

Rabbi Leads Human Rights Struggle

By Rabbi James Rudin

"The human rights rabbi of America" was how Sacred Heart University of Bridgeport, Conn., described him when earlier this year it conferred an honorary doctorate on Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, a leading personality in promoting improved relationships between Christians and Jews in America.

As a colleague and friend for the past 10 years of this dynamic, incredibly creative 52-year-old Conservative rabbi-scholar-activist, I know that this characterization meant more to him than most of the many other doctorates, honors and awards he has received during his 25 years of public service.

The "human rights rabbi of America" tribute expresses succinctly the remarkable synthesis that Rabbi Tanenbaum has achieved in his quarter century of dedicated service. He is a committed Jew deeply rooted in the faith and traditions of Judaism, vitally concerned about the security and welfare of the Jewish people in the United States, Israel, the Soviet Union, Latin America and elsewhere.

He is at the same time a compassionate humanitarian who has responded with deeds as well as with eloquent words,

passionate words echoing the prophets of Israel, to the plight and suffering of black Christians in Uganda, Biafra, the Sudan, South Africa and Rhodesia; to the Vietnamese boat people and Indo-Chinese refugees; to Catholics and Protestants in Ireland; to Catholics as well as Jews afflicted by terrorism in Argentina and in other Latin American countries; to Moslems in Bangladesh and in the Sahelian zone of West Africa; to Greek Orthodox in Cyprus and to Christians and Moslems in Lebanon.

In every one of these crisis situations in which human life was at stake, Rabbi Tanenbaum was among the first Jews to help organize major national interreligious programs to defend human rights and to provide food, clothing and shelter for the starving millions of deprived peoples regardless of their religious, racial or ethnic identities.

Given all the pressures and threats against the Jewish people in the world today, where does a Jewish leader of Rabbi Tanenbaum's stature find the moral resources to be concerned both about Jews and about other members of the human family?

"We Jews have learned one permanent, universal lesson from the Nazi trauma," Rabbi Tanenbaum declares over and

over again in the hundreds of speeches he makes annually throughout the United States and in other parts of the world. "And that lesson is a paraphrase from the Book of Leviticus: 'You shall not stand idly by while the blood of your brothers and sisters cries out to you from the earth'."

He adds: "Because the world community has refused to face up to the meaning of the Nazi Holocaust, anti-Semitism and racial prejudice, and to mobilize adequately in a determined effort to stand against such evil, we face all over the world today an epidemic of callousness to the value of human life, a wave of dehumanization manifested in violence, terrorism and abuse of human rights.

"Without any messianic fantasies, I am simply determined to do whatever I can in concert with my Christian brothers and sisters and other people of good will to try to lessen the quotient of human suffering in the world."

Those passionately held biblical and democratic convictions, which Rabbi Tanenbaum claims he first learned as a child attending an orthodox Jewish school in Baltimore, led him to active involvement in what he regards as the three major turning points in his professional career:

— His presence as the only rabbi at Vatican Council II, where he played an influential role as counselor to those council Fathers who drafted the council declaration which condemned anti-Semitism and called for "fraternal dialogue" between Catholics and Jews.

— His recent participation as the Jewish representative on an international rescue committee's fact-finding mission in Southeast Asia to the Vietnamese boat people and Indo-Chinese refugees, which has contributed to a more liberal American immigration policy for these suffering refugees.

— His role as the Jewish consultant to NBC-TV's productions of "Jesus of Nazareth," and of "The Holocaust," which reached hundreds of millions of people with new insights into Jewish-Christian relations.

In January, 1978, a poll of America's religion newspaper editors published in the *Christian Century* voted Marc Tanenbaum "one of the 10 most respected and influential religious leaders in America" - after Billy Graham, Martin Marty and Jimmy Carter. It was one activity that Rabbi Tanenbaum had no hand in organizing.