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MEETING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Bishop Francis J. Mugavero gave this address on March 16, 1969, at the Rego Park Jewish Center in Queens, New York, during an inter-faith reception co-sponsored by the Diocese of Brooklyn and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.

SHALOM! Shortly after I became Bishop of Brooklyn, I expressed my desire to meet with the Jewish community. Through the efforts of the Anti-Defamation League, my request has been generously honored. And I am pleased to be on the same platform with the co-chairmen of the Catholic-Jewish Relations Committee of Brooklyn and Queens: Rabbi Israel Mowshowitz, the first Jewish Co-Chairman of the Committee; Rabbi Josiah Derby, his successor; and Monsignor Vincent Genova, the first Catholic Co-Chairman of the Committee. This Committee was founded to foster dialogue and fraternal reconciliation between the Catholic and Jewish communities in our two boroughs. I have come here today to reaffirm the Catholic commitment to the work of this Committee.

As Bishop of Brooklyn, I have placed Catholic-Jewish relations high on my list of priorities. The presence of the officials of the Diocese of Brooklyn here today is a pledge of our concern for the growth and development of our mutual interests. The presence of so many leaders of the Jewish community here today gives unmistakable testimony to their solicitude for the expansion and evolution of our common ventures. We are not strangers but friends—for we have learned to communicate with each other. We are not competitors but colleagues—for we are heirs to an ancient wisdom. We are not enemies but comrades—for we live at a time that is hostile to that ancient wisdom.

For most of our common history, Christians and Jews have lived on isolated islands. There were some Christians who banished Jews to live in isolation, saying that the Jews were eternally cursed by God. There were some Jews who fled from Christians, saying that the People of God must not be contaminated by the *goyim*. These at-

titudes, like much of history, have been turned around by events in our times. Believing Christians and believing Jews, living on their isolated islands, have been battered by a sea of unbelievers. We must build a bridge between these islands. We must build an impregnable sea wall against hatred and unbelief.

We have entered into dialogue because Christianity and Judaism have a unique relationship with each other that goes beyond their kinship with any other religion. We have entered into a dialogue because we have a religious kinship and because we have our religious differences. We are all aware of the difference between saying that there are two testaments in the Bible and saying that there is but one. We know that there is a profound disparity between worshipping the one God and worshipping the one God in three Persons. We realize the implications of accepting Jesus Christ as the Messiah or of waiting for the Messiah-to-come. We have our differences, but no one who enters into dialogue will be asked to abandon the faith of his fathers. Dialogue is no monologue and dialogue presupposes differences as well as kinship.

We have a kinship of faith in the God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: for there is only one God and He has created us all. We have a kinship in the Torah; and, according to an ancient rabbinical saying, God will be nourished and strengthened, so to speak, by our discussion of matters pertaining to the Torah. We have a kinship in God's plan for redemption even though the meaning of our respective roles must remain a mystery hidden in God.

We have had a kinship with each other for almost two millennia. We have heard each succeeding age say that Judaism is a dead religion; but we have seen the Jews continue to live as Jews to deny the assertion. We have heard each succeeding generation say that Christianity is passé; but we have seen Christianity absorb its would-be conquerors. The witness of history and the testimony of our beliefs argue for our coexistence until the time God comes to rule on earth.

Whatever our religious differences may have been in the past, we have initiated a dialogue about our God and about our world. Whatever else may be said, Christianity understands you as Jews; the secularist looks at you and does not see you in the perspective of sacred history. To the Christian, your Scriptures are revealed truth;

to the secularist they are literature. The Christian sees you as a chosen people of God, the secularist regards you as curiosities. The Christian understands your professions of faith and the *mitzvot* by which you sanctify the profane world in which we live. You see the setting sun and light a candle. The first is a natural perception of the course of the earth on its axis, the other a commonplace action. But you add: "Who commanded us to light the Sabbath light," and that candle and its light become sacred. You don a piece of cloth with fringes and add: "Who commanded us concerning fringes," and that cloth becomes like no other cloth because it is a means of worshipping our Creator. You build a hut of branches and flowers in the autumn and say: "Who commanded us to sit in the *sukkah*," and those branches become a sacred shelter. We understand these customs, the secularist merely interprets them. The Christian sees in you a mystery, the secularist reduces your existence to an anomaly in the laws of sociology.

We have a kinship in suffering, for millions of both our peoples were condemned to extermination camps where natural death became unnatural and lethal machines operated with absolute efficiency to leave no unusable residue of life. The racist Superman razed the Temple of the Jewish spirit at Auschwitz as the pagan Roman had destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem. His minions trampled on Christian values proclaiming a rule that would last a thousand years as the barbarian hordes had pillaged Western civilization a millennium before. Men whose minds had been poisoned and whose hearts had stopped beating shot at our relatives and friends whom they did not know well enough even to hate.

We have a kinship in the world in which we live since the Jewish people have emerged from the isolation of the ghetto and have entered into the mainstream of Western civilization. In your intellectual, political, economic, and artistic endeavors you have become, like us, children of Western culture. This very fact implies an openness to dialogue. Since Western culture is a Christian culture, we are meeting each other at very close quarters.

We have begun a dialogue. None of us knows where this dialogue will lead us. We must not be detoured. For "[The] day is short . . . the reward is great and the Master of the house is urgent. It may not be given [us] to complete the work, but [we] are not at liberty to

desist from it" (*Ab.* 2, 15-16). In God's good time we shall be successful if we are faithful to the command: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." This is Torah and the rest is commentary.¹

1. See Tobit 4:16; Matthew 7:12; Shabbath 31a.