



DIOCESE OF FORT WORTH THE BISHOP'S OFFICE



Saturday, January 15, 2011

At the invitation of Rabbi Gary Perras
Conservative Jewish Congregation
Ahavath Sholom, Fort Worth

Dear Brothers and Sisters here today,

I wanted to open these remarks with *Psalms 133* for several reasons. The Psalms are part of all priests' and religious' daily prayer...five times a day in fact, and often, I have found them speaking to me of God's ever abiding presence in the sometimes challenging moments of life and ministry. This particular Psalm is also one of my favorites because in seminary formation it is often prayed as a reminder to men preparing for the priesthood of how we need to be a community of Faith and prayer with one another. I do not remember many particulars from my seminary formation in the late 1970's, but I do remember *Psalms 133*. The name of your synagogue, Ahavath Sholom or "Love of peace", I believe, reflects what this Psalm teaches us, especially in light of what has now been over 45 years since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, *The Declaration on The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* promulgated by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965. But we are also reminded of the efforts of Pope John XXIII, whose experience before becoming pope was enriched by his relationship with Jewish people in the various countries where he was posted as Papal Nuncio.

In section No. 5 of *Nostra Aetate* itself it says,

"We cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we treat any people in other than brotherly fashion, for all men are created in God's image. Man's relation to God the Father and man's relation to his fellow men are so dependent on each other that the Scripture says, 'He who does not love, does not know God' " (1 John 4:8).

I come here today grateful for this invitation and gathering and would like to thank especially Rabbi Gary Perras for his gracious and brotherly welcome. I hope that in God's providence, a new friend has come my way. I have been in Fort Worth for about 5 1/2 years now, and am happy that I am able to be with you today. I hope that this is the beginning of a relationship of brotherly love that is expressed in both *Psalms 133* and *Nostra Aetate*, and that together we can advance in the love of peace. I have tried to place these reflections in a framework of remembrance and from the heart, recalling what the Word of God tells us in Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." For us as Catholic Christians, this is at the heart of the Gospel, as it is the heart of the Torah.

I should state that although I got to Texas as fast as I could, I am also a product of the Midwest, and I am a bishop and priest of the time of Pope John Paul II. Certainly, he is a major figure in my life and time, having

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seen him many times when I was a graduate student in Rome in the early 1980s. And for this reason I would like to bring to your attention a book that I've read again and again, entitled *The Hidden Pope*. It chronicles the boyhood friendship of Karol Wojtyla with Jerzy Kluger, whose father was head of the Jewish Community in Wadowice, and how that friendship continued into his adult life as the Bishop of Rome. One remembrance that was in the book was an incident in which Jerzy Kluger rushed over to the Church of the Presentation on the square in Wadowice, to tell his friend Karol that he had passed his exams. When Fr. Wojtyla was asked by an older woman why he [Jerzy] was in the Church, he simply responded, "Aren't we all God's children?!"

This anecdote reminds us of how single occurrences of love pierced through the unfortunate anti-Semitism of the time. Certainly, because of a breakdown in the communion of love, a new approach to dialogue and relationship between Christians and Jews has been necessitated. And for this reason I have thought long and hard about what improved relationships with Jewish peoples means in my own life as both priest and bishop. In Springfield, Illinois, where I grew up, there are two Jewish Congregations: one "Reformed" and the other "Conservative." I do not honestly ever remember my parents or grandparents uttering a negative word about Jewish people. My father was a postal worker and my grandfather a salesman for General Mills who traveled all over central Illinois to sell flour and breakfast cereals during the great depression and years later. My grandfather Jones, who was a convert to the Catholic Faith, valued relationships and friendships with many people, Catholic, Protestant and Jewish. They both worked with people of different faiths. As an adult, as a priest, I began to go the YMCA to try to get some physical exercise and work out--after a fashion. It was there that I was blessed with a number of members of the local Jewish community, who to this day are important to me even if I do not see them so often. I think of Sid and Ruth Goldman, Jerry and Annette Schwartz, Ralph and Betty Hurwitz (who came to my ordination here in Fort Worth), and Bob Goldman. One time Bob and I, and an athletic director at one of the community colleges - Yavuz Gonulson (a Muslim) said to me, "Where else but in the United States could a Muslim, a Jew, and a Catholic priest be friends?"

Despite the way in which we met, these were not superficial relationships since they opened the door to me for a spiritual and familial heritage that provided an occasion not only to live the Psalms better, but to better understand some of the prayers of the Catholic Liturgy, and roots of the Church when we bless God saying, "Blessed are you Lord God of all Creation." These experiences of friendships and relationships reflect the words that I believe are attributed to John Paul II when he said, "We are all spiritual Semites."

If we see *Nostra Aetate* as the foundation for the age in which we now live, how then do we live this document of 45 years ago in "our time", in this world which is often marked by violence, fear (as last week in Arizona), division, and a perceived and sometimes felt specter about return to past attitudes? Where do we turn and what do we find, and then where do we go from here?

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In recent generations we have turned to Pope John Paul II and his many encounters with Jewish communities around the world, his visit to the Great Synagogue in Rome, and his visit to the Western Wall and his insertion of a prayer in the wall to God which said, "God of our Fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to the Nations: we are deeply saddened by the behavior of those, who in the course of history, have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the People of the Covenant." For as even the Christian Scriptures say, "The gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (*Romans*).

Pope Benedict XVI too, is certainly committed to building on the contributions of his predecessors and the direction laid out by *Nostra Aetate* and the Second Vatican Council (in which he participated as a theological advisor to Cardinal Frings of Cologne). In fact it will soon be the one year anniversary of Pope Benedict's visit to the Roman Synagogue, where in the presence of Roman Jews he said:

"When he came among you for the first time, as a Christian and as Pope, my venerable predecessor Pope John Paul II, wanted to make a decisive contribution to strengthening the good relations between our two communities, so as to overcome every misconception and prejudice. My visit forms a part of the journey already begun, to confirm and deepen it. With sentiments of heartfelt appreciation, I come among you to express to you the esteem and the affection which the Bishop and the Church of Rome, as well as the entire Catholic Church, have towards this community and all Jewish communities around the world."

From my reading of this, it seems to be that Pope Benedict is reflecting on the importance of relationships between Jews and Christians. In 2008, when he visited the Park East Synagogue in New York he said:

"I know that the Jewish community makes a valuable contribution to the life of the city. I encourage all of you to continue to build bridges of friendship with all the many ethnic and religious groups present in your neighborhood. I assure you most especially of my closeness at this time, as you prepare to celebrate the great deeds of the Almighty, and to sing the praises of Him who has worked such wonder for his people."

The name of your Congregation - "Love of Peace" (Ahavath Sholom), has the word "Sholom" in its name. As we all know "Sholom" is the word of greeting and goodbye in Hebrew. And it conveys wholeness and completeness, which are very relational. I also believe this points us the way to go, in addition to the words of Pope Benedict XVI.

In that light, (peace, relationship, building of bridges of friendship between Catholics and Jews) may I relate to you one more story of my own life? I was the pastor of a large parish in Decatur, Illinois (central Illinois) from 1992 to 2001. Part of my priestly ministry there was first Friday communion calls. This was in fact

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the practice of taking Holy Communion to the sick and shut-ins the first Friday of every month, to assure that they would have a visit from one of the parish priests. One of my calls was an older woman whose name was Leah Greenberg. Leah was Italian Catholic, and her husband Bill was Jewish. I took Leah communion on several occasions and Bill was always friendly and pleasant. He himself was not well. It dawned on me (perhaps the work of the Holy Spirit, I believe now) that I should pray with him as well. So, I began the custom of always praying the Blessing of Aaron from *The Book of Numbers* (Chapter 6) over him. He seemed to appreciate that, and in those moments, I was learning, and a bridge was being built. I always enjoyed my visits with Bill and Leah. Their son Joel and I even became good friends. When he took over his father's shoe business I always bought my shoes from him. Bill died in 1998, before Leah. I attended his funeral and to the best of my recollection, even assisted the visiting Rabbi. Leah died some years later after I had been transferred from the parish back to Springfield. I spoke with Joel just yesterday in preparation for this reflection about his mother and father. I asked specifically about Bill's funeral and the prayers that were said, but Joel mentioned something to me, which I had completely forgotten, responding, "Father don't you remember Christmas Eve 1996?" I said, "No, I do not." He said, "You came over on Christmas Eve with everything else that had to be done in the parish on that day to pray with my father because he was so sick. My parents always remembered that."

I had forgotten about it, and I guess that I prayed one of the Psalms and the blessing of Aaron. I am not saying this to speak about myself, but to reinforce what I believe is a key for all of us now, to work together to build relationships and friendships. Because when we do, not only do we know each other better, but we can build those bridges and relationships, or rather, let God in His providence and goodness do that for us. The hand of God, through Bill and Leah and Joel, built a bridge toward me as well.

With that I would like to thank you again for this time together and conclude with that same blessing, which I often use on New Year's Day:

*"May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.
May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace."*

SHOLOM!

+ Bishop Kevin Vann

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