

REVIEW

Gunther Lawrence

The Business of Being a Jew

(New York: Jay Street Publishers, 2008) Paper, 149 pp.

Reviewed by Eugene Fisher, Retired, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

Gunther Lawrence has been professionally active in the organized Jewish community for nearly half a century. This book is his memoir of that life, behind the scenes organizing and serving to communicate with the press for meetings with the key leaders of that period, ranging from Martin Luther King Jr. to Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Readers of this journal will be especially interested in the approximately 40% of the volume that deals with Christian-Jewish and especially Catholic-Jewish relations. The reviewer has known and worked with Lawrence on the latter for over thirty years, so can affirm the essential accuracy of his memory of the key events we shared.

The narration of Catholic-Jewish relations begins with the Second Vatican Council, when he arranged an interview of Father Gustav Weigel, SJ, with a friend who was a reporter for the New York Times. The story of the work being done on a statement on the Jews, which became *Nostra Aetate*, §4, was carried on the front page of the *Times*. In Lawrence's estimation, it helped in making it most difficult for the considerable forces arrayed at the Council against any statement on the Jews, to bury the issue. Weigel rightly insisted that this must be faced by the Church.

Lawrence goes on to sketch, albeit briefly, the formation of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) and, in the United States, the Synagogue Council of America (SCA). He was the public relations head for the latter. It is in narrating the latter that Lawrence's story becomes very gripping. He presents the Jewish side of the great controversy over the 1987 audience given by Pope John Paul II to Kurt Waldheim, the then president of Austria whose past as a member of the Nazi party was just surfacing. An historic meeting between the pope and the leadership of American Jewry had been scheduled as the first major event of the pope's visit to the United States in September. The meeting with Waldheim, of course, placed this larger meeting in jeopardy. How could the Jews be expected to meet with the pope just weeks after he had hosted a by now notorious ex-Nazi?

As the staff person for relations with the Jews of the US bishops' conference, I can attest to the sheer volume and intensity of the behind the scenes negotiations between Catholic and Jewish leaders. They worked feverishly together to manage the manifold difficulties facing all who wanted the meeting between the pope and the leaders of the world's largest Jewish community both to take place and to be successful. During an August visit to New York, in anticipation of the pope's visit, Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, the Holy See's Secretary of State, met with a small group of leaders of the Synagogue Council of America, the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and a representative of IJCIC. In the hall outside the room staff, such as Lawrence and myself, anxiously awaited the outcome of the 90 minute meeting. The

outcome was an invitation by Cardinal Johannes Willebrands of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews to a special meeting in Rome at the end of August.

As the person in charge of press relations for the Jewish side, Lawrence narrates the meeting in Rome from his point of view. It started with a meeting of the nine Jewish leaders and corresponding Catholic leaders representing the Holy See and the US Bishops Conference, Cardinal Keeler and myself. Needless to say, the meeting was intense; however, it paved the way for the meeting with the Pope the next morning. This meeting went extremely well, with the pope making some very moving remarks about the Holocaust, which murdered so many of his childhood Jewish friends. He spoke about the need for Catholics to hear the witness of Jews to the Holocaust and called for Catholics to join their voices to those of Jews to ensure that it never be forgotten. He went on to voice his desire to visit Israel. Along with Rabbi Tanenbaum and Cardinals Willebrands and Keeler, I worked with Lawrence on the press release. Gunther rightly points to the significance of its key phrase: "The Holy See declared that there existed no theological reasons in Catholic doctrine that would inhibit such relations" (p. 62). (It is important to note that this was well before the Vatican and Israel exchanged ambassadors.)

As Lawrence narrates it, the meeting in Miami between the pope and over 200 national Jewish leaders went quite well. He goes on to describe subsequent key meetings in which both he and I took part, such as the meeting of IJCIC and the Pontifical Commission in Prague in 1990 and—against the background of the Auschwitz Convent controversy—an unforgettable encounter between a small, key group of Jewish leaders in Washington and Cardinal Jozef Glemp of Poland.

As part of the press corps flying on the same plane, Lawrence accompanied the pope on his historic visit in 2000 to Jordan and Israel, and reports the response of Jews to this visit. He describes his idea of creating a liturgical sculpture, which eventually became a Yom Hashoah Menorah, in honor of the victims of the Holocaust. He has reverently placed this Menorah on the grounds of several cathedrals and Catholic seminaries in the United States, as well as on the ground of the North American College in Rome.

Lawrence describes a series of priest-rabbi dialogues on intermarriage which he organized for dioceses across the USA and Canada. These have established deeper understandings among not only Jewish and Catholic clergy, but even more significantly between the families of Catholic-Jewish marriages. Finally, in 2007 he organized a trip to Rome for a large group of Catholic and Jewish lay leaders, along with some clergy. This experience of dialogue and intense mutual learning accentuated educational, community and humanitarian activities as well as joint study.

I heartily recommend this book for all who wish to be knowledgeable about this important phase in the history of Catholic-Jewish relations.