



Proclaim Jubilee!

Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland's Homily

November 7, 1999 · Congregation Shalom · Fox Point, Wisconsin

Dear Friends All,

During the Jubilee Year the land was to lie fallow. While that land was regaining its strength, those who tilled the land were to rest so that they, too, could start their lives over with new vigor, new vision, new zeal. The result was not to be a return to the old ways, nor to linger in the status quo, but truly to provide the possibility for a new beginning. The Jubilee Year was to make possible a creative, refreshing, renewal that would be characterized by previously unheard of fervor. In other words, a Jubilee Year was to afford for the individual and for the community a fresh start.

In our day and age we know that for such freshness to take hold of us we have to change interiorly. At the end of the Jubilee Year we cannot be the same people who began it. We Christians say that we need to be inwardly “converted,” that is, turned around. To describe that change the Greeks used the word “metanoia.” We have to change our attitudes if we want to change course—the course of our lives and of our society. Our tradition tells us that such deeper and more profound conversions do not happen at once but seem to involve various stages. Spiritual writers often talked of three stages in the conversion process. First, we must acknowledge the wrongs we have done. Secondly, we must seek forgiveness, just as we are willing to pardon others. Thirdly, we must make a firm resolve or commitment to reform, to be and act differently, as we move forward into the future. This evening I sense a need to walk through these three stages.

As we prepare to enter into this Jubilee Year, I want first of all to take this occasion to acknowledge before my fellow Jewish citizens of this city of Milwaukee the wrongs we Catholics have done. I do so as the appointed leader of the Roman Catholic community. I would ask the Catholics present this evening to act like good “Baptists,” that is, if they feel in conscience they can do so, to say “Amen” to the three affirmations that I make.

I acknowledge that we Catholics have through centuries acted in a fashion contrary to God's law toward our Jewish brothers and sisters.

Amen.

I acknowledge that such actions harmed the Jewish community throughout the ages in both physical and psychological ways.

Amen.

I acknowledge that we Catholics, by preaching a doctrine that the Jewish people were unfaithful, hypocritical, and God-killers, reduced the human dignity of our Jewish brothers and sisters, and created attitudes that made reprisals against them seem like acts of conformity to God's will. By doing so, I confess that we Catholics contributed to the attitudes that made the holocaust possible.

Amen.

Mindful of the admonition that only the victims can impart absolution, I feel a need publicly to ask God for forgiveness at the beginning of this Jubilee Year. I do so personally and in the name of the Roman Catholic community I represent. If the Catholics here present feel they can do so in conscience, I ask them to say “Amen” to the affirmations I make.

I ask for forgiveness for all the hurtful and harmful statements by Catholics against the Jewish people throughout the centuries.

Amen.

I ask for forgiveness for all the statements that implied that the Jewish people were no longer loved by God, that God had abandoned them, that they were guilty of deicide, that they were being, as a people, punished by God.

Amen.

I ask for forgiveness for all the statements that reduced the Jewish people to “non-people” that created contempt for them, that reduced their human dignity.

Amen.

I ask for forgiveness for all the teaching and preaching in Catholic churches that may have led up to the holocaust and that may have contributed to the horrors of that attempt at genocide.

Amen.

I ask for forgiveness if Catholics in any way here in the city of Milwaukee contributed in the past or in the present to those movements that denigrate Jews and threaten their well-being in our midst.

Amen.

But I also realize that for such assertions to have any force they must be supported by a firm purpose of amendment. They must be based of that kind of sincerity that

leads to trust. These affirmations must guide us Catholics in our future actions. I ask those Catholics here present, if in conscience they feel they can do so, to say "Amen" to each of them. For this purpose I now say:

I firmly believe that the God we Catholics worship and that we worship together with the Jewish community will not be divided by our human hatreds, that our God cannot be the source of hatred and harm to others.

Amen.

I firmly believe that the God we worship together cannot go back on His word. A covenant made by God will not be a covenant rejected by God. We will struggle to learn what that continued love of God for all of us, Jews and Christians alike, means in how we live together in the same society. We accept its demands that we change our attitudes toward one another and the world around us. We admit our openness to the new courses of action such attitudes demand.

Amen.

I believe that our faith compels us to see each other as created in the same unique image of God and that we both bear the image of that same God within us. I acknowledge that, because of that same image, we must stop seeing each other as rivals before the one God, because we are brothers and sisters in that one God's unique and living love.

Amen.

My next words are addressed to all here present, Jews and Catholics alike. The Jubilee Year should then permit us to move forward together to try to heal this world. There are four points I would hope we could agree on. If all feel they can accept these points, I ask them to say "Amen."

1. First of all, we must come to see that the intrinsic worth of all people on this globe is not dependent on their race or ethnic origin, their religious beliefs nor their worldly achievements, but on the image of God they carry within them. We must come to see that our God, the one we both worship, loves the starving baby in the Sudan as much as the dieting middle class in the United States. All people, in God's eyes, are sacred. All life is sacred and never to be taken for granted.

Amen.

2. We must work together to reverse the Cain-syndrome that has haunted the human race from time immemorial but especially in these last centuries with their emphasis on the rights of the individual almost to the exclusion of the common good. We cannot say to the God who loves us all: "Am I my brother's keeper?" as if somehow the fate of the other is of no concern to us. We must accept that we are responsible for our brothers and sisters on this planet. We are responsible for one another. Evil that harms one of us harms all of us.

Violence toward one of us is violence against all of us. Exploitation of one of us is exploitation of all of us. We form a community with all others because they too were created in the image and likeness of the same God. The relationship of brothers and sisters that must characterize our mutuality as Catholics and Jews must also be the bond that ties us to the rest of humanity.

Amen.

3. To heal the world we must also be willing to be prophets for the voiceless. If we want all to live in a just world, we must honor those who speak out the injustices against some of our members. Some in our society simply do not get the same chances as others. Such inequities must be unearthed and corrected. It is the prophet's role to speak God's word to society, pointing out the value of each person regardless of class or race or achievements, uncovering the inequities that keep people in subordinate roles, making us all feel uncomfortable till such disparities are healed. Being the voice of the voiceless is not a pleasant task, but who will do it if not the prophets in our midst?

Amen.

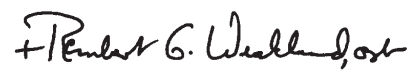
4. Together we must also reach out to others in need with works of charity. When someone is hurting, we must not just form another committee. We must, as individuals and as a society, be present, not waiting till we are forced to do so, not anticipating that the state will do all, not expecting that others will reach out.

Amen.

Finally, all of these words I have spoken today are easy to pronounce. Living differently than in the past will be harder. We must never again let words that diminish each other enter into our preaching, our teaching, our actions. That is not easy to accomplish since we all carry much historical baggage. We Catholics must know that the baggage of two thousand years is not cast off in a decade.

But we have now made a beginning. If we continue to be concerned about what is best for the other, if we no longer continue to stereotype each other, if we can develop mutual respect and love as brothers and sisters in the same one God, we will be able to work together to bring a spirit of healing to this world and to all those who live here. Such healing must be our aim.

My prayer is that the one God who loves us all and in whose image we are all created keep this spirit of unity among us alive and fruitful into the future. I pray for courage for all of us. I do so in the name of the God who loves us all equally, that God in whose image and likeness we are all created. I pray in God's name. Amen.


Rembert G. Weakland, O.S.B.