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Who is my friend? Who is my enemy?

by Lesley Dawson

Joe's uncle was a priest based in Rome. During his younger days he had spent a semester at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem studying the Holocaust. It was something his bishop had suggested might be helpful in developing Jewish-Christian relations in the New York parish that was to be his next posting. Father Bernard knew that Vatican 2 had tried to improve relations between Catholics and Jews and huge efforts were being made to understand the effects on the Jewish community of the massacre of 6 million Jews by the Nazis. Everything had changed since then.

Arriving in Jerusalem, he soon realized that there were two distinct parts, one Jewish and modern, the other Arab and older. His lodgings were in East Jerusalem, with the White Fathers on Nablus Road, just a stone's throw from the wall of the Old City and within walking distance of both the Dome of the Rock mosque and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It was enjoyable walking through the streets in the Old City and conversing with Arab Muslims and Christians as well as Armenians and Orthodox Jews.

This helped him come to terms with his studies about the Holocaust, which were really freaking him out. Every day he returned home from class like a limp rag as he reflected on what he was hearing and seeing about how western Christians had conspired against the Jewish communities in so many countries to hand them over to the Nazis. The horrendous films and pictures he was seeing of such events was made even more pointed by the setting of the modern Hebrew University and the European looking students and teachers he met in West Jerusalem.

The culmination of the course was a visit to Yad Vashem museum. As he passed through halls where collections of children's toys and shoes were followed by false teeth and wigs and other intimate objects. It was almost too much but he felt he had to keep going to the end. After all this human detritus, just before the exit was a large black and white photo of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem shaking hands with Hitler. The juxtaposition of this seemed to make a link between the happenings in Europe and those in Arab Jerusalem.

Bernard badly needed to discuss what he had seen and one of the White Fathers suggested he approach members of the Nussaibi family who were the keepers of the keys at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Over a cup of Arabic coffee and with a nargileh to smoke in one of the cafes of the Old City, Sari Nussaibi tried to explain how the photo had been taken.

"You may remember that during the Second World War things were not going well for the British in Sinai and Egypt. My grandfather was concerned to get support for Palestinian independence, so he decided to approach the Germans who were being tipped to win the war. There is an Arabic proverb "The enemy of my enemy is my friend". The Germans were no more our friends than the British but needs must."

Bernard had forgotten that one of his tutors lived in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City and the man walked past seeing one of his students in conversation with a prominent member of an old Jerusalem Arab family. He nodded at the father and went on his way home. Bernard thought no more about it until next morning he found a letter in his mailbox at the university. The body of the message was a single sentence "Now everyone knows who you really are."

Joe had heard the story many times and only now, after living in Bethlehem, was he beginning to understand its significance.