

Homily for the Hebrew Catholic Conference Mass

January 29, 2006

By Bishop Victor Galeone

What a coincidence! Today's first reading from Deuteronomy – proclaimed throughout the entire Catholic World – touches on the very theme of this conference!

In that first reading, we heard Moses speaking to the chosen people: "A prophet like me will the Lord your God, raise up for you from among your kinsmen; to him you shall listen." And the Lord confirmed Moses' words: "This was well said: I will indeed raise up a prophet like you from among their kinsmen, and I will put my words into his mouth. He shall tell them all that I command him."

In today's Gospel, we see that prophecy fulfilled in Jesus. He is teaching in the synagogue with authority, much to the amazement of the people: "What is this? A new teaching with authority – unlike any of our scribes."

As the backdrop for our reflection on today's theme, I would like to place three episodes – three cameos, if you will – from my seminary days in Rome.

The first episode took place during one of our walks in Rome. This particular afternoon, my comrades and I were paying a visit to the Ghetto area of Rome.

Etymologically, "Ghetto" was the name of that section of Rome, where the Jews were required to live. Initially, it was merely the name of a Roman neighborhood, much like Mandarin in Jacksonville. When the Jews were forced to occupy the Ghetto in the early 1600s, the governor of Rome encircled it with walls, allowing for just one entrance.

Well, the afternoon of our visit, the walls that once enclosed the Ghetto were no longer standing. Nor was the gate from the 1600s at the main and only entrance to the Ghetto.

But one thing was, and still is standing to this day – the church in front of the old Ghetto gate. Painted on the façade of that church is a fresco: It depicts Jesus crucified, arms outstretched on the cross. And beneath the fresco, quoted in both Hebrew and Latin is the verse from Isaiah the prophet: "All day long I stretched out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people." (65:2)

As I looked up at the fresco that chilly winter afternoon, I thought to myself: "How sad! Those poor inhabitants of the Ghetto were confronted with this not-so-subtle insult every time they had to leave the Ghetto."

The second cameo I'd like to recall is the anecdote that was circulating around Rome for several weeks after Pope John XXIII had granted a special audience to a group of Jewish businessmen. They were in Rome attending a conference. On entering the audience room, Pope John greeted

the businessmen with the verse from Genesis: “I am your brother, Joseph.” With that one short greeting, Pope John was attempting to counteract centuries of mistreatment.

The third and final cameo I want to share with you took place in August of 1960. I had traveled to Munich, Germany with three of my classmates, for the closing of the International Eucharistic Congress. That Sunday morning, along with one million Catholics from around the world, we were gathered in the enormous open square, seated on benches in concentric circles around the main altar, erected high on a central platform. I will never forget the sense of exhilaration I experienced as we received the Eucharist at that Mass. Like the disciples distributing the loaves on that Galilean hillside so many centuries before, thousands of priests fanned out through the crowd, distributing the Bread of Life. That morning I experienced concretely, the truth of the statement: “Love produces unity” Yes, we want to be near the ones we love. And Jesus loves us so much that he hides himself under what looks like bread to come and feed our souls in the love embrace of the Eucharist!

That afternoon I was to learn the reverse of the adage, “Love produces unity,” which is, “Hatred breeds separation.” After lunch, my classmates and I boarded a train for the half-hour ride to Dachau. To this day, the former concentration camp is preserved as a museum – a museum of man’s inhumanity to man.

On exiting the train, we walked the few blocks from the station to the concentration camp – retracing the steps of hundreds of thousands who had arrived in cattle-cars during the Nazi period.

Those fit for work were housed in one of the hundreds of wooden barracks that engulfed a brick building with its ominous smokestack at the far end of the camp. It was to this building that all the elderly, the disabled, the children and the Jews were marshaled within a day or so of their arrival. They were herded there like animals in groups of 30 men or 30 women at a time.

As my classmates and I entered the brick building that Sunday afternoon, we found ourselves in a large room with clothes hooks around the walls. A sign on the side wall described in three languages what took place during the war. The prisoners were told to strip and hang their clothing on the hooks. They were going to be “de-loused.” After each had received a bar of soap and a wash cloth, they were ushered into the next room, while the door was bolted tight.

The second room was the “shower” room, with such a low ceiling that we could touch the showerheads. But in those days, instead of water, the prisoners heard the hissing sound of poison gas. The first inkling that those poor unfortunates knew they about to meet their Creator was when they began choking for air. Two air pumps were then engaged – one to suction out the gas, the other to pump in fresh air. The corpses were then dragged into the third and largest of the rooms, where they were methodically fed into one of the three gaping ovens.

On leaving the crematorium, one encounters two circular flower beds, each covering a deep, dry well, into which the human ashes were poured. Atop each well is a simple gravestone, inscribed in German, French and English: “The Grave of Thousands Unknown.” And so greatly did the Nazis despise the Jews that they did not want the Jewish ashes to “contaminate” that of the

Christians. Atop one of the flower beds stands the Cross, while over the other is the Star of David. Hatred breeds separation!

Against this tragic backdrop, I would like to present a few passages from the Church's more recent teaching. This teaching underscores a fundamental truth that unfortunately had not been stressed for quite some time: The New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. For as Jesus himself, proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount: "I have come not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them."

First, there's this excerpt from Vatican II's *Constitution on Divine Revelation*: "Through Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, God taught Israel to acknowledge him as the one true God...and to wait for the promised Savior...God entered into a covenant with Abraham, and then – through Moses – with the people of Israel... "The principal purpose of the Old Covenant was to prepare for the coming of Christ, the Redeemer of all...One and the same God is the author of both the Old and the New Testaments...He wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and that the Old be made manifest in the New."

Next, let's go to the Synagogue of Rome, where in April 1986 Pope John Paul said: "The Jewish religion is not extrinsic to us, but in a certain way is intrinsic to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship, which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a way, it could be said that you are our older brothers."

And lastly, Pope Benedict XVI, in a set of interviews from the late 90s, stated: "As Christians, we are convinced that the Old Testament is directed toward Christ, and that Christianity – instead of being a new religion – is simply the Old Testament read anew in Christ. We can be certain that Israel has a special place in God's plans and a special mission to accomplish today. The Jews still stand within the faithful covenant of God, and we believe that they will in the end be together with us in Christ... "We are waiting for the moment when Israel, too, will say Yes to Christ, but until that moment comes for all of us, Jews and Christians stand within the patience of God, of whose faithfulness we can rest assured."

Yes, we Christians and Jews share a common heritage: We believe in the one, true God – the Lord of Heaven and earth – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Together with St. Paul, we Christians can affirm without hesitation: "Theirs is the adoption of sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the Law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all – forever to be praised!" (Rom. 9:4-5)

In view of this, how can one explain a Christian, who is anti-Semitic? An anti-Semitic Christian is a contradiction in terms. How so? For a Christian to be anti-Semitic it is necessary to deny one's own ancestry; for as Pope Pius XI said, "Spiritually, we are all Semites."

In the old Roman Canon, the first Eucharistic Prayer of today, we ask God to accept our offerings, as He once accepted "the sacrifice of Abraham – our father in faith." Yes, it's true! Spiritually, we Christians are all Semites. So whether we realize it or not, we Christians have

Abraham as our father in faith. And whether they realize it or not, our elder Jewish brothers and sisters have Jesus as their brother in faith. Let me illustrate this point with a concrete example.

I would like to quote a passage from a journal that I keep whenever someone or something moves me deeply. This entry is from October 20, 2001:

“Last night, during the dedication of the expanded Ahavath Chesed Synagogue on San Jose Blvd., Rabbi Michael Matuson paid a moving tribute to his Rabbi grandfather – long since deceased. The incident he recounted had occurred years before in his native Brooklyn, when Michael was only seven years old. “It happened early one cold, bleak morning while it was still dark, with a mixture of light rain and sleet falling. A few blocks from their cold-water flat, they came across a miserable beggar, coatless, trying to protect his shivering frame in the doorway of a store. The old Rabbi paused, removed his raincoat and gently placed it around the beggar’s shoulders. “As they continued on, little Michael asked, ‘Grandpapá, why did you give that man your coat? Don’t you need it yourself?’ The old man bent down and asked, ‘Michael, if your grandpapá were that cold with only a shirt to wear, wouldn’t you want someone to give him a coat to help keep him warm?’ – ‘Why, yes! Of course I would.’ – ‘Well, that poor man is probably someone’s grandpapá, and I was just doing his grandchildren the favor.’”

I concluded my journal entry with: “Lord Jesus, tradition recounts that St. Martin of Tours shared just half of his cloak with a poor beggar that he had encountered along the road. How surprised Michael’s grandfather must have been when you called him home and he heard you say, ‘Come, blessed of my Father...for I was naked and you clothed me!’”

I would like to close with the shortest of all the psalms, Psalm 117. During my 12 years of seminary training, it was the custom to conclude Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament by singing that Psalm in Latin: “Laudate Dominum, omnes gentes...” Gentes! From that Latin word we get our word, “gentiles.”

How marvelous! Long before the coming of the Messiah, God’s Chosen People were praying that all the nations – the goyim – the gentiles would someday be praising the one, true God! My brothers and sisters, let us pray for the hastening of that day, when Jew and gentile together, will proclaim Psalm 117 in unison:

“Praise the Lord, all you nations, extol him, all you peoples. For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.”