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# That We Remember: A Personal Reflection on the U.S. Bishops and Rabbis Study Tour to Poland and Rome

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# That We Remember: A Personal Reflection on the U.S. Bishops and Rabbis Study Tour to Poland and Rome

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Anthony J. Cernera is President of Sacred Heart University. This address was delivered as part of the U.S. Bishops and Rabbis Study Tour, September 2-7, 2007, sponsored by the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University.

ANTHONY J. CERNERA

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*That We Remember:  
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and Rabbis Study Tour to Poland and Rome*

In his essay “No Religion Is an Island,” the great Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel says, “Humility and contrition seem to be absent where most required—in theology.” Catholic theology took a humble turn at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). The declaration *Nostra Aetate* initiated a significant development in Catholic understanding and teaching about Jews and Judaism. It created a historic possibility for Catholics and Jews to begin reversing their age-old relationship of hostility and denigration in favor of a relationship of “fraternal bonds” and “shared spiritual patrimony.” If humility is the beginning of religious thinking, *Nostra Aetate* signaled a new era in religious thinking among Christians and Jew, a new theology that evolved out of repentance after the *Shoah*.

The U.S. Bishops and Rabbis Study Tour began in Auschwitz as a witness to the compelling need to preserve the memory of the *Shoah*. The systematic extermination of 1.2 million Jewish men, women, and children for no reason other than their Jewishness is an unspeakable horror. Remembering the *Shoah* honors those who

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perished and protects those who live. Our best defense against repeating this massive cataclysm of evil that turned humanity against humanity is the preservation of its memory as something to which the faithful of the Church are called, alongside of the Jewish people. Pope John Paul's "We Remember: A Reflection on the *Shoah*" was an effort to engage the whole Church in an examination of conscience. As John Paul II said many times, anti-Semitism is "a sin against God and humanity."

I have been to Auschwitz five times and with each visit it is still heart-wrenching to realize that human beings could be capable of such evil. Remembering the cruelties of Auschwitz is an act of conversion and a will to renewal. It is recognition of the truth, however painful that may be, of the facts and responsibility of the Catholic Church in this catastrophe. As Pope John Paul II put it on one occasion, "Guilt must always be the point of departure for conversion." The Most Rev. Michael Cote, Bishop of Norwich, Connecticut, and a member of the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding (CCJU) delegation, described the transforming effect of the Auschwitz visit on him personally. "I had read about the Holocaust and seen photographs of the horror, but nothing prepared me for the experience of standing in a crematorium or confronting the unimaginable atrocities that occurred behind the barbed wire fence of the death camp," the bishop said.

Remembering is also a call to renewal: the renewal of Catholic awareness of the Hebrew roots of their faith and the resolve "to build a new future in which there will be no more anti-Judaism among Christians or anti-Christian sentiment among Jews, but rather a shared mutual respect."

For the experience of these bishops and rabbis standing shoulder-to-shoulder at Auschwitz to be a true act of remembering, it must involve a retelling, a passing-on of the lessons of the Holocaust and the new relationship of the Church to the Jewish people as those who adore the one Creator and Lord. The Bishops Tour provides the kind of transforming experience that turns awareness of past sins into the resolve for a better future. It also

points to the critical role of education if Catholics and Jews are to recognize each other beyond prejudice and memory in the generations to come.

When the CCJU delegation was welcomed as special guests at a public papal audience and presented His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI with the *Nostra Aetate* Award, it symbolized the commitment of the Catholic Church to respect, friendship, and peace between the two traditions. The CCJU chose to recognize the pope because of his singular stature in advancing Catholic-Jewish relations. His visits to a synagogue at Cologne and to Auschwitz early in his papacy signaled to the world that the commitment to greater understanding between Catholics and Jews was a priority at the Vatican and for him personally. Later in the trip to Rome, the bishops and rabbis met with Bishop Brian Farrell, vice president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. The discussion centered on the task of educating for Catholic-Jewish relations at the local level of our communities and the Commission requested that the CCJU lend its resources to the U.S. bishops in making the vision for “educating in the pews” a reality.

A cornerstone of the mission of the CCJU has historically been to act as resource for the Church in implementing ongoing study, scholarship, and education in Christian-Jewish relations. When Sacred Heart University first established the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding in 1992, it was done so in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* and the conviction that Catholic universities are called to do their share in promoting the theological dialogue that would deepen understanding and reconciliation between the two religions.

What happens in our classrooms and from our pulpits is critical to an ongoing dialogue. For the past fifteen years, the Center has led academic conferences in the United States and around the world to bring together Christian and Jewish scholars and leaders to participate in informed and respectful dialogue. We have also reached out to religious leaders. The CCJU Institute for Seminarians and Rabbinical Students has convened annually since 2000 to help educate future religious leaders in the new relations

between Christians and Jews. Graduates of this program are invited annually to the CCJU Colleagues in Dialogue, a continuing education program for interreligious dialogue to support young clergy as they begin their ministries. Our most recent education initiative is an effort to reach deep into the community among school teachers, religious educators, and the laity. The Institute for Education in the Diocese will bring the new spirit of Catholic-Jewish relations into the pews to replace the past spirit of distrust and suspicion with one of mutual understanding and good will.

The experience of walking the death camps at Auschwitz is beyond words. The *Shoah* raises a dark side of humanity that cannot be explained but must not be forgotten. We must not tire of reflecting. We must continue to defend human dignity and fight all forms of prejudice and discrimination that undermine the value of divinely-created human life. As Pope John Paul II taught repeatedly, promoting trust and fraternal relations between Catholic and Jews is essential at the level of what it means to be a committed Catholic. "The Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain way is 'intrinsic' to our own religion," the pope said.

The Bishops and Rabbis Study Tour teaches that it is not just a matter of recalling the past: "There is no future without memory." The common future of Jews and Christians and the solidarity of all humanity demand that we remember.