



# Recognising Our Brothers and Sisters

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**by Lisa Palmieri-Billig**

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The positive injunctions of *Nostra Aetate* have born good fruit in our deepening dialogue. The conciliar document said, "Since Christians and Jews have such a common spiritual heritage, this sacred Council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation. This can be obtained, especially by way of biblical and theological inquiry and through friendly

discussions."

Christian-Jewish Dialogue groups engaged in theological discussion and in formulating the basis for a shared ethics rooted in our common heritage have multiplied nationally and internationally. The International Liaison Committee, composed of Vatican representatives and representatives of five major international Jewish organizations, has met regularly for the past twenty years. The International Council of Christians and Jews, born in Seelisburg in 1947, representing all the Jewish-Christian Friendship Federations of the world, also meets annually. Last year, a major meeting was held in Warsaw on Jewish and Christian ideas on "The Quest for an Ideal Society". The workshops, especially those on issues related to Polish-Jewish relations were painful, sincere and moving. To me, it was another step forward in a growing friendship. In July there was another ICCJ world

gathering in  
Budapest.

Two years ago in  
Jerusalem,  
Christian and  
Jewish leaders from  
all five continents  
gathered to discuss  
"Religious  
Leadership in a  
Secular Society."  
Perhaps we are  
close to achieving  
what Father Marcel  
Dubois, the  
Dominican Superior  
of Isaiah House in  
Jerusalem and a  
great pioneer of the  
Christian-Jewish  
dialogue, calls one  
of the basic  
necessities of our  
new friendship: the  
ability to "agree to  
disagree", about the  
divinity of Jesus, for  
example. The  
Jewishness of  
Jesus, he says,  
both separates and  
unites us in our  
common religious  
roots.

A Sister of Sion,  
recalled a significant  
episode that took  
place recently in the  
Philippines. She  
had been told there  
was absolutely no  
anti-Semitism. In  
fact there were  
practically no Jews  
living there. An  
American Jewish  
professor was thus  
invited to give a  
series of talks on  
Judaism in different  
Philippine churches.  
To her horror, after

his talks he was assailed by a host of hostile questions headed by "Why did you Jews kill Jesus Christ?"

Last Good Friday in Rome - in a gesture of ecumenism by the Catholic Church, a Protestant nun of the Grandchamp Community in Switzerland was entrusted with writing meditations for the Pope's "*Via Crucis*" procession to the Colosseum. She invited all Christians to ask God's forgiveness for having "rejected" and "shown disdain" for the Jewish people even in its liturgy.

"*Vita Pastorale*", the periodical of the Italian Bishops Conference, published an editorial around Easter which shows that it is too soon to ask forgiveness for theological anti-Judaism in the past tense, since it is still being practiced. The writer Luigi della Torre, suggested the removal of parts of the Roman Good Friday liturgy which still contained sections contrary to *Nostra Aetate*. He was referring to "The Lamentations of our Lord" which blames Jews for

ungratefulness, for having "repaid the Lord" for the blessings they received "by killing him". Many other issues still clutter the path of our dialogue.

## **Saviours**

During the last World War, Jewish perceptions of Christians were either sublime or abysmal. They were sublime with regard to those thousands of Christians who, under Nazi occupation all over Europe, risked their lives to save Jews, and the Jews who were saved began to seek out their saviours decades later, when they could begin to really talk about the terrible trauma they had lived through. They tried to express their gratitude, honouring their saviours by giving them medals, writing about them, making documentaries and planting trees in their names in the valley of "Righteous Gentiles" at the Yad Vashem Memorial to the Shoah in Jerusalem.

Poland had by far the largest pre-war Jewish population in

Europe; a total of 3.3 million, of which less than 300,000 survived and only 10,000 of whom live in Poland today. Over three million Christian Poles were also killed by the Germans, and in the midst of this immense suffering there were also exceptional people who risked their lives to save their brothers.

At Yad Vashem, by far the largest number of trees dedicated to "righteous gentiles", are dedicated to Polish saviours of Jews. The present Foreign Minister of Poland, Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, is one of the many glorious examples of the heroic altruism of individual Poles during the war, and a tree in his honour stands in Yad Vashem's "Alley of the Just".

## **Convert**

In contrast, Jewish perceptions of Christians were abysmal when they found indifference or even connivance with Nazi anti-Semitism amongst them. Examples of such "un-Christian" Christians, sadly, continue to emerge

from the past, just as examples of moral courage continue to emerge.

Another obstacle to dialogue is the largely prevailing and not entirely unjustified Jewish perception that Christians still await the day when Jews will convert to Christianity. Of course active proselytising is no longer practiced [by most mainline churches, ed.], but we all know that Christians in their hearts and through their very caring for us, continue to hope. As Pope John Paul II said in his book, "Crossing the Threshold of Hope", "The New Covenant has its roots in the Old. The time when the people of the Old Covenant will be able to see themselves as part of the New is, naturally, a question to be left to the Holy Spirit. We as human beings try only not to put obstacles in the way. The form this "not putting obstacles" takes is certainly dialogue between Christians and Jews, which, on the Church's part, is being carried forward by the "Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity."

This is beautifully and very delicately put, but not quite according to the rules of our definition, not quite a dialogue between equals.

Jewish scholars with a strong Jewish religious identity, who are not new to our dialogue, will have no serious problems coping with this attitude. After all, we all secretly hope to convince the other with our ideas. On the other hand, religious Jews who are not updated on the progress of our dialogue and recall the history of mediaeval disputations, might become dissuaded from participating in the present Jewish-Christian dialogue for this reason.

A lovely means of bringing home to both Jews and Christians the human importance of our friendship and of combating the stereotypes we have of each other is to read the book by Gianfranco Svidercoschi, *"Letters to a Jewish Friend"*, now available in Polish from the "M" Publishing House. This book is the true story of the lifelong



friendship between the Pope, Karol Wojtyla, and his Jewish schoolmate, Jerzy Kluger, who now lives in Rome. The book has been translated into many languages - English, Spanish, German, French, Hungarian, Rumanian and Hebrew. It is a simple but moving and paradigmatic story, and I highly recommend it to you and your children.

This pope, the "Polish Pope", is particularly dear to Jews. He has proven on countless occasions that he deeply understands and feels sincere compassion for the suffering of Jews and for the decimation of our people as a result of the Shoah. He is to us, as to you, an important moral voice. Without such strong and sensitive moral leadership, we could not have arrived at today's point of irreversibility in the Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Religious relations between the Roman Catholic Church and world Judaism, and the political relations between the State of Israel and the Holy See have always been

inextricably intertwined. Political and religious conciliation walk hand in hand and neither would have come about without *Nostra Aetate*.

The now famous "Preamble" to the Agreement between Israel and the Vatican which led to the opening of official diplomatic relations last year, is certainly not the language of normal diplomacy. It goes far beyond, as behooves the ushering in of a new era of dialogue and friendship - the rediscovery of or common moral outlook based on the shared religious roots that unite us.

### **Unique Nature**

"Mindful of the singular character and universal significance of the Holy Land", the agreement opens, "aware of the unique nature of the relations between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people and the historic process of reconciliation and growth in the mutual understanding and friendship between Catholics and Jews..."

In this context, I would like to tell you a "midrash" from the Jewish tradition: One day, a rabbi asked his disciples, "How does one know the precise moment when the night disappears and the day dawns -- the moment when one must bless God for the creation of light?"

The disciple said, "When from afar one can distinguish between a palm tree and a fig tree." "No", replied the rabbi. Another said, "When from afar one can distinguish between a dog and a goat." "No", said the rabbi. "Then tell us When! When does the moment come when we must bless God for the creation of light?" Asked the disciples impatiently. The rabbi then replied, "When from afar, in seeing a man, you recognise him as your brother, because then the night that was in your soul disappears and both your heart and his are filled with light."

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