

Remarks Made in Tribute to Pope John Paul II

Rabbi Abie Ingber, executive director, Hillel Jewish Student Center of Cincinnati and co-executive director, “A Blessing to One Another: Pope John Paul II and the Jewish People,” delivered these remarks at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, D.C. on April 5, 2005, during a press conference on the pontiff’s life and legacy.

In 1921, just months after the birth of Karol Wojtyla, Rabbi Abraham Kook became the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem. One of his favorite sayings was “what is old you make new and what is new you make holy.”

Pope John Paul II lived that saying. He refreshed the church spiritually as he embraced the youth of the world and made them feel holy in the Church. He also borrowed their technology and coupled with the ease of international travel became the first global pope.

But it is in his life-long relationship to the Jewish people that the Holy Father, for me, charted the newest course. In his six decades of ministry and his 26 years of papacy, Pope John Paul II broke the chains of 2000 years of painful history between Catholics and Jews. He was the first pope ever to enter a synagogue; the first pope to officially visit and recognize the State of Israel; he was the pope who formally engaged in an act of repentance for the Catholic Church’s past treatment of Jews, including during the Shoah, the Holocaust.

Growing up in Wadowice, Poland with Jewish friends, neighbors and classmates established in the Pope a lifelong openness to Jews and Judaism that shaped his actions throughout his ministry.

This legacy of affirming the common spiritual heritage that Christians share with Jews built on the blueprint of *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council. This legacy of fostering relationships and dialogue extended far beyond the Jewish community. The Holy Father has arguably done more for interreligious relationships than any other person in history. By doing so he has helped to set the world on a new path of mutual understanding.

I had the privilege of meeting the Holy Father twice. The most recent time was just five months ago when we shared with His Holiness the plans for the building of a first-of-its-kind experiential exhibit documenting the extraordinary contribution of Pope John Paul II to relations between Catholics and Jews. The exhibit takes its name, A Blessing to One Another, from the Holy Father’s remarks in 1993:

“As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing to the world. This is the common task awaiting us. It is therefore necessary for us, Christians and Jews, to be first a blessing to one another.”

(50th Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising)

The exhibit is to open in Cincinnati, Ohio on May 18th, the day that would have been the Pope's 85th birthday. It will open, and it will honor his legacy and inspire all those who view it to commit, or re-commit themselves to the ideals of mutual understanding and spiritual fellowship that he held so dear. The exhibit will then travel to this very special Center in September of 2005 and remain here through Christmas.

The first time I met the Pope was in April of 1999 when I was privileged to join Cardinal Keeler of Baltimore, and to be welcomed by Cardinal Cassidy at the Vatican. I was part of a delegation that dedicated a Holocaust-themed menorah, candelabrum, at the Vatican. In my remarks I quoted the 18th century spiritualist, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav.

“The entire world is like a narrow bridge.
The important thing is to be not afraid.”

When Karol Wojtyla was elected Pope John Paul II, his first words were “be not afraid.”

The Pontifex Maximus, the Master Bridge-Builder, has built a bridge of historic proportions. He was not afraid. We now must embrace his legacy and walk on the bridge together.

Together we can find the spark of our common humanity; together we can find the strength of brothers united in purpose; together we can illumine the world with faith and goodness; together we can create miracles; together on the narrow bridge that Karol Wojtyla, Pope John Paul II built - we will be not afraid.

May the memory of the righteous be for blessing.