

**REMARKS OF RABBI A. JAMES RUDIN AT THE PAPAL KNIGHT INVESTMENT
CEREMONY OF THE ORDER OF ST. GREGORY
NOVEMBER 20, 2022
SAINT LEO UNIVERSITY**

Dear Bishop Mark O'Connell:

Thank you for making the journey from Massachusetts to represent both Pope Francis and the Archbishop of Boston, Cardinal Sean Patrick O'Malley. Thanks also to the Archdiocese's Interreligious and Ecumenical Director, Father David Michael, who is here today, and I am pleased that Bishop Frank Dewane of the Diocese of Venice also joins us today.

After more than fifty years of working in the interreligious vineyard, especially in the realm of Catholic-Jewish relations, I am keenly aware that when the Pope requested Cardinal O'Malley's presence in Rome this weekend, even well laid plans must be put aside. Please express my warmest thanks and gratitude to the Cardinal when he returns from the Vatican.

I deeply appreciate your generous words as well as those of the Cardinal. It is an honor and a privilege to accept this extraordinary award. To be selected for a papal knighthood is a highlight of both my professional and personal life.

It is not a cliché to say that I figuratively stand upon the shoulders of many rabbis, priests, nuns and countless lay men and women who were and remain leaders in the interreligious arena.

And I am especially proud to join my American Jewish Committee dear friend and colleague, Rabbi David Rosen of Jerusalem, Israel, who received this papal knighthood a few years ago. And I remember with esteem and affection Rabbi Mordecai Waxman and Rabbi Leon Klenicki, may their memories be a blessing, who also received this knighthood.

At our luncheon earlier today, I thanked the many wonderful people of Saint Leo University, especially President Edward Dadez, our host for this unique moment in the history of Catholic-Jewish relations.

I first visited this campus in 1998 and together with then Saint Leo president Arthur Kirk, Jr., Bishop Robert Lynch, who is here today, and Bishop John Nevins of blessed memory, we worked to establish the University's Center for Catholic-Jewish Studies. We were joined in that effort by the American Jewish Committee, my professional home since 1968.

When President Kirk and Bruce M. Ramer, the AJC's president back then, signed a joint statement creating the Center, we had no idea that nearly a quarter century later the CCJS would become one of America's leading interreligious centers that is today ably directed by Dr. Matthew Tapie and now joined by Rabbi David Maayan, the Douglas and Maureen Cohn Visiting Professor of Jewish Studies.

And present with us today is Rabbi Eric J. Greenberg and his wife Sara. Rabbi Greenberg is the Director of United Nations Relations and Strategic Partnerships of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Rabbi Greenberg played a major role in making this day a reality, and I offer him my warmest thanks for his untiring efforts.

And the best for last: during my thirty-two years of “active duty” with the AJC, I made forty-two round trip flights over the Atlantic, while also during those years, I constantly visited the American Jewish Committee’s thirty-two regional offices around the United States. Too many flights, too many cramped coach airplane seats, too much bad food, too much time away from my young family.

Fortunately, there was and is my wife Marcia. She is a Phi Beta Kappa Boston University graduate who also earned a master’s degree in Philosophy and Religion from Columbia University & Union Theological Seminary, and is a former college professor.

Marcia was and remains a super mother to our two extraordinary daughters, Rabbi Eve and Jennifer, a gifted entertainment talent agent. My love to them all.

My interreligious itinerary brought me to Beirut, Amman, Geneva, Warsaw, Vienna, London, Seoul, Athens, Salonika, Prague, Hamburg, Belgrade, Budapest, Bucharest, Paris, Madrid, Krakow, Berlin, Munich, Oberammergau, Aarhus, and of course, Rome, the Vatican and Jerusalem.

The worst of my professional travel destinations was Auschwitz, a place Marcia accurately described on a visit with me as “the vortex of evil.” I actually felt inner trembling vibrations within my body during my several trips to that mass murder Nazi German death camp. I am haunted every day knowing that had I been born in Transylvania in Europe and not in Pennsylvania in the United States, I would have been one of 1.5 million Jewish children murdered during the *Shoah*, the Holocaust.

As the AJC’s Interreligious Director, I appeared on radio and television programs in many countries, and was the subject of numerous newspaper and magazine stories---all focused on building sturdy human bridges of mutual respect, knowledge and understanding between Christians and Jews.

I wrote a myriad of articles and books and delivered more than a thousand speeches in churches, temples, synagogues, and classrooms in the United States and abroad that ranged from nursery schools and kindergartens to universities, colleges, and seminaries.

As a rabbi, I met Pope John Paul II eleven times, Pope Benedict XVI twice, as well as Presidents Harry Truman, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton as well as Vice President Al Gore.

I was always in a hurry, constantly in a rush to reverse twenty centuries of negative Christian attitudes towards Jews and Judaism. To accomplish this difficult task, there was always one more bishop to meet, one more seminary to visit, one more sermon to deliver in a basilica or cathedral, one more Christian educator asking my advice on a proposed book or film about Judaism, one more international conference to attend in order to rally

interreligious support for Soviet Jewry, one more radio or TV talk show to discuss the inextricable connections and significant differences between Passover and Easter, one more journalist working on deadline who wanted my views on the anti-Jewish elements in the world-famous Oberammergau Passion play in Germany, one more public criticism of Christian attempts to convert Jews, one more media comment on a Vatican statement on the Holocaust, one more attendance at a Good Friday church service as an unannounced visitor to hear how the clergyperson described the death of Jesus vis-à-vis “the Jews,” and so many other encounters, assemblies, gatherings, conclaves, colloquia, seminars, news conferences, panel discussions, classroom lectures and media appearances.

Rapidly moving from place to place, from one meeting to another, I spent almost no time wondering how a Jewish boy from Alexandria, Virginia became an “Ambassador to Christians.” My personal slogan was “So many Christians, So Much to Change, So Little Time.”

In my work, I was always guided by Jewish philosopher Martin Buber’s succinct five word description of authentic interreligious dialogue: “All real living is meeting.”

That is, even our revered theologians of the past or the present do not ultimately shape our deepest core beliefs. Instead, personally lived experiences and encounters in everyday life create our most profound religious values and views.

Those personal relationships provided me a “brush with history,” an insider’s “front row seat” of many extraordinary events and a unique insight into how positive history is actually made. That happens when leaders develop trust relationships with one another.

Personal relationships, I discovered, count far more than differences in ideology, theology, or politics. This was certainly true in the post-World War II spiritual revolution that has dramatically improved Catholic-Jewish relations.

I met many skeptics, including members of my own family, who perceived interreligious relations as a worthwhile pleasant distraction, a “nice thing to do.” But I always believed it was much more than that because throughout history and continuing to this day, religion has often been a demonic force that provided divine justification for the slaughter of millions of innocent people. In addition, religion frequently shapes politics, culture, science, medicine, and economics in negative ways.

Deeply held religious beliefs are like radioactive material. If handled carefully, they can be of great positive value. But if mishandled, they can be a source of human destruction and pain. I saw my task on the stage I was privileged to occupy; it was to make sure religious leaders, and hopefully their followers, would handle the radioactive material in beneficial ways.

It wasn’t always easy, and there were many off-the-record heated meetings, closed door angry encounters, and stormy confrontations that had to be overcome. But progress, albeit hardly enough, has been made, and I strongly believe those advances in mutual understanding and respect between Jews and Christian are irreversible.

The decades since 1945 and the end of the Holocaust have been momentous ones as Jews and Catholics, two ancient religious communities, reached out to one another to reverse centuries of suspicion, hatred and mistrust; to overcome bigotry, prejudice, and stereotypes. I have often said and written that there have been more positive interactions between Catholics and Jews since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 than there were in the first 1900 years of the Church.

While there have been great advances, I have no illusions the task is complete. I see myself as a religious explorer, a pioneer who helped set in motion an irrevocable process of ending the alienation among followers of the world's religions.

I proudly accept this award by voicing a challenge:

We are today witnessing and experiencing a severe wide spread outbreak of the world's oldest deadly social pathology: antisemitism....the hatred of Jews and Judaism. In response, it is now the sacred mission of Catholics, the spiritual "Children of Rome: the Eternal City," to join with the Jewish people, the spiritual "Children of Jerusalem: the Holy City," to vigorously attack and root out this obscene malignancy wherever and whenever it appears.

In 1965 at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, the world's Catholic bishops overwhelmingly adopted the now historic *Nostra Aetate* Declaration by a vote of 2221 to 88. Nearly sixty years later, we recognize the Declaration still remains our clear call for collective action:

Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues...

Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.

I am a former United States Air Force chaplain and I consider those words our official orders.

And I strongly believe there is higher ground, a better place, a promised land for Catholics and Jews...that there is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands and marching together.

Thank you again for this high honor.