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# CATHOLIC COURIER

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## Improved relations outlast dispute

**By Lee Strong**  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — When Father Joseph Brennan studied in Israel in the 1950s, he discovered many of his Jewish classmates were afraid of him.

The Rochester priest soon realized that those classmates feared him simply because he was a Catholic priest. All too often, he learned, the priests they knew in Europe had cooperated with Nazi persecution of the Jewish people.

And centuries before the Nazi era, the Catholic Church in Europe had established a history of discrimination.

Thirty years later, Father Brennan, a member of Rochester's Commission on Christian/Jewish Relations, said he no longer sees Jews fearing priests or the Catholic Church.

"I think in the United States and Europe, a large segment of the Jewish population is ready to accept that the Catholic Church has modified its positions," he said.

But as the recent conflict over a Carmelite convent at Auschwitz has shown, anxiety, misunderstanding and distrust still exist.

Particularly troubling to Jewish leaders during the dispute were statements by Poland's primate, Cardinal Jozef Glemp. On Aug. 26, he defended the presence of the convent at Auschwitz and suggested that Jewish people control the media. An agreement reached by Jewish and Catholic leaders in 1987 stipulated that the convent would be moved by February of this year.

**M**embers of the Jewish community regarded the cardinal's remarks as anti-Semitic, and Catholic leaders worldwide criticized the statements. Among those voicing criticism were U.S. Cardinals John O'Connor of New York and Bernard Law of Boston, and Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee.

Originally, the Vatican had refused to become involved in the dispute, saying that it was a local affair. But on Sept. 19, the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism ordered the convent moved.

"Before (the order), there was a feeling that things haven't changed much in the last 45 years" in terms of Jewish/Catholic relations, observed Michael Schnittman, the commission's vice chairman.

He speculated, however, that the the Vatican's interven-

tion would help the Jewish community "to realize that the pope is not turning a deaf ear to them."

Some members of the Jewish community had, in fact, begun to question Pope John Paul II's attitude toward them. The Polish-born pope had visited the great synagogue in Rome in 1986, and in 1987 promised to write a document on the Holocaust. Both actions spurred hopes for improvement in relations between the Jewish and Catholic communities.

On the other hand, Jewish leaders were troubled when, in 1987, the pope met with Austrian president Kurt Waldheim, who has been linked to anti-Jewish activities during World War II, and in 1988 with Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

**T**o Rabbi Judea Miller of Rochester's Temple B'rith Kodesh, however, such meetings were not a call for concern. "The pope can meet anyone he wants," he said. "Who are we to set his agenda?"

Father Brennan noted that the pope met with Arafat and Waldheim in his role as political leader of the Vatican, not as spiritual leader of the Catholic Church. "I don't think either of those diminish the level of cooperation between Catholics and Jews, either locally or in the United States," Father Brennan said.

Relations between the Catholic and Jewish communities within the diocese have been positive for a number of years. Catholics have participated not only in the interfaith commission's activities, but also in a Jewish-Christian dialogue group that is beginning its third season of monthly discussions.

"Jewish-Catholic relations are flourishing," acknowledged Marge Nurnberg, chairwoman of the commission and director of the diocesan Department of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. "I think it is mainly because we have developed among us such trust, such openness, we can criticize without being so hurt that we cannot continue a dialogue."

In the United States, anti-Semitism simply has not been the problem that it has been in Europe, observed Eugene Fisher, an official of the National Conference on Catholic Bishops.

Fisher, associate director of Catholic/Jewish relations for the NCCB's Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreli-

gious Affairs, noted that Catholics and Jews arrived in the United States together as immigrants, and that they faced many of the same problems and discrimination.

Citing the predominance of Jewish and Catholic leaders in the labor movement earlier this century, he said Catholic and Jewish immigrants worked together to resolve their common problems.

"I think there's been an ability of American Catholics and American Jews to relate to one another," he said.

Judea Miller experienced some discrimination when he was growing up, but the rabbi recalls that the major childhood disputes in his neighborhood were not between Jews and Catholics. Instead, conflicts arose among Irish and Italian children — with Jewish children taking one side or the other.

"When I heard about pogroms (persecutions), it was always overseas," he said. "It wasn't here."

A key event in Jewish/Catholic relations was the Second Vatican Council, Fisher said. In the 1965 document *In Our Times*, the council fathers repudiated the idea of collective Jewish guilt for Christ's death; reaffirmed the ongoing validity of the Jewish covenant with God; and urged dialogue between the two faiths.

"Before," Fisher said, "there had been a lot of relating on a social level. Vatican II allowed us to talk religiously."

"The public view of Jews by Catholics changed because of the council," acknowledged Larry Fine, executive director of Rochester's Jewish Federation. "I think it allowed for dialogue on a lot of issues that couldn't be talked about before."

Fine said Jewish leaders' reaction to the convent conflict arose from two sources. The first source was Cardinal Glemp's remarks.

**"I** think in the Jewish community there was some fear that some long-standing anti-Semitism that we had thought had gone had resurfaced," he said. But those fears were calmed by Catholic leaders' strong opposition to the the cardinal's remarks as well as Vatican intervention in the dispute, he said.

The second source of Jewish concern was the convent itself. Fisher noted that the root of the entire dispute is the

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