

Anti-Semitism

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Do not forget.

On the same island that holds Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, there is a memorial for French Jewish Holocaust victims who were deported in the 1940s. When you enter, you see white stone walls covered with rows and rows of uncountable black buttons, each signifying a person. When turning to leave, you see the “Do Not Forget” (“N’oubliez pas”) over the exit.

This image came to mind on Oct. 28 as I heard of the 11 martyrs shot to death at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. As in our tradition, a person killed solely because of their faith is termed a martyr.

Over the past couple of weeks, I have listened to reports about people and groups who have ramped up anti-Jewish rhetoric in recent years. I confess that I have been unaware that kind of “hate speech” has slipped into the mainstream. It seems to rise and fall through history, and too often, someone picks it up again for their own strange reasons. In my first year of priesthood, I preached something that upset a person enough for them to post a message on the parish bulletin board: “Jesus was no Jew.”

There are a couple of things I hope to do through this column. First, publicly express my sadness and my support for the survivors of that shooting. I am not thinking just of people in Pittsburgh, but of all people who are Jewish by faith and by heritage.

Second, I encourage every-one who reads this to talk about the term “anti-Semitism” around their kitchen table. Parents should talk to their children about this term, and the potentially deadly results this bias may have. It is difficult to locate the tipping points where a prejudice turns to violence.

Of course, getting to know different people as people greatly reduces suspicion or ill feeling. I think back to when I taught the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) to freshmen and we took busloads of students on a day trip to visit a synagogue. The leaders at the synagogue were thrilled that we were interested in them, and that we wanted to hear them explain their faith tradition in their own words.

My students had a different human perspective when they again heard that we all worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

We must not remain silent about anti-Semitism. It is important that we all examine our consciences on being part of the problem or part of the solution. Silence can have dire consequences.

CANDLES is a small Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Terre Haute, Ind. Eva Kor founded it, herself a survivor of Second World War Nazi imprisonment. She still does public presentations. During a visit to the museum, I purchased a poster that hangs in a prayer space at my residence. It quotes a Protestant minister, Pastor Martin Niemöller (1892-1984): “First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out because I was not a communist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.”