

Lessons learned from conflict over convent

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated Columnist

The controversy over the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz had a happy outcome. Pope John Paul II *did* intervene in support of the relocation of the nuns.

A statement issued over the name of Cardinal Jan Willebrands, president of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, expressed support for the Geneva agreement of 1987. That accord was signed by four cardinals and various representatives of Jewish organizations. The agreement called for the establishment, within 24 months, of a center of information, education, meeting and prayer outside the area of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camps. Cardinal Franciszek Macharski, archbishop of Krakow and one of the document's signers, will oversee the center's operations.

The establishment of such a center would mean that "the Carmelites' initiative of prayer will find its place, confirmation and true meaning in this new context... There will, therefore, be no permanent Catholic place of worship on the site of the Auschwitz and Birkenau camps."

Unfortunately, the two-year deadline passed without any progress on the center. Meanwhile, the nuns remained in their convent at the camp site.

There followed the protest demonstration by a small group of Jews from New York; the physical and verbal reaction of Polish workers on the convent grounds; the public statements of Cardinal Glemp, primate of the Catholic Church in Poland, in support of the nuns' right to re-

main and in criticism of Jewish opposition; and the criticism, in turn, of Cardinal Glemp by three signatories of the agreement — Cardinals Lustiger of Paris, Danneels of Brussels, and Decourtray of Lyons — and certain U.S. cardinals and archbishops in New York, Boston, Los Angeles and Detroit.

At first, the Vatican refused to intervene on the grounds that this was a local matter. But, of course, it was never only a local matter.

The agreement, which had been signed in 1987, was approved by cardinals from three different countries and by Jewish leaders representing both national, European, and international organizations. And Auschwitz remains a universal symbol of inhumanity.

The Vatican has now urged that the agreement be honored; that the center be established with the help of Vatican funds; and that the convent be moved away from its present site.

Case closed? Not quite. There are lessons to be learned from this whole unpleasant — and finally unnecessary — episode.

Much like a plane crash, we have to find out what went wrong, correct it, and make sure it doesn't happen again.

What went wrong? An agreement en-

tered into was not honored. The Archbishop of Krakow should not have allowed the two-year deadline to pass without explanation and proper assurances.

In lieu of a good-faith renegotiation of the agreement to provide more time for the construction of the center and the removal of the convent to other temporary quarters, a vacuum was allowed to develop.

Into the vacuum leapt a small group of Jews from the United States, representing none of the Jewish signatories of the agreement but acting on their own. We know what followed.

The first moral of the story, therefore, is that we should never enter into formal agreements that either we don't intend to keep or whose conditions we can't realistically meet.

The second moral of the story is that those who are not party to such agreements should not throw stones at it after the fact. If Cardinal Glemp had problems with the agreement when it was about to be signed two years ago, he should have expressed his reservations at that time.

The third moral of the story is that officials of the Catholic Church have got to take the Catholic principle of sacramentality seriously. We live in a world of signs. It's not enough that we do or say the right



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thing; we also have to appear to be doing and saying the right thing.

Cardinal Glemp surely did not intend his words to wound Jews, but his words did wound them. He should have known better.

The fourth moral of the story is that the Vatican cannot intervene at will on truly internal matters, while holding back on truly international matters.

The pope's action in this case was thoroughly commendable, but somewhat late. Too much poison was allowed to circulate through the ecumenical bloodstream before an antidote was administered.

And a fifth moral of the story is that there is more vigorous disagreement in the highest official echelons of the Catholic Church than many pious Catholics realize or are willing to admit.

The spectacle of cardinals shouting at cardinals may be shocking to some. In the end, it may have been the healthiest part of the whole Auschwitz controversy and its longest-lasting lesson.

David keeps his promise to a worrisome Bathsheba

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"Nathan, what's happened?" Bathsheba hesitated before asking the next question. "Has David died?"

"No," answered Nathan to her great relief. "I just found out that Adonijah is hosting a huge celebration in his own honor."

"Yes, he invited all of his brothers except my son, Solomon," Bathsheba replied.

"Adonijah knows of David's promise to you that Solomon would reign as the next king of Israel," Nathan continued. "He is holding this party to declare himself the rightful heir to the throne as David's oldest living son."

"What shall we do?" Bathsheba asked. "David is sick and I know that he will not live much longer. If he dies without setting things right, everyone in Israel will think that Adonijah was his choice for king."

"Go and tell David what has happened," Nathan said. "In a little while, I will come and confirm your story."

David acted immediately when he heard about Adonijah.

"Nathan, take Solomon and let him ride



on my mule through the city of Jerusalem for everyone to see. Then go together with him, Zadok the priest and my court officials to Gihon Spring. Anoint Solomon as king of Israel. After you have done so, return here blowing a trumpet and announcing as you come: 'Long live King Solomon!' This should put an end to the false claim of Adonijah."

Meanwhile, as Solomon was returning to Jerusalem as the anointed king of Israel, Adonijah was still celebrating with his guests. Even from where they were on the outskirts of the city, they could hear cheering and shouting.

"For my first act as king of Israel," Adonijah joked, pointing to one of his guests, "I command you to go and find out the cause of this great disturbance." When Adonijah saw him returning, he said to his guests, "He brings good news. Perhaps someone else is rejoicing over the new king of Israel." "I'm afraid the news is not

what you expected," the man said. "There is a great celebration in the streets of Jerusalem. King David has just proclaimed Solomon to be his successor."

Adonijah's guests went quickly to their homes. They were worried that if they were seen, they would be declared traitors.

Adonijah fled, fearing that Solomon would order his death. But when Solomon learned of it, he said, "Tell Adonijah that if he is loyal now, nothing will happen to him. Only if he chooses not to shall he be put to death."

Before David died, he gave Solomon many instructions about being a good king for the people of Israel. The most important thing he told his son was: "Be careful to do all that the Lord tells you. Obey the laws and commandments given by God to Moses. If you do this, your own descendants will rule as kings of Israel forever. Turning away from God will bring disaster on yourself and all of Israel."

David died and was buried in Jerusalem. The people mourned his loss for many days. He had ruled Israel as king for 40 years.

Scripture reference: 1 Kings 1-2:12. obey My commandments" (John 14:15).

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