

Address delivered by Monsignor John M. Oesterreicher
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JEWISH AID TO BIAFRA: A HISTORY-MAKING EVENT

Friends:

Two years ago, I spoke to you on "The Conciliar Declaration on the Jews--One Year After." Should I continue from where I left off and talk on "Three Years After?" It would be a tempting assignment, for I would be able to report on a few setbacks and on many more advances, even on some achievements.

But lately something has happened that I consider so remarkable that I should like to devote my entire address to this one event. Ten days ago, Jews all over the world celebrated the Day of Atonement, a day so great that the Talmud simply calls it "The Day." Let me recite but one invocation of the morning service:

Our Father, our king!
Let this be an hour of mercy
And a time of favor with you.

The Day is meant to be one of forgiveness, of purification, or renewal. Thus one of its hymns opens with these words:

Lo, as the potter mouldeth plastic clay
To forms his varying fancy doth display;
So in Thy hand, O God of Love, are we.

It was on that great day last week that here in this city Rabbi Karasick, President of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, stood before his congregation and uttered these searching words:

We must ask all men how, but for a few religious groups, they could stand by with such massive silence and indifference when daily thousands of innocent children die of starvation in Biafra.

On this Day of Atonement, so that we may be worthy of atonement, let us resolve our voices, always, even in the midst of global callousness and indifference, for the oppressed, for the persecuted and the downtrodden.

At first, these words seem far from startling. Jews have always been a people of pity. The Torah, with its provisions for the protection of the stranger in the land, the poor, the widow, the orphan, the deaf, the blind and all the disabled, has been for them a school of compassion, and so has their long history been. All its cruel oppressions, all the injustices Jews had to suffer has made them sensitive to the plight of others. A sympathetic temper, a sense of sharing in the sorrows of others, an eagerness to stand up for the oppressed and speak out on behalf of those who cannot make themselves heard are among the admirable qualities--the glories--of the Jewish people.

Yet, if you listen closely to the words of the Orthodox leader, you will realize that they are not the usual sermonizing. They are not a general plea for tenderness, nor a vague reminder of responsibility, addressed to his own congregation as well as to all men. Rather does Rabbi Karasick try very concretely to make us see the unspeakable misery of Biafra's starving children and to have us rush aid to them. In this age, when our eyes and ears are inundated with horrors, we easily become saturated, deaf, and callous. Let me then refresh your memories and mine as to what has happened in this West African country.

On May 30, 1967, the Eastern Region of Nigeria seceded from the country's main body, declared its independence of the central government, and assumed the name of Biafra. It is inhabited by one of the most capable and culturally advanced tribes of Africa, the Ibos. Their secession was the result of a series of grave conflicts between the various tribes of the whole country. Because of their ability and outstanding performance, the Ibos filled a great many major positions in the country. This led to envy, to bitter rivalry, to the unseating of governments, even to the slaughter of tens of thousands of Ibos and the maiming of hundreds of thousands of them. It is true, their unique position made Ibos often clannish and arrogant. But no shortcoming of theirs could ever justify the hideous pogrom they were the victims of.

No wonder that the Ibos wished to make their future safe and thus sought independence; no wonder either that the central government did not acquiesce in the dismemberment of their land and the loss of its richest region. To the central government, war seemed the only solution to the problem. From the beginning, it was an uneven and extremely cruel war. The Nigerians had the most powerful and modern weapons, supplied by Great Britain and Soviet Russia; the Biafrans, little more than their determination. Much of their land was soon, and is today, occupied; a great deal of the population of the occupied territory fled and is now housed in refugee camps. The conditions there are extremely sad, but those of the defeated towns and villages are worse. Conquered Biafrans have often been nailed to the walls of their wooden huts and sprayed with bullets from automatic rifles. Sometimes, whole villages have been slain. In the refugee camps, however, another foe holds sway: hunger. It is said that last summer one thousand children were dying, every day. At present, hunger's toll is a multiple of that figure.

If, in the face of such horror, many individual Jews have been stirred to their depths and sought to help, this would have been worth recording. For the victims of starvation are not Jews; they are, to a large extent, Christians. But the thrust was much stronger. Jews created an emerging body of their own to aid the people of Biafra. Let me quote the originator of this effort, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, National Director of the Interreligious Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee. Rabbi Tanenbaum writes:

It is to the eternal credit of the Catholic and Protestant communities that they have responded to this human crisis with a moral passion, courage, and realistic help that, as of now, is not matched by any other group, voluntary

or governmental. While governments and international relief bodies that have had on hand large quantities of food and medicines, as well as transportation capabilities, have failed to act for reasons of state, Caritas Internationalis, the World Council of Churches, Catholic Relief Services, and Church World Service were flying in nightly two or three airlifts of mercy supplies from Sao Tome and Fernando Po, the two island off West Africa.

The flights were risky, they were expensive, they were carried out in the face of bitter criticism of the Nigerian federal government, they were even shot down. To these relief bodies, the moral and humanitarian claims of the sick, starving and dying superseded the need for correct diplomatic relations.

The genocidal nature of the tragedy in Biafra, as well as the model of the response of the Christian Bodies, had a profound effect on the Jewish community. The creation in early August of the American Jewish Emergency Effort for Biafran Relief by twenty-one national Jewish organizations which represent the entire spectrum of organized American Jewry--religious, communal, social welfare, philanthropic--is in itself unprecedented, indeed, historic. Haunted by memories of the Nazi campaign of extermination and of Israel's struggle for survival, American Jews are particularly sensitive to any threat of genocide or mass destruction against any group.

I will not burden you with many figures. As of September thirtieth of this year, \$90,000.00 were collected by the Jewish Emergency Committee. But the collection of that sum and its distribution are not of great moment. It is the principle that is of deep significance. Rabbi Tanenbaum phrased it this way: "This was the first time that the entire Jewish community volunteered to join with Catholics and Protestants on an international humanitarian endeavor to serve people who were not Jewish and were not likely to become Jews." In the story from which I am quoting he tells of a meeting last July between three Irish missionaries and some Jewish leaders; the initiative came from the American Jewish Committee. In the course of the conversation the priests showed photographs of starving children. They were very much like the photographs taken of Jewish children in the Forties, at the notorious death farms of Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, or Theresienstadt. One of the priests exclaimed:

To our eternal shame we sat by while millions of Jewish people and others were put to death before our very eyes. We did practically nothing then. Have we learned nothing from those days? What is happening to mankind? We know all too well what is going on with the poor, helpless people in Nigeria and Biafra. Why are we so silent?

It was on hearing this, that the Jewish leaders, gathered around the conference table, decided to form the ad hoc committee I mentioned: the American Jewish Emergency Effort for Biafran Relief. May I say again that I consider this effort of the American Jewish community one of great import and rich promise? Their initiative broke new ground. It was an act of vision, of extraordinary unselfishness, and of great daring. It was an act we must make known, we must acknowledge, and pay tribute to. I have no doubt that the unprecedented effort is a history-making event, that it has set the history of Christian-Jewish relations on a new course.

When I say that the Jewish attempt to assist Biafrans in their need is an act that has all the freshness and promise of a new morning, I do not wish to imply that Jews acted here in a way that transgresses their Judaism. Quite the contrary. As a resolution of the Synagogue Council of America, the umbrella organization of the three major religious branches of American Judaism, states:

To feed the hungry is a profound religious duty incumbent upon every Jew. In Jewish tradition, to stand idly by the blood of one's neighbor is a desecration of both God and man. We who have endured the barbarism of the centuries condemn those who watched our suffering with callous unseeing eyes and hearts of stone. We regard the silent spectators as accomplices of the persecutors.

When the ancient rabbis thought of the creation of man, they were so enchanted by God's work that they began to weave all sorts of tales. One has God fashion the human body out of dust gathered from the four corners of the earth. According to it, God ordered Gabriel: "Go and fetch me soil from the four winds, and with it I will create man." Why did God use clay from the four ends of the earth? The simplest answer given by Jewish tradition is this: If a man from the east should happen to die in the west, or a man from the west in the east, he would always return to the earth from which he sprang. (See Ginsberg, The Legends of the Jews, I, 54f) But this does not exhaust the legend's meaning. If God took Adam's body from all directions, as the legend tells, all of them--east and west, north and south, and everything in between--are equal, and so are men. Mankind is one. And man's concern must be for every other man, his peer.

The rabbis of old often tried to sum up the whole of revelation in one sentence or to find one commandment that was the source of all others. The finding of such a summary or chief commandment must have been an intellectual sport, testing their ingenuity and sharpening their perception. You all remember the scribe who asked Jesus, which of the commandments of the Torah was the greatest, and heard the Master say: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and might. . . , and love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments the Torah and the prophets depend" (Mt 22:36f). You may also recall the pagan who asked of Shammai to be made a proselyte, on the condition that he be taught the whole Torah, that he be told the essence of Judaism, while standing on one foot. Shammai threw him out; he must have considered him impertinent. When the same pagan went to Hillel, he was

given this answer: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn it" (Shab 31a). Again, Rabbi Akiba held that "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18) was the essence of Judaism, the commandment that comprised all others. Rabbi ben Azzai disagreed. To him, the words of Genesis 5:1 contained a greater principle. The words are: "This is the record of Adam's line (Often rendered, "These are the generations of man," or "This is the book of the descendants of Adam"). When God created man, he made him in His likeness (Sifra Kedoshim IV, 12, Gen R. 24, 7). Rabbi ben Azzai wanted to say that all men, and every man, must be loved as God's image. He who insults a man insults God. Or, he who denies his love, his help, to his neighbor, denies them to God.

When you hear this, can you still accept the timeworn cliché that Judaism is a legalistic, a loveless religion? Let me add another example. A witness who is to appear before a court that tries a capital offense is admonished of his grave responsibility: the life of the accused may depend on his testimony; hence, he is told that God created, at first, only a single man to teach us that if someone causes but a single man to perish, it is as if he had caused a whole world to perish; and if he saves but a single being, it is as if he had saved a whole world (Sanh 37a). I have recalled this rabbinic saying because it shows the Jewish effort on behalf of the starving Biafrans in its true greatness, because it reveals some of the undying splendor of Judaism.

I would like to end this eulogy of the American Jewish community's devotion to men, women, and children that are forgotten by most of the world, that suffer in a far away land, and are tied to them by no other bond than that of their common humanity, by reminding you of two sayings. The first is from Jesus' farewell speech to his disciples, as recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew, the other from a Midrash on Psalm 118. The first makes the man in need Jesus' special representative: "Amen, I say to you [whenever you fed the hungry, gave a drink to the thirsty, or received a stranger in your house], whenever you did this for one of these poorest brothers of mine, you did it for me" (Mt 25:40). The second, a commentary on "Open to us the gates of righteousness" (Ps 118 [117]:19), reads like this:

When a man is asked in the world-to-come: "What was your work?" and he answers: "I fed the hungry," it will be said to him: "This is the gate of the Lord (Ps 118:20). Enter into it, O you who did feed the hungry."

When a man answers: "I gave drink to the thirsty," it will be said to him: "This is the gate of the Lord. Enter into it, O you who did give drink to the thirsty."

When a man answers: "I clothed the naked," it will be said to him: "This is the gate of the Lord. Enter into it, O you who did clothe the naked."

This will also be said to him who brought up the fatherless, and to them who gave alms or performed deeds of lovingkindness.

(The Midrash on Psalms, ed. Braude, II, p243)

Do we need more proof than these two sayings, the evangelical and the rabbinic, to be certain that, for all the differences, Jews and Christians are of the same cast of mind; that both are servants of the God who commands and who comforts, servants of the living, the holy, the just and the merciful God, and hence brothers? It is my fervent hope that the cooperation of Jews and Christians in helping the stricken people of Biafra will be the beginning of a creative relationship, of a continuous cooperation in making God's demand for justice and compassion heeded in the world. The social message of the prophets is addressed to both, to Jews and Christians. And so are the words of Micah:

You have been told, O man, what is good
and what the Lord requires of you,
Only to do the right and to love goodness,
and to walk humbly with your Lord.

(Mi 6:8)

These words remind Jews and Christians that they are stewards of God's world and hence meant to be co-workers.