

A BLESSING TO ONE ANOTHER

POPE JOHN PAUL II &
THE JEWISH PEOPLE

DATE: May 10, 2005

CONTACT: Anna Bauer Smith
703-556-6800
asmith@sojourncommunications.com

Mollie Katz
301-493-8223
mkatzpr@erols.com

UNIQUE COLLECTION OF ARTIFACTS CELEBRATES POPE JOHN PAUL II'S LEGACY OF IMPROVED CATHOLIC-JEWISH RELATIONS

CINCINNATI (April 27, 2005) — A biretta and vestments worn by Pope John Paul II, shoes confiscated from the feet of concentration camp prisoners, and a videotaped interview with the pope's closest childhood friend — a Jew — are among the artifacts being brought together in an extraordinary exhibition that will take visitors on Pope John Paul II's lifetime journey to improve interreligious dialogue and understanding between Catholics and Jews.

“A Blessing to One Another: Pope John Paul II and the Jewish People” will have its world premiere at Xavier University in Cincinnati on May 18 on what would have been the pope's 85th birthday. The exhibit will chronicle the pope's childhood in Poland — growing up with Jewish friends, neighbors and classmates — and how it instilled in him a lifelong openness to Jews. “A Blessing” will also describe his experiences during the Holocaust, and how this dark period in history strengthened his views on reconciliation with Jews and shaped his actions throughout his ministry.

Visitors to the exhibit will retrace the life of Pope John Paul II, as his story is told through a blend of oversize photographs, artifacts, and video and audio interviews from the people who have known and worked with the pope. Items in the exhibit are being donated by individuals and museums in the United States, Europe and Israel.

Eight foot high replicas of vintage photographs and postcards will serve as the exhibit walls. These photographs, along with artifacts and videos, will take visitors back in time to pre-war Wadowice, the Krakow ghetto during World War II, and the pope's ministry in Krakow and Rome. As visitors walk through the exhibit, symbolically retracing the pope's steps, they will see the church in Wadowice as the pope saw it from his own bedroom window; they will learn about Jewish life in World War II after walking through a re-creation of the gate of the Krakow ghetto. At the exhibit's end, visitors will be able to write prayers and place them in a replica of the Western Wall in Jerusalem, just as the pope did during his visit to Israel in 2000. These prayers will be transferred to Jerusalem after the exhibit closes.

“During his childhood in Wadowice, Poland, the pope grew up in a situation that set him on a path to interreligious dialogue,” said Dr. James Buchanan, director of the Edward B. Brueggeman

Center for Dialogue at Xavier University and vice president of the exhibit. “As you walk through ‘A Blessing to One Another,’ you will literally be walking down the same path as the Holy Father, and you will understand how his experiences in Wadowice, during the Holocaust, and beyond have shaped him into becoming the person that he is — the man who has done more for interreligious dialogue than any other person in history.”

“This exhibit is important as a model of tolerance to all people in today’s world, where much of the discord we see, globally and locally, is rooted in religious difference and conflict,” Buchanan said.

Personal items of Pope John Paul II will be on display throughout the exhibit, including the biretta he received when named a cardinal in 1967 and vestments he wore at an interreligious prayer service in Assisi. These are on loan from the John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, D.C., a partner in the exhibit.

The exhibition will also feature a videotaped interview with Jerzy Kluger, who was the pope’s closest friend growing up in Wadowice. Kluger is now a resident of Rome, and remained a friend until the pope’s death.

The exhibit will paint a picture of life in pre-war Wadowice, where Pope John Paul II grew up in a community of 12,000 residents, including 2,500 Jews. Visitors to the exhibit will see artifacts of Catholic and Jewish life in the community. Among the items is a model of the Wadowice synagogue where the future pope attended a service led by tenor David Kussawiecki in 1937. The synagogue was destroyed by the Germans in 1939 and never rebuilt.

The collection also features artifacts from the Nazi occupation of Poland that demonstrate how the lives of the Jewish people were drastically changed. Visitors will see a Nazi business plaque, on loan from Zygmunt Kraus, owner of the Polish-American Private Museum in Wadowice. The plaque was placed by the Nazis on the businesses owned by non-Jewish residents, deemed appropriate for shopping. The City of Wadowice Museum has also donated an official license plate, bearing the swastika symbol, from one of five Nazi-owned vehicles used in the city.

Visitors to this exhibit will also see stark reminders of the Holocaust, which Pope John Paul II saw during a very personal visit to the Auschwitz concentration camp in 1979. The camp was located near the city of Wadowice, and most of the city’s Jewish residents were murdered there — including the mother, sister and grandmother of the pope’s lifelong friend Kluger.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum has loaned Hebrew prayer books, fragments of prayer shawls and Catholic rosary beads, all of which were brought to the concentration camp by the prisoners murdered there. “All the people at Auschwitz had was the prayer that this was not the end of their journey. Their prayers were not answered,” said Rabbi Abie Ingber of Hillel of Cincinnati and a co-director of the exhibition. “Both Catholic and Jewish religious life found its end at Auschwitz.”

Influenced by his experiences in Poland before and during World War II, the pope broke the chain of 2,000 years of painful history between Catholics and Jews. He was the first pope in two centuries to enter a synagogue, as well as the first pope to establish diplomatic relations with and officially visit the State of Israel. Pope John Paul II has also spoken of repentance for past treatment of the Jewish people.

The 1,500-square-foot exhibition takes its name from the pope's 1993 commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. On that anniversary, he said, "As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing to the world (cf. Gen. 12:2 ff.). This is the common task awaiting us. It is therefore necessary for us, Christians and Jews, to be first a blessing to one another."

Following its premiere in Cincinnati, the exhibition will move to the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center for an opening in mid-September. From there, it will tour other venues in the United States before traveling to Europe and becoming a permanent display in Israel.

The lead financial sponsor of "A Blessing to One Another" is The Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati, with major support from Xavier University of Cincinnati and in partnership with the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center. The exhibit is being created and produced by Xavier University, the Hillel Jewish Student Center of Cincinnati, and The Shtetl Foundation of New York.