

#### **Rabbi Howard Abel Hirsch**

#### **Keynote Commencement Address**

## Regis University, May 4, 2014

In his magnificent conversation entitled "A Big Heart Open to God," Pope Francis, who was recently voted *Time's* Man of the Year, refers to Peter Faber, who was one of the first companions of St. Ignatius, and describes him in these words:

"His dialogue with all...even the most remote, and even with his opponents; his simple piety...... His careful interior discernment, the fact that he was a man capable of great and strong decisions, but also capable of being so gentle and loving."

# Pope Francis continues:

"I have a dogmatic certainty; God is in every person's life. God is in everyone's life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs, or anything else.....God is in this person's life. You can, you must try to seek God in every human life. Although the life of a person is a land full of thorns and weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow. You have to trust God."

Throughout this historic interview, one marvels at how Pope Francis shows respect for all people whom he tries to see as men and women loved by God before they are distorted by societal, moral, economic, political, and, I might add, religious classifications. His constant use of the word "solidarity" indicates that he is pushing us beyond the comforts of our religious boundaries to invite the entire human family into a circle of dialogue. St. Thomas Aquinas noted that we are called by God for unity with God, for friendship with God, and that inevitably requires us to love our neighbor. In adopting this standard, Pope Francis is encouraging us to listen to each other with love and with no other agenda implied.

## Kurt Cardinal Koch recently put it this way:

"Have Christians and Jews the will and the strength for conciliation and reconciliation on the common foundation of faith in the one and only God of Israel?"

My teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote these words:

"We must insist upon loyalty to the unique and holy treasures of our own tradition, and, at the same time, acknowledge that in this aeon religious diversity may be a providence of God"

At a banquet in honor of Cardinal Bea, Rabbi Heschel spoke these stirring words:

"God's voice speaks in many languages, communicating itself in a diversity of institutions. The word of God never comes to an end. No word is God's last word.......A

Christian should realize that a world without Jews will be a world without the God of the Jews.

And a Jew should acknowledge the role of Christianity in God's plan for the redemption of all people.....The Jew's task is to help the Christian, not to debate with him."

What does this mean practically speaking? The explicit precondition of dialogue is understanding and mutual respect. Christians ought to seek opportunities for loving conversations with Jews in order to understand Judaism, NOT to entice Jews to baptism. And Jews must speak lovingly to Christians in order to avoid a demonization of the unknown. My experience indicates that constructive dialogue eliminates misunderstanding and hatred of each other, not to mention sheer ignorance or crippling misconceptions. Positive interreligious relations based upon love and mutual understanding are absolutely essential.

How are we to accomplish this? My 23 years of teaching at Regis have led me to believe that the Catholic university is the institution where this process must flourish. The Catholic university, where every question deserves a reasonable and principled answer, is the ideal institution to foster the dialogue process. There are specific steps which the Catholic university can take to keep the dialogue process alive. Such steps may include the following:

- 1. We must learn to understand the extent of how the memory of enmity and animosity between our two communities precludes a full appreciation of our historical relationship.
- 2. In the face of 2,000 years of hostility, we must encourage an appreciation of each other's theology and spirituality.
- 3. We must search for every aspect of the life and word of Jesus that Jews can learn to appreciate and accept.
- 4. We must together create a common social action agenda that can build positive relationships between Christians and Jews.

The election of Pope Francis gives us an unprecedented opportunity to ask each other these fundamental questions, exposing each other to our respective beliefs and ways of life. This is a process that must be undertaken candidly, with great sensitivity, and with a total absence of defensiveness, remembering that as Rebecca's twins, we Christians and Jews all have an indissoluble link to each other and we are joined at the hip.

I would suggest that the Catholic university, take the following steps:

- 1. Promote and encourage the establishment of a Department of Interfaith Dialogue, which would be staffed by qualified resident and affiliate faculty.
- 2. The clearly stated goal should be not only mutual respect and understanding, but also the dissemination of accurate knowledge about the theology of Catholics and Jews. The authentic knowledge of what Catholicism teaches is largely a disaster area in the Jewish community. The same can be said of Catholics when it comes to an authentic knowledge of Judaism.
- 3. The university must seek out and call upon those who celebrate the "Nostra Aetate" process and are qualified to speak for their own community. This would mean that Jewish and Catholic leaders, such as rabbis, priests and educators, be brought in to co-facilitate formal courses of instruction.
- 4. The Catholic university should consider this new department to be of utmost importance and must foster its growth and contribute its resources for building a public awareness of the program.
- 5. Useful interreligious community social action projects, such as identifying racial profiling, identifying discrimination in employment and promoting care of the disenfranchised should be established as an integral feature of the program. Repairing the world is axiomatic to both Catholicism and Judaism.
- 6. And finally, there ought to be some public acknowledgement and expression of appreciation for those who make genuine contributions to authentic dialogue. An annual "Pope Francis" event honoring such people might be considered by Catholic and Jewish institutions.

The time has passed when faith communities live side by side in some sort of de facto existence. We live in a world of harsh religious bigotry and violent extremism that are based upon political and economic upheaval. It is easy to affirm religious pluralism when our world is at peace. But in today's world that is simply not enough. Dialogue is not a luxury. Mere religious tolerance is not enough. This is no mere dream. It can be done.

In essence, what I am suggesting is that the Catholic university take the lead and become the model for others to emulate. I am asking that the Catholic university, which contributes so much to our knowledge and well being, become the vanguard of a meaningful dialogue because Christians and Jews already share so many spiritual expressions, beliefs and actions, all under the aegis of a universal God.

Permit me to conclude my remarks with a statement written by Professor Susannah Heschel, Rabbi Heschel's daughter and a preeminent scholar in her own right:

"My father did not discuss Jesus or Paul. He did not write about the New Testament. He did not engage in debates on points of doctrine. He was in fact interested in helping Catholics

become better Catholics......My father asked, what can Jews learn, spiritually, from the great religious traditions of Catholicism? That is a question that most Jews do not ask."

In this process the Catholic university faces an enormous challenge as well as a great opportunity: the elimination of what Rabbi Heschel called "spiritual fratricide." The Jewish community faces the same challenge. So let us go forward together, remembering that disdain, disparagement and contempt frustrate the growth of mutual acceptance and human dignity.

For we are each other's "dearly beloved brother."