

**Remarks of Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan
On the Occasion of the Dedication of a
Commemorative Plaque at Park East Synagogue
In Honor of the Visit of Pope Benedict XVI**

April 22, 2010

“Catholic-Jewish Relations in America: A Modest Proposal”

Introduction

Thank you, Rabbi Schneier, for your kind introduction and the very warm welcome which Park East Synagogue has offered me. We gather here tonight in appreciation of the visit of Pope Benedict XVI just two years ago, on April 18, 2008. That wonderful occasion recalls the embrace of the Jewish community that the Holy Father enjoyed during the first papal visit ever to a synagogue in the United States. As the Archbishop of New York, I share in the pride of our city as a place where history was made in Catholic-Jewish relations. Moreover, I am very pleased to be present on this anniversary to witness the placement of a beautiful plaque so prominently positioned at the front entrance of the Synagogue where all passers-by can see this tribute to Catholic-Jewish friendship. I thank you, Rabbi Schneier, and your Synagogue community for the thoughtfulness of your outreach to the Catholic Church and for tonight’s commemoration of the Holy Father’s historic visit to Park East.

Without a doubt, my meetings with the Jewish community of New York have been amongst the most gratifying of all of my activities over this first year in office as Archbishop. At last count, I have met with approximately 40 separate Jewish groups and leaders, allowing me to gain a working understanding of Jewish life and concerns in New York, Israel and the world over. This evening’s gathering comes both at the second anniversary of the Holy Father’s visit to Park East Synagogue, and close to the one year mark of my own installation last April as the tenth Archbishop of New York. There could be no better moment than now for me to offer thanks for the friendship and support which I have received from all of New York, but with special affection from my Jewish colleagues whom I have come to know and admire. My prayers and good wishes are offered to you this evening that we may continue true friendship in the many years ahead.

The Diversity of the New York Jewish Community

Jews in America are found in diverse, vibrant, creative and generous communities of many kinds, reflected nowhere better than here in New York. The Judaism I have come to know and admire in its religious forms – whether Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox or Hasidic – gives witness to an ancient faith in a modern world much in need of the light and wisdom it brings. I am reminded each time I celebrate the Divine Liturgy that Christianity itself is dependent upon Judaism for many of its foundations. Jesus, the most important person in my life, my Lord, Savior, and best friend, lived and died a faithful Jew. We who are Christians come to know Judaism religiously through the same faith that Jesus radiated in his life, teaching, and ministry. Just as in his own day, Jesus experienced the vibrancy and diversity of the Jewish community of Israel, so do we who are privileged to live side-by-side with you, our Jewish brothers and sisters in New York, appreciate its modern expression in the many religious and humanitarian Jewish organizations which surround us. I am deeply grateful for the witness which Jews give to all of us: that God who is one and has created us in his own image and likeness, calls all nations into a single family as a reflection of his own unity and love.

If this sentiment were not in place today, how else could we even imagine the possibility of our gathering together tonight, or of Rabbi Schneier's invitation to Pope Benedict to come and pray with him in this very synagogue some two years ago? It should not be lost on us that a millennium ago, a century ago or even fifty years ago, these visits would have been unthinkable – even condemnable – in both Christian and Jewish circles. How far our friendship has come, that our leaders can welcome each other with affection and respect into their very houses of worship! Again, I thank the Jewish community of New York and, in particular, that of Park East Synagogue for helping us to overcome the history of mistrust and injury, of destruction and hatred which has too long sadly characterized our interactions. I rejoice with the psalmist, who exalted God with his prayer: “Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity!” (Ps.133.1).

Catholic-Jewish Relations Today

On January 17th of this year, it was my pleasure to host a group of Rabbis and other Jewish delegates to observe the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the great synagogue of Rome. While Rabbi De Segni welcomed the Bishop of Rome and Successor of St. Peter to prayer and conversation with the Jewish community of the Eternal City, so it was my pleasure to ask

Jewish friends in New York to pray and share a meal with me and to express our fraternity with both of our communities many thousands of miles away on that memorable day.

On the occasion of the Pope's visit to the great synagogue of Rome, three important points emerged – no matter our missteps from time to time -- as an affirmation of the present state of our relations:

- First, our visits with each other, begun under the gracious and reconciling initiative of Pope John Paul II, are evidence of a commitment to bettering our relationship as a religious duty to which we are mutually obliged. The good will we share has over and over again provided us with the resilience often needed to work our way through whatever difficulties arise on the journey we share, as they have and will. Our strength in this effort comes from God, who prompts our hearts to undertake this task and who never fails to nurture what he inspires in us.
- Secondly, we note that papal visits to various synagogues and my visit with you today are signs of friendship between our communities as hoped for in *Nostra Aetate*. There, we find something of a blueprint for our future: the vision of what can and must be reconciled between us, along with the friendship it promises. Our visits with each other, especially in holy places, reaffirm and recommit us to pursuing that same friendship as we embrace each other in the great peace of God, who is Creator and Ruler of all.
- Finally, be assured that this tradition of invitation and visitation, of welcome and of hospitality offered and accepted, is intended to put to rest the notion that the Church's renewal of her relationship with the Jewish people is not an authentic or irreversible part of her life. On the contrary, the decisions of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI to visit with their Jewish brothers and sisters, most especially in Israel as a full diplomatic partner of the Holy See, is a direct affirmation of all that *Nostra Aetate* challenges the Church to realize in herself. This deepening friendship is not just a nice idea, a hobby, or a quirk of any one pope or rabbi, but an essential of our common faith. As a result, Christians and Jews everywhere should be able to see our own Rabbi Schneier and Pope Benedict as examples of how those who love God must work together to heal a past where before there was little but conflict and misunderstanding. May God strengthen and bring to perfection in each of us all that he has begun!

A Modest Proposal for Our Future Dialogue

During this past week, we have celebrated nation-wide the 65th anniversary of the liberation of the death camps by Allied Forces at the end of World War II. The American commemoration of these events and of Yom HaShoah was at once stirring and heart-breaking, for the bravery and the poignancy of liberators and captives alike. To see these two groups sitting side-by-side, after so many decades apart, brings to mind the possibilities of a future long delayed that is nonetheless created together, whenever evil that is commonly faced is commonly defeated. It is always moving to witness the dialogue between prisoner and liberator: words of gratitude and of joy, to be sure; but more compelling still, to see their mutual gaze of silent commitment to ending forever the obscene oppression of the Shoah. It is by keeping sacred the memory of these events – and, in particular, by exposing Holocaust deniers who would defame them -- that we likewise keep ourselves from repeating them, and at the same time, help to pass this same obligation on to the next generation.

“Memory” in this sense is a foundational element of our dialogue together; without it, we lose a sense of who we are, most especially in relation to each other. As well, such “memory” is inseparably linked to “mutuality in engagement” and these two qualities make fine partners in the construction of interreligious dialogue. Both of our traditions reverence *memory*. “To forget” is disastrous, dangerous, and heretical. We both worry about an amnesia that seems a part of today’s existence, to live only for the now, unconscious of our roots, our foundations. It is my hope that in the many years God may give me as Archbishop of New York, our Catholic-Jewish dialogue may be marked by a practice of “memory” which never fails to hold us mutually accountable to the honesty and transparency demanded by the tragedy of the Holocaust, but also to a “mutuality” of concern for each other which places our friendship first, and our grievances second. Our dialogue must never be reduced to one of exchanged grievances.

So many challenges again face both of our communities:

- the protection of children from any kind of abuse or deprivation;
- the slow, but steady diminution of the importance of marriage as the keystone of family life, culture, and civilization itself;

- the continued marginalization of the poor, in particular of immigrants, refugees and the homeless on our streets;
- the denial of human dignity, seen almost everywhere in crimes of bias, hate, and discrimination;
- A reclaiming of the importance of Sabbath rest and worship in a culture that tends to be frantic and function-oriented, placing value upon what we produce and do, rather than who we are.

In addition, a Pew Foundation report from 2007 helps us to identify issues of mutual concern in the strengthening of family, religious identity and practice in the United States. Most urgently, that study provokes questions of how religious identity is transmitted from one generation to another; in effect, it asks into the very survival of our two religious communities within American culture and its interplay with faith. Surely, we could learn both with and from each other when puzzling our way through what social scientists tell us about the religious behavior of our families, especially our young people. It is chilling to read the results of the research of religious sociologists who soberly report that our young people feel less and less loyal to their inherited faith.

Can we not work together, then, for our own good and that of the society we hope to transform? Can we not imagine how our dialogue could assume the twin qualities of “memory” and “mutuality” for the sake of its own growth in a time when our combined strengths could be a light to all the peoples of the world? I would hope that we can do so and now invite Rabbis, Jewish leaders, my fellow bishops, priests, academics of both our communities, organizers, and members of the dialogue to consider re-conceiving of our dialogue to bring about just such changes.

Conclusion

As we conclude our program, I am reminded of how many times the nature of interreligious dialogues has changed since the middle of the last century. At their start, most dialogues tentatively explored a relationship of “tolerance” for the religious other, and we Catholics and Jews are often considered “the other” by the society we call our earthly home. Later, dialogues evolved into associations dedicated to limited “cooperation” in areas such as eliminating racism. Eventually, the idea of “exchange” took hold as the preferred method for dialogue, so that both communities could begin to know each other “from within”, i.e., from

the self-told stories that inform our religious partners of who we say we are, and who our God has told us we are.

Today, however, I am suggesting that we take a further step: that we “engage” each other actively, fully respectful of our identities and differences, yet come together in whatever convergences would help us to build up our relationship. What until now has been an “arms-distance” style of learning – perhaps more concerned with mistakes than achievements – may do well to become a mutual engagement on many levels that not only reminds us of our obligations to each other, but carries us to a new level of friendship. Let us build on what has been given to us, without losing what we have learned at each step on our journey.

I close with a reflection from a story told by Jerzy Kluger, one of Pope John Paul’s closest Jewish and childhood friends. Both little Karol and Jerzy would come to the parish church of Wadowice, just as they weekly visited the local synagogue to hear the stunningly beautiful voice of the cantor. A woman in the church who recognized Kluger as Jewish demanded angrily, “What are you doing here?” But when Karol later heard about this remark, he asked: “Why would she say that? Aren’t we all God’s children?” Simple, yet profound. Indeed, are we not all God’s children tonight in this synagogue, his beautiful house? May our visits to church and synagogue be the occasion of our dialogue to become for us “a blessing to one another.” And may the plaque we unveil serve as a testimony to that glowing evening when the Park East Synagogue became a monument, but for a moment, to the way the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus meant it to be always.

I thank you for your kind attention.