catholics, Christians, and Jews to shout “We want God!” For what had been squandered was a sense of awe at the very mystery of God, a mystery at the soul of Judaism and Christianity. Our visions have been blotted; skepticism and cynicism dominate our discourse; all is at the mercy of manipulation by our self willfulness; and the pleasure principle has ended up robbing us of joy. Man had become a puzzle for technicians to solve, not a mystery for poets to love and embrace.

Nostra Aetate tells us that all peoples comprise a single community, and have a single origin . . . one also is their final goal: God. His Providence, His goodness, His saving designs extend to all.

A couple of months ago, I was honored to host the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Riccardo Di Segni, for lunch. He told me the intentions of Pope Francis to visit the Great Synagogue of Rome. He also recalled the visit of John Paul to the synagogue in 1986, when the Pope called Jews and Christians to “a collaboration in favor of man.”

For Jews and Christians, our belief in God has certain implications, which John Paul believed impel Jews and Christians to work together.

One would be our insistence on the *dignity of the human person*, created, according to Genesis, in God’s own image and likeness, made, so says the psalmist, “little less than a god.”

Two would be the *sanctity of every human life*, never a means to an end but an end in itself.

Three would be an allegiance to *God's Law*, truths, as John Paul commented at Sinai, "written on the human heart before engraved in stone," not to be contradicted by self-will or popular demand.

Four would be *solidarity*, a sense that we're all in this together, and that we're much better off sticking together and looking out for each other than we are locked-up in our own comfort.

Fifth would be a *mutual worldview*. Jews and Catholics share the same glasses. Simply put, history is His-story! The history of salvation, in which Jews and Christians believe, is, in fact the history of the world. Both John Paul and Rabbi Joshua Heschel would remind us that "coincidence" is the term that non-believers use instead of "providence"! And, like Heschel, evident in the title of his great book John Paul II was convinced that the human story is not so much the recounting of our search for God, but of God's search for us.

So, Pope John Paul II could become a pilgrim, like Abraham, reminding the world of its real story, its genuine identity, as God's creation, unfolding according to His plan, the story of Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus.

This optic common to Jews and Christians makes us, as John Paul often commented, "a blessing to one another." Together, we share our eye glasses with others, so all can see history to be "His"-story, that human dignity and life are enhanced, not shackled, when we proclaim, "We want God," that each of us is called to renew the *Exodus*, allowing the Lord to free us from slavery and death to freedom and life, as we celebrate each spring at Passover and Easter.

It was Theodor Herzl a century ago who understood that anti-Semitism is proof that something is seriously flawed in the culture of the West. George Weigel again:

"When the fever chant of anti-Semitism spikes upward, it is always the sign that the patient . . . is in mortal danger . . . in no small part because it has forgotten the biblical roots of the Western civilizational enterprise: for the foundational Western metaphor of freedom and human liberation is not the Enlightenment . . . but the *Exodus* . . . and the Exodus is a liberation completed

by a moral code intended to help the free rid themselves of the habits of slaves—the bad habits that derive from willfulness and self-absorption.”

Elio Toaff, who was Chief Rabbi of Rome when John Paul visited the synagogue on the Tiber River, died a couple of weeks ago. Pope John Paul mentioned only two men in his brief last will and testament, thanking his loyal priest secretary, Stanislaw Dzwisz, and Elio Toaff.

No wonder: Karol Wojtyla and Elio Toaff, a Catholic and a Jew, were two men who sensed the groans of their century in their gut, and who believed that only by placing God first, and in trusting and respecting one another, can we get back on the path to God, instead of remaining on a dead-end-road of forgetting or denying Him.

Our project of together asking those theological questions of election, covenant, revelation, messianic hope, divine promise, and redemption . . . scholarly questions Jews and Christians now both probe together; or of facing those social and cultural challenges we face, such as ominous anti-semitism and persecution of Christians;

All start with our mutual chant, so innate in the fiber of Jews and Christians, that “We want God!”

We need God! Dominant cultural attempts to sideline Him, reject Him, deny Him, ignore Him, run from Him, or mock Him, only lead to trouble.

So, that's my plug: that *Nostra Aetate* inspired John Paul II to not just tolerate Jews, not just have theological discussions with them, not just meet with them at times of controversy and neuralgia, but to invite them into a providential and urgent partnership, flowing from mutual faith, love, and Biblical roots, where Jews became like their prophets of old, and Catholics like the twelve apostles, in calling the world away from the worship of false idols into the arms of the one, true, eternal God, who personally and passionately loves us, who has a plan for us, in whom alone we find purpose and peace.

When I was a boy in fourth grade, we had to memorize the Ten Commandments. The pastor would be in the next day to quiz us. I knew them by heart . . . or, so I thought, until Father Callahan called on me in class to recite them.

“I am the Lord thy God! Thou shalt not have strange gods before me!”

I started fine, but then went blank. Was I ever relieved when the pastor said,
“Well, Tim, that’s the most important one. All the others flow from that one!”

John Paul II would agree!

Jews would agree!

Christians would agree!

And *Nostra Aetate*, 50 years old, just a baby to a Jew or a Christian, would agree

. . . and urge us to work together to teach it to a world which now sadly goes hoarse

when moved to shout, “We want God!”