



36th annual Catholic-Jewish colloquium examines impact of war on groups' relations

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April 24, 2024 - As the conflict between Israel and Hamas continues into its sixth month, a group gathered at the Center for Pastoral Leadership to examine the impact of the war on the relations between Catholics and Jews.

It was the 36th annual Sam Miller Catholic-Jewish Colloquium, an interfaith dialogue that rotates host sites between the two faiths. The colloquium evolved from a friendship between the late Cleveland Bishop Anthony Pilla and the late Miller, a prominent businessman and Jewish leader.

This year's keynote speaker was **Phillip Cunningham**, an author, theology professor and co-director of the [Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia](#), Pennsylvania. Cunningham has addressed the colloquium previously, according to Sister Mary McCormick, OSU, who introduced him. She is a professor of systemic theology at [Saint Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology](#).

Presenting the Jewish perspective was **Tema Smith**, a writer, educator and regional director of Jewish outreach and partnerships at the [Anti-Defamation League](#). She leads the agency's work to fight antisemitism across the country. Smith also noted she was raised by a Catholic father and a Jewish mother, which gave her a unique perspective of the dynamics between the two faiths. In addition, her maternal grandmother fled Poland before World War II when she saw what was happening to the Jews in Europe.

Cunningham said his presentation "would mine the words of Scripture" and other sources as he examined the relationship between the two groups and how it continues to evolve since the most recent hostilities in Israel and Gaza. The current conflict began on Oct. 7, 2023 after a surprise attack by Hamas that killed more than 1,200 Israelis.

"That (Oct. 7, 2023) was the greatest loss of Jewish life since the Holocaust," Smith said, noting Israel "was supposed to be their (Jewish) 'safe place.'"

According to Cunningham, "After centuries of teaching contempt for Jews, the attitudes of American Catholics toward Jews has improved greatly since 1965 (the Second Vatican Council)." He referred to a July 2022 survey of Catholic attitudes toward Jews. Also, Pope Francis is the first pope to have a real dialogue and true friendships with Jews. He showed a short video (in Spanish) to illustrate this.

However, a statement issued by Pope Francis on Oct. 11, 2023, that said the use of weapons and violence must stop because "terrorism and war bring no solutions, only death and suffering of many innocent lives." Cunningham said the pope's remarks caused friction between Catholics and Jews, with five Jewish scholars and rabbis responding in an open letter to the pope and the faithful of the Catholic Church. Another 400 Jewish scholars also signed on, referring to the Oct. 7 Hamas attack as "genocidal" and noting it "shakes the ground beneath our feet" as they sought clarity.

Cunningham also discussed the biblical promise of land for the Israelis, how the Vatican views that and distinguishes between the religious and political aspects of the State of Israel's founding and existence. The Vatican State (Holy See) has ambassadors and formal relations with many countries across the world, he said, adding that the Catholic Church "relates to Israel in a way no other Christian denomination does." The Jewish scholars pressed for further clarification on the Church's position about what they called the moral equivalence of Israel's actions and Hamas' motivations.

In her remarks, Smith said Catholics account for a very small percentage of the Gaza population, but noted Jews are a majority of the population of Israel.

"The Jewish community is tight in the global context," she said, adding many know someone who has been impacted by the Oct. 7 attack. "There is a real tension between religion and politics" with differing views on the attack, Smith said. The expulsion of Jews centuries ago, the Holocaust and the evolution of the State of Israel are all factors. She said her mother was distressed to see missiles pointed at Israel, which many Jews viewed as their "safe place."

"How do we say we don't understand each other, but let's try?" Smith asked,

Cunningham said as the current hostilities continue, the relationship between Catholics and Jews continues to evolve with each having an opportunity to learn from the other – including how to be more tolerant.

Father Joe Hilinski, pastor of St. Barbara Parish in Cleveland and diocesan delegate for ecumenical and interfaith affairs, moderated a brief question and answer session after the presentation.

Ursuline Sister Lisa Marie Beltz, assistant professor of biblical studies at Saint Mary Seminary, said work is being done in Catholic schools – including at the seminary – to help educate students and to break down what she called "weaponization of the Gospel."

Cunningham reminded the audience that "Jesus was a Torah-compliant Jew," a fact many Catholics may not realize. He said this is one reason Catholicism evolved in the way it did.

"It's important to teach this in the historical context," Smith added.

A reception and additional opportunities for conversation followed the program.

Source: [Catholic Diocese of Cleveland](#).