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A Witness of God's Triumph

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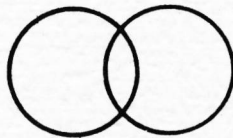
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A WITNESS OF GOD'S TRIUMPH

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A WITNESS OF GOD'S TRIUMPH

Words of Appreciation

by John M. Oesterreicher,

occasioned by the publication of

STANDING BEFORE GOD

edited by Asher Finkel and Lawrence Frizzell

Friends:

I genuinely appreciate the significance of this moment: it is a unique moment, hardly to be repeated in my lifetime. Hence your presence, my friends, makes me happy. The honor accorded me -- the *Festschrift*, this handsome volume with its descriptive and, at the same time, demanding title, *Standing Before God* -- fills me with gratitude. May I place our celebration tonight in a wider context? May I also try to respond to the challenge the book represents, and state once more my dedication to an ever new encounter of Christians and Jews?

I

It is only fitting that I begin with a saying by Jesus of Nazareth. It is rare that He let others see His inner pain, the disappointments of His ministry. Yet, He tells us that no prophet is accepted in His own town, the place He grew up in. It is a widely known proverb Jesus uses to show His sorrow. To quote it precisely, that is, in the idiomatic way proper to the original Hebrew that the Greek text has preserved: "Nowhere is a prophet unhonored save in his native country" (Mt 13:57).¹

Moreover, in applying a well-known proverb to Himself, Jesus, however unique the drama of His life, seems to have pointed to a universal phenomenon, a frequent human reaction.² The people of Israel is, we must not forget, humanity in miniature; its vices are the major vices, its virtues the great human virtues. A Christian who reads the New Testament, indeed the whole of Scripture, without keeping in mind that Israel represents all humankind is bound to misread them.

II

Israel's prophets, too, those gentle giants of humanity, forthtellers of God's will rather than foretellers of the future, as H.H. Rowley called them,³ complained that their voice was not heeded. Even the Second Isaiah, chosen comforter of his people,

is compelled to ask:

Who of you hearing this
will pay attention and mark it
against the time to come?
(42:23)

Jeremiah is still stronger, still more dramatic in describing
his people's lack of response:

A laughing stock I have become
all the day long,
Everyone mocks me.
(20:7)

This prophetic fate is echoed in the lives of thousands of
pioneers -- Jews and Christians, believers and not-yet-believers,
thinkers, poets, artists, healers, and discoverers of all kinds.
Many of them had to walk through life, unrecognized and unloved.
Many died in grief believing that they had not been able to carry
out their mission. And how many men or women of the Church whom
God called to renew her life or reshape her thought met with of-
ten incomprehensible resistance!

III

From the many let me select two major figures of Church
history. Thomas Aquinas (ca 1225-74), as most people call him,
or Fra Tomaso d'Aquino, as he would prefer, gave Christian phi-
losophers a new orientation. With the help of Aristotle, he di-
rected their thinking to the whole of reality: God and Humanity,
mind and matter, intellect and senses, faith and reason, freedom
and law, conscience and authority. In 1567, about 300 years af-
ter his death, he was proclaimed *Doctor ecclesiae*, "Teacher of
the Church." During his lifetime, however, his views were often
attacked, while a few years after his death, certain of his teach-
ings were condemned by the Bishop of Paris and by two Archbishops
of Canterbury.

Another "Teacher of the Church" was Teresa of Avila (1515-
1582), a woman whose life uniquely combined sublime contemplation
and never-tiring activity. She was called by God to restore the
Carmelite order to its original dedication, to love-filled auster-
ity. Her efforts were opposed by friends and foes, by nuns and
friars, even by some ecclesiastical authorities. At times, the op-
position to her reforms was violent, though it was never carried
as far as it was for her coworker John of the Cross, still another

"Teacher of the Church." He was subjected to close confinement
and many privations. In all her struggles, faced with an army of
adversaries, Teresa was wont to say: "God and I are the majority."

IV

Why am I directing your attention to prophets and pioneers?
Do I consider myself one of them? Believe me, I never think of my-
self as a pioneer, much less do I dream of the glory of having
spearheaded a new sense of kinship uniting Christians and Jews.
Yet, I cannot, and do not wish to, deny that -- objectively -- I
am one of those whom Pope John Paul II had in mind, as he addressed
the representatives of the Jewish community of France, at the time
of his visit to that country, last May. He recalled "the courage
and decision of some pioneers" who had helped usher in "the move-
ment that led us to the present dialogue and collaboration, in-
spired and promoted by the declaration *Nostra Aetate* of the Second
Vatican Council."⁴

Let me ask again, why have I conjured up the painful fate
of pioneers? Do I wish to intimate that the measure of my suffer-
ing is that of the great pathfinders of history? By no means!
Still, my years of serving the reconciliation of Christians and
Jews have not been without dark moments.

In 1936, three years after Hitler's rise to power, the
house organ of the SS portrayed me as a key figure in a major plot
against Nazism. The institute I then headed, *Das Pauluswerk*,
Vienna, was said to be the clearing house that channeled the money
of International Jewry into the coffers of the International Church.
An interesting charge, don't you think so? When asked about it, I
countered, "Fantastic! I wish it were true."

Yet, the absurdity of the accusation notwithstanding, I knew
it was a matter of gravity -- it was to disgrace me in the eyes of
many as a money-grubber and prepare me for a limited term in prison
or an unlimited one in a concentration camp. From the moment of
having been named a conspirator, my name "graced" the blacklists
of the Gestapo. Wherever I went, the Gestapo followed me; yet, by
the grace of God, I was able to elude their search.

V

At the beginning of World War II, some leading Austrian ex-
iles asked me to address the people of Austria and German-speaking

men and women in all of Central Europe, week after week. I thus became part of the "Voice of Austria" which went on the air with the help of *La Radiodiffusion Nationale*, Paris. In weekly sermons, I showed that Hitler's view of God and the world was heretical, indeed an entirely anti-Christian ideology. Three or four days after the conquest of Paris by the German army, the Gestapo looked for me in every possible spot -- thank God, again in vain.

The Gestapo knew where I lived, where I took my meals, who my friends were. Yet, at times it blundered: one of their secretaries must have written my address, 85, rue d'Assas, in such a way that it could easily be misread as 83, rue d'Assas. God must have smiled when He saw some Gestapo agent importune the *concierge* at 83, rue d'Assas. As often as he asked for me, she is said to have answered: "He does not live here, he has never lived here, I don't know the man." He replied again and again: "But he must be here. In our files, he is carried as living at this address." I trust, you are smiling, too. It is good to remember that the agents of the great murderer were fallible, that now and then they made a *faux pax*.

VI

To give a more complete history of myself, I would have to speak of other charges, of the Institute as a front for Communist subversion or as a screen for proselytizing Jews. I myself have been called an enemy of the Jewish people. Were I to go on, you might be tempted to think I am out to get your pity. As I stated before, I neither see myself as a pioneer, nor do I think of myself as a great sufferer. I could not possibly view my life as wrapped in a shroud, for I outlived, not merely physically, the attacks against me as well as the attackers.

In fact, I am so blessed that Dean Bernhard Scholz was moved to say, the other day:

Rarely has a life over five decades been dedicated so, singlemindedly to so necessary and noble a goal; and rare indeed must be the man in the Church whose concerns and hopes became, within his lifetime, the policies of popes and a general council of the Church.

Do not think me ungrateful when I feel compelled to alter this gracious encomium in a few details. Whatever I achieved at the Second Vatican Council, I did not accomplish singlehandedly. I was a member of a team. Nor would I want to be thought of as a teacher of popes; rather were the popes my teachers.

From the many statements of recent Popes, let me quote but two. Pius XI condemned Jew-hatred by saying: "Spiritually, we are Semites," while John XXIII prepared the ecumenical atmosphere between Christians and Jews by greeting a Jewish delegation with open arms and the words: "I am Joseph, your brother." What I have had to say on the bond of Christians and Jews is really an explanation of these and other sayings by the popes of our time. As I see it, these often spontaneous papal utterances are evidence of the workings of the Holy Spirit. To say it again, in the rediscovery of Judaism, that is of its own independent worth and its significance for the Church; in the re-ordering of the relationship of Christians and Jews; and in their new encounter, God's Spirit triumphs.

VII

To have been a witness and a servant of that triumph is a special favor, for which I cannot thank the Lord enough. This evening is another sign of God's favor. When, almost a decade ago, I asked Rabbi Finkel and Father Frizzell to join me in the establishment of a graduate program of Judaeo-Christian Studies, I did so because of their impeccable scholarship, their total commitment to their own faith, and their deep respect for the faith of the other. I had not the slightest notion that one day they would conceive the idea of a volume in my honor. If I had secretly planned their editing a *Festschrift*, I could not have done better.

How can I thank them both? How many hours they must have spent in inviting friends and colleagues of mine to contribute to this *Festschrift*! How often they had to urge some busy contributors to carry out their promise! How much time it must have taken to prepare the manuscripts for the printer! How much of their day was spent in refining translations! And how often their chosen task must have pursued them into their sleep! It is not enough to say that I am impressed with the fruit of their labor -- I am delighted, overjoyed, and deeply moved.

The other day, one of the contributors to the *Festschrift*, a friend of many years, wrote me:

Standing Before God is handsomely produced, wouldn't you say? I don't mean only your picture at the beginning, but the binding, typography, and the jacket generally. Its contents also strike me as very strong, more so than most *Festschriften*. You can be humbly very proud of it.

Standing Before God is an exception in still another sense. As a rule, *Festschriften* are the work of a scholar's former students. They solicit other former students and colleagues of their master for scholarly studies which they edit in book form. All this they do to honor their teacher, repay an intellectual debt, or express their gratitude to him. In my instance, it is my peers who made this volume a reality. To be appreciated by one's equals is rare indeed; peers are more likely to be rivals. I wonder, then, does my life refute the old proverb with which I began. Am I a prophet who is accepted, if not in his native, then in his adopted country?

Faced with this wonder, I must ask again: How can I thank Rabbi Finkel and Father Frizzell? First, I am certain, by asking personally God's blessing on them: *Yishar koḥakha*, "May you go from strength to strength!" Second, I venture, by asking the administration of Seton Hall University for its blessing. Recognizing the scholarship of the two editors of *Standing Before God*, their devotion to *shalom*, to harmony and peace, indeed, a creative tension between Jews and Christians, and -- not to forget -- their contribution to the good name of this University, I commend them and the Department of Judaean-Christian Studies to the University's care. May they all, administration, editors and department, grow in wisdom and grace before God and man.

The outline of this address that I have been carrying in my head these days calls for a response on my part to the various studies in the *Festschrift*. I wanted to express my appreciation to every contributor, at least to all of them who are able to be with us tonight. I had planned to offer some comment on themes treated by them. But I realize if I did this, my talk would burst at its seams.

Yet, there is one issue that I cannot leave unmentioned. Though the *Festschrift* is evidence to the contrary, I fear that some people -- Jews as well as Christians -- may think that logically I am somewhat of a loner. True, I do not always conform to the notions and practices of my milieu or act as conventions demand, but I am not a maverick. (Let me remind you that the original meaning of a maverick is that of an unbranded, motherless calf or colt, or one that has run away from the herd.)

What my colleagues and I stand for is not fashionable but is, to speak with Pope John XXIII, the fruit of reading the "signs of the times." It is, without doubt, the mind of the Church. I know of no better way of demonstrating my avowal than by quoting extensively from the address with which Pope John Paul II greeted the representatives of Germany's Jewish Community, in Mainz, on November 17, 1980. I am omitting from it only references meant for the German audience.⁵

When on his pastoral journeys the Pope arrives in a country in which Jews live, he meets with their leading members. Most of the time, his speech is a simple expression of respect and good will. The address he gave in Germany, however, is of great moment: in it, Pope John Paul II offers a far-reaching but, I fear, widely unknown theology of the kinship of Jews and Christians. May his prophetic voice be heard, not only by a few, but by the whole Christian community.

Shalom!

Gentlemen, dear brothers!

. . . . If Christians are bound to see all human beings as their brethren and treat them accordingly, how much more are they bound by this sacred obligation when face to face with members of the Jewish people!

The bishops of the Federal Republic of Germany began their "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Judaism," published in April 1980, with the affirmation: "Who meets Jesus Christ, meets Judaism!" I want to make these words my own.

The faith of the Church in Jesus Christ, son of David and son of Abraham (see Mt 1:1), indeed contains what the bishops in their Declaration call "Israel's spiritual patrimony to the Church" -- a living patrimony that we Catholics must learn to understand and treasure in all its depth and richness.

The concrete relations between Jews and Catholics take on a special significance when lived against the dark background of the persecution and attempted rooting out of the Jewish people in this country.

The innocent victims in Germany and elsewhere,

The destroyed and dispersed families, the irretrievably lost cultural values and art treasures are tragic proof of the horror to which discrimination and contempt for human dignity can take a people, particularly when these attitudes are animated by perverse theories of alleged value differences among the races, or of partitioning human beings into those useful or worthy to live and those useless or unworthy to live. Before God, all people are equally worthy and important. . . .

The depth and richness of our common patrimony is particularly revealed to us through a sympathetic dialogue and a cooperation of mutual trust. . . .

These dialogues are not merely intended to correct a religious perception seeing the Jewish people in a false light and having caused partly the misjudgments and the persecution Jews had to suffer in the course of history. What is at stake is rather the dialogue between two religious communities. Together with Islam, they were chosen to give the world the faith in the one, ineffable God who speaks to us; moreover, they seek to serve Him as surrogates for all human beings.

The first dimension of this dialogue, that is, of the encounter between God's people of the Old Covenant -- never annulled by Him (see Rom 11:29) -- and that of the New Covenant, is at the same time a dialogue within the Church between the first and the second part of its Bible

A second dimension of our dialogue -- the actual and central one -- is the encounter between today's Christian Churches and today's people of the Covenant concluded with Moses. The postconciliar guidelines tell how important it is for Christians to strive for a better understanding of the fundamental elements of the religious tradition of Judaism and to learn which fundamental lines are, according to their own understanding, essential for the lived reality of Jews. The road to a better getting-to-know each other is dialogue.

I thank you, my venerable brothers [in the episcopate] that you, too, conduct the dialogue with that "delicacy," that "sensitivity," which the above-

mentioned guidelines urge upon us Catholics.

Let me briefly mention a third dimension of our dialogue. The German bishops devote the final chapter of their Declaration to the tasks we have in common. As sons and daughters of Abraham, Jews and Christians are called to be a blessing for the world (see Gn 12:2). They will be a blessing if jointly they stand up for peace and justice among all people and peoples . . . The more this sacred duty puts its imprint on our encounter, the more does it redound to our own well-being.

In the light of this Abrahamitic promise and call, I look with you at the destiny and role of your people among the nations of the world. I gladly pray with you for the fullness of *shalom* for all your brethren of the flesh and faith, also for the land on which all Jews look with special reverence. . . .

In concluding his address, John Paul II recalled Pope Paul VI's pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the prayer Paul VI offered on entering Jerusalem: that harmony and peace pervade this unique land, and that brotherhood unite all people and peoples. He ended his petition with words of one of Israel's psalmists. Pope John Paul repeated this plea and then added words of acclaim all his own, which remarkably follow the style of Buber and Rosenzweig in their translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Earlier in his speech, the Pope had expressed admiration for their contributions to the cultural meeting of Jews and Germans.

Pray for the well-being of Jerusalem;
may those who love you be at peace.
May there be well-being within your ramparts,
peace in your palaces
I pray for your well-being
I pray for your good.

(Ps 122:6-9; JPS)

May the nations all be reconciled in Jerusalem
and blessed in Abraham.
HE, the Ineffable One: all His creation speaks
to us of Him.
HE, who does not force humanity to choose goodness
but guides it nevertheless.
HE, who makes Himself known in our destiny
and yet is silent.
HE who leads us on His paths into His future.
HIS NAME be praised. Amen.

NOTES

1. The Gospel tradition attributed great importance to a prophet's fate. With minor variations, the proverb appears in all gospels, see Mk 6:4; Lk 4:24; Jn 4:44. Apocryphal gospels, too, contain it.
2. Some exegetes assume that the experience of itinerant preachers among Jews underlies the proverbial saying. But that experience is not confined to Jews, even if some Christians may think so. Even plain sense tells that this experience is universal. Moreover, several statements by Greek philosophers, complaining that their own homeland does not know them, resemble the saying of the gospels. According to Epiktet 3,16,11, "a philosopher shuns his native city." An Arab saying holds that "when in his own land, a flutist takes no delight [in his art]." See Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976) I, 320.
3. See Professor Harold H. Rowley, "The Nature of Prophecy in the Light of Recent Study," *Harvard Theological Review*, 38 (1945) pp. 1-38.
4. See "Addresses to Jewish Representatives, 1, France: Paris, May 31," *Information Service of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, Vatican City*, 44 (1980) III-IV, p 87.
5. See *Papst Johannes Paul II in Deutschland, Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls*, 25 (Bonn: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, 1981) pp. 102-105. The translation of Pope John Paul's II. address is my own. Another rendering appeared in *Origins, NC Documentary Service, Washington, D.C.*, 25 (December 24, 1980), pp. 399-400.