

Monsignor Francis A. Glenn Lecture Interfaith Relations: We've Come a Long Way

by Blanche McGuire

"Interfaith relations have come a long way," speaker Rabbi Alvin Berkun told attendees at the annual Monsignor Francis A. Glenn lecture sponsored by the Catholic Historical Society on November 6, 2011 at St. Paul Seminary.

Rabbi Berkun, rabbi emeritus of Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Congregation, set the stage by explaining how Vatican II started Catholics and Jews on the road toward greater understanding and friendship. *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican's 1965 document on non-Christian religions, recognized Jews as the "elder brothers" of Christianity and firmly rejected the centuries old belief that Jews in perpetuity are to be held responsible for the death of Jesus.

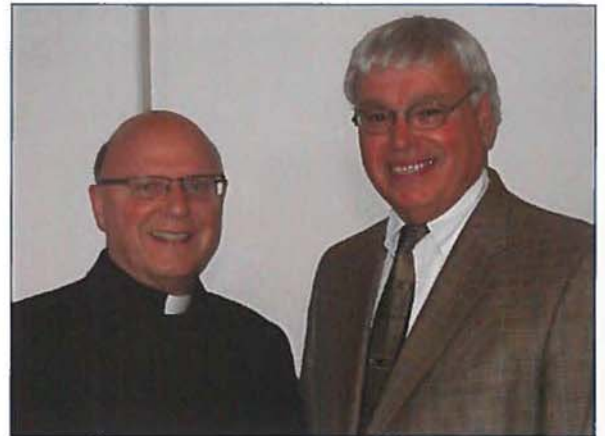
"For 2000 years, the relationship between Christians and Jews was pretty miserable" Rabbi Berkun told the crowd. One example, he said, was his father's experience as a boy in Russia. Rabbi Berkun's father was told to avoid walking in front of churches because Jewish boys were kidnapped by the Russian Orthodox Church, forced to serve in the Russian army for 25 years, and required to accept the Orthodox tradition.

One generation later, Rabbi Berkun now walks into churches on a regular basis and works hard to promote Catholic-Jewish dialogue. He has participated in meetings with the Vatican and the Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In Pittsburgh, he worked in close partnership with Bishop (now Cardinal) Donald Wuerl to create key interfaith programs that have flourished for more than a decade.

One such program is C-JEEP, an educational enrichment program designed to help young people understand each other's religion. C-JEEP is a teacher exchange initiative in which Jewish rabbis and educators teach Catholic students about Jews and Judaism and Catholic educators teach about their faith in Jewish schools, congregations and youth groups. For 10 years, Rabbi Berkun has taught students at Central Catholic High School about the Jewish roots of Christianity. "As the only city that has implemented C-JEEP in all 12 Catholic diocesan high schools, Pittsburgh has history happening right in front of our eyes" he said.

Other local programs are the Rabbi-Priest Dialogue in which rabbis and priests from the Diocese of Pittsburgh study Biblical text together on an ongoing basis and the Pursuer of Peace Pilgrimage in which a group of Catholics and Jews together visited the Holy Land and Rome.

Rabbi Berkun's talk was made all the more engaging with the many stories he told. One such story involved a prominent rabbi who was baffled when his mother sent him a chemistry set. When asked for an explanation, she reminded him



Rev. Joseph Mele, Rabbi Alvin Berkun

that he had wanted a chemistry set as a child and was told he could have one when the Pope visited a synagogue. Years later, the unthinkable happened when the Pope did just that.

Rabbi Berkun's lecture concluded with a question and answer session.

Blanche McGuire is the Interim President, Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

