Rabbi Leon Klenicki

Rabbi Leon Klenicki, an advocate for improving interfaith relations whose efforts were lauded by Pope Benedict XVI, has died. He was 78. He died Jan. 25 of cancer at his Monroe Township home, his wife, Myra, said Saturday. Klenicki wrote or co-wrote numerous books and papers aimed at improving relations between Jews and Catholics, according to the Anti-Defamation League, the organization Klenicki served for more than 30 years.

Myra Cohen Klenicki said her husband was exposed to progressive Catholic thinkers such as Jacques Maritain as a youth, and those experiences shaped his later efforts. He delivered a paper on behalf of the Jewish community in 1968 at the first Latin American meeting of Jews and Catholics in Colombia during Pope Paul XI's visit, according to the league. Klenicki became director of the ADL's department of interfaith affairs in 1984 and also was the organization's co-liaison to the Vatican. In 2007, he was made a Papal Knight of the Order of St. Gregory the Great by Pope Benedict XVI, making him only the second interfaith official to receive the honor, according to the league. After his retirement in 2001, Klenicki taught at Cambridge University and at Belgium's Leuven Catholic University.

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