

DR. EUGENE FISCHER

**Filmed in Washington, D.C.
January 9, 2001**

Fis: My name is Eugene Fisher. I work for the national conference of Catholic Bishops in Catholic Jewish Relations. I've been there going on 24 years now, since 1977.

M: [Asks question re Roncalli.]

Fi: He was supposed to be an interim pope. Because he was a little older, they thought they would take a break between the long reign of Pious XII and the next one. They sometimes do that. And he wasn't just an interim pope. He hit the ground running as it were and just kept going until he had brought about the Second Vatican Council which when he first announced it to his inner circle thought it was just absolutely the craziest idea they had ever heard in 400 years. That's the time since the last council. But he pursued it. One of the advantages of being Pope is you can move forward on ideas like that, even against the skeptical. And that changed the Church, and to some extent changed the world.

Dr. Eugene Fischer: An Ecumenical Council of the Church is a gathering of all the world bishops together to decide for weighty matters usually on faith **and** morals. The last one had been four hundred years earlier than the second Vatican council in the sixteenth century at the time of the Protestant reformation.

Michael: And what was the um, were the issues the Vatican council dealt with?

F: Essentially the second Vatican Council dealt with the issues raised to Church and society in the relationship between Church and society that have been raised by the age of the enlightenment, modernism, by the um, creation and development of the modern nation states, by the whole change in the way human society was organized into nations and the implementations of technology for moving people around and how all of this impacted the life of the Church and the role of the Church in the world. This was a council that was called after two World Wars had devastated the world. It was a council that in the Pope's mind should bring about re-engagement in the sense of the Church in and with history at a more active basis than it had in the past, there was a very strong feeling that the church had in a sense, not become to spiritual but had lost touch with how the moral implications for society of the Church's teaching needed to be worked through by all Catholics on all levels, layette and clergy alike.

M: How did the um, Church's teaching of the Jews fit into all of this?

F: It in some extent is a litmus test. The teaching of the Church on the Jews is right in the middle of all of these issues. It has implications for the Church's understanding of it's

self, its the people of God; in continuity with the history of Israel. Therefore, with human history. It has implications of our understanding of Jesus. By the time of the second Vatican Council, it could not be presumed for example; that people had a clear understanding that Jesus was Jewish. In the Council statement on the Jews, *Nostra Tate*, fifteen sentences in Latin. They devoted one of those entirely to stating that Jesus reminding Catholics that Jesus was a Jew. His mother was a Jew. The Apostles were Jews, and that the Christian proclamation as it evolved, evolved as a Jewish proclamation of by those first generation of Christians, pretty much all of whom were Jews.

M: What was the impact of *Nostra Tate* on Christian-Jewish, Catholic-Jewish relations?

F: Well nothing less than revolutionary. Uh, and it was intended to be revolutionary. Uh, the council really changed what had been the accepted normal understanding of Jews and Judaism by Christians since practically the second century. Ah, and they did that consciously. This was the only document of the council that does not refer or site in any way any of the teachings of the fathers of the Church. They went right back to the New Testament. They went right back to St. Paul. Which is earlier even than the Gospels. And, re-founded the Christian understanding of Judaism, on that basis in a positive way. thus, opening up what they hoped for and what we have enjoyed in the sense in the last thirty years, is a dialogue of what they called mutual esteem - between the Church and the Jewish people. It is not so much a dialogue between *isms*, Judaism and Christianity. It's a dialogue between the community of God, of Christians and the community of God, of Jews. And, that's exactly what they focus on and wanted to achieve. After two millennia of monologues to bring about a dialogue, a real engagement of the people who's faith derives from the faith of Abraham.

M: How central was Pope John XXIII leadership to this effort?

F: Oh absolutely. In 1961 with the Council . . .

M: Did I ask you to somehow repeat . . . ?

F: Right, you mentioned that.

M: Repeat the question and you answer you know, somewhat . . .

F: Uh hum. Pope John XXIII's influence on the course of the Council's consideration of uh, it's re-evaluation of Jews and Judaism, from a church's point of view, was absolutely crucial. Uh, the Pope met in 1961 before the Council uh, with a French historian. A Jewish historian - Jules Isaac, how had a theory that he, Isaac had evolved and worked on, during the holocaust itself, while he was in hiding. Had he had traced back negative teachings about Jews and Judaism all the way back through the history of Christian teaching, and showed very conclusively how the early fathers of the Church began almost systematically to introduce misunderstandings of what the New Testament was saying, and to Christian teaching, uh in order to provide an apologetic on the one hand for the, for Christianity over against Jewish. And pagan objections towards Christianity. In that

apologetic, on the other hand, already by the fourth century had evolved into a very negative polemic against Judaism that he very aptly called the teaching of contempt. Pope John XXIII listened very carefully. And after the audience turned to the man who was his spiritual advisor and mentor in many ways, Cardinal Augustine Vega - a Jesuit, German. A brilliant biblical scholar. Um, and said "We need in the council a statement on the Jews and on Judaism. We need to address this, we need to change this." And they was given that task along with the equally important task of humanism. Of working out a statement that would move the Church toward unity with other Christians.

M: So the Pope's leadership itself was the decisive in shaping that the issue come . . .

F: Yeah, the issue, the issue of the relationship with Jews came before the Council precisely because Pope John XXIII clearly saw he wanted it, and moved that agenda forward very aggressively - against I might add, a lot of opposition, both within the curia and from bishops. For example bishops from the eastern churches who were minorities living under Islam were very nervous about a statement on the Jews for very understandable reasons. Minorities tend to be nervous groups, and they really didn't want a statement on the Jews. Cardinal Baya's response again at the urging of the Pope, and I'm sure with the Pope's direct knowledge was to expand *Nostra Tate*, which means "in our time," or as some Jews would put it "it's about time," and to expand that into taking into account all the world's religions. The major world religions. There's a section on Islam that is very positive. There's a section on Buddhism and Hinduism, even on native religions, and other religions in general. It's a very expansive statement. *Nostra Tate's* consideration of the Jews was the start of all of those - those were added to it in response to these real concerns of bishops from other areas in the world.

M: What if the . . .

F: (Cough)

M: . . . characterize *Nostra Tate* in some ways as a response to the Holocaust?

F: Yes that would be quite fair. In 1974, in fact in the guidelines to implement *Nostra Tate* put out by the Holy Seas Commission For Religious Relations with the Jews, their introductory paragraphs admit that was the background against which the consideration was made. And, that certainly was the history of it. It was raised as they say by Jules Isaac, a survivor, who had come to the Pope how was very knowledgeable about what went on because he participated in helping Jews in Turkey. And that was really the, the background. It's very interesting that in the course of the debates in the council the key groups of bishops that moved it forward were the American bishops because we have had such good relationships actually with Jews all during American history, cause we're all fellow immigrants, and we came across in steerage in boats together, and hit New York Harbor together and ended up in the same urban ghettos. But also the German bishops were very influential and the French bishops were very strong and vocal and influential. Those three groups of bishops, all of whom had different experiences during the war and different levels of relationships with Jews during the war, but all of whom had very

strong motivations to move that agenda forward. Um, they were going to do it, and um they did do it. But the American bishops for example, went into the Council knowing that it was on the agenda and that it was one of three things they wanted to come back with. The other two were statement of religious liberty , which was mostly drafted by an American - John Courtney Murray out of humanism, because we have learned as a church how to live in a religiously free society, and to prosper, here in America. This in a sense was a gift back to Europe where the Church had much more difficulty. The explanation for that goes into the difference between the French and the American Revolution. The American Revolution was good for the Church. The French Revolution, if you were in the Church and having your lands confiscated and your nuns raped, and your churches burned was not a good experience. So the Church resisted the enlightenment for some centuries after the French Revolution precisely because if it had not been, the whole forces on enlightenment and secularism in Europe were forces that were, that sought to really destroy the Church in a lot of ways. Were as in America those same enlightened ideas allowed the Church to prosper.

M: *(Cough)* Tell me a little about what's happened since *Nostra Tate*.

F: Well, you know . . .

M: What, what, what does this set forth in the Church and in it's relationship with the Jews?

F: In, if you look over the long course of the centuries uh, in one sense this is the third very significant turning of events. The first came with the time of Augustine and uh, later St. Gregory The Great, which enabled the Jews to survive in Europe because Augustine had argued that the Jews witnessed to the validity of what they would call the Old Testament, we today would call the Hebrew scriptures, so they must be allowed to be the only non-Christian religion to have a legal place in Christensen. And, so it was. And that is why there were so many Jews in Europe. Uh, because of the uh, the brilliant theology of Augustine and the pastoral leadership of St. Gregory The Great. The second great phase came after the Crus, Crusades uh, when it turned all very ugly and that's a long story, uh in itself and that story presages to some extent the Holocaust. And, the third phase starts in 1965. October 20, 1965 with the proclamation of *Nostra Tate*. It is that profound and that revolutionary uh, as Cardinal Baya, and Cardinal Vilerance, and Cardinal Cassidy - the three people in the Holy Sea in charge of implementing since the time of the council, have all said "There really is no precedence for the second Vatican council's look at this." No previous council in the Church ever said anything about kernel relevance about Jews, and Judaism. They said things of social relevance, usually negative uh, usually restricting Jews. But, of that kernel relevance they never considered that. It was always negatives of the teachings of contempt were simply presumptions that almost everybody shared since the second century. Um, so, what has happened since the second Vatican Council is in one sense the entire history of the founding and . . .

M: *(Cough)*

F: . . . development of official Catholic teaching on Jews and Judaism. The rest really is what everybody presumed. Uh, but was not something that they even needed to footnote in a reference because there wasn't, it wasn't, was not the result of a, of a statement on a level of, of, of a deckumental council of the Church. This was, this changed everything.

M: How will history look back on . . .

F: (*Loud exhale*)

M: . . . Pope John XXIII?

F: I think history will look back very positively on Pope John XXIII. His was one of the shorter reigns uh, but he called this massively significant council which has had rocky times being implemented in some areas, but is, but is a fundamental change of course in the history of the Catholic church. Uh, I think fundamentally beneficial to all of society. Uh, there are one billion Catholics and how they are kind' a directed to understand the world is going to have an impact on humanity. Uh, it, in, in the long run. The entire teaching of the church really to it's own uh, has changed. It is much more open. Uh, it brings about much more engagement and pushes people to help better the world. That was always part of it, it's just more central now. Um, one finds the evolution of a more active papacy, today then there was during World War II, when the papacy, the World War II was still reflecting the loss of the people states. Not knowing what to do, it was determined out a very policy of neutrality. Hence, the fact the Pope very rarely publicly spoke out about what was going on, um not only to Jews, but to Catholic bulls and the, the more than decimation of the Catholic clergy, a pool up hold by for example by the Nazis. Um, the Pope did not mention this publicly. Lots of stuff behind the scenes diplomatically as also within the Jews. But, the policy was one of strict neutrality. After the council, after World War II, that whole policy began to change. By the time you get to John XXIII, he made a profound difference being he started issuing encyclicals directed right at the heart of social moral concerns. *Potcum Teris* - Peace on Earth, going after the nuclear build up, going after, uh, the causes of war. Going after the causes of pov, poverty. Envisioning an entirely different economic system, uh for, for the world. And, then the Vatican aggressively pushing that forward, so that for example; one of the themes of this jubilee year designed to celebrate 2000 years of Christianity was the small idea of re-distributing the wealth between the northern hemisphere and the southern hemisphere by relieving um, the debts, debt relief. And, they pushed that very strongly.

M: An encyclical . . .

F: An encyclical . . .

M: (*Background*)That's very good.

F: (*Background*) Let me finish this story. Stop the sound for a second.

F: An encyclical is a letter sent by the Pope meant to be read by everyone in the Church. Uh, and uh it's okay if everybody outside the Church wants to look, look at it and profit by it. So, it, it, it's, it's a universal address by the Pope to the Catholic people.

M: What is the continuity between um, Pope John Paul II's visit to um, um, to the holy land? During the jubilee year and the war commission by uh, the arch-bishop and colleague Pope John XXIII?

F: Ah, there is a direct relationship uh, between the, the present holy father's visit to Israel, to Yadvashem, to the Western Wall, uh and Papa Rencali's tenure as Pope. Um, he set the ground work, the, the, Rancali did that um, Pope John Paul II was, was able to enjoy with, with his very warm and positive visit. Uh, in a sense the visit of the Pope to Israel, the first step of that was made uh, by Pope John XXIII when coming back to the Vatican one night, Friday night. They were passing the great Synagogue of Rome, the Pope saw Jews coming out from um, Sabbath services there. Uh ordered his driver to stop the car. Jumped out of the car and went to greet the people of that, whose prayers he respected so much. Uh, and wanted to tell them that. Um, he blessed the people I think, and got back into his car. It was the first step, the second great step, in this sense would be the present Pope's visit to the great Synagogue of Rome when he actually went into the Synagogue and became the first Pope since St. Peter, who was of course a regular going to Synagogue. Uh, to go into a Synagogue and there prayed together with Jews. He joined Jewish, a Jew, really a Jewish prayer service, not an official service but uh a joint service that had been mutually agreed upon. And, as the Pope entered the Great Synagogue the choir had been singing and they just happened to hit the phrase "Alleluia," at that point uh, as, as the Pope and the chief Rabbi walked in together. So, then the, the third great step in a sense would be taken with the Pope's respectful visit to Israel. He kissed the soil of the crowd, he listened to the Hatticva - the Israeli national anthem, uh it was a very moving experience, everyone who was there reports. Uh he made sure to go to Yadvashem, meeting their survivors of the Holocaust, some of whom were his home town. Uh, he said his prayers at the Eternal Flame, at Yadvashem - Israel's memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. And he went over, and it's not so easy for him to walk, but he walked over to the survivors, to, to greet and literally embrace them. Uh, and then even more surprising, one surprise after an other, the Pope went to the Great Wall, the western wall, the last remnant of the Temple of Israel and inserted a prayer asking for God's forgiveness for what Christians have done to Jews over the centuries. That's in direct continuity to what was started uh, begun by Pope, Pope John XXIII uh, when he greeted the Jews there and he launched uh, the, the second Vatican Council.

M: How would you characterize the last 35 years of Catholic-Jewish relations?

F: The last 35 years has been the most productive time. There has been more progress in Jewish-Christian relations in the last 35 years than there had been in the, all those 2000 years before that. Uh, there has been, been the implementation uh, in so many ways of the council's vision. Catholic text books are entirely changed on what they say about Jews and Judaism. Um, there have been three doctoral dissertations studying them. Mine was the second one. I noticed tremendous changes in the Council, but sill a lot of challenges

in terms of how Judaism is treated. Uh, the latest one in 1992, the conclusion of Dr. Philip Cunningham was, "If you didn't already have in the patristic fathers, you cannot derive out of Catholic text books today the teaching of contempt. It is not in there anymore. The major pieces are gone, uh, from the teaching, from Catholic text books. You can't, mean there are still some problems here and there that are associated with that. But, you couldn't reconstruct it out of those text books. Uh, that's amazing progress. There are dialogues today between churches and synagogues all over the United States, increasingly in other parts of the world as well. Uh, we are, the United States are annularly the leader in, in terms of Catholic -Jewish relations. Uh, because of our framework of freedom and the good relations our two communities have always enjoyed. Um, a little story. Um the parish that we are in (*Clearing throat*) um, was founded right next to uh, a, a, synagogue.

M: The house that we were in

F: We

M: . . . were in Washington.

F: Uh, yes. In Northern Virginia. First my wife and I and my daughter oh

M: In Northern

F: In Northern Virginia

M: Now say the whole sentence.

F: (*Cough*) The parish that my wife, and daughter, and I live in, in Northern Virginia um, was founded at about the same time uh, the Jewish community was, was trying to build a synagogue. The church was finished before the synagogue. So, for several years, the Jewish community uh, was given really the church to, for Sabbath services - uh its a modern sort of building. Uh, so they simply took the cross down from the alter. Uh, the Jews worshipped there. Um, when the synagogue was finished they had a number of classrooms, whereas the church didn't have enough classrooms for the expanding size of it's community. So, today, probably I can say that my daughter is attending Catholic-Catechism religious education classes in the neighborhood synagogue, which didn't happen too often in the past.

M: Anything else you want to share with us about uh, Arch-Bishop Papa Rancali?

F: Rancali was a very warm person. On, I think this is behind, he liked people. He liked being with people. He liked eating with people. Um, he was very sensitive to people. He grew up, one of the two things we have to understand is growing up in the Italian culture, you're growing up in a culture where at that time at least, uh, and for centuries before, racism wasn't a thing that Italians could get their heads around. Its, its, um, given the history of Italy, of all the different peoples that attacked and went through an uh, Sicily

which was concurred by Northern Africa's, often as the Roman concurred Northern Africa, practically. Um, the category of race is not a big one, whereas it is over, up over the Alps in Germany and Austria. The Italians never viewed the Jews as that much or other, they were always there. You have to remember that there was a Jewish community in Rome, there to greet St.'s Peter and Paul when they arrived. Uh, and both of those, uh, Apostles went to the Jewish community first, in Rome. And, there are Jewish families in Rome today that trace their ancestry back before St. Peter arrived in the first, the first century. So, that in Italy the, the, the Italians have great respect for antiquity, uh for the continuity of, uh peoples for family. Well the Jewish community of Italy has always been a very secure part of that. There were never expulsions from Italy. A lot of the people expelled from Spain in 1492, the Jews from Spain, ended up uh, in Italy. And, the Italian city-states accepted them, the Pope urged them to, and of course in the people -states they did. Uh, there were, was ghettoization, I'm not saying there were no problems. But, you've got a situation where in the Renaissance, for example Italian communities would commissions Catholic composers to compose music for synagogue worship. So, this is the, the very, the first tomen was printed in Italy by an Italian-Catholic publishing house. Um, this is a very different relationship than one would find else where. Rancali grew up in this relationship where it was simply an accepted part of the scene - locally, as well as nationally for the Jew to be part of Italia. What, what ever Italy is the Jews have always been a part of it. So, that the violation of this social compact, uh by the Nazis was resisted very strongly not only by Arch-Bishop Rancali Asuncio, but by Italians. The, uh high percentage of Jews survived in Italy as anywhere in Europe. As high survived in Denmark. Um, and it was more difficult, frankly for the Italians to hide those Jews for all those months than it would be to imp, imp, not putting down the Danes for their heroic rescue, but it's one thing to get some people on a boat, be other there and back in the same night, it's another to hide people for months and months and months with the Gestapo sniffing around. Uh, and this the Italians did. Um, and that's to their credit, but it also helps explain why it came so naturally to Rancali, to Rancali to feel, and understand the violation of his concept of civilization, his concept of humanity, that was done by the Nazis when they moved in an started to kill all the Jews. He felt this very deeply, uh and was in a sense presented to him by an historian you know, it clicked obviously for him and he moved forward as I say, very aggressively to make sure that was on the agenda of the council to protect the agenda. Another Italian Pope Paul VI finished up the job, quite admirably. Uh, we tend to forget Pope Paul VI, but he, he did finish the council and finish it quite well.

M: Anything thing else Eugene?

F: I don't think so, yeah . . .

M: Thank you very much.

F: Thank you.

M: (*Background*) We have a couple of still photos we'd like to take and . . .

Beth: (*Cough*)

End of Tape