



Repentance, reconciliation and Jewish-Catholic relations

January 22, 2001

This talk was delivered to an adult education gathering at Temple Sinai in Denver on the evening of Jan. 22, 2001.

My theme tonight is “Repentance, Reconciliation and the Future of Jewish-Catholic Relations,” and I had to smile when I heard it, because as a bishop, you get asked all the time to talk about big strategic issues that are completely outside your competence. Then you have to scramble to sound like you know what you’re talking about. Which unfortunately doesn’t stop any bishop from talking anyway.

But tonight is different. Tonight we’re talking about something that has practical implications for our life together in northern Colorado. That’s important for all of us, right here and right now. So as a pastor, I’m glad to be here, and very grateful for the chance to share my thoughts, and to hear yours. In fact, over the years I’ve found that the best part of an evening like tonight comes after the formal remarks, in the questions and conversation that happen later. So let me offer you some comments, and then we can move on to the really interesting part.

I want to pose two questions to frame the evening.

Here’s the first question: *How did we come to be here tonight?* Given all the bitterness that’s occurred down through the centuries between Christians and Jews — with Christians usually the ones at fault — why are we even able to hope for reconciliation? Why is the Catholic Church suddenly offering these public statements of grief over past sins, and why should anyone think she’s sincere? I think we’ll find the answer to that in the Catholic understanding of repentance, which is rooted in Scripture.

Here’s the second question: *Where do we go from here?* Assuming these expressions of sorrow are honest — so what? Nobody can erase the past. Nobody can bring back the dead. Jews living today can’t forgive sins committed against the dead. And Catholics living today resist being held responsible for sins committed before they were born.

That’s a recipe for talking past each other. So what would “reconciliation” even look like — especially since we’re going to continue to disagree on some very jugular issues? The identity of Jesus is the obvious one. But questions about the guilt or innocence of Pius XII; residual anti-Semitism in the Church; anti-Catholicism among some Jews; Catholic attitudes toward the State of Israel, along with practical policy matters like abortion law, where Catholics and Jews frequently disagree — we’re stuck with these issues for the foreseeable future. So how are we going to make our common future different from our common past?

Obviously, the first question — *How did we come to be here tonight?* — is a lot easier to answer than the second question: *Where do we go from here?* What makes tonight possible is a sea change in Catholic attitudes toward Judaism; an awakening by Catholics to the need for repentance *as part of their Christian identity*; and a willingness by Jews to at least entertain the idea that this repentance might be real.

I want to dwell on this for a few minutes because it's the foundation of everything we're talking about tonight.

I think most people involved in inter-religious dialogue would trace the conversion of Catholic attitudes toward Judaism to two things: emotionally, to the shock of the Holocaust; and intellectually, to the Second Vatican Council, which took place in Rome in the early 1960s. Vatican II was what Catholics call an "ecumenical council" — a gathering of all of the bishops from all around world, under the guidance of the Pope.

In the Catholic Church we have many different forms of service and leadership, but the final authority belongs to the local bishop, like myself, whom we see as a successor to the first apostles. The bishop in turn owes his fidelity to the Pope. So getting all the bishops together is a very significant event. In the last 20 centuries, the Church has had fewer than two dozen of these councils, and they're usually called to discuss very serious matters of faith and morals.

Vatican II was different because it was called for mainly *pastoral* reasons — in other words, not to settle a big argument over Catholic doctrine, but to reform and renew the way the Church interacted with the modern world. Part of the council's work was reexamining the way religious truth should relate to freedom of conscience, and that led to a declaration on the Church and non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate*, which in Latin means "in this age of ours." *Nostra Aetate* repudiated anti-Semitism and rejected the idea that the Jewish people were somehow collectively responsible for the death of Jesus, and it urged Catholics to seek out a new relationship with Jews based on a common spiritual heritage.

For Catholics, *Nostra Aetate* was revolutionary, because it opened the possibility of a dialogue of mutual respect. That was the effect of the whole council. In fact, I think the most important thing the council did for Jewish-Catholic relations was to simply point Catholics back toward rediscovering their own Scripture. Why? Because it's impossible to pray over the Word of God in our Old and New Testaments and ignore the Jewish roots of the Catholic faith. The more deeply a Catholic encounters Scripture, the more contradictory anti-Semitism becomes.

Let me give you one example. Yesterday in celebrating Sunday Mass, our First Reading was from Nehemiah, Chapter 8. There's a verse that immediately struck me in thinking about tonight. Nehemiah and Ezra have been reading the Law of Moses out loud to the people, and Verse 9 says, "For all the people wept when they heard the words of the Law." I know there are different ways of interpreting that, but I immediately thought of the gap in my own life between the Law of love that God writes on the heart, and the lack of love and the failures to love that become my daily routine.

When a Catholic reads Proverbs 9:10, this is what he reads: "Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." What does that mean? It means that pride is a kind of mental illness, and humility is the beginning of sanity. Humility is the proper human posture in the face of God's greatness and our sinfulness, just as the people of Israel prostrated themselves as Nehemiah and Ezra read the Law. And the proper response of the humble heart in the face of its own sinfulness is repentance. The first thing Jesus says in the Gospel of Mark is: *Repent*. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. *Repent* and believe in the Gospel," by which he means good news, the good news of salvation.

Now I'm not suggesting that Scripture means the same thing for Jews and Christians — only that Catholics see themselves as children of Scripture. When John Paul II travels to Yad Vashem and expresses public sorrow for "the hatred, acts of persecution and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews by Christians at any time and in any place," he does it for two reasons.

First, it's the truth, and justice requires that the truth be spoken, and only in speaking the truth, can the sinner become free. That's what Jesus means in the Gospel of John when he says, "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free." Second, the Pope is simply being true to the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: "Repent and believe in the Gospel." And by his witness, he gives an example to the entire Church about how to live the Christian vocation, not just in relationship to the Jewish people, but to the whole world.

For Christians, the renewal of a person and the renewal of a community can only be built on a foundation of repentance, an acknowledgement of the truth, and a reliance on the mercy of God. A future different from the past can only come from a *purified memory* of the past. And what the Church means by the “purification of memory” is the act of reexamining the past honestly and without fear, and acknowledging the sins of those who have acted in her name. That’s why the story of Esau and Jacob, which is so uniquely powerful for Jews, also has meaning for Catholics.

Reexamining the past also means, by the way, that the Church will challenge people when they accuse her of things she *didn’t* do. Anti-Catholicism has always been a feature of modern life. And if you look around, you can still find plenty of examples. The BBC produced a documentary on the Crusades a few years ago that was insulting — and inaccurate — anti-Catholic propaganda. And *The New York Times* just a week ago published a review written by a *disaffected* Catholic journalist, of a book written by a *disaffected* ex-Catholic priest — which, no surprise, attacked the Church for getting into bed with the Roman Emperor Constantine 1,700 years ago.

One of the things I’ve learned from 30 years as a pastor is to take what a man says about his ex-wife with a grain of salt. People who love and leave the Church, and then write bitterly about her, probably deserve the same caution.

But my point here is that the Church since Vatican II genuinely desires to renew the spiritual life of Catholics — and that can’t be done without a real effort at repentance and conversion. Catholics around the world just concluded the Year of the Great Jubilee, which marked the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus. Our celebrations explicitly grounded themselves in the Jewish tradition of jubilee found in Leviticus 25. So I think this really is a new and unique juncture in Catholic-Jewish relations, and Catholics will never be able to go back to the kind of prejudice that marked the past several hundred years.

That’s the good news. The more complicated news is that repentance, as hard as it can be, is the easy part. Repentance requires a sinner to acknowledge his sins, turn to God, and change his actions. But reconciliation requires both the sinner and the person sinned against to *want* some sort of common future, and to work toward it honestly. And frankly there’s no blueprint or easy fix to make that happen.

As ignorant as many Catholics are about the Jewish roots of their faith, I think a lot of Jews would be very happy just to have the Catholic Church go away and leave them alone. And that flows both from painful historical memories, and from their perceptions or apprehensions about the Church as a kind of religious corporation with a lot of institutional power.

For believing Catholics, the institutional side of the Church is probably the least significant part of their faith. The institutions are *necessary* in the way a skeleton is necessary to support the muscle and organs of the body. But that’s not where the soul resides.

The Catholic soul resides in prayer and worship, in service to others, and in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I’m not sure Jews always see that in their understanding of the Church. In fact, in some ways, Jews may know even less about Catholics than Catholics know about Jews. Other Jews may know a lot, and think we’re heretics or pagans. I had a rabbi tell me a few months ago — very politely and respectfully — that Jews had more in common with Muslims than with Christians . . . which I had never even imagined before, but can understand.

In like manner, Catholics often find it hard to understand what holds the Jewish community together. Catholics — and by “Catholics” I mean those who actually practice their faith, because they’re the ones who keep the Church alive from one generation to the next — tend to approach things from a religious perspective. But in our dialogue with the Jewish community we’ve observed that being Jewish — depending on the dialogue partner — can be a religious definition, or cultural definition, or a matter of land, language and blood, or some combination of all of them.

Being Catholic is a different kind of experience. What holds the Church together is mainly what we believe and how we worship. So doctrinal unity on central matters of faith becomes very, very important. The Catholic faith is not just a good system of ethics. You can’t deny the Resurrection and honestly call yourself Catholic, even if you’re a very good person. Of course, some people do — but when they do, they separate themselves from the Catholic community as it has always defined itself from Scripture and tradition. They may use the label “Catholic,” but it doesn’t mean anything. When the Church corrects a theologian for teaching what she regards as an error, she’s not doing it out of some arbitrary misuse of power, but to help ensure unity in what we profess, because that unity of creed is our lifeblood.

So where does that leave our discussion, and how do we answer that second question I posed at the beginning: *Where do we go from here?* Can we really talk about “reconciliation” between Jews and Catholics when Jews are not going to wake up one morning and believe that Jesus is the messiah . . . and Catholics are not going to stop claiming that He is?

This is the heart of the matter. Christians can’t stop preaching Jesus as the Christ without abandoning their own identity. The *first* thing Jesus says in the Gospel of Mark is “repent.” The *last* thing He says in the same Gospel is a command to all His disciples to “go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation.” In the Gospel of Matthew the mandate is even stronger: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” Catholics can’t abandon that mission without repudiating who they are. In fact, in repenting of their sins, Catholics seek to become stronger witnesses of their faith, not quieter ones.

At the same time, all persons have a right to freedom of conscience as children of God — and that freedom implies the right to be free from being harassed or coerced into believing what they don’t believe to be true. I think what’s fundamentally changed today in the Church’s understanding of her missionary mandate is the fact that any kind of coercion in the name of truth ends up subverting the truth and undermining the sanctity of the human person. If the Gospel is a message of salvation and freedom, how can it be imposed and still be believed? Having learned this lesson the hard way, I think the Church can’t really ever “unlearn” it.

Reconciliation between Catholics and Jews, whatever shape that takes after so many centuries of mistakes and sins, is finally something that will be the work of God. And God will do it in His own time using us as His instruments — not in dramatic gestures, but in the little things we can do together that accumulate to make a difference. Some things we can do together. Nothing would make me happier, or be more fruitful, than to have a chair of biblical studies at our seminary which would form our future priests in a way that was both *authentically Catholic* and thoroughly informed by Jewish spirit, culture and history. And surely we can find issues in society where we can cooperate for everyone’s benefit. Rabbi Eric Yoffie reminded us last year that

“We may read the Bible somewhat differently, but I think that [Jews and Catholics] can agree that there is a biblical mandate for a just society. I think that we can agree that religion without a passion for justice is a failed mission, a contradiction in terms.”

We can pursue that passion for justice together, beginning in our own hearts and in how we treat each other. The fourth century Christian saint and bishop, Augustine — he was a saint in spite of being a bishop — once said that “being faithful in little things is a big thing.” Listening to each other is a big thing. Being patient with each other is a big thing. Remembering, repenting and forgiving are big things.

And being together tonight is a big thing. So may God grant that it be the first of many times.

Thank you.