

Cardinal Keeler  
Interview  
February 7, 2001

Sound guy: That's a minus 18 db reference tone. Program is "Desperate Hours." Interview with Cardinal Keeler, K-E-E-L-E-R. Camera is running at 24 frames, sound is 30 non-drop frames. Camera role 77, sound role 77. February 7, 01. Baltimore, MD.

(People talk in background for a minute)

Dennis Boni: And, marker please.

Assistant Camera: Marker.

D: Good go right ahead folks.

Michael: You were one of the youngest officials at the council. Tell us a bit, the Vatican council, tell us a little bit about the Vatican council.

Cardinal Keeler: Well, one of the things that strikes me as I think back across the years, it was as though our church had gone on retreat. It was something that the press didn't catch, but those of us who participated every day saw it as a richly spiritual experience. The morning, in the morning the Bishops came and would pray privately at the side altar on their knees before they would go to their places. And then each day the session formally began with a celebration of the Eucharist. And then an ancient prayer in which they placed themselves in God's presence and asked for the wisdom to make decisions in the light of what was right without any regard for what human opinion or judgement might be and then the discussions would begin.

M: Tell us, especially for non-Catholics, what is a Vatican council?

K: Our faith is that Jesus founded the church by beginning, beginning by calling together the apostles, the 12, who became his principal witnesses. When he spoke publicly in parables he spoke privately to explain the parables to Peter and the others. And at the end of his life as in fact the eve of his death he celebrated, we believe, the Eucharist, and gave them the job of continuing that celebration in memory of him. Memory of his death and ri, it also became memory of his rising. Then, before he ascended into heaven, he gave Peter and the others the commission to preach the gospel to every land. And we believe that what happens in an Ecumenical council is what happened in the council of Jerusalem as described in the 15th chapter in the acts of the apostles when they all gathered together to look at an issue that had arisen in a transition from their observance of the Jewish law, the Mosaic law, to the admission of Non-Jews, of gentiles to the church and the new questions that arose there. And they made authoritative decisions regarding this. That's what we say when all of them or most of them gather together with a sense of teaching or offering guidance to the whole church. That's a continuation of the mission that Jesus gave to them in the beginning.

M: What were the issues that brought together the Vatican council?

K: The main thing seems to have been the insight of Pope John the 23rd. That it was time for the church to take a look at today's world. In his initial talk he said we must approach this world today without fear. That we need to begin to build bridges to other Christian churches and to other world religions for the sake of things we hold in common. And we need to be able to restate the ancient teachings of the church in a way that people of this age can understand them better.

M: You were a very young man and you were clearly not a Cardinal at that time. What was your role at Vatican council 2?

K: My background was in..

M: If I could just interrupt you for one second, Sir, if occasionally you can pretend I never asked you a question and repeat the question in your answer that would be helpful.

K: O.K. Right.

M: Cause we're not gonna use me at all.

K: During the council I was told by my bishop, "Be useful." And the first usefulness that came along was an assignment by the conference of bishops of the United States to serve on a panel that met each day with the English speaking press. It was a wonderful educational experience for me because I saw the reporters as people who were swimming in a strange sea. They reported on wars and obituaries and politics but they had never ever covered something that had the religious spiritual liturgical biblical dimensions that the council brought up. So it was, it was trying to build some bridges between the church and the media. For me it was a great educational experience. After the first period of the council several of us were invited by then archbishop John Crowe of Philadelphia, was an undersecretary of the council, to serve as notetakers in the Latin talks and each day to sunrise all the talks that were given in the morning into a bulletin that was distributed to the bishops by late afternoon. To all English speaking bishops that were interested. I think by the end of the week people from every country where English was spoken were subscribing to our service.

M: What were your impressions of the holy father?

K: Well there were actually two holy fathers, two Popes we dealt with during Vatican 2. Pope John the 23rd convened the council and I remember vividly a couple of meetings with him in the course of the council. One personally with the, with the bishop of the diaspora who I accompanied and then one that he had with the experts.

M: We're gonna have to cut for the..

V: Just a second

(Tape stops and restarts)

(People talk in background for a few seconds)

V: And..

SG: Role sound.

K: I remember talking about Pope John the 23rd and his, one of the things I remember vividly about him was a, was an audience that we went to already he, he knew that he had the cancer that would take his life. And he spoke to a number of us at a general audience in which he said, "I'm not going to see from here the end of the council but I've got my bags packed." And it was very serene about what the future would be. He said, "The holy spirit is in charge of the work of the council and I have no concern about it's good outcome." Then he was exceeded by Pope Paul the 6th who persuade every one of the initiatives that had been opened up in the first session. There had been some concerns that certain directions would not be followed but actually Paul the 6th followed them through. One of the notable ones that I remember so vividly was one presented by Cardinal Augustan Baya, a German scripture scholar, who had been the confessor and very close to Pope Pious the 12th, made a Cardinal by Pope John the 23rd and put in charge of relations with other Christian churches and with the Jewish people. And he said that Pope John the 23rd had very much wished to have presented to the council a document that would end the use of anybody of Christian history, of the Bible, the Christian scriptures for Anti-Semitic purposes. He recalled what had happened in Nazi Germany and how through Hitler's propaganda many had been duped and that Christian saints had been used out of context in a way to cause the great suffering to the Jewish people and the effort to eliminate them and the death of millions of them and said this must never happen again. And Pope John wished the council to find a language to help our church to construct a path that would be positive in relations to the Jewish people.

M: Tell us a little bit about the content of Nostritate.

K: The document that Cardinal Baya introduced evolved through further periods of the council until finally it became a document known as Nostra a tatay. The conciliar declaration on the relationship between the Catholic church and other religions, world religions. Nostra a tatay literally means "In our day", "In our time" and the council saw that in our time we need to enter into a new kind of relationship with the religions of the world. In the document, in it's 3rd chapter it talks about the relationship with the Jewish people and notes how much we share with them in terms of spiritual patrimony. It speaks of the scriptures, of the Hebrew scriptures, the beginning, the Torah, the prophets, the psalms, the wisdom literature, that is part of a common heritage and the document says can be the basis of discussions for deeper mutual understanding and respect. It speaks also of the fact that Jesus was, as the apostle Paul had written according to the flesh, Jewish and that his mother, his relatives, his first followers, the apostles, were all Jewish and that we had to understand, we should understand the life, the

deeds, the words of Jesus in the context of his Jewish background. And therefore when you look at events such as the crucifixion to remember that and that, it looked at the specific issue that had been raised because especially in Nazi propaganda evidently some of the words, regard, with respect to the death of Christ were taken out of context from the scriptures and they wanted, the council wanted to make it very very clear that the Jewish people of that day and the Jewish people of other periods of history should not be accused of being responsible for the death of Christ because our teaching is that we are all responsible, it's the sins of everybody and that goes back to the council of Trent of the 16th Century.

M: What was its impact in the Roman-Catholic church?

K: The impact of this, of the document, *Nostra aetate* in our church has been extraordinary and far reaching. I think that many of our own people do not realize how thorough the revision of the liturgy has been so far, although I'm hopeful that we can still take some additional steps, but already both the choice of readings for liturgy and the teaching in our Universities and seminaries has taken this into account. And it's also reached the parish level and the parish school level. We've had several dissertations that have looked at Catacombs texts since the period of the council and they've borne witness to our remarkable evolution towards a formal teaching now of positive attitudes of Jews and Judaism at every level.

M: How much

D: Excuse me we need to reload.

(Tape stops and restarts)

SG: Go to camera role 78, 78 is up.

(People talk in background for a few minutes)

D: O.K. Let's roll sound please. And, marker please.

SG: O.K. Marker.

M: How much of the spirit of Pope John the 23rd pervades the document and also pervades what happened in Eptaphinal?

K: Pope John the 23rd had a vision and it was very strongly and forcefully articulated by Cardinal Baya presenting the document to the council. It was a vision that said we must come out of this in a positive way but it actually was the work of all the people who participated in the council and I'm very happy that my predecessor here in Baltimore Cardinal Lawrence Sheehan was one of the major advocates of the document as he was also on the document for religious liberty. And others from the states were extremely supportive in speaking out of experience with respect to both of these documents which I think have real relevance to the relationship between the church and the Jewish people.

V: Excuse me, we have a technical problem. It will just take us a second.

(People talk in background for a minute)

K: And and France who's name was Morella, he's now became in time a Cardinal. And when the Pope's closing words were give my best wishes not to the Nuncio but to the cook.

(People laugh)

(People talk for a minute)

K: After the Cardinal's colors, that the title existed long before, and you know too probably that the Yamaka is borrowed from our skull cap that I think the Jewish men wore bigger caps until they saw the clergy wearing this to cover their big taucher and then that's a copy. The most historic thing I have on right now is this cross which was John Carroll's the first Catholic bishop in the United States. This goes back to 1790. His diasis was 13 states plus the NW territories plus in the Louisiana Purchase we had a big responsibility.

(People talk in the background)

M: What about the Vatican 2?

K: Well I think the issues that we got into most were on ecunamism justice and peace and this issue the Nostra a tate and the religious freedom issues. Those were the ones that were our people intervned, they spoke on many other topics but that's where I think our contribution was greatest. Not in the theoretical but theological documents. Although we had people serving on the commissions. Cardinal John Wright, well at that time he was bishop John Wright of Pittsburgh made extraordinary contributions in the theological area. And, let's see someone else, Cardinal Terradin, I believe, he wasn't Cardinal then he was Archbishop of Detroit also made some strong theological contributions.

V: Michael I just want to ask him a question while sound is rolling. O.K.

(Noises in background for a minute)

D: O.K. We are rolling with speed. O.K. Marker please.

AC: Marker.

D: Great.

M: I guess all of us have a nudges of the role of Pope John Paul the 2nd and his journey to Jerusalem. How much has Pope John Paul the 2nd continued this transformation of the Roman Catholic church?

K: Pope John Paul the 2nd has really made come alive the words of the council Nostra a tatay. From the time he made his first visit to Auschwitz and Burkenau after he was elected Pope and stood in silence there in tribute to the Jews who had been put to death in the extermination camp through countless talks just about every place he's traveled he's looked for an opportunity to meet with Jewish leaders and to apply for the benefit of the many Catholics who are watching the teaching of Notra a tatay. Of the doc, considered document in our day. I think his trip to the holy land was the moment of the greatest teaching moment. It struck me that when he was at Yad Vashem in a service there which I watched on television was in Jerusalem in the time that that was being telecast simultaneously around the world and people, Catholic people in Poland were hearing the lesson he was uttering there. Even more dramatically then when he had visited Poland himself. It was an enormous teaching moment for our church and when he placed with his trembling hand that letter in the western wall in which he asked God's pardon for what had been done to Jewish people by Christians through the ages he sent a message not only to God but to many millions around the world that is indelible.

M: Can we talk for a moment about the document you remember? Tell us about it's importance.

K: At the time of the, what I would call a serious misunderstanding, about Pope John Paul's meeting with Chancellor Waldheim of Austria in '87 as a follow up on that in order to reopen the communication links between the Catholic church and the world Jewish community was a meeting in Rome, and at that meeting, I participated in it representing bishops from the United States we were preparing at that time for the Pope's visit which would include a meeting with American Jewish leaders at Miami. At that time there was reflection in our discussions on the Holocaust. And on what was behind it and on what it did and on Catholics and Jews together in the statement agreed that the Holocaust was a terrible terrible event in history which saw the extermination of so many Jews, the effort of the Nazis, was so acknowledged that the Nazi approach was essentially anti-religious in that many Catholics also had died as victims of the Holocaust. And at that time Cardinal Willabraums on the part of the holy spirit promised that there would be a study done on the Holocaust and it's historic roots by the Catholic church. Subsequent meetings took place of the international liaison committee in Prague, one of them took place here in Baltimore in '92, Prague was 1990, Jerusalem 1994 in which, it was really unique. For the first time I think in history the holy sea was seeking information from other people about a document that was essentially a document internally for the Catholic church. And what happened though as we remember came nearer to publication was that a number of national conference of bishops, national conferences of bishops made statements that were very moving. Looking at the particular people in their own lands so Germany, France, we in the United States made a number of statements at committee level, I know I as chair of our committee on ecumenical religious affairs back at the time of the anniversary of the Crystalnot had issued a statement looking back. So by the time the document was ready there had already been a number of things happening around the world and the holy sea sought to prepare a document that would be for

worldwide consumption and issued it in March of, I think it was '98 and it stated general principles, it spoke about Christian anti-Judaism that contributed in a small measure to the setting up of the scene in which the Holocaust took place.

M: Do you have any personal recollections of Pope John the 23rd?

K: Yes. My bishop visited, my Bishop visited Rome in 1959 for his regular adliminum visit he was the Bishop Leach of Harrisburg and brought me along for his private meeting with the Pope. Now he was in with Pope John the 23rd for maybe 15, 20 minutes and then I was brought into the meeting and there's posing for pictures, Pope John gave me a gift and then he poked me in the ribs and whispered something in my ear he said, "This is for you alone." And I've always kept that as a secret between him and me. It was a very beautiful little thought. Later I met him again when our class at the Casa sanami at Roma graduate house class prepared to return to the States we had a, an audience with him and it was so funny because he'd start to talk about one topic, finish, start to stand up and say, "Oh, I just remembered this, I have to tell you something else" and it would, he would go on like that for maybe 15, 20 minutes with a lot of enthusiasm, inner enthusiasm about what he was saying.

M: What special qualities did he, did being in his presence..?

(Someone coughs)

K: A very warm person. Easy to talk to, I had that feeling. But I spent much more time with the present Pope, Pope John Paul the 2nd so I can talk much more readily about that.

M: Let me ask the very same question.

K: Pope John Paul 2nd is a person who I found is very easy to talk to and each time he asked questions he listens, makes an occasional comment but seems to be absorbing all kinds of information and at the same time is able to make, and wants to make witty comments that has everybody laughing as he udders them. I remember..

M: In what language?

K: In English. The first time I really had supper with him right before he came to the States in '87 and somebody at the table started speaking Italian and I went into Italian and I was reminded by the priest sitting next to me "No, no speak English, speak English, the Holy Father wants to be practicing and hearing English before he goes to the States next week." But we always speak English when we're with him.

M: Now in the long history of Christian - Jewish relations would it be fair to characterize this as probably the most successful and warmest period?

K: I don't think there's any question but that we are living now through the

most positive period of Christian - Jewish relations. I see this as especially true in the United States where since '87 we've had regular dialog with the National Jewish Rabbinical and Cocommunal Organizations that has, the ones that are related to the movement, Orthodox conservative and reform that have been very constructive, very positive and we've also had individual conversations with organizations that represent a considerable number of Jewish people and interests. They, they've been generally positive.

M: Now would you say this is the embodiment of the vision that Pope John the 23rd..?

K: I, I was, this really makes what Pope John the 23rd talked about and dreamed of and what Vatican 2 put into it's declaration, it makes it come alive. When we met in Prague in 1990 with the representatives of the International Jewish committee for innerreligious consolations educate and the Catholics representing the Holy Sea's commission of religious relations with the Jews it was the Jewish representatives that said put in the document that we publish that the example being given in the United States, especially in our Catholic schools is something that the whole world ought to take note of and imitate.

M: Anything else that we haven't asked you that you want to add?

K: I think, well this is something that I see and going way back to visits to Poland and even to that meeting in 1987 the need for the healing of memories is very important. When we visited Poland and I went with a group in which there were 20 Jewish leaders and 6 Catholic leaders and we spent several days in Poland meeting with Polish Catholic and Jewish leaders and Stanislov Krayevsky the scholar in Warsaw said he saw one big problem and that is that most of the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust who had lived in Poland during those terrible years were in the United States and most of the survivors who lived in Poland were Catholic Poles and they had two different sets of memories that they nourished apart from each other and had been in conversation and we need to get people together to heal memories. On that trip we stopped at Auschwitz and Burkenau and at Auschwitz we met a Catholic survivor from the States who heard we were out at the camp and he came out just to visit then and when he met the Jewish, there were two Jewish survivors in our group, one of them had been rescued by a Catholic at the camp and that Catholic turned out to be a friend of the survivor, of the Catholic survivor and they fell in each other's arms weeping. And I think this is a story that has been repeated many times as people discover that both Jews and Catholics suffered very horribly especially in Poland in the Holocaust. O.K.

V: Well, are we going to ask any questions about Pope John's activities when he was Papa Roncalli in Turkey?

K: I don't really know anything except, you know, I saw, I visited, in 1963 we visited Istanbul on the way to the Holy Land and had a meal in his house and saw the changes he had made when he was apostolic delegate in Turkey. But I don't know anything else about that particular period.



V: Were the nuns carrying papers?

K: No, but here's something I did hear to something that may be relevant, the Holy Sea had evidently, as Pious the 12th had evidently sent out instructions to be as helpful as you can. I know in Rome the rectors of the religious houses were convened in the Vatican and told give shelter to Jews, do whatever you can, feed them, rescue them, so that and I always understand that what later Papa Roncalli, Archbishop Roncalli did in Istanbul he did because his superiors in Rome said this is something you ought to be about. I know that here in the United States our Bishop's conference made some very strong statements in the 40's about what was going in Germany in that evidently was encouraged by the Holy Sea.

V: O.K.

K: O.K. Thank you.

V: Can we just have everyone still for 30 seconds. We need to record the room tone.

V: O.K.

K: You didn't make us hold our breath anyway.

(People talk in background about getting photographs)