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The Churches and the Shoah *

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I was born in 1965, in the town of Bergamo in North Italy. I begin with this personal data because I must situate myself as I address a subject that is so important and painful and which continues to be at the heart of the meeting of Jews and Christians. These facts situate me in the generation after the War and in a new epoch in the life of the Catholic Church. In this regard, I would like to explain the following:

1.

I was neither a direct nor indirect witness to the terrible events that took place during the Shoah in Europe and that led to the extermination of six million Jews. I was born exactly twenty years after the end of the Second World War and the liberation of the survivors from the concentration camps, on a European continent that was wrestling with its past in an attempt to deal with this weighty past, which includes the Shoah. My generation has had to deal with the heritage of our parents, which continues to define our identity.

2.

As a believing Christian and as a man of the Church, this wrestling is not only cultural, political, social and pedagogical but also spiritual and theological. The challenges that face the Church after the Shoah are many and Christian believers must deal with a multiplicity of dilemmas, theological, spiritual and communitarian. I am conscious of being a member of a Church that has been asking itself for a number of decades already searching questions about its own past and future in the light of the War. How should we understand what happened in the past and how must we educate our children to ensure a better future? The year of my birth marks one of the most important events in the history of the Catholic Church in the modern age. In that same year — 1965 — the Second Vatican Council drew to a close. This meeting of thousands of Catholic bishops — the spiritual leaders of the Church — from all over the world fundamentally changed the face of the Church. These changes, at least in part, were a response to the profound crisis that was provoked by the Second World War. Thus, one might say, I was born into a Church that not only sought to situate itself anew in the modern world but also sought to freshen itself up.

Due to the far-reaching changes that occurred in the Catholic Church in the sixties and seventies, I breathed a new spirit, very different from my predecessors, and found myself in a Church quite different from the one my parents had known in their childhood. Among the most noticeable changes within the Church were those in liturgy (prayers were no longer said in Latin for example). Among these changes in the Church's thinking was the positive attitude to the world at large, no longer perceived as threatening but rather as a place where we develop and deepen our faith. One of the most important transformations in Church thinking was in the approach towards other churches and religions. After the Council, the Catholic Church invested much effort and interest in the meeting

with representatives of other churches, other religions and even with non-believers. The Council, it is said, opened the windows of the Church.

There is no doubt that one of the most important turnarounds in the period of the Council was that which related to the Jews. Since time immemorial "the Jewish question" has had a central place in Christian thinking. Traditional Christian ambivalence towards the Jews is expressed in the tension between two images. On the one hand, they are God's chosen people, the people of the patriarchs, the priests, the kings, the sages and the prophets, the people of Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples. On the other hand, they are the people against whom the prophets raged, the people who, according to age old Christian exegesis, rebelled against, opposed and refused to recognize the sovereignty of God, leading up to their refusal of His Messiah. According to this image, the Jews are the people responsible for the crucifixion of the Messiah because of their blindness. God had given them His revelation, His Torah, and they were unable to see the fulfillment of His promises in His son, Jesus, the Jew from Nazareth, who was sent, first and foremost, to them. Regretfully, hundreds of years and an event as awful as the Shoah were necessary in order to bring the faithful of the Church to reconsider their opinions about the Jewish people and to substantially change their attitudes.

In all truth, I must say that in my childhood I heard very little about the Jews. In the region where my family lives there is no Jewish community. Jews had lived there once, coming probably from Venice, the city that dominated the area. They arrived in the fifteenth century but were expelled in the wake of the anti-Jewish preaching of a Franciscan monk, Bernadino da Feltre. When I tried to recall the first time I had heard about Jews, I was reminded that in my childhood I did sometimes hear the word "Jews". People who did not go to Church regularly on Sunday were called "those Jews". Of course, these people were not really Jews but rather "irreligious" people, who did not observe the traditions of our ancestors and therefore aroused the suspicions of the elders of the community. Calling someone a "Jew" was for them an insult without ever having known flesh and blood Jews. This seems to derive from a perverted reading of the Holy Scriptures and probably from distorted sermons on the readings.

In school, we did learn about the victims of the Fascist regime in Italy during the War. We were aware that among the victims of the War and the Nazi occupation were also the Jews who were sent to death camps together with the opponents of the regime. The accusing finger of our teachers was directed against the Fascists who collaborated with the Nazi occupiers. We did not consider these Fascists to be Christians but rather to be enemies of the Church. In those days, we still had not formulated the important question of Christian responsibility for the culture of anti-Semitism in Europe. We spoke explicitly about Jews only in the context of the War. In my childhood I did not know any Jews personally. Only after many years, during my theology studies, did I become aware of the fact that I had indeed always known many Jews, brilliant and heroic Jews, Jews who were exemplary figures for me. I did not know them as flesh and blood real people but I was familiar with them from the stories of the Bible. Yes, it took quite some time for me to link the personalities that filled the readings, I heard in our prayers and which I studied with great interest alone right from my earliest childhood, to this same Jewish people.

I arrived in this country as a young monk and, unlike my predecessors before the Vatican Council, I was exposed to Israeli society and to the Jewish people. This happened first in the Ulpan where I studied modern Hebrew and afterwards when I continued my studies in the Department of Bible at the Hebrew University. It was then that I came to realize how much I did not know about the history of Europe as seen from the Jewish perspective. I understood then that the religious difference is only one of the elements that divide Jews and Christians. (It is interesting to point out here that the religious difference did not influence relations between myself and my Israeli friends). Rather, the difference in how we study and interpret history, especially the history that Jews and Christians have shared, constitutes an abyss between us. I came to know that the Jewish reading of history puts the suffering of the Jewish people at the center and that we, Christians, often play the role of the persecutors.

In what follows, I do believe that I am not speaking only for myself, as a Christian believer born two decades after the Shoah, but rather that I am echoing a broad and widely accepted Catholic position. Two pivotal questions face us as we, Christians, try to deal with the heavy burden of our history as Church in the days of the Shoah:

1.

The first question touches on the past. How could the Shoah have taken place in a world that had been Christian for generations? How did the Church in Europe fail in the task of forming the conscience of the faithful so that they would absolutely refuse to collaborate with movements and parties that diffused values totally opposed to the values of Jesus of Nazareth and the Gospel? How did it come about that some Christians collaborated with the Nazi machine of destruction and a majority of Christians simply stood by when the Nazis and their collaborators tried to destroy the Jewish people?

2.

The second question relates to the future and puts at the center the educational and social challenge: how can we prevent the repetition of the Shoah? How can we contribute to the creation of a culture founded on the values of life, peace, justice and development? In my opinion, we are going to have to work together because it is impossible to build a new world without a common effort.

In the time that I have left, and I will be brief and thus necessarily partial and selective, I would like to present to you the Catholic wrestling with the two questions I have just formulated.

Firstly, how can we deal with the question of the past? The Church is working in four directions in order to substantively change the attitudes of Catholic believers to the past.

1.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has been emphasizing in both education and preaching the Jewish identity of Jesus and of the early Church. The central figure in the faith life of every Christian is Jesus Christ, whom we recognize as Messiah and Savior and as Son of God. It is impossible to come to know Jesus without underlining the importance of his belonging to the Jewish people. Almost ten years ago, the late Pope John Paul II (may he rest in peace) gave a lecture to the Pontifical Biblical Commission and left us an impressive image of Jesus the Jew. His words reflect the change in the perception of Jesus of Nazareth, and I quote him: "Jesus" human identity is determined on the basis of his bond with the people of Israel, with the dynasty of David and his descent from Abraham. And this does not mean only a physical belonging. By taking part in the synagogue celebrations where the Old Testament texts were read and commented on, Jesus also came humanly to know these texts; he nourished his mind and heart with them, using them in prayer and as an inspiration for his actions. Thus he became an authentic son of Israel, deeply rooted in his own people's long history. When he began to preach and teach, he drew abundantly from the treasure of Scripture." (Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, April 11, 1997). Within the context of our discussion here, I cannot avoid the frightening thought that if Jesus had lived in the period of the Shoah, his fate would have been the fate of every Jew. However, this belonging to the Jewish people is not restricted only to Jesus. His mother too, his family, those close to him, his disciples were all Jews. Jewish and Christian scholars in universities here and abroad research today the writings of the New Testament that were written by the Jewish disciples of Jesus and they see this literature as part of the Jewish literature of the Second Temple period and its aftermath.

Obviously, pointing out the Jewish identity of Jesus, of his disciples and of the early Church completely contradicts opinions that were once widespread with regard to the negative role of the Jews in the Biblical stories. The Old Testament harshly condemns the sins of the people. However, the Christian reader tends to forget that this is part of the greatness of Israel — a people that is capable of expressing sharp criticism of itself, pointing out its own sins and failures and asking God and humanity for forgiveness. Even the accusation that the Jews crucified Jesus ignores the more important fact that Jesus was himself a Jew. The Christian reader distorts the Scriptures when he finds in the writings of Israel (the Old Testament) and the writings of the Jewish writers who believed in Jesus Christ (the New Testament) reasons to accuse the Jews. No! The reading of these Scriptures is supposed to prepare the Christian reader to identify with Israel and to find in Israel's humanity the positive and negative aspects of our own proper humanity.

2.

When the Christian looks at Jesus and clearly understands that this man is a son of the people of Israel, he or she must also take into account the Jewish heritage of Jesus, which constitutes the common heritage that Jews and Christians share. The roots of Christianity are to be found in Judaism. I myself learnt and always teach that the New Testament is incomprehensible outside of its unity with the Old Testament. In the Christian tradition, what Jews came to call the "TaNaKh" was called the "Old Testament" — a term that represents the relationship between the two parts of the Christian Bible. The problem has been that Christians have tended to attribute to the word "old" a materialist interpretation. They have thought of the "Old" Testament like one might think of old shoes or an old computer — old being redundant, not up to date and perhaps even faulty and of no use. Today, we must educate Christians to understand that the meaning of "old" in the expression "Old Testament" is the opposite of its materialist meaning. "Old" means roots, depth, experience, wisdom. It relates to the essential framework for understanding the "new". "Old" tells us about a faithful love that continued for generations and without which there is no possibility for anything new. In fact, Jesus in the New Testament did not come for any other reason than to fulfill the "old" and thus we can see that the "new" is the illumination of the "old" and not its abolition. Jesus is the man of the Torah par excellence for Christians and he is indeed incomprehensible cut off from the Torah that defined his life and all his steps. His prayer towards the end of his life concretizes this perfectly: "Not what I want but what you want" (my God) (Mark 14:36).

Part of the problem in the attitude to the Old Testament is the opposition that some have tended to stress between the image of God in the Old Testament and His image in the New Testament. The contradictory caricatures of an "angry and vengeful God" in the Old Testament and a "loving and merciful God" in the New Testament do not match the reality of the two parts of the Christian Bible. Rather they give evidence of an ignorance concerning the content of the Bible itself. Pope Benedict XVI has explained this well in his first letter (encyclical) to the Catholic faithful, "God is love", which was published just a few months ago. That which is really new in the Christian Bible is to be found in the pages of the Old Testament and it is the fact that God loves his people Israel and through this love He expresses His love for all nations.

3.

The fact that today we are facing the challenge of returning to our roots in order to correctly understand Jesus and interpret our Bible points to another element in our wrestling with the past after the Shoah. This element is the critical approach to some important points in Christian tradition, which are expressed in the writings of the Church Fathers, the great teachers who interpreted the Scriptures in the early period of the Church and were active at

the same time as the first rabbis of the Talmudic period. Here we can learn much from the people of Israel in the Bible and from their prophets, who did not hesitate to point out and denounce sin in the heart of the people. Christian preachers and commentators helped believers over centuries to understand their faith, however, they did not always do this with the responsibility that is coherent with the vision of Jesus, the Gospel and Christian values. Due to complex historical reasons and because of a certain embarrassing shortsightedness, even the greatest of the Christian teachers throughout the history of the Church tended to characterize the Jews as accursed. The anti-Jewish reading not only of the New Testament but also of the Old Testament presented the Jews as a stiff-necked people, their stubbornness being responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Today, we are aware that the New Testament blames everybody for the death of Jesus — not only the Jewish religious establishment but also the Roman political authorities and, more importantly, the disciples of Jesus themselves, accused of having denied him, abandoned him and fled. The early Christian Biblical commentators tended to forget too quickly the universality of the blame and focus uniquely on the accusation against the Jews. The obsession with Jewish guilt stems, perhaps, from the difficulty to understand why the Jews refused to accept Christian belief. In fact, we forgot that in this story almost everyone is Jewish — the good protagonists and the bad. The term "Jew" was reserved in our reading only for the bad guys. Suddenly, Jesus, Peter, Paul, Mary, John the Baptist and all the other "heroes" had become Christians. Only the Jewish religious establishment, the chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees and Judas Iscariot, of course, are Jews. Furthermore, not only were the authorities seen as guilty but the entire people, and this not just in one place at one time but everywhere and always.

The genesis of the process of demonizing the Jews is to be found in the polemics between the Church Fathers and the Rabbis in the period in which the borders between Judaism and Christianity were being defined — the period of the Talmud and after. The Jews were defined as children of Satan. Not only had they crucified Jesus, Son of God, and thus had become killers of God, but they also continued in their refusal of the clear truth of their very own Scriptures, which according to the Christian allegorical reading, saw in every page a prophecy regarding the coming of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. Thus, this blind people, who bear witness to the truth of the Christian faith, although they read the Scriptures differently, are destined to wander from place to place without a homeland, spreading their Scriptures and thus preparing the way for Christian faith. It should be pointed out, as formulated by Saint Augustine, that it was not permitted to kill them but rather that they should be kept in their state of humiliation as eternal witnesses to the truth of the Christian faith.

The failure of large sectors of the Christian tradition to deal with the Jew and Judaism in a positive way prepared the way for the development and flowering of modern anti-Semitism. The mid twentieth century Jewish French historian, Jules Isaac, defined the attitude of Christians to Jews as "a teaching of contempt" and the great project that is clearly formulated in the documents of the Vatican Council rejects this teaching of contempt and replaces it with a teaching of respect.

4.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church is struggling with the question of responsibility for what happened in the days of the Shoah. Does the Church share in the responsibility for what happened? There is no doubt that many leading Catholics as well as ordinary Catholics did not behave according to the values of the Gospel and did not adopt a courageous position in the face of the Nazi regime. I ask myself why were there so few heroes, so few who were willing to risk their lives in order to save Jews. It is certainly true that in the period before and during the war some clerics were more concerned with Communism than they were with the Nazi movement.

In the years following the war, local Catholic Churches tried to formulate their positions on these questions. There is much to be learnt from the declarations of the bishops of Germany, France, Poland, etc. These declarations not only express deep regret but also try to sketch the general outline of a new attitude to the Jewish people. Most of these declarations criticize the Christians and their leaders who stood by in these dark days when Jews were crying out for help. After the Shoah, this question became more urgent. In 1998, the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews published a declaration on the Shoah, entitled "We remember". At the center of the discussion before and after the publication was the complex question of taking responsibility. The document aroused much debate but I do not want to enter the debate here. I do want to cite this document because it was very important for Catholics, especially those who had never posed the question of responsibility at all. The document explicitly states, and I quote: "It may be asked whether the Nazi persecution of the Jews was not made easier by the anti-Jewish prejudices imbedded in some Christian minds and hearts. Did anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians make them less sensitive, or even indifferent, to the persecutions launched against the Jews by National Socialism when it reached power?" This declaration ends with the call to remember the terrible experience of the Shoah so that (and I quote): "the spoiled seeds of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism must never again be allowed to take root in any human heart."

I would like to end my talk with the question of the future: How can we prevent the repetition of an event like the Shoah? How can we, Catholics, make our contribution to the creation of a culture founded upon the values of life, peace, justice, respect and development? As I have already pointed out at the beginning, I believe that we must work together because it is impossible to build a different world without a joint effort.

Regarding the developments in the Catholic Church after the Council in the 1960s, I would like to emphasize four elements in a vision of the future.

1.

Today, the Catholic Church seeks a dialogue with the world at large. In the 1960s, we discovered how necessary this dialogue is. The Fathers of the Council decided to open the windows and to look out at the world not with animosity but with interest and love and to ask whether there was not something we could learn from the world. At least a part of the weakness of the Catholic Church in the period of the Shoah might be attributed to the isolation from and even suspicions of some groups in the Church with regard to the world at large. This isolation led to a kind of naive attitude and even ignorance. Encouraging a culture of dialogue after the Council was one of the great changes in the teaching of the Church. The Church recognizes that it has partners in "tikkun olam" (the repairing of the world). The Church, furthermore, believes that religious leadership can influence the currents in the world, for either good or for bad. We must build alliances with other believers and with non-believers too in order to prevent the negative exploitation of religion.

2.

There is no doubt that within the culture of dialogue, the dialogue with the Jewish world is central. The Catholic Church is conscious of the unique relationship that binds it to the Jewish people. We have just begun the dialogue and we are still at the stage of removing the obstacles. We must advance to the next stage, which is building together a society founded on the values we share. Pope Benedict XVI spoke about this during his visit to the synagogue in Cologne last year (and I quote him): "Much still remains to be done. We must come to know one another much more and much better. Consequently, I would encourage sincere and trustful dialogue between Jews and Christians, for only in this way will it be possible to

arrive at a shared interpretation of disputed historical questions, and, above all, to make progress towards a theological evaluation of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. (...) Our gaze should not only be directed to the past, but should also look forward to the tasks that await us today and tomorrow. Our rich common heritage and our fraternal and more trusting relations call upon us to join in giving an ever more harmonious witness and to work together on the practical level for the defense and promotion of human rights and the sacredness of human life, for family values, for social justice and for peace in the world."

3.

It is not coincidental that the Pope spoke about human rights. The Second Vatican Council stresses the Catholic commitment to both human rights and individual freedom. The position of the church did not always conform to these values and here too there is need for redress. However, today the Church has adopted a basic attitude founded on human rights. This fact can constitute part of a common heritage shared by Jews and Christians, who see in every human person the image and likeness of God. Thus we have a clear theological basis for a regime built upon mutual respect even in cases of difference and conflict.

4.

Finally, I must stress that the Church lays particular emphasis on the values of justice and peace in our world. It sees in the Jewish people a special ally in the attempt to influence along these lines. Again, we have learned much from history, and we must admit that we have not always worked for this goal. The late Pope John Paul II had a strong influence on me personally and I would like to cite his 2002 message for World Peace Day: "*No peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness*: this is what in this Message I wish to say to believers and non-believers alike, to all men and women of good will who are concerned for the good of the human family and for its future. *No peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness*: this is what I wish to say to those responsible for the future of the human community, entreating them to be guided in their weighty and difficult decisions by the light of man's true good, always with a view to the common good. *No peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness*: I shall not tire of repeating this warning to those who, for one reason or another, nourish feelings of hatred, a desire for revenge or the will to destroy."

At the conclusion of my talk I would like, once again, to bring in a more personal note. When I face the Shoah I must ask myself: How would I have acted? Would I have heard the cries of the Jews? Would I have found in myself the courage to stand by them and risk my life?

I have adopted two personalities from the days of the War as models and both are linked to my personal story because of how our stories have crisscrossed. These two personalities symbolize for me the prophetic stance of the Catholic Church in the days of the Shoah because these two men were willing to risk their lives and the Church by their positions and their acts in order to save Jews during the Shoah.

The first is the man who would later, in 1958, become the Pope who led the Church on the way of the reforms of the Council. His name is John XXIII. He was born in Bergamo, my own home town, and his name then was Giuseppe Roncalli. He was a man with a big heart. I know that tomorrow Prof. Dinah Porat will be telling you about his work when he served as Vatican ambassador in Istanbul. This man symbolizes for me the possibility to change positions and repair traditions. I am proud to belong to his tribe.

The second personality is that of Franciscan Father Ruffini Niccacci. He was a monk who, during the

Nazi occupation of Assisi, the town of Francis, who founded the Franciscan order, organized an underground which saved thousands of Jews. I am proud to belong to the same Franciscan order to which he belonged, an order, however, which did not always stand with the Jews.

These two represent a model of what it means to be a man of the Church for me. Totally faithful to the Church of Jesus and its tradition, they were not afraid to go against the current. Their courage attracted many others and they had a positive influence. They opened for us a door in the attempt to correct ourselves. They helped us to go in search of our Jewish brothers and sisters in the aftermath of the days of darkness. They helped us to go out into the light of day and together with our brothers and sisters from every religion and nation to look for a common way to a better world.

Editorial remarks

* On April 25, 2006, Shoah Memorial Day, the Custodian of the Holy Land, Father Pierpattista Pizzaballa, spoke at the Tel Aviv University about the responsibility and guilt which Christianity shares in the events of the Holocaust. This presentation had at that time found a strong echo in the Israeli public. Father Pizzaballa is one of the highest in rank of the Vatican representatives in the Holy Land. He spoke in Hebrew to a scholarly Conference gathered to examine the issues of "Christianity and the Holocaust." In his presentation Father Pizzaballa went further than many other Vatican representatives had gone by criticizing even some leaders of the Catholic Church for not speaking out against the evil of National Socialism. Many understood these comments to include a criticism of Pope Pius XII.