

Cardinal in a Synagogue
By David Hains

(Cardinal William Keeler, Archbishop Emeritus of Baltimore visited Temple Beth Shalom, Miami Beach, on May 13, 2008 as a guest of Bernardo Benes, President of Our Elder Brothers and Sisters Foundation, Inc. and Senior Rabbi Gary A. Glickstein)

The elderly man with the gravelly voice stood at the podium and asked a question.

"How many people in this room have never seen a Cardinal? Please raise your hand." About a quarter of the 550 or so gathered in the Miami Beach Temple Beth Shalom raised their hands. "Then this is an important occasion for you," said Bernardo Benes, organizer of the event to honor his Eminence, William Henry Keeler the Cardinal Archbishop Emeritus of Baltimore.

Keeler, a prince of the Catholic Church, long associated with interfaith dialog was in the Temple Beth Shalom synagogue to receive the first John Paul II at the Western Wall Award from Our Elder Brothers and Sisters Foundation where Benes is Founder and President.

The seeds of the award were planted 22 years earlier in 1986 when Pope John Paul II crossed a great divide to do what no other Pope before him had done. He visited a Jewish house of faith, the great synagogue of Rome. Although the distance traveled that day by the Holy Father was less than a mile from St. Peter's Basilica the symbolism and impact on two great religious traditions has been felt for decades.

Keeler, who was made a Cardinal by John Paul II in 1989, talked about the late Pontiff's dedication a meaningful dialog between Christians, Jews and Muslims. In his native Poland John Paul grew up in the village of Widowice alongside a vibrant Jewish community. "The pope," Keeler stated, "talked to us about returning to his home in Poland after World War II. The Jewish people were all gone, wiped out by the Nazi's. The pope had meditated on the book of Exodus that morning and said that this helped him understand the high value that the Jewish people place on the State of Israel."

Keeler went on to talk about the Covenant God established with the Jewish people and how reflections on those covenants, written by Rabbi's over the last 2000 years, are extremely important to our current understanding of God.

In the present day the Cardinal made reference to the situation involving Israel and its neighbors. Keeler spoke of the two state solution that will allow the Jews to live in peace with the Muslims and Christians of the Middle East. As if to emphasize that point the gathering featured prayers offered by a Muslim leader, a Catholic priest, a rabbi and a Protestant minister. Keeler was introduced by Archbishop John Favalora, the Bishop of Miami.

Keeler concluded his remarks by reaffirming the Second Vatican Council teaching on Catholic-Jewish relations that reiterated the commitment of the Church to the dialog of the last 40 years that has fundamentally changed the relationship. "Because of that growth in trust and friendship, Christians and Jews can rejoice together in the rich spiritual ethos we share. Each year when we listen to the Passover story we return to that blessed night of liberation. This should be a call to both of our communities to pursue justice, mercy and solidarity with the stranger as Moses commanded."

Not surprisingly Cardinal Keelers words were met with a standing ovation. The evening concluded with music and a recitation of the written prayer that John Paul II placed in the Western Wall in Jerusalem when he visited the site in March 26, 2000. Rabbi Gary Glickstein of Temple Beth Shalom led prayer and 550 emotion filled voices joined in to what has become the rallying cry of the Elder Brothers and Sisters Foundation:

"God of our fathers,

You chose Abraham and his descendants
To bring your Name to the Nations:
We are deeply saddened
By the behavior of those
Who in the course of history
have caused these children of yours to suffer.
And asking your forgiveness
We wish to commit ourselves to
genuine brotherhood
with the people of the Covenant."