

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

November 13, 2020
Zoom Conference

Attendance:

Rabbi David Straus, Rabbi Lewis Eron, Rabbi A. Nathan Abramowitz, Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, Leslie Brier, Martin Budd, Rabbi Leonard Gordon, Dr. Adam Gregerman, Rabbi Noam Marans, Rabbi Daniel Polish, Rabbi David Saperstein, Rabbi Burton Visotzky, Rabbi Jonathan Waxman, Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, Allyson Zacharoff, Rabbi Harold Berman

Most Rev. Wilton Gregory, H. E. Timothy Cardinal Dolin, Most Rev. Steven Lopes, Most Rev. Denis Madden, Most Rev. James Massa, Most Rev. William Murphy, Most Rev. Mitch Rozanski, Most Rev. Edward Scharfenberger, Most Rev. David Zubik, Rev. Lawrence Frizzell, Rev. James Loughran, Rev. Msgr. Guy Massie, Julia McStravog, Rev. Brian McWeeney, Rev. David Michael, Jan Skrehot, Sr. Anita Baird, Sr. Jamie Phelps, Rev. Charlie Cortinovic, Rev. Walter Kedjerski, Rev. Dennis McManus, Rebecca Cohen

Guest: Most Rev. Shelton J. Fabre

MINUTES RECORDED BY RABBI HAROLD BERMAN

Archbishop Wilton Gregory opened the meeting with a prayer and words of welcome.

Rabbi David Straus expressed thanks to the planners of the meeting and invited those participating to briefly introduce themselves.

Rebecca Cohen gave a brief introduction to the logistics and etiquette of our Zoom meeting.

RECOGNITION OF H. E. TIMOTHY CARDINAL DOLAN

Archbishop Wilton Gregory expressed admiration for Cardinal Dolan and offered his personal gratitude for the honor of being able to succeed him as co-chair of the dialogue. Archbishop Gregory praised Cardinal Dolan's warmth, joy, integrity and constant encouragement on a personal level and in his leadership of the dialogue.

Rabbi Noam Marans spoke of Cardinal Dolan as the right man for the role he had taken over the years of leading the dialogue. As a leader of substance and style, Cardinal Dolan has always been able to show both seriousness and humor at the right times. Cardinal Dolan, as a visible symbol of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish community always went above and beyond the expectations of his position. He was, for all, an ally and a friend, sharing challenges and joys, a strong voice against anti-Semitism

and any other kind of bigotry anywhere in the world. He was also a personal friend and pastor in times of need.

Dr. Adam Gregerman described the background of the sculpture, “Church and Synagogue,” which was commissioned for St. Joseph University. **Rabbi David Straus** displayed the miniature of the sculpture that members of the dialogue had commissioned as a gift for Cardinal Dolan. **Rabbi Harold Berman** made the (virtual) presentation of the miniature, which bears the inscription:

**Grateful for your Leadership and Friendship
Timothy Cardinal Dolan
Co-Chairman, Catholic-Jewish Dialogue
2009-2020**

**אני יוסף אחיכם (Gen. 45:4)
*I am Joseph your brother***

Cardinal Timothy Dolan accepted the gift and spoke of his gratitude to Archbishop Gregory for his willingness to assume the role as chair. Cardinal Dolan spoke of his plans to continue as a participant in the dialogue in which he has been active since 2001. He became chair following the leadership of the late Cardinal William Keeler. While reflecting on those who had inspired him, Cardinal Dolan also paid tribute to the memory of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, late Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom.

Cardinal Dolan noted that in the past many of the dialogue meetings were about volatile and dangerous situations around the world. Fortunately, discussions have moved from being largely reactive to being proactive in learning and sharing. While there are still many sources of tension around us, we can be grateful that they are not always the central items on our agenda. We are fortunate to be able to trust each other as friends and colleagues who do not need crises to serve as excuses for reaching out to each other.

**DIALOGUE AS EXCHANGE OF GIFTS:
WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED AS A POSSIBLE MODEL
FOR PURSUING RACIAL JUSTICE IN AMERICA**

Rabbi David Straus, Chair of the National Council of Synagogues and **Fr. Walter Kedjierski**, Executive Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical Affairs of the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, shared a presentation they had prepared on the potential for Catholic-Jewish dialogue to serve as a model for racial healing.

Fr. Kedjierski opened with reflection on his experience at a Yom Hashoah commemoration at which the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, invited to join with him in lighting a memorial candle, proposed: “Let’s light this together.” He referred to the friendships of Pope John Paul II and many Polish Jews, as well as the special relationship of Pope Francis and Rabbi Skorka, as examples of mutual respect and as models to be emulated in dialogue. He suggested that these could offer models for conversations about race in America.

Rabbi Straus noted that throughout history times of great upheaval have led to introspection and transformation. Nostra Aetate, in the aftermath of the Shoah, was another example, and perhaps, at a time of racial unrest in America, there is the potential to deal with questions of justice, health care, judicial reform and other lingering challenges. Suggesting that while we have always been family, but often a somewhat dysfunctional and abusive family, from the Jewish side it has not generally been on the basis of equality or of mutual respect for each other's sacred texts.

Fr. Kedjierski explained that following the Shoah, the Catholic Church began a serious moral and theological reckoning with what the writer Jules Isaac referred to as a "teaching of contempt." Pope John XXIII knew that this needed to involve an openness to admitting mistakes of the past and a study of history not only from one's own perspective but also from the perspective of the other.

Rabbi Straus referred to racism as America's "Original Sin," and suggested that even people who moved to America long after slavery was abolished still need to examine the privileges they acquired for coming to a nation as free people while others endured a history of enslavement and racial discrimination. A careful study of each other's history would be a valuable beginning, with serious attention to each other's narratives. Dialogue needs to be enhanced by a self-examination that includes hearing the voices of others.

The spiritual dimension of dialogue is also an important gift to improving relations according to Rabbi Straus. Removing hostility to others is an ongoing spiritual process. In this way there is a common interest in sharing a religious imperative to search for peace.

Fr. Kedjierski outlined four gifts that could result from sharing what has been learned from Jewish-Catholic dialogue:

1. The importance of studying history side-by-side, listening to each other's narratives.
2. The importance of dialogue as a means to enrich one's understanding not only of the other, but also of oneself.
3. The Spiritual dimension of dialogue, expanding common interests in religious traditions and ultimately in relationships with God.
4. Understanding that success must be measured by the actions that flow from it.

Rabbi Straus noted the benefits that have flowed from dialogue in the aftermath of Nostra Aetate:

1. A forceful rejection of anti-Semitism
2. The Historic declaration: "I am Joseph your brother, and we are truly brothers and sisters."
3. Symbolic acts that included visits by popes to Jerusalem, with prayers at the Western Wall, visits by Popes to synagogues and visits by popes to concentration camps, accompanied by prayers of repentance.

Rabbi Straus identified three foundations, all intertwined, at the core of Nostra Aetate: reform of theological models, interpersonal relationships and institutional relationships.

At the conclusion of his presentation, Rabbi Straus shared a working document prepared to serve as a foundation for ongoing discussion and action. (Attached)

Fr. Kedjierski closed the presentation by affirming that we take action because it is rooted in who we are, Jews and Catholics, as people of faith who care deeply about the suffering of others, not because we have a common history, but because we have a common commitment to justice, equality and dignity for all.

RESPONSES

The Most Rev. Shelton J. Fabre, Bishop of Houma-Thibodaux, Louisiana, re-emphasized the importance of allowing others to define themselves in dialogue. Too often in the past, he noted, people have been unable to envision a future because they were limited by their personal understanding of the past. He also noted that racism is a moral problem that requires changing minds and hearts in a way that can only take place with God's help. He added that the process of seeking and receiving forgiveness is essential.

Racism and anti-Semitism, said Bishop Fabre, are issues that challenge the inherent dignity of all people. It is the denial of this essential dignity that leads to prejudice. Because each individual has unique qualities, one cannot compare one manner of suffering to another. Important steps have been taken through ecumenical dialogue, now Jews and Catholics need to come together in the effort to deal with racial injustice.

Yolanda Savage-Narva, Executive Director of Operation Understanding and incoming Director for Racial Equity, Diversity and Inclusion of the Union for Reform Judaism, emphasized that we must begin our work with the acknowledgement of the original inhabitant of the land on which we live. She noted that race and racism are imbedded in every interaction among communities, citing the recently published book, *Caste*, by Isabel Wilkerson, which identifies the artificial construction of placing one group above another in society. America has a caste system that we need to address but don't always recognize. We address it by discussing the stories of ourselves that change over time, the stories of our people that identify who we are and the story of "now," which currently includes pandemic, climate crisis and the need for a national reckoning on race. An honest dialogue involves understanding how all of these issues affect us and also those around us. We also need to be able to celebrate who we are, even as we see that we have much more to do.

Ms. Savage-Narva insisted that we have the tools to be anti-racist. She identified Jewish sources and contemporary secular writing about freedom and perseverance to emphasize that we have the capacity to make change happen in the world in which we live.

COMMENTS AND RESPONSES

Questions and thoughts that were raised included:

How do we start?

How do we acknowledge our uncomfortableness in entering an open and honest dialogue?

We must keep in mind the teaching of the Talmud: "It is not your obligation to complete the task, but that does not excuse you from the obligation of doing your part."

We must look at our own institutions and work for change among ourselves.

We need to overcome our "personal racism" as we try to overcome assumptions about the other.

Repentance is a key element if we are to be successful going forward.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Rabbi Straus and **Rev. McManus** proposed that we establish a working group which will share recommendations at our next meeting. It will be important to be able to include churches of the African American community who are not usually part of our Jewish-Catholic dialogue. One of the initial challenges will be finding partners for dialogue in communities where there is enormous diversity.

Archbishop Gregory suggested that working groups report back to the dialogue group at our next meeting.

Several dates were suggested at the beginning of June for our next full dialogue meeting. Meanwhile a working group will discuss proposals and next steps.

Archbishop Gregory thanked all those who participated as the meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Rabbi Harold J. Berman
Executive Director
National Council of Synagogues

PROPOSAL FOR DISCUSSION AND ACTION ON RACISM – Shared 11/13/2020

The proposed topic for the November consultation between representatives of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Council of Synagogues is an exploration of what lessons can be learned from the Jewish-Catholic rapprochement to inform current discussions revolving around racial tensions in the United States. While the Catholic-Jewish reconciliation is not complete, the experience of Catholics and Jews over the last several decades can help us frame current discussions with a dialogue model illustrated by “word and gesture”.

This model is illustrated by the seminal document *Nostra Aetate*, whose meaning was only deepened by the sincere apologies issued by Pope John Paul II. *Nostra Aetate* continues to be further extrapolated in Church documents and its spirit is clearly embodied in the abiding friendship between Pope Francis and Rabbi Abraham Skorka.

The Jewish-Catholic dialogue has been a journey of self-awareness only gained in dialogue with the other, a dialogue that is open to the experiences of the other. While one needs to accept their role and ask the other how to change, the other must find a way to forgive. Such an exploration calls for both Catholic and Jewish members of the dialogue to consider how these elements might be implemented in reconciliation with persons of color in the American context.

In short, the elements, or steps, can be identified as:

1. Admission to role as perpetrators of injustice as both institution and through its members
2. Repudiation of underlying justification – theological, in this case – and an apology
3. Actions to support this apology, such as clear teaching of a corrective that corresponds with the victim’s terms
4. Allowance of victimized community time to absorb and respond in their own time
5. Growth and reconciliation

These steps have not always been easy; in fact, they have been painful at times for both Catholics and Jews. However, there has been great progress in facing these together, and it is reasonable to question whether such a process may be applied to race relations in the context of current tensions in the United States.