

# The Mobile Dialogue

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Paul Filben, Editor

For those of you who have been visiting Norway, Sweden, Denmark or Finland, please be advised that Summer has arrived in Mobile, Alabama! The heat index (for those living outside our area) has been up to 112 degrees Fahrenheit. Mary and I have been planning the program for the coming Dialogue year and although those plans are incomplete, we are anticipating another stimulating year of provocative dialogue. The autumn of 1998 marks the 24th year of dialogue in Mobile and whereas great strides have been made since those early beginnings, there is yet much to be done. It seems that we continue to find ways to diminish the "other" in order to somehow insure our own survival. States, nations, ethnic Groups and families continue to perpetrate crimes within and outside their own boundaries. There has been much talk about families and values in the contemporary political arena. The Mobile Dialogue proposes that we adopt an agenda for the coming decade to discuss these issues in depth. We welcome your ideas.

Thanks to all who have sent checks. We are genuinely grateful for your continuing support.

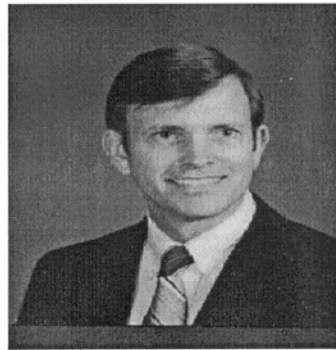
## Faith and Families

By Donald K. Berry, Ph.D.  
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Relating to persons of other faiths compares to relationships with those from different families. I relate to the world in the "Berry" way: long slow anger, quiet brooding, reluctance to interfere, refusal to admit mistakes. My wife relates to the world in the "Howard" way: good natured effusiveness, a quick temper, humility, love for open dialogue.

Relating to those from other families is like playing the same game with different rules. What seems to one set of players an unforgivable breach of the rules is to another set of players a standard protocol. This produces much of the tension involved when individuals relate to groups.

In the Protestant family, "but the Bible says" serves as the standard reference to an unimpeachable rulebook. Members of our family like to assume that all others who share portions of our scriptures use the same passages



we do to build an impregnable framework of doctrine. At the other extreme we sometimes remain so ignorant of other families, that we assume their scriptures are somehow inherently alien. Yet it is not that the Hebrew Bible differs in any of its content from what we know as the "Old Testament" nor is it that the Septuagint Bible (even with the Deuterocanon) differs significantly from its Protestant counterpart. We differ in the sort of authority we ascribe to the text. Already some from my family might protest (no pun intended) that the scriptures are worthy of the highest authority. Yet the difference is not in the degree of the Bible's authority, but in the ways its authority is

mediated. For much of the Protestant world, the pattern for biblical authority is the legalistic/moralistic consensus of western society. For Jews, the Bible's authority is filtered through their centuries of distinctive communal experience. For Roman Catholics, the encounter with scripture finds direction in the lives of saints and canon law.

In marriage, we contract through mutual understanding to accept the differences between ourselves and our mates. It is precisely those differences that make our spouses appealing to us. Part of the idea of marriage is to "move away" from the home environment to create a different intersection of in-laws. Difference is inevitable among the various families of the human community. The very worst strategy is avoidance, because this breeds distrust based on ignorance. Better to embrace our spiritual relatives and blend our inherited strengths and liabilities.



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## Reflections on the Millenium

On May 5, 1998 the National Council of Synagogues and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs met in Baltimore and issued a joint statement entitled "Reflections on the Millennium." The co-chairs, Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore and Rabbi Mordecai Waxman, President of the National Council of Synagogues began the Consultation in 1987 as a follow-up to the meeting in Miami between Pope John Paul II and leaders of American Jewry. The meeting in Baltimore discussed a range of social issues of common concern. It took up as well the Holy See's recent statement, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, discussing ways in which its mandate for joint historical studies and for holocaust programs in Catholic education could be implemented both nationally and on the local, diocesan levels. The following is the statement: The turn of the millennium in the year 2000 is increasing the focus of social and religious currents in virtually every facet of contemporary culture. From the most secular to the most religiously serious, themes of introspection, inter-group reconciliation, and idealistic aspirations for peace, justice and environmental concern are manifest, and are to be encouraged. We speak as Jews and Christians who have benefited from the dialogue that has marked the last thirty years since the Second Vatican Council. We speak at the end of a Century that Pope John Paul II has called "the Century of the Shoah." Because of our dialogue and commitment to continuing it, we can look forward to the next century with greater hope and confidence than might have been thought possible just a generation ago. We speak as religious leaders of our communities, rabbis, bishops, clergy and lay leaders dedicated to the path of reconciliation between our peoples. We note the expressions of *teshuvah* (repentance) that have been uttered by Conferences of Catholic Bishops in Europe with regard to the Holocaust and the too often tragic centuries that went before it, as well as the recent statement by the Holy See, *We Remember: Reflections on the Shoah*. We also note the

consistent teaching of the Holy See since the Second Vatican Council acknowledging the permanent validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people. In place of past efforts of religious groups to proselytize one another, we share a mutual respect for our two faith traditions, each of which, in the words of Pope John Paul II, "carry with them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God." We are united in our concern to overcome the spread of religious indifference. This represents "one of the outstanding phenomena of our times, especially in the Euro-American culture. Many people live as if God did not exist." We remain committed to work together to bring a positive collective image of religious affiliation to the American public. In this regard, we plan to assess the portrayal of the religious community in the secular media and in other modes of contemporary communication. In this country, blessed with an ongoing dialogue between Catholics and Jews of depth and substance, we have the opportunity to apply our institutional and academic resources to the task it mandates to look anew at the long history our peoples share, and to seek by joint studies a healing of memory in order to frame a common understanding upon which to base educational programming for future generations. While much work remains to be done in this regard, we note as well that a solid beginning has been made since the Second Vatican Council, a record of achievement which offers hope for further progress toward mutual understanding. At the end of century which has seen in the Shoah the ultimate form of dehumanization of a whole people, we wish to affirm and proclaim together the sacredness of the human person. Joint reflection on our Shared Scripture, in particular the Creation accounts of Genesis, teach us that humanity is made in the image of God. Here, we would recommend to dialogue groups around the country two documents issued by the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee. These documents draw out for consideration shared themes drawn from our common understanding of Creation. The first, *On the Sanctity of Marriage and the Family* was issued in

Jerusalem in 1994. The second, *Care for the Environment: A Religious Act* was issued in Rome in 1998. Together, these statements can enrich local events related to the millennium. The year 2000 has been proclaimed by the Catholic Church as a Jubilee Year. The Hebrew Scriptures in Leviticus 25 define the meaning of the Jubilee. Both in this chapter of the Bible and in Papal reflections upon this theme, one can see a three-fold obligation placed on the People of God as a mandate for national reflection. These obligations have significance, we believe, not only for Catholics and Jews working together in joint study and action but also for the renewal of our American society as a whole.

1. **The Liberation of Slaves - Human Liberation.** Consideration of this theme can involve local communities in confronting the inhuman conditions of bigotry, exploitation and violence that enslave such a large part of America's inhabitants to this day, and in planning and implementing educational programs and social activities to address the problems jointly studied.
2. **Return of Property - Economic Liberation.** This legislation (Lev. 25:13) was revolutionary in introducing moral guidance into economics. It sought to prevent the permanent accumulation of land in the hands of the few, to alleviate poverty, and to give people another chance for achieving economic fulfillment. Its underlying principles challenge our discussions today with regard to welfare, tax reform and other issues within our country.
3. **Resting the Land - Ecological Liberation.** Respect for the land and the seas can be stressed here, as well as humanity's role as a steward. (Genesis 2:15) responsible to God for nurturing and caring for all forms of life. Finally, as we approach the millenium, we can develop channels to work together to witness to that which is shared in our spiritual heritage. Not only do we bring to bear on the profound problems our day the riches of our separate yet related traditions, but we work together to prepare the way for the coming of the Reign ("kingdom") of God, for which we both pray, as a task of **Tikkun Olam** - ("perfecting or "repairing" the world).

## United Church of Canada Statement

Toronto, June 3 (JTA)

Canada's largest Protestant denomination has called upon its members to stop attempting to convert Jews to Christianity and to recognize that Christianity is neither superior to nor a replacement for Judaism. "Christianity does not supersede Judaism," said the Reverend Bill Phipps, moderator of the

United Church of Canada, which claims more than 700,000 members. The call is contained in a report, "Bearing Faithful Witness: United Church-Jewish Relations Today," which must still be debated and approved within the church. It acknowledges the close links between the two religions and calls upon churches to stop interpreting scripture in ways that might lead to anti-

Semitism. Jewish officials here are praising the report. It "is deserving of the highest of accolades," said Rabbi Reuven Bulka, chairman of the Religious and Interreligious Affairs Committee of the Canadian Jewish Congress. The report "opens up, in terms of honesty, a whole new chapter in interreligious relations," Bulka said. "This is the way to redress the past."

### Editorial

Paul Filben



Children often have a more perceptive view of "family" than their parents and other adults. From "Children's Letters to God", Nan writes: "Dear God: I bet it's very hard for You to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in our family and I can never do it." Many of us would like to believe that the "family" is a kind of one-dimensional reality - and of course, normal. The family, we believe, provides comfort, love, and support and is always dependable. The double-edged reality is that the family sometimes lives up to the sentimental image we create, but often it is apparent that the family is simply a microcosm, made up of good and evil. *It seems to me* we are, in all of our complexities, about as good and bad as each other. Throughout our human history there are examples of courage, unselfishness, and kindness. Conversely, there is evidence that humans are capable of unspeakable evil. There is much talk today about the

so-called "good old days." Days when there was no such thing as alcoholism, drug abuse, physical and sexual abuse and neglect. No pressures were exerted by anyone and the family provided all the support that we have imagined to be the norm. *Nostalgia* is the word we use to describe these somewhat pleasant, if not euphoric, memories. The facts, however, do not seem to bear this out. There were it seems, many secrets that family members kept bottled up within the family unit. In families we often live in close proximity to people that we might not otherwise want to talk to at all. Interestingly, the word *nostalgia* comes from the Greek, *nostos*, to return home + *algos*, a pain. Perhaps this explains why family members feel a need to come home for the holidays to get that sense of connectedness while at the same time, seeking to avoid the painful memories of past relationships. A little togetherness often goes a long way. The so-called "kids with guns" stories in Arkansas, Pennsylvania, Oregon, etc., have sparked nationwide debate about family life. The ongoing saga of the

Starr investigation reads like softcore pornography passed off as journalism. We would like to come up with simplistic answers to complex problems so that we can "feel good" about having addressed the problem and found a solution. H. L. Mencken said that "for every complex problem there is a solution that is quick, simple and wrong." An examination of the facts of the families of yesteryear and any year, seems to indicate that there is every reason to believe that families from any time period have possessed both virtue and wickedness. We are faithful and undependable. We make good decisions and we make poor decisions. We live in an imperfect world that is neither all black nor all white. Diversity is not something to be overcome. Hopefully we can learn something from one another in continuing dialogue and one day see the beauty in the myriad colors of the rainbow. Eugene wrote his letter to God as follows: "Dear God: I didn't think orange went with purple until I saw the sunset you made on Tuesday. That was cool!" Eugene

## National Workshop on Christian-Jewish Relations

The Program for the 1999 National Workshop on Jewish-Christian Relations has been announced. The Program will take place in Houston, Texas from October 24 -27, 1999. The theme will be "FROM RECOGNITION TO RECONCILIATION: LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD AT THE MILLENNIUM." The preliminary program has Cardinal Edward Cassidy delivering the Keynote Address.

Plenary sessions include the following: "Past and Future Readings of Scripture", Historical Memory: "Reckoning and Healing", "Jewish Understanding of Christianity" - "The Other as a Person of God: Toward Recognition and Reconciliation with Other Religious Traditions" and "Religion and the World": Visions for the Future." The meeting will be held at the Adams Mark Hotel in Houston.

Anyone interested in knowing more about this conference may contact us at 334-342-9384 for further details. Our plans are to attend as usual and we would like to have a good representation of Mobile area people in Houston. Please make a note of the dates and let us hear from you if you are interested in attending. We will keep you informed regarding speakers and other news in future issues.



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The Mobile Dialogue

Your gift of \$10.00 or more will help us continue to produce this newsletter. Thanks for your support!

## A Prayer of Thanks

The following was sent to us recently from a friend in who states that it was delivered at the conclusion of a Bat Mitzvah earlier this summer. We do not know the source of this prayer but thought it appropriate to include as part of this edition of the newsletter.

"Thank you God of Eternity for the great wonder of your creation, for the earth, the stars, the sun and the moon, and the beauty of your universe with which in your great kindness you have blessed me. Thank you for granting me life, in its richness, for its brilliant moments of joy which allows me to soar as the birds, and even for its anguish and pain, which somehow seem to precipitate inner growth and change. For all these things, God, I am grateful. But thank you, especially, God, in your abundant love for having chosen to make me a human being, blessed, among all the fruits of your creation, with a mind to reason and seek truth and justice; with a soul

which can feel pain, ecstasy and compassion, and has the freedom to choose life and goodness over cruelty and destruction; and with a heart which can love and care and reach out to touch the hearts of my brothers and sisters as together we walk through the years of our lives."



### Schedule

The schedule for the 1998-99 Dialogue year is presently being worked on and details will be forthcoming as soon as we can get confirmations from some of the illustrious (and therefore, busy) speakers we have contacted. Initial discussions are underway with Professor Amy-Jill Levine, Carpenter Profes-

sor of New Testament Studies and Director of the Carpenter Program in Religion, Gender and Sexuality at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Plans are also in the offing for a special program for commemorating the victims of the Shoah.

Because of scheduling problems, we are at the mercy of many speakers who are now booking as much as eighteen to twenty-four months in advance. As soon as we can finalize details and schedules however, we will let you know.

We look forward to the coming year and because of the upcoming 25th Anniversary of the Mobile Dialogue, we are finding it necessary to make plans as suggested above, far in advance. As always, we are indebted to you for your faithfulness in attending these events and making Mobile the Dialogue of record. We also appreciate your continued financial support. Happy Summer! Peace! Shalom!