

‘Yad,” Rabbi Joel Meier explained to an audience of Jewish and Catholic leaders, “means ‘hand’ in Hebrew.”

By extension it refers to a pointer lectors use as they read the Torah before a congregation. The occasion for his remark on Nov. 19 was the conclusion of the semi-annual meeting of the National Council of Synagogues, an association of Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Jewish leaders, with the Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interfaith Affairs. The rabbi was presenting a “yad” to Cardinal William H. Keeler in gratitude for 20 years of leadership in Catholic-Jewish relations.

It was a quiet, low-key transition, suited to the man it honored. For Cardinal Keeler, the archbishop emeritus of Baltimore, is a soft-spoken, modest gentleman, whose plain words are carefully chosen. It would be easy to mistake him for just another Catholic prelate. But when the history of the Catholic Church in the late 20th century is written, his achievements will stand above those of many.

More than anyone else, he has been responsible for the progress of the U.S. church in ecumenical and interfaith affairs, and above all for unique advances in Catholic-Jewish relations that made this special relationship a model for the world.

With calm determination, he has fostered those relations, earning the respect and affection of the Jewish community. Whether the climate was stormy or sunny, he was tireless in meeting with local Jewish groups around the country. With sureness of purpose, he worked with American Jewish leaders through crises, like the controversy over the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz in the mid-90s. When Jewish defense groups complained about Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah’s defense of Palestinian rights, he would calmly urge them to meet the patriarch in person; and when Patriarch Sabbah planned visits to the United States, the cardinal would quietly offer to arrange meetings for him with his Jewish friends.

In 1983 Cardinal Keeler became chairman of the Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interfaith Affairs. After his term as N.C.C.B./U.S.C.C. president concluded, he again became the moderator for Jewish relations; and after a split between the Orthodox Jewish leadership

and the Reform and Conservative rabbis and lay leaders, he co-chaired the dialogue with the National Council of Synagogues, the Reform-Conservative umbrella organization. (First the late Cardinal John J. O’Connor and more recently Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre have chaired the dialogue with Orthodox Judaism.)

When Bishop Keeler of Harrisburg took over as moderator of Catholic-Jewish relations from Bishop Francis Mugavero of Brooklyn in 1987, plans were underway for Pope John Paul II’s second visit to the United States. About six weeks before the visit the Austrian president, Kurt Waldheim, a former Nazi officer whose unit had participated in killing Jews, visited the pope at the Vatican. A storm of protest went up from the Jewish community. Bishop Keeler was at the heart of negotiations that put the pope’s anticipated meeting with American Jewish leaders during the visit back on track. At the same time, he

helped Jewish leaders resolve a dispute among themselves

about where in Miami they would meet the pope.

Similarly, as a member of the Dialogue of [Eastern] Orthodox and Catholic Bishops, Cardinal Keeler, even in difficult times, always found ways to sustain relations. In 1997, after Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew had given a provocative address at Georgetown University, the cardinal offered the patriarch an irenic welcome in Baltimore and soon after hosted one of the more contentious meetings of the International Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue at Mount Saint Mary’s Seminary in Emmitsburg, Md. Afterward he worked steadily to re-gather the group and re-establish the dialogue. That Catholic-Orthodox relations are now on a steadier, more positive course is due, in large part, to Cardinal Keeler’s fidelity to the cause of Christian unity.

Among his other accomplishments were gaining the bishops’ approval to fund and staff interreligious dialogue, resulting in solid Islamic relations; interreligious collaboration for peace; and the formation of Christian Churches Coming Together in the USA, a Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical forum on public issues. **Drew Christiansen, S.J.**

Of Many Things

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106 West 56th Street
New York, NY 10019-3803
Ph: 212-581-4640; Fax: 212-399-3596.
E-mail: america@americamagazine.org;
letters@americamagazine.org.
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