



## The Historic Visit of the Pope to Israel in March 2000: Memories and Hopes

31.03.2004 | Kronish, Ron

**Rabbi Ron Kronish, Director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, discusses the lasting significance of the visit of Pope John Paul II to Israel in March, 2000.**

### The Historic Visit of the Pope to Israel in March 2000: Memories and Hopes

[Ronald Kronish](#)

#### Introduction

Despite predictions of impending gloom and doom - including a headline in a local Jerusalem Hebrew newspaper just one week before the visit of the Pope to Israel in March 2000, which indicated that the Pope would be entering *gehinom* (hell),<sup>1</sup> because there would be so much opposition to his visit here from so many people in the Jewish community - the visit of His Holiness Pope John Paul II was an extraordinary historical success. How did this happen? What were the factors that caused this visit to be so successful? How did this particular Pope change the course of Jewish-Catholic Relations - both in the years leading up to this pilgrimage to the Holy Land and during the pilgrimage itself, which was undoubtedly one of the spiritual highlights of his papacy? Why and how did this Pope focus on the religious reconciliation with Judaism and the Jewish People in this official visit to the Jewish state as part of his overall pilgrimage to the Holy Land?

#### Background: Progress in Jewish-Christian Relations Since Vatican II

The visit of Pope John Paul II to Israel was the culmination of systematic and substantive progress in Jewish-Christian Relations since the famous council known as Vatican II in the mid-1960s and right up through the 1990s, with the recognition by the Vatican of Israel at the end of 1993 and the issuing of a significant statement by the Vatican on the Shoah ([We Remember](#)) in March 1998.<sup>2</sup> The last 35 years have witnessed a truly historic revolution that is above all evidenced in the educational materials relating to Jews, Judaism and Israel that have been developed in the United States and in other places around the world.<sup>3</sup> However, most Jews are totally unaware of these developments. According to Rabbi Harold Schulweis, a rabbi who has been deeply involved in Catholic-Jewish Dialogue over many years, "the war" with the Catholic Church is over. In a very powerful article in which he accuses the Jewish people with having slept through this revolution, he explains the changes - and the need for us to change accordingly - in graphic terms:

It is understandable to want to fight yesterday's war and this time to give it a different ending. But to wage war with the wrong enemy, at the wrong time and on the wrong occasion is to fall into a trap of dangerous anachronism. Pope John Paul II is not John Chrysostom. The Church of Vatican II is not the Church of the middle ages. The new Catholic catechism is not the old Catholic catechism. . . . There is something new under the sun and it requires a new statesmanship, a new politics, a new theology as we enter a new century.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed so much has happened that is new during these past 35 years. In a paper prepared for the foreign press in advance of the visit of the Pope to Israel by Fr. Michael McGarry, Rector of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem and Co-chairperson of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI), the major signposts along the new path of dialogue were highlighted:

For forty years Catholics and Jews have walked a new path, the retracing of which reveals a number of significant steps towards a new understanding and a new relationship . . . while most of these signposts are official Church documents, all represent hours and years of consultations, often with our Jewish dialogue partners, and which represent a sea change of ways in which we Roman Catholics approach our Jewish brothers and sisters.<sup>5</sup>

In short, the Catholic Church has made enormous strides forward on the subject of relations to Jews and Judaism since Vatican II in the mid-60's. Even though the beginnings of this revolution in Catholic doctrine took place under Pope John XXIII, there is no question that the current pope, Pope John Paul II, who began his papacy in 1978, encouraged and expanded these developments based on his own personal history (having grown up in Poland among Jews) and due to his own personal inclinations and theology.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, his very desire to come on spiritual pilgrimage to the Land of Israel was very much a culmination of this process, a fact that was so clearly expressed in many of his speeches and gestures during the visit itself. Despite his poor health, this was a dream that he fervently hoped to live to see. As became evident during the visit, this was as much a personal spiritual pilgrimage, as well as an institutional one on behalf of the universal Catholic Church.

### **Arrival at Ben Gurion Airport**

After weeks of media hype and conferences that speculated on what would happen during the visit of the Pope, he actually arrived on Tuesday afternoon, March 21st at 5:30 p.m. at Ben Gurion Airport in the center of Israel. Like so many other moments, this was an amazing symbolic and emotional experience. The Pope and his entourage arrived on a Royal Jordanian Airline's plane from Amman, where he had spent the previous day as part of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and on the front of the plane flew two flags - the blue and white flag of the State of Israel and the flag of the Holy See, a sovereign state as well as the capital of the universal Catholic Church.

This airplane signified the merging of the Peace Process with the new spirit of understanding and cooperation that has been developing since Vatican II in Jewish-Christian Relations. Just as the signing of the Fundamental Agreement between the State of Israel and the Holy See on December 31, 1993, was implemented just three months after the signing of the Oslo peace agreements on the White House lawn in Washington D.C. on September 13th of the same year, so too this event was clearly a merging of processes of political and diplomatic "normalization" with similar religious and interreligious processes of reconciliation that have become characteristic of Jewish-Catholic Relations in recent decades.

The commentators on Israeli and international television networks confirmed this as the Pope was landing at Ben Gurion airport, the national airport of the State of Israel, aptly named after Israel's first visionary Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion. "How different this visit is than the visit of the Pope to Israel in 1964," remarked Ya'ackov Achimeir, the well-known veteran anchorman on Israel's Channel One. David Witztum, a commentator on Channel One, added: "This visit is different because under this pope, there has been progress on three major fronts: between Catholics and Greek Orthodox, between Catholics and Jews/the State of Israel, and between Catholics and Palestinians."<sup>7</sup>

Thus began the unbelievable media love-fest for the Pope that continued throughout the visit. It seemed that the usually cynical foreign and Israeli media melted when the Pope's plane touched

down at the airport. It was such an emotional moment. Indeed the response of the Israeli media - and the foreign press - was so extraordinarily positive to the visit of this major world leader to Israel that it was probably unprecedented in journalistic history in Israel. It was an amazing phenomenon - somehow the media became mesmerized and enchanted with the rich combination of historical, diplomatic, religious and interreligious symbolism involved in this unprecedented papal visit to the Holy Land. Rather than striving to serve their own agendas, the media functioned as the major educator of the Israeli public - as well, of course, of the entire world community - in teaching about who this Pope is and what he represents and what the changes in the Catholic Church in the second half of the 20th century have wrought, all leading up to this historic spiritual/diplomatic pilgrimage.

After the plane came to a halt, Prime Minister Barak and President Ezer Weizmann went to the bottom of the stairs to receive the Pope. His Holiness was to receive a state welcome, with all the protocol usually bestowed upon a leader on an official state visit, and even more. Thousands of security personnel surrounded the airport and a large receiving line of Jewish, Christian and Muslim public figures waited on the tarmac to receive the Pope. When he emerged from the plane, and walked down the stairs by himself, showing the strong willpower that characterized his every move and every speech throughout the visit, he was greeted symbolically by three children from Nazareth - a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim - who each gave him some earth from the land of Israel, the Holy Land, which he promptly and emotionally kissed. In his speech at the airport, which was carefully crafted, as were all of the papal speeches throughout the visit, Pope John Paul II set the tone for the rest of the week:

My visit is both a personal pilgrimage and the spiritual journey of the Bishop of Rome to the origins of our faith in 'the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob' (Ex 3:15). . . my journey is therefore a pilgrimage, in a spirit of humble gratitude and hope, to the origins of our religious history. It is a tribute to the three religious traditions which co-exist in this land. . . I pray that my visit will serve to encourage an increase of interreligious dialogue that will lead Jews, Christians and Muslims to seek in their respective beliefs, and in the universal brotherhood that unites all the members of the human family, the motivation and perseverance to work for the peace and justice which the peoples of the Holy Land do not yet have, and for which they yearn so deeply.<sup>8</sup>

## Visit to the Chief Rabbis

Thursday, March 23rd, was the Pope's main Jewish day, with visits to the Chief Rabbis, the President of the State of Israel and Yad Vashem. It was a day rich in symbolism and emotionalism, which undoubtedly left a deep impression on the people of Israel and on Jews all over the world. The Chief Rabbis of Israel - Rabbi Meir Israel Lau and Rabbi Eliahu Bakshi Doron - welcomed the Pope at their offices in Heichal Shlomo, with the traditional Hebrew greeting *Barach Ha'ba*, Blessed be your coming to Israel. Their short speech, which was warm and conciliatory (and devoid of political references, unlike Rabbi Lau's provocative reference to Jerusalem later in the day at the Interfaith Meeting, see below), expressing appreciation for what this Pope has done for the Jewish people during his papacy:

We welcome one who saw fit to express remorse in the name of the Catholic Church for the terrible deeds committed against the Jewish people during the course of the past 2,000 years and even appointed a commission for requesting forgiveness from the Jewish nation with regard to the Holocaust. We remember and mention to his credit the decisive assistance he gave in the matter of moving the Carmelite convent out of the area of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp, a place where millions of our brothers and sisters were murdered for the Sanctification of the Name...We appreciate as well his recognition of our right to return and to live in the Holy Land in peace and brother-hood within safe borders recognized by the nations of the world and especially by our neighbors. All these things were given expression in the prayer he offered at Auschwitz (June 11,

1999) for the success of the Israeli people's efforts for peace.<sup>9</sup>

The Pope's remarks to the Chief Rabbis were equally conciliatory and uplifting, expressing the hope that this "uniquely significant meeting" will lead to increasing contacts between Christians and Jews, "aimed at achieving an ever deeper understanding of the historical and theological relationship between our respective religious heritages". He also repeated what he had said on the occasion of his visit to the synagogue in Rome in 1986 that "We Christians recognize that the Jewish religious heritage is intrinsic to our faith: you are our elder brothers."<sup>10</sup>

The Pope did inject one paragraph into his remarks to the Chief Rabbis which caused much speculation and discussion. In stressing the need for some reciprocity in the Catholic-Jewish Relationship (without using the word 'reciprocity' specifically), he urged the Chief Rabbis, as Jewish leaders, to acknowledge that the Catholic Church repudiates antisemitism: "We hope that the Jewish people will acknowledge that the Church utterly condemns antisemitism and every form of racism as being altogether opposed to the principles of Christianity."<sup>11</sup>

This was undoubtedly a subtle call for the Chief Rabbis to take more of a role upon themselves in educating the Jewish people in Israel and abroad concerning the fact that the Catholic Church has indeed changed in recent decades, under this Pope. This call for reciprocity has been one of the main themes emerging from the Catholic side in the official Jewish-Catholic Dialogue of the International Liaison Committee (ILC), since 1994, when representatives from the Vatican and other leading Catholics came to Jerusalem for four days of dialogue.<sup>12</sup>

The most specific call for reciprocity was in a sentence in this speech (which was repeated in his speech at Yad Vashem later in the day) that first appeared two years previous to this in the document called [We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah](#) (authored by Cardinal Cassidy, former President of the Pontifical Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews, the body in the Vatican responsible for interreligious dialogue with the Jewish people): "We must work together to build a future in which there will be no more anti-Judaism among Christians or anti-Christian sentiment among Jews." Given the long history of Christian virulent anti-Judaism, violence and antisemitism over many centuries (which was not paralleled by anything comparable by Jews against Christians), the symmetry of this sentence bothered most of the Jewish leaders who heard it for the first time at a seminar of the ILC at the Vatican, March 1998, and it didn't sound any better with repetition during the visit of the Pope to Israel.

While there is undoubtedly a need for dealing with some "anti-Christian sentiment" among Jews, this cannot be simplistically equated with the long history of antisemitism against Jews by Christians. The equation just does not work, and it would be better if it had not been repeated twice on this day. Nevertheless, except for those who read each speech with a fine tooth comb, this point generally was overlooked by the media and did not serve to destroy or even inhibit the good atmosphere of the reconciliatory meeting between the Pope and the Chief Rabbis on this historic occasion. Indeed, the gestures and the geography (the location of the meetings), as on so many other symbolic occasions during the visit, were much more important than the words crafted by committees of speech writers, who often were writing things to please their own constituents.

## Visit to Yad Vashem

Following the visits with the President and the Chief Rabbis of Israel, the Pope and his entourage attended a special ceremony at the Hall of Remembrance at Yad Vashem, Israel's official state memorial to the Six Million Jews who were annihilated during the Holocaust. The Pope began the ceremony by laying a wreath, with the help of Cardinal Etchegary, the then President of the Pontifical Commission for the Commemorations of the Year 2000, and Cardinal Cassidy, then President of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, both Catholic leaders

who have played leading roles in the Jewish-Catholic Dialogue of recent decades and in the fostering of good relations with Israel as part of this process. As a cantor sang "El Maleh Rachamim" (God Full of Mercy), the traditional memorial prayer chanted for the dead and especially for martyrs of the Jewish people, we could see the Pope's face straining to take everything in at this highly personal and intensely emotional occasion. When it was over, the Pope, who is known as a master of the symbolic gesture, slowly got up from his seat and walked across the Hall of Remembrance, to greet the Jewish Holocaust survivors who were standing there, one by one. As he shook each hand, the commentator on television revealed that many of these survivors had been saved by Righteous Gentiles, Christians in Europe who risked their lives to save Jews, including one woman who was saved by Pope John Paul II himself long before he became Pope, during the days when he was a young priest in Poland.

The Pope's speech at Yad Vashem had been distributed to all the journalists in the press room, so everyone there could read it as he spoke. When I first read through it quickly, my first reaction was that there is nothing new here. But after rereading it as the Pope delivered it - with such complete sincerity and in a mood of serene spirituality in this special place - I realized that it wasn't the words that mattered here as much as the spirit, the symbolism and the sensitivities he expressed through his actions as well as his words.

The Pope began and ended the speech with a quote from the Psalms. This was a carefully crafted symbolic gesture, to show the common spiritual patrimony between Jews and Christians that can be found in the Hebrew Bible, a theme that has characterized the Jewish-Catholic Dialogue since Vatican II in the 1960's. Indeed, the whole speech was more like a modern psalm than a typical speech. The words and the mood were meant to be poetic. His cry from the depths was so reminiscent of the psalmist, which is what made the speech so evocative and so powerful. This was not your typical papal speech. Nor was it a "community relations" speech, which is why some of the Jewish community relations organizations - who had pumped the media for days previous to this with false expectations of some dramatic new announcement - were not satisfied. Rather, this was a deeply religious, spiritual declaration, expertly crafted for this very special moment in Jewish-Catholic history.

After quoting from Psalm 31:13-15 "I have come like a broken vessel, I hear the whispering of many, terror on every side, as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life, But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, You are my God," - the Pope captured the moment with a plea for silence, mixed with his own personal memories:

In this place of memories, the mind and the heart and soul feel an extreme need for silence. Silence in which to remember. Silence in which to try to make some sense of the memories, which come flooding back. Silence because there are no words strong enough to deplore the terrible tragedy of the Shoah. My own personal memories are of all that happened when the Nazis occupied Poland during the War. I remember my Jewish friends and neighbors, some of whom perished, while others survived. I have come to Yad Vashem to pay homage to the millions of Jewish people who, stripped of everything, especially of their human dignity, were murdered in the Holocaust. More than half a century has passed, but the memories remain.<sup>13</sup>

Beginning with silence and with the need to remember, the Pope also used this occasion to denounce antisemitism once again (as he has done so many times during his papacy):

As Bishop of Rome and Successor of the Apostle Peter, I assure the Jewish people that the Catholic Church, motivated by the Gospel law of truth and love and by no political considerations, is deeply saddened by the hatred, acts of persecution and displays of antisemitism directed against the Jews by Christians at any time and in any place. The Church rejects racism in any form as a denial of the image of the Creator inherent in every human being.<sup>14</sup>

This is clearly the place in which some Jewish organizational leaders were expecting more. They wanted the Pope to accept responsibility on behalf of the Catholic Church for the Church's failings during the Holocaust. But those who know more about Catholic theology - especially the doctrine of papal infallibility - knew that this was not possible. In fact the Pope went no further in his words than he had done in the *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* document of March 1988, from which he quoted in this speech. Yet, his gestures spoke much louder than his words, as did his very presence at Yad Vashem, the national Holocaust Memorial of the State of Israel. Indeed, the picture of him standing, bent and broken - looking, next to Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who stood straight and tall, spoke more than words. It was the Pope's indomitable spirit on that day - and throughout the trip - that moved Jewish people in Israel and all over the world to tears. It was his spiritual presence that moved Prime Minister Barak to react so positively in his speech. Prime Minister Barak's speech, like that of the Pope, was beautifully crafted for this highly symbolic occasion. He welcomed the Pope, not only in the name of the Jewish people, but also in the name of the State of Israel and all of its citizens - Christians, Muslims, Druze and Jews - "in friendship, in brotherhood, and in peace, here in Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, the eternal city of faith."<sup>15</sup>

The Prime Minister also captured this special moment by acknowledging this Pope's special role in bringing about a historic change in the relationship of the Church to the Jewish People and he saw this visit as the apex of this process. Addressing the Pope personally and poignantly, he said:

You have done more than anyone else to bring about the historic change in the attitude of the Church towards the Jewish people, initiated by the good Pope John the XXIII, and to dress the gaping wounds that festered over many bitter centuries. And I think I can say, Your Holiness, that your coming here today, to the Tent of Remembrance at Yad Vashem, is a climax of this historic journey of healing. Here, right now, time itself has come to a standstill. . . this very moment holds within it two thousand years of history.<sup>16</sup>

As if all this was not enough, Prime Minister Barak also took two very bold steps forward by expressing gratitude for the Pope's "Mea Culpa" (which was part of the Pope's historic mass at St. Peter's on Sunday, March 12th, just nine days before his coming to the region) and by enunciating the desire to continue to work together to fight against racism and antisemitism:

Shortly before setting out on your pilgrimage here, you raised the flag of fraternity to full mast, setting into church liturgy a request for forgiveness, for wrongs committed by members of your faith against others, especially against the Jewish people. We accept this noble act most profoundly.<sup>17</sup>

Here was the Prime Minister of Israel taking the Jewish-Catholic Dialogue of the past 35 years a few giant steps forward. In contrast to many Jewish organizational leaders outside of Israel who expressed the view that the Pope had not gone far enough in his speech at Yad Vashem, the Prime Minister of Israel acknowledged the Pope's apology with great respect and utmost profundity.

## **Interfaith Meeting at Notre Dame**

Following the highly emotional and symbolic visit to Yad Vashem, the Pope journeyed across town to the Notre Dame Cultural Center, a major cultural institution in the center of Jerusalem, owned and operated by the Vatican, to attend the "Interfaith Meeting," which was planned as a dialogue between the Pope, one of Israel's Chief Rabbis, and a leading Muslim. Unfortunately, this event turned out to be an interfaith disaster, which some people believe would have been better if it had not taken place at all.

There was no question that one of the Pope's main messages during his visit to Israel and Palestine during this week was the urgent need for more and better interfaith dialogue to build

peaceful relations between the peoples of the Middle East. However, this message was only partially heeded at the Interfaith Meeting at Notre Dame.<sup>18</sup> Vatican officials who organized this meeting originally had high hopes that this would be an historic "Interfaith Summit." They had hoped that the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem would attend and would offer a message of peace and reconciliation similar to the one that the Pope and the Chief Rabbi would deliver. But all attempts to persuade the Mufti to participate in this meeting, over many months, proved fruitless.

The Jewish speaker, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Meir Israel Lau, tried hard to demonstrate that he understood the symbolic significance of the moment by offering a warm reflection on *shalom* (peace) at the beginning of his talk. Moreover, not only did he warmly welcome the Pope, with whom he had clearly established a good rapport in his meeting earlier in the day (and in previous meetings in Rome) but he also injected a note of cordiality by referring to the Muslim speaker, Sheikh Taisir Tamimi, as "my colleague."<sup>19</sup>

After talking about the need for religious pluralism, by quoting the prophet Micah who said "Let all peoples walk in the name of their God and we will walk in the name of our God," and after emphasizing some of the basic values that followers of the monotheistic religions share - such as friendship, understanding, speaking and listening to each other with mutual respect, and a yearning for peace - he then proceeded to make an extremely politically incorrect comment that clearly upset many people in the audience. As he turned to the Pope and thanked him for his visit to Israel, Rabbi Lau also stated that his visit to Jerusalem means that the Pope recognizes the city as the capital of the State of Israel. This was a bad case of putting words the Pope did not utter into his mouth. And it injected an unnecessary and unhelpful political message into what was supposed to be an interfaith gathering for peace and reconciliation. It would certainly have been much better to let the Pope's actions speak for themselves. There he was sitting in an auditorium in downtown Jerusalem, under Israeli sovereignty. Unfortunately this political reference caused some Palestinians in the audience to yell out, "You know that this is not the case! This is not the position of the Vatican!"

It might not have been so bad if this incident had been the only one of the day. But when the Muslim cleric began to speak, things went from bad to much worse. It was obvious from the angry tones from the first moment of Sheikh Tamimi's speech that he did not come to enter into any kind of meaningful dialogue on this potentially historic occasion. Instead, it appeared that he came to deliver a religio-political diatribe meant to fan the flames of extremism. According to those who had seen his speech in advance, he had clearly come prepared to deliver a fiery, aggressive speech in the first place, regardless of Rabbi Lau's remarks. Most people in the room could clearly see from the beginning of the Sheikh's remarks - which were made throughout with a loud screeching voice matched by somber facial expressions - that this was not a religious leader who had come to enter into dialogue.

Pope John Paul II, in his wisdom, totally ignored the Sheikh's ranting and raving by sticking to his prepared text which emphasized the need for more communication in what he called "the new era of interreligious dialogue."<sup>20</sup> In stark contrast to the Muslim speaker, he said, "We must find in each other's traditions the sources to ensure the triumph of mutual respect." Moreover, he urged that religion not become an excuse for violence. Instead, he said that religion and peace should go together.

The Pope reiterated his well-known position on the need for interreligious dialogue: "The Catholic Church wishes to pursue a genuine dialogue with members of the Jewish faith and members of Islam. We listen respectfully to one another and we should cooperate in everything that favors mutual understanding and peace."<sup>21</sup> In comparison to the previous speech, the Pope's pronouncements sounded somewhat like a pious wish list. He and everyone else in the audience on that day were presented with a bitter lesson on the gap between the ideal and the real in the

Middle East. The Vatican organizers did not realize their goal for this interfaith meeting to be a new beginning that could symbolize the potential for interreligious dialogue to further the cause of peace. This remains still a vision and a dream for the future.

## At the Western Wall

One of the most moving events of the whole week, from the Jewish point of view, took place on the last day, March 26, 2000. This was the remarkable visit of the Pope to the Western Wall, the holiest site for Jews and Judaism in Israel. The image of this visit remains indelibly etched on the hearts and minds of Jews everywhere. There has never been anything quite like this in Jewish-Christian history.

On behalf of the government of Israel, Rabbi Michael Melchior, the Israeli Minister for World Jewish Community and Israeli Society, welcomed the Pope at the Wall: "We welcome your coming here as the realization of a commitment of the Catholic Church to end the era of hatred, humiliation and persecution of the Jewish people." Rejecting much of the past, especially the perversion of religion to justify war, Rabbi Melchior proclaimed that this was the beginning of a new period in world history. In addition, Rabbi Melchior responded positively to the Pope's call for religions to advance the cause of peace by announcing his intention to begin immediately to work towards the establishment of an interreligious forum to which will be invited representatives of the three great monotheistic faiths in order to promote peace among religions and believers in this sacred land.<sup>22</sup>

The Pope made no formal speech at the Wall. Instead, he simply touched the stones of the Wall, prayed and placed a note in its cracks, asking God for forgiveness. In the note, which was distributed throughout the world via the internet and television, the Pope offered the following short prayer:

God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your name to the nations. We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the covenant. Amen.<sup>23</sup>

In immediate response, Internal Security Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami, a professor of European history, said in an interview on the radio, "For the first time, the Pope has explicitly said that he was sorry to the Jews."<sup>24</sup> And Rabbi Melchior was also quoted on the radio and in the press as saying, "He touched the Wall but the Wall also touched him.

There is something of great spiritual significance to this request for forgiveness at Judaism's holiest site, under Israeli rule."<sup>25</sup>

## Towards The Future: Where Do We Go From Here?

Never before in Israeli or Jewish history did so much education take place - mostly through the electronic and print media - about Christianity and Christian-Jewish Relations in one week or in one month, especially about the relations between Jews and Christians in the contemporary era, since Vatican II in the 1960's. This was totally unprecedented in Israeli society and in Jewish society in the modern period. The people of Israel - and people around the world - were exposed to and educated about the progress in Jewish-Christian Relations, which the visit of the Pope to Israel symbolized and epitomized, in quantity and quality the likes of which had never been seen or heard in such intensity.

Now is the time, more than ever before, to capitalize on this momentum and to establish a systematic and sustained educational program which will take off where the Pope left off at the end

of his historic pilgrimage to the Holy Land. As a natural follow-up to the visit of the Pope to Israel, this is the time to begin to increase education about each other between Christians and Jews in ways that were inconceivable before this. So many taboos were broken in Israel during that week. There was more discussion of Christianity on Israeli television and radio - and more reportage in the English and Hebrew press - than ever before. Jewish-Catholic Relations will be intensified in the years ahead in Israel because this is also part of the political-diplomatic agenda. Since the signing of the Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel at the end of 1993 (only a few months after the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords on the White House lawn on September 13, 1993), the political and the interreligious spheres in Catholic-Jewish Relations interweave and interact more than ever before. This will continue to be the case in the future. Jewish organizational leaders involved with the Vatican will need to coordinate their policies, statements and programs much more carefully with the government of Israel than in the past so as to build a joint agenda of cooperative education and action in the areas of fighting antisemitism and racism as well as promoting educational and cultural cooperation between Catholic and Jewish institutions.

This visit of Pope John Paul II to Israel should be considered therefore not only as one of the hallmarks of his papacy but also as the beginning of a new educational process. In a panel discussion for the foreign press on the last day of the papal visit to Israel, Brother Jack Driscoll - a member of the Congregation of Christian Brothers, former President of Iona College in New York, and since 1995 a student and teacher of Jewish-Christian Relations in Jerusalem - reflected on some of the next steps that need to be taken, from a Catholic perspective. In outlining a proposed action agenda for Catholics, he stressed the role of education as a major area of activity for the future. In particular, he called for the investment of resources in the renewal of Catholic theological education at all school levels, including teacher training, curriculum development and new pedagogy as well as new technology.<sup>26</sup>

In the light of the unparalleled educational experience afforded to Israeli society and Jewish communities throughout the world by this historic "journey of healing" (to quote Prime Minister Barak) by Pope John Paul II in Israel during the six days from March 21-26, 2000, there will be a similar need to begin to broaden and deepen the education in the Jewish communities of the Diaspora about the new revolutionary developments in Catholic-Jewish Relations of the second half of the 20th century, so that the Jewish Community will no longer be accused of sleeping through the revolution (as it has been previously accused by Rabbi Harold Schulweis.)<sup>27</sup> Part of this educational process will entail the need for Jews to remember the long and difficult past - replete with so many centuries of Christian anti-Judaism and antisemitism - without allowing ourselves to be stuck in it. This will include much study of the Holocaust period, as difficult as it may be, toward the goal of ascertaining the truth concerning what the Catholic Church did and did not do in order to save Jews during this period.<sup>28</sup> Rather than merely criticizing Catholic documents, and saying that they still have not done enough to correct the past, the Jewish community will need to carefully study statements and documents such as the Catholic document called *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* (March 1998) - which was prepared as a study document for Catholics and does not necessarily represent the last word in Catholic thinking on this subject - in order to fully understand the process of *teshuvah* (repentance) in which the Catholic Church is engaged in our century and in the previous one.

In addition, there are new voices in the Jewish community who are arguing and acting for the development of a new approach to the Catholic Church in the ongoing dialogue between the Church and the Jewish People. Rather than focusing on "community relations", they argue that we must now begin a new chapter of Jewish-Catholic dialogue by engaging in honest and sincere theological dialogue, in total mutual respect and without fear. Recent conferences - such as the ones in London in March 2000 and May 2003, co-sponsored by the World Union of Progressive Judaism (Reform) and the Pontifical Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews - and one in

Washington D.C., held at the Catholic University of America and co-sponsored by the same Vatican commission together with the new Rabbinic Committee for Interreligious Dialogue, comprised of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis - proved that this can be done. They are responding to the call for reciprocity from the Vatican and the genuinely expressed need for and interest in serious and sustained inter-religious dialogue to be carried out by people of faith on both sides, who are genuinely interested in learning about the other and then translating this new learning into educational programs and curricula for both faith communities in the future.

Lastly, now that the Pope has come to Jerusalem - and has made his clarion call for more and better interreligious dialogue in the Holy City loud and clear for the whole world to hear - it would seem appropriate for Jerusalem to play much more of a central role in Catholic-Jewish Dialogue, and Christian-Jewish Dialogue in general, in the future, especially as we move toward peace agreements between Israel and the Palestinians in the years ahead. As one interfaith activist in Jerusalem has put it succinctly, "If we are sincere in our prayers for the peace of Jerusalem, we must proclaim a ceasefire in our destructive wars of memory in which our memories and traditions often become prisoners of war. Rather, we must make Jerusalem the capital of dialogue between different memories, for dialogue is peace incarnate."<sup>29</sup>

In the 21st century, Jerusalem can become not only a center for Jewish-Catholic Dialogue but also one of inter-religious dialogue in which the political processes of peace-making between governments can be supplemented by the people-to-people processes which bring members of the major faith communities in Israel together in ways which were inconceivable only a few years ago.

**Notes:**

1. Eyal Hareuveni, et al, "Welcome to Hell," *Kol Ha'Ir*, March 17, 2000, p. 23, in Hebrew.
2. [We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah](#), published by the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, March 1998.
3. Rabbi David Rosen, "A History of Reconciliation: The Catholics and the Jews," *The Jerusalem Post*, Dec. 31, 1999.
4. Rabbi Harold Schulweis, "Sleeping Through a Revolution," *The Forward*, Oct. 11, 1999.
5. Fr. Michael McGarry, Roman Catholic-Jewish Relations. . . *Signposts along the New Path of Dialogue*, Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, March 12, 2000.
6. For details on the Pope's life, see the excellent biography by Carl Bernstein and Marco Politi, *His Holiness, John Paul II and the History of Our Time*, Penguin Books, 1997, especially chapters 1-3 on his early childhood, adult development and beginnings as a priest in the Catholic Church.
7. David Witstum, Israel TV, Channel One, broadcast March 21, 2000.
8. Pope John Paul II, address at Ben Gurion Airport, March 21, 2000.
9. Statement of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, March 23, 2000.
10. Address of Pope John Paul II to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, March 23, 2000.
11. *Ibid.*
12. This dialogue with Jewish leaders involved in interfaith dialogue was hosted by the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) and its Israeli constituent, the Israel Jewish Council for Interreligious Relations (IJCIR). It is significant that this took place in Jerusalem less than a year after the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords, and only a few months after the signing of the Fundamental Agreement between the State of Israel and the Holy See.
13. Address of Pope John Paul II at Yad Vashem, March 23, 2000.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Address by Prime Minister Ehud Barak at Yad Vashem, March 23, 2000.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. See: Ron Kronish, "The Pope and the pitfalls and potential of interfaith dialogue,"

*Ha'Aretz*, March 26, 2000.

19. Remarks of Chief Rabbi Meir Israel Lau at Interfaith Meeting, March 23, 2000.
20. Address of Pope John Paul II at the Interfaith Meeting, March 23, 2000
21. *Ibid.*
22. Since his speech, Rabbi Melchior helped to establish The First Alexandria Declaration of the Religious Leaders of the Holy Land, Alexandria, Egypt, January 21, 2002.
23. Prayer of Pope John Paul II at the Western Wall, as released by the Israel Government Press Office, March 26, 2000, and as published on the World Wide Web only minutes after the prayer was offered.
24. As reported in "Pope says `sorry' at Wall," *The Jerusalem Post*, Internet edition, March 26, 2000.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Br. Jack Driscoll, *What are the Next Steps? Reflections from This Catholic's Perspective*, briefing for Foreign Press at the International Press Center, Jerusalem, March 26, 2000.
27. Schulweis, Op. *Cit.*
28. An international committee of six scholars - three Jewish and three Catholic, appointed by the Vatican and by the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (I.J.C.I.C.) - began to do just this, to study the documents of the Catholic Church during the Holocaust period, to arrive at a better understanding of what the Catholic Church knew and did during this period. However, after a year and a half of work, which lead to the framing of a long list of questions, the committee was disbanded due to disagreements about its mandate and agenda.
29. Daniel Rossing, *Mother Jerusalem: Memory, Symbols and the Between*, briefing for Foreign Press at the International Press Center, Jerusalem, March 22, 2000.

Dr. Ronald Kronish, a rabbi and educator who has lived in Jerusalem for the past 24 years, is the Director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI).

First printed in *Ecumenical Trends*, published by the Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute, 33/2, February 2004.