

Jewish exile takes up late pope's work

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Bernardo Benes, left, with the president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Walter Cardinal Kasper.

At only 96 pages, it is a slim book, but its hefty message has changed Bernardo Benes' life.

Fifteen years ago, Benes, a retired Cuban-born banker perhaps best known in Miami for negotiating the release of thousands of Cuban political prisoners in 1978, garnering gratitude and controversy from fellow exiles, received Letter to a Jewish Friend from his cousin Zaydee Lopez-Ibañez. Benes is Jewish and lives in Surfside. Lopez-Ibañez is Catholic and lives in Charlotte, N.C. They share Jewish grandparents and strong family ties.

The book, by longtime Vatican observer Gian Franco Svidercoschi, recounts the friendship between the young Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope John Paul II, and his Jewish school buddy, Jerzy Kluger. But for Benes, it revealed much more: The story of a childhood that foreshadowed the pope's efforts to build bridges to the Jewish community. John Paul II became the first pope since St. Peter to visit a synagogue. He established diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Israel and, during a visit to the Holy Land, prayed at the Wailing Wall.

"By the time I finished reading this little book, John Paul had become a hero of mine," Benes says. "I saw how he had had a lifetime commitment to better relations with Jews, and as a pope he had changed 2000 years of injustice."

When John Paul died in April 2005, Benes went "as a simple Jew" to Rome for the funeral. Using his considerable business contacts, he was able to meet Kluger. That visit confirmed what Benes had been feeling for a while: somehow, the late pope's work with the Jewish community had to continue.

A NEW PROJECT

Back in Miami, Benes threw himself into a new project, Our Elder Brothers and Sisters Foundation (www.ourelderbrothers.org). Its goal: To foster better relations between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people by building upon the late pope's work.

So now Benes, 73, spends 10-hour days in front of a computer at a desk an old friend has loaned him in an office overlooking Coral Way. His fiery red hair has faded, and the stogie that was once his trademark is only an occasional indulgence.

Benes' optimism, however, remains intact.

"He's a very idealistic person, and that has sometimes gotten him into trouble," says Dave Lawrence Jr., former Miami Herald publisher and a member of the Our Elder Brothers advisory board. "But we need people like him to make progress in this world. What would we do without big dreamers?"

The organization builds on the late pope's work in three ways: by distributing a four-page brochure on John Paul II and the Jews, by promoting a universal celebration of April 13 in every synagogue and Catholic church as a commemoration of John Paul's visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome in 1986, and by working with Catholic and Jewish educational institutions to include lessons about John Paul and the Jews in their curricula.

SPECIFIC GOALS

So far, Benes has recruited well-known local and national leaders to join his board and has raised \$70,000 in small donations. His core advisers believe that the foundation's mission is different from the efforts of other interfaith groups.

"It's more practical and more activist," says former U.S. ambassador Ambler Moss, a professor of international studies at the University of Miami who is on the foundation's board. "The goals are very specific. He's very focused on education."

Benes has distributed hundreds of thousands of copies of the brochure -- now translated into 11 languages -- through churches, schools and other organizations. In October he attended the First Conference in the Vatican of Lay Catholic and Jewish Leaders. At his suggestion, John Paul's writings on the Jews have been added to the curriculum at St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary in Boynton Beach, and the school's course offerings now include a Jewish theology class taught by a rabbi.

"From an academic point of view, you can't understand Catholic theology, certainly Christianity itself, without knowing Jewish thought," says Steven O'Hala, vice rector and academic dean. "From a pastoral view, we want our seminarians to be more effective in a pluralistic setting, and this certainly contributes to that."

Benes says his work these past two years is not that much different from the delicate political maneuvering he managed three decades ago. In fact, the goal -- "To make this a better world" -- is the same.

MEETING CASTRO

Back in 1978, Benes met with Fidel Castro more than a dozen times to negotiate family reunification flights to the island and the freedom of 3,600 political prisoners. But he was an unlikely broker for such negotiations. Yes, he was successful in the business world. With a childhood friend he had founded the first Cuban-American bank in Miami. He established United Way International in 46 countries. He helped start Miami Beach's Cuban Hebrew Congregation. He opened 200 savings and loan associations in Latin America and was active in the Greater Miami Jewish Federation. But he had little experience in the quicksand arena of exile politics and no relatives left in Cuba.

By 1979, he was a pariah in the community, accused by hard-liners of being Castro's agent. His life was threatened and his bank bombed. These reactions stunned him. He had thought he had sterling anti-Communist credentials. His family's business had been confiscated by the Cuban revolution. His father had fled the Bolsheviks in the early 1920s and the Castro brothers 40 years later. But that did not stop Cuban radio commentators from labeling him a traitor. In 1985, at 50, he retired.

But friends say he never gave up.

"He's like the Energizer bunny," Lawrence says. "He keeps coming back -- always with his heart in the right place. Is he going to be able to eradicate hateful prejudice in my lifetime or yours? No. But what he is doing is very practical. He's going at it by way of education."

Though he loves his homeland, yearns for it still, Benes says he no longer is interested in being involved in exile politics. "At my age, I want to work at something where I can make a difference," he says.

'I still have the ideals of a 24-year-old student who wants social justice. And I'm looking at my grandchildren and thinking, 'I want this to be a better world for them.' "