

Peace between Christians and Jews beg

By Dori Berahya

Brother against brother. The story is as old as time. Just a few pages into the Bible we have the first murder: Cain kills his brother, Abel. Only with God's help can we learn to love one another, to put an end to hatred and killing. Since the beginning of time God has called us to live in peace. By the Grace of God, Christians and Jews are finally answering that call.

Communication is the first step. An open and honest dialogue between these two groups can begin to heal the wounds and correct the misperceptions. Unfortunately, an open and honest dialogue must begin with some painful realizations for Christians. Centuries of persecution must be faced head on. We cannot dwell in the past but we cannot ignore it either.

Mobile is blessed to have a quarter century of experience of Jews and Christians getting to know one another. Paul and Mary Filben began the current Christian-Jewish dialogue at the request of Bishop John May. Little did they know they were embarking on an endeavor that would still be going strong 25 years later.

Mr. and Mrs. Filben laugh as they shake their heads "no" to the much-asked question, "Did you have a special call to ministry between Christians and Jews?" Their "call" came when they were serving on the Community Relations Committee of Civil Rights and Bishop May asked them to serve on the Diocesan Interfaith Commission. A couple of years earlier, the Jewish community had invited the different Christian faiths, including Bishop May, to an evening at the Springhill Temple to get to know one another.

"We needed to reciprocate," said Mary Filben, "That is nothing but good manners." So the Filbens

picked up the phone, called the Rabbi at the Temple and asked him to invite some members of his congregation to come and watch a video with some of their Catholic friends. The 28-minute video, "Troubled Brotherhood," is about the history of Christian persecution of Jews. The group of about 20 people watched the video, not an easy viewing for Christians unaware of centuries of mistreatment of Jews by Christians.

After the video, several of those present said that "something" must continue said the Filbens, and the Christian-Jewish Dialogue was born. They credit their new friends at the Temple with coming up with the idea of "Dessert and Dialogue." Soon, 8 groups of 16 people, Jews and Catholics, were gathering in their homes to share goodies and get to know one another and the religious traditions and beliefs that define them. Paul Filben said that there were specific guidelines that were followed by facilitators in order to maintain the emphasis on respectful dialogue.

"But you cannot shy away from difficult topics," said Paul Filben. Topics for discussion included the Papacy, abortion, anti-Semitism, Papal Infallibility, Original Sin, and views of creation. Each group had a Christian facilitator and a Jewish facilitator who met after each monthly gathering to discuss what worked and what did not work in the Dialogue.

Soon friendships were formed and Catholics were invited to Pass-over dinners and Jews were attending Baptisms. The second year, Christians from the Protestant churches were invited to join the Dialogue. The Filbens stress that what made the Dialogue work, from the very beginning, was that all involved made it clear that this was a dialogue, not a desire for

Christians to proselytize the Jews, as has happened so many times before in history. Another important issue was the temptation to say that both Christians and Jews were worshipping the same God, ignoring important theological differences that had to be recognized and respected. The Dialogue was to learn about the differences, not just celebrate the similarities.

By the third year, the group had grown in numbers and the format was changed. A speaker was brought in once a month to speak about current events at local churches or the Temple. After the talk, those attending would break off into groups to discuss the topic. The fifth year the Dialogue went to its current form of lecture series.

"We have come a long way," said Mary Filben, "But we have very far to go." Both of the Filbens agree that it is important to keep the laity as the primary participants in the Dialogue. Problems have arisen in other Dialogue groups when clergy take over the planning. Too often, the discussions reach a scholarly level of theological debate. The Dialogue is meant to be neighbor learning about neighbor, dispelling myths and misconceptions. The goal is always understanding, never conversion.

Mary Filben said that one of the most interesting meetings that the Temple held was when they

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gins with dialogue

had tables set up representing every Jewish holiday. The food, the traditions and the background behind the rituals were displayed and explained. Christians learned a lot about how Jews celebrate life and God.

Twenty-five years after the first tentative steps toward brotherly love between Jews and Christians, Mary and Paul Filben are in the thick of things. They were the driving force behind getting the funds to send McGill-Toolen Catholic High School teacher Jerry Darring to Israel over the summer to learn how to teach the Holocaust.

"The Holocaust is a Christian problem because it happened in the heart of a Christian civilization," said Paul Filben. "It is the Christian's job to do the repairing," he said. "Jews do not need Christians for validation," he said, "But Christians need Judaism for validation."

A long and troubled brotherhood is showing signs of reparation. God's call to love is finally being heard. In Mobile, that is due to the efforts of a Roman Catholic

couple who were simply doing what their Bishop had asked them to do. "We are successful because we did not know it would be hard," said Mary Filben.

To find out more about the Christian-Jewish Dialogue as it begins its 26th year, call Mary or Paul Filben at 342-9384.



IN DIALOGUE-Paul and Mary Filben have been facilitating Mobile's Jewish-Christian Dialogue for 25 years. One of the longest-running programs of its kind in the United States, the dialogue has been a tremendous benefit to local Jewish-Christian relations on theological as well as personal levels.