

Rabbi: Jews and Christians 'live in amazing new times' since Vatican II

BY PAULA DOYLE
Staff Writer

Jewish-Catholic relations have come a long way, dramatically changing for the better since Vatican II.

So declared Rabbi Michael Mayersohn, director at the Alliance for Christian and Jewish Studies based in Southern California, in a recent Religious Education Congress workshop exploring the growth in Jewish-Catholic relations in the decades following the Second Vatican Council.

Rabbi Mayersohn opened his March 20 talk, "Jews and the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II," with a personal story reflecting the changes experienced by the last couple of generations in his family.

His father, whose Lithuanian Jewish immigrant parents in the

1930s were living in Kentucky, was often taunted with the words "Christ Killer" by Catholic children on his way to school. Thirty years later in the San Fernando Valley, young Mayersohn had a close Catholic friend, but his friend couldn't be a guest at a Temple service since there was a restriction at the time on Catholics attending worship services outside of their faith.

"Now," related Rabbi Mayersohn, "Catholic churches throughout Los Angeles, Orange County, San Diego and Arizona are inviting that kid from Van Nuys [who grew up to be a rabbi] to teach people about the Jewish roots of their Christian faith, the Jewish context of Jesus' life and his teaching and why it matters, why it's relevant to his teaching." He noted that his daughter, now in her late 20s, never heard the epithet, "Christ Killer," while growing up in Orange

County.

"It's good for us," declared Rabbi Mayersohn, "to take a moment and realize how dramatic that change is, how much has happened just in the last couple of generations, and especially since Vatican II and its document, 'Nostra Aetate,' in 1965. We live in amazing new times."

The rabbi called "Nostra Aetate" a "game changer" for Jewish-Catholic relations as it declared that all Jews cannot be held responsible for Christ's death and condemned any expression of persecution or anti-Semitism.

"It changed everything about the nature of our relationship between Catholics and Jews ... even the rest of the Christian world has been influenced over the last 45 years by this statement coming out of the Vatican" endorsed by 2,221 bishops, said Rabbi Mayersohn.

"If the Church and the Jewish community had responded to this declaration with silence, it probably would have been the end of it," noted the rabbi. Instead, dialogue started happening at leadership levels in the 1970s.

"It took another generation or so for us to begin having dialogue at the street or pew level, for people to begin talking with each other," said Rabbi Mayersohn.

He said the ensuing discussions among bishops led them to say that Jews can achieve salvation from their own teachings. "What flows from that is that, therefore, people don't have to be committed to converting Jews," said the rabbi.

He praised Pope John Paul II's courage and wisdom in his declarations against anti-Semitism and his historic 1986 visit to the synagogue in Rome, where he said to the Jewish congregation, "You are our beloved brothers. It could be said you are our elder brothers."

"It was a statement of the heart,



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DIALOGUE — Rabbi Michael Mayersohn speaks with an audience member following his March 20 workshop, "Jews and the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II" at last month's Religious Education Congress in Anaheim.

a statement of the spirit," said Rabbi Mayersohn. "There are times, like all siblings, when we will disagree. We can disagree with each other and we can love each other. We can know we have this bond that began 2,000 years ago."

The rabbi added that another sign of John Paul's decision to walk a new path into the future was his 1993 decision that the Vatican should recognize the state of Israel, which had been established 45 years earlier.

"John Paul II showed his willingness to walk that new path and create a new present for all of us, and it was his words and his actions which breathed life into Nostra Aetate of Vatican II," said Rabbi Mayersohn. "Without the courage of his actions and words that percolated through the entire Catholic community, it would have been a document that sat on a shelf."

Though much progress has

been made in Jewish-Catholic dialogue, Mayersohn pointed out, some Jews are still skeptical about interfaith relations considering their long history of persecution.

"I believe with all my heart it will take one more generation for the spiritual and emotional change to take part," said the rabbi. At the same time, he added, "I believe that we as Jews and Christians are finally at a time when we can say to each other, 'I know what causes you pain, I know what hurts you.'"

"John Paul II said we can get to a place where we can see each other, Jews and Christians, as a blessing to one another. I believe that we are."

"I believe that Jews are a blessing to Christians and that Christians are a blessing to Jews and that, together, we can do just about anything. Most importantly of all, we can love each other well, fully and in God's spirit." ❖



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CCC lauds Court decision re Arizona education program

The California Catholic Conference applauded the U.S. Supreme Court's April 4 ruling which upheld an Arizona program granting tax credits for contributions to scholarship programs that provide tuition support to students attending K-12 private schools.

"We are pleased with the Court's ruling," said Ned Dolejsi, CCC executive director. "Parents have the right to direct their children's education — meaning that they ought to be able to choose a school that

supports their values, meets their child's academic challenges and needs, and cultivates their child's natural talents and interests. With this decision, the U.S. Supreme Court has upheld a vital parental right."

Arizona's education tax credit legislation, enacted in 1997, has withstood multiple prior legal challenges, including the 2010 Ninth Circuit Court ruling which brought this case (*Arizona Christian School Tuition Organization v. Winn*) to

Please see *ARIZONA*, page 14