



# Widespread Gratitude Expressed for Role of Pope John Paul II in Christian-Jewish Relations

11.04.2005

Gratitude for the role of Pope John Paul II in helping to create a new era in Christian-Jewish relations has been expressed by many groups and religious leaders following his recent death. In London, the [Council of Christians and Jews](#) stated: "Pope John Paul II witnessed the Holocaust at first hand and made the transformation of Catholic-Jewish relations one of the great themes of his pontificate. This was symbolised by his unprecedented visit to the Western Wall in Jerusalem in March 2000. In a gesture of utter simplicity, dressed in white and bent with the suffering of old age, he stood in prayer as Jewish pilgrims have done for more than two millennia. We hope and pray that his beloved memory will be a source of reconciliation for Catholics and Jews, throughout the world."

In Washington, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (formerly at: [www.ushmm.org/research/center/church/pope](http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/church/pope)) stated "The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum mourns the passing of Pope John Paul II, whose experiences as a young man under Nazi occupation were to shape much of his papacy. He will be remembered for many historic achievements, among them his singular commitment to strengthening Catholic-Jewish understanding."

The [American Jewish Committee](#) expressed its sorrow on the passing of the Pope, noting that "He was the central figure of our times in the remarkable transformation in Catholic-Jewish relations in particular, and Christian-Jewish relations in general." Rabbi David Rosen, AJC director of interreligious affairs, headquartered in Jerusalem, stated: "The Pope's visit to Israel opened the eyes of Israelis to a new reality. Not only was the Church no longer an enemy, its head was a true friend! To see the Pope at Yad Vashem, demonstrating solidarity, weeping at the suffering of the Jewish people, to learn that he had helped save Jews during the Holocaust and that subsequently, as a priest, he had returned Jewish children adopted by Christians to their Jewish families, to see the head of the Catholic Church placing a prayer of atonement for the sins of Christians against Jews between the stones of the Western Wall - all of these scenes had a profound effect on many Israelis."

Rabbi Ron Kronish, director of the [Interreligious Coordinating Committee in Israel](#), issued a statement to "express our condolences to Catholics in Israel, in Vatican City and around the world. We join you in mourning the loss of a great world leader, a man of intense spirituality and commitment, a personality who communicated his love and caring and compassion for human beings around the world in an unprecedented manner in the history of world religious leadership." He added, "We remember the Pope's frequent calls for the need for peace and reconciliation in various places in the world, including and especially the Middle East. On his historic visit to the Holy Land, this indeed was one of his main messages, one that unfortunately was not heeded well or soon enough."

The president of the International Council of Christians and Jews, The Rev. John T. Pawlikowski, OSM, in a [statement](#) already posted on [www.jcrelations.net](http://www.jcrelations.net), noted that "Pope John Paul II took the

document of Vatican II *Nostra Aetate* and its chapter four on the church's relationship with the Jewish People and made it a centerpiece of his papal ministry. He said more positively than any Pope in history regarding the centrality of Judaism to Christian self-understanding.”

Dr. Peter A. Pettit, director of the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding of Muhlenberg College (Allentown, Pennsylvania, USA), observed that “Prominent among the things for which history will note Pope John Paul II will be his legacy in reshaping the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church with the Jewish people. Indeed, his leadership has also inspired and strengthened many Protestant Christians in their efforts toward rapprochement with Jews.”

Rabbi. David Blumenthal, Professor of Judaic Studies at Vanderbilt University (Nashville, Tennessee, USA), [recalled](#) that “John Paul II continued and expanded the teaching of the church on the subject of the Jews, affirming that they are not guilty of deicide, that the Christian faith does not supersede or replace the ongoing covenant between God and the Jewish people and that Jews are not to be targeted for evangelization. These teachings reversed many centuries of Catholic doctrine; they have, however, not been universally accepted. Indeed, there are very powerful forces within the Catholic Church that would reverse these teachings, or at least condemn them to inaction. The next Pope will need to energetically enforce these teachings through education and church discipline.”

The Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College (USA) has put together a [comprehensive summary](#) of Pope John Paul II's contributions to Christian-Jewish relations. The material includes a streaming media audio-visual presentation, with photographs of significant moments in this aspect of his career and quotations from his most important speeches and statements on the subject.

Franklin Sherman