



In Joy and Hope

by

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The Holocaust – a memory or a reality today?

As a society, we have become accustomed to violence. If I recall correctly, it began during the Vietnam War when that war was not only fought in a distant Asian country, but the events of each day became a regular feature of the evening news as we ate supper. The civil rights struggles and protest movements of the sixties escalated our passion for violence. So many movies and videos today are successful in proportion to the violence which is graphically shown.

The recent events in Los Angeles, as well as in our own community and in cities throughout our country, revealed once again the potential which we as human beings have to inflict violence on others. The tragedy of a society caught up so often in violence could well take violence for granted. That is why it is good that we stop on occasion to reflect on human behavior and our penchant for violence.

The Holocaust - the ultimate violence

Though we are shocked by the violence which plagues our society today and infiltrates so many of our lives and communities, we need to reflect on the violence which has been a part of our history as a human race, especially the violence which has taken place in our own lifetime. The ultimate violence which has characterized the present century is an event which we call "the Holocaust." Fifty years ago, six million Jews and three million people of other faiths and beliefs were exterminated. History has no record of any greater violence perpetrated by human beings toward one another.

The Holocaust was the deliberate attempt fifty years ago to exterminate the Jewish community in Europe. In 1989, Pope John Paul II called the Holocaust "a shame for humanity, the planned barbarism which was unleashed against the Jewish people ... who were subjected to deprivations and brutalities that are almost indescribable. Persecuted at first through measures designed to harass and discriminate, they were ultimately to die by the millions in extermination camps." And the reason for this ultimate violence was because people were Jews. The Holocaust will forever be remembered as the tragic consequences of racism.

Why is the Holocaust so important?

The Holocaust is important not only because it happened, but because roots and cause continue to exist today. Anti-Semitic feelings and attitudes are unfortunately spreading and experiencing a new resurgence. Last August, Pope John Paul II said, "We must teach consciences to consider anti-Semitism, and all forms of racism, as sins against God and humanity."

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History does not reveal the best relationship between Christians and Jews. Christians and Jews share much in common. Both are called to witness to the One God of Israel and to proclaim God's Kingdom to the world. As Christians, we have failed at times in our respect for and our appreciation of the Jewish people. As Pope John Paul II states in a letter to the President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1987, "There is no doubt that the sufferings endured by the Jews are also for the Catholic Church a motive of sincere sorrow, especially when one thinks of the indifference and sometimes resentment which, in particular historical circumstances, have divided Jews and Christians. Indeed this evokes in us still firmer resolutions to cooperate for justice and true peace."

A challenge to the Catholic community

Vatican II challenged the whole church to study the vast treasure made up by the common spiritual patrimony which unites us with Abraham's stock so that we can make a greater commitment to faith and action. We must meet the challenge of Pope John Paul II to "find ways for Christians and Jews to get to know one another better, to engage in dialogue, to cooperate intensely in the sphere of human rights, religious education and the fight against anti-Semitism."

On Sunday, May 24th at 7:30 p.m., St. James Cathedral will host an unprecedented service called "Shoah: A Catholic Response to the Holocaust." The purpose of the service is to remind Catholics, other Christians and people of all faiths that they must stand together in decrying racism, bigotry, intolerance and anti-Semitism. This service will bring people together from the Jewish and Catholic communities in Western Washington.

The service will conclude with the recitation of an inscription from a cellar wall where Jews hid from the Nazis: "I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. I believe in love even when not feeling it. I believe in God even when He is silent."

The violence of today's society has deep roots fed by a racism which denies the dignity of every human being made in the image of God. We cannot allow ourselves or our world to forget what racism can do to the human race. The Holocaust is a reality we must never forget. May God's grace and peace be yours.