



## A New Era? Christian-Jewish Relations in Post-Cold War Europe

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**In December 2015, during a festive gathering at Tel Aviv University, a book – the first of its kind – was launched: *In our time: Documents and Articles on the Catholic Church and the Jewish People in the Wake of the Holocaust*.<sup>[1]</sup> The volume includes papal and Vatican announcements, sermons, declarations, and agreements, all concerning a dramatic change in the attitudes of the Catholic Church towards the Jewish people and Israel, issued within a 50-year span: from the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council (1965) until the end of 2015.**

Taking a look at more recent declarations and papal addresses issued since 2015, the main research questions that arise now, in the 2020s, are: how were the unprecedented changes occurring within the Church implemented? Have they filtered down to the vast number of Catholic believers – a billion and a quarter worldwide – and changed the deepseated, centuries long negative attitudes towards the Jewish people? Has the downfall of the former Eastern Bloc, that opened a new era in so many aspects, affected Christian-Jewish relations, particularly in Europe? Finally, what are the present formal and informal Jewish reactions? Attempts to find some of the answers will rely on the analyses of texts and interviews with officials and activists on both sides. This text traces some recent developments and also sheds light on a certain change in attitudes on both the Christian and the Jewish side.

A number of key documents have recently been published by the Vatican and its officials. On 15 July 2021, in a session dedicated to “the Power of Religious leadership,” held during the seventh Global Forum for Combatting Antisemitism in Jerusalem, Msgr. Tomasz Grysa, the first Counsellor of the Apostolic Nunciature in Israel, said: “The Holy See reiterates (...) its position against antisemitism and invites every person of good will to embrace the golden rule of loving one’s neighbour, as a solid foundation for fraternity and social friendship.”<sup>[2]</sup> In order to enhance the message, he quoted Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, the Vatican’s central body for dealing with these matters. The Cardinal pointed out that antisemitism was re-emerging, but “we can overcome it by opening ourselves to the other, by building fraternity and deepening the common heritage with Judaism.”<sup>[3]</sup> Moreover, he said this in the presence of more than 50 of the world’s top leaders, who gathered in Jerusalem to mark the international Holocaust Memorial Day on 23 January 2020. Two years earlier, in January 2018, Pope Francis had told the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) conference in Rome that he would never grow tired of the “struggle against antisemitism and crimes associated with antisemitic hatred.” Later that year, on 13 June, he called upon his followers to never forget the Shoah, using the Hebrew term, and to remember it as “a constant warning for all of us, of an obligation to reconciliation, of reciprocal comprehension and love toward our ‘elder brothers,’ the Jews.”<sup>[4]</sup>

While more such declarations have been made recently, let us concentrate on the events of 2015 which are of special interest and relevance to this analysis. On December 10, during a press conference held in the Vatican, with two Rabbis standing in attendance, the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued an unprecedented declaration – one of utmost historical importance. Entitled “[\*For the Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable\*](#)” (Rom. 11:29): A

*Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations*, it marked the fiftieth anniversary of the *Nostra Aetate (In Our Time)* – the 1965 declaration which, upon its issuing, was a watershed moment in Jewish-Christian relations and will be discussed in detail further in this chapter.

It should be noted that prior to the release of the December 2015 declaration, “a very special general audience” was organized at Pope Francis’ wish. It took place on 28 October, the day which marked 50 years since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*. A major conference, with hundreds of participants, was held at the Pontifical Georgian University in Rome, where the Pope spoke quite emphatically about interreligious dialogue and cooperation.<sup>[5]</sup> Why was there a need to issue the December declaration, in addition to the clear address the Pope had delivered barely a few weeks earlier?

In search for an answer, one needs to take a close look at *Nostra Aetate* which serves as a binding foundation for documents issued by the Catholic Church in its wake. Then, one can turn their attention to the 10 December Pontifical document, while also taking into consideration changes occurring within the Church and attempts to implement them.

*Nostra Aetate* (Engl.: *In Our Time*), the *Declaration on the Relations of the Church to non-Christian Religions*, was proclaimed at the end of the second synod, better known as the Second Vatican Council. This impressive gathering which spanned three years, from 1962 to 1965, attended by some 3,000 cardinals and bishops from the world over, was initiated by Pope John the XXIII, formerly Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli. In his capacity as the Vatican’s delegate in Istanbul during the 1940s, Roncalli met the members of a rescue delegation from the Yishuv, the Hebrew community under the British Mandate between the two world wars, who told him about the horrors of the Holocaust. Roncalli, a warm and open person, was deeply moved and in tears when he heard about the sinking of the “Struma,” a boat carrying hundreds of refugees that was denied access to Turkish ports. He was even more shaken when presented with the Protocols of Auschwitz, written by two escapees who described, for the first time, the realities of the mass killing of Jews. He did his best to extend help, writing intensively to Pope Pius the XII and to European heads of state he had contacts with, in an attempt to alleviate the plight of their Jewish communities.<sup>[6]</sup> Once WWII was over and the prospects of establishing the state of Israel were at stake, Roncalli became willingly instrumental in behind-the-scenes diplomatic efforts to gain US members’ votes, by facilitating audiences of Zionist activists with high-level Vatican officials.<sup>[7]</sup>

When Roncalli became Pope in 1958, he did not forget the Holocaust and its implications for the Jewish people. The Second Vatican Council he initiated revolutionized the life of the Church at large. A volume published in its wake included a page and a half that came to be known as “the Jewish Document,” or the *Nostra Aetate Declaration*. This short document marked a theological shift and a watershed moment in Christian-Jewish relations. Given the importance the wording of such a declaration carries and the fact it serves as a binding basis for subsequent Papal documents, it is important to spell out its most significant parts: “The Church [...] cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant.” Maria and her son Jesus were Jews, the text goes on, and the Church “also recalls that the Apostles, the Church’s main-stay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ’s Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.” Moreover, “Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod [the Second Vatican Council] wants to foster and recommend [...] mutual understanding and respect.”

The above-mentioned statements are placed in the introduction, providing context and background for further content. Further on, *Nostra Aetate* presents three points, each of which has been awaited for almost two thousand years by Jews, both as individuals and as a group:

First, it states that during the time of the Second Temple, “the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.”

The second point is no less surprising given the centuries-long persecution of Jews and the way the Church had fostered their thoroughly ugly, almost demonic image: “Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures.” Finally, the document reads that the Church “decries hatred, persecutions, displays of antisemitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Such words were unheard of during the long history of Christian-Jewish relations and went contrary to popular, deeply rooted, centuries-long Christian beliefs. The charge of deicide is revoked, while the right of the Jewish people to continue the covenant with God in a manner equal to that of His new people, the Christians, is reinstated. Antisemitism in all forms and under any circumstances is outright denounced.

Numerous Papal documents written over the following years continued in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*, each referencing the 1965 Declaration. This insistence on a consistent wording by several Popes and Vatican committees shows that the change in the attitude of the Catholic Church towards the Jewish people was not a momentary trend, spurred by a well-attended meeting (such as the Second Vatican Council), but rather the outcome of a long and genuine process. Indeed, in 1974, during the papacy of Pope Paul VI, the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued directives and suggestions aimed at helping the believers internalize *Nostra Aetate*: this was a milestone in the history of Jewish-Christian relations, according to the Commission’s members, a milestone that was influenced by the memory of the persecution of Jews and their annihilation in Europe before and during World War II. The Commission reminded the believers that the spiritual and historical ties that bind the Church with Judaism mean every form of antisemitism and discrimination is contrary to the spirit of Christianity. It strongly recommended that Christians strive for a better knowledge of the components of the Jewish tradition.<sup>[9]</sup> These words were indeed a new development, reflecting a profound change: antisemitism as contrary to the Christian spirit!

In 1985, the same Commission issued a much longer and detailed document on “the Right Way” to present Jews and Judaism in Catholic education and preaching. The text relies, again, on *Nostra Aetate*; it emphasizes that the uniqueness of the Jewish people is a fact and should not be questioned; that Jesus was and always remained a Jew, a person of Jewish Palestine who shared its concerns and hopes; and – again – that any form of antisemitism and discrimination is contrary to the very spirit of Christianity.<sup>[10]</sup> This document was issued during the long papacy of John Paul II, who insisted time and again on rapprochement between the two religions and advanced it in a variety of ways. Much as for John XXIII, the Holocaust had a deep impact on his conduct as a pope: he had witnessed the disappearance of his childhood Jewish friends from his home town in Poland and was a member of the Polish underground during the war.

Among the many speeches, addresses, and documents issued during his long papacy (1978–2005), some stand out with special significance and highlight the continuing change, well into the post-Cold War years. The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews carried on its work and in March 1998, on the eve of the third millennium, published the Pope’s letter to the believers, *‘We Remember’: Reflections on the Holocaust*. This long address, which by now is considered one of the most important expressions of the development of the Vatican’s position in this regard, outlines the long history of Jewish-Christian relations. While some parts of the Pope’s thoughts and historical facts, as he presented them, might be considered debatable by Jewish and other historians, certain elements of his rhetoric are starkly unequivocal. He described the Holocaust as a merciless, indelible crime, an indescribable tragedy never to be forgotten. He also appealed to the Jewish people to hear Christians out with open hearts, despite the fact that during

WWII many did not protest against the persecution and killing of their Jewish neighbours. On behalf of the Church, he apologized for the mistakes and failures of these believers. The letter, it should be noted, does not mention that many Christians collaborated with the Germans in the actual round-ups and killings, nor does it speak about the Church as an entity during the Holocaust, but rather about individual believers. The address reminds its readers that Jesus was a descendent of king David, that the Jews “are our very beloved brothers,” if not elder brothers, and warns against the evil seeds of anti-Judaism and antisemitism that should never again take root in any human heart.[\[11\]](#)

The basic agreement between the state of Israel and the Holy See signed in 1993 – a historic milestone in itself – includes in its second item a commitment of both sides to an appropriate cooperation in the struggle against all forms of antisemitism as well as all types of racial and religious intolerance. The Holy See used this opportunity to reiterate its renouncement of hate, persecution, and other expressions of antisemitism directed against the Jewish people and against Jews as individuals at any time, in any place.[\[12\]](#) By signing this agreement, the Catholic Church acknowledged, for the first time, the legitimacy of the Zionist movement (as opposed to Pope Pius X, who outright rejected Theodor Herzl’s plea in 1904), and of the Jewish state it built. The Vatican confirmed its wish to maintain contacts, ambassadors included, between the two states. The demise of the Soviet Bloc made it easier for the Church to conclude such an agreement with Israel, since the necessity to choose between East and West was no longer a factor.

Other documents, such as the 1990 *Antisemitism: A Sin towards God and Humanity* and the 2003 *Antisemitism: A Wound to be healed* declarations, should also be mentioned. Along with a host of other declarations and statements, they were issued while John Paul II was still Pope. In March 2000, during his visit to Israel, he left a moving personal note among the Western Wall stones. In it, he asked God, the God who chose Abraham and his offspring to bring His name to all nations, to forgive those who caused suffering to God’s children. Pope Benedict XVI went along the same *Nostra Aetate* lines in his two-volume biography of Jesus, in which he reiterated Jesus’ and his disciples’ Jewish origins, as well as the exoneration of the Jews from the deicide accusation that affected their lives for centuries.[\[13\]](#)

The above-mentioned documents form an incomplete list, as one could go on quoting more speeches, addresses, letters, and the like. This brings us back to the question of why Pope Francis issued one more emphatic statement in December 2015, given so many already existing documents that were written after 1965. A close look at the contents of Pope Francis’ declaration might perhaps provide an answer.

The document of over 30 pages was first issued in Rome on 10 December. Its abstract was brought to Tel Aviv a few days later by Cardinal Kurt Koch who leads, as was already mentioned, the Jewish-Christian relations in the Vatican. Cardinal Koch presented it at the opening of a special conference held in the Diaspora Museum, attended by the heads of most religious denominations in Israel. He emphasized it was the Pope’s wish to have it presented in the Holy Land right after it was first published in Rome. This is a unique document that summarizes all the documents that preceded it and still depicts Jewish-Christian relations in an unprecedented manner, imbued with deep respect towards the Jewish people, in a clear and unequivocal manner.

This declaration, like the former ones, takes up *Nostra Aetate* as a starting point, yet it “broadens and deepens” its principles, while especially remembering the Jewish roots of Christianity and the fact that “Jesus and his early followers were Jewish, shaped by the Jewish tradition of their time” (page 1 in the abstract). This is a study document, said and wrote Cardinal Koch, “whose aim is to deepen the theological dimension of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue” (3). As the Cardinal argued, the dialogue finally had a good chance of succeeding, since over the recent decades “from enemies and strangers we have become friends and brothers” (4). Moreover, a very close and unavoidable family relationship has developed, so much so that the present dialogue is not inter-religious but

rather an intra-familial one (5).

There are indispensable harmonies between the two testaments, the Old and the New one, and special relations between the Old and the New Covenants: “The covenant offered by God to Israel is irrevocable [...] the new Covenant has its basis and foundation in the Old one [...] the New Covenant is neither the cancellation nor the replacement but the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Covenant” (5–6).

Both the original full document and its abstract do not sweep thorny problems under the carpet: how can Jews be part of God’s salvation if they do not believe in Jesus as Christ and Messiah? This, says the Pope, “remains an unfathomable divine mystery” (6). Another issue is the Church’s traditional wish to convert the Jews. “The Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews,” while it may be directed at members of other religions. This is an additional issue, since for centuries Christians had prayed for the conversion of Jews and tried their hand at forcing it, sometimes in a cruel fashion. Moreover, if Christians choose to approach Jews in order to explain the principles of Christianity, they should do so in “a humble and sensitive manner,” because Jews are the bearers of God’s word and had undergone the great tragedy of the Shoah (7). The ending to the document follows what has become almost a traditional form: it is a wish for a common struggle against any manifestation of racial discrimination against Jews and all forms of antisemitism (7).

The December declaration includes more statements, some of which have not been included in the abstract. A Christian can never be an antisemite, mainly because of the Jewish roots of Christianity; mutual respect is both a pre-condition for inter-religious dialogue and its purpose; one more basic purpose of the dialogue is learning about each other. In this regard, the document contains the following, inspiring sentence: ‘one can only learn to love what one has gradually come to know, and one can only know truly and profoundly what one loves.’ A repeated emphasis is being put on the Holocaust as the starting point for the process of change in the Vatican. It was the dark, terrible shadow of the Holocaust that hovered over Europe after the Nazi era, says the declaration, that has led the Church to re-think its ties with the Jewish people.[\[14\]](#)

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The documents discussed above reflect an enormous change, practically a revolution, in the Catholic Church’s attitude towards the Jewish people – from centurieslong hostility and antisemitism in a variety of forms to expressions of friendship, kinship, and respect. The change is of utmost importance. There are more than a billion and a quarter of Catholic believers worldwide today and such declarations, coupled with Papal visits to Jerusalem and Auschwitz, are bound to have a positive impact on Christian-Jewish relations. Moreover, the manner and tone – *et c’est le ton qui fait la musique* – in which the change is introduced are essential to its reception by the audiences in various countries. Indeed, successive popes’ behaviour, their warm, open personalities, and the history of contacts with Jews has played a vital role. Roncalli met with the rescue delegation in Istanbul. John Paul II had close friendships with Jews, some of which lasted throughout his life. Francis befriended Rabbi Avraham Skorka during his tenure as the cardinal in Buenos Aires. These three men, much more than other popes in office during and after the Holocaust, initiated and maintained the momentum of the revolutionary change towards the Jews.

Nonetheless, these positive developments have not eradicated all problems, not least the reactions from the Jewish side and the practical implementation of the improved relations.

One of the issues concerns timing: Pope Francis’ declaration of 2015 was issued in the midst of the so-called refugee crisis, a wave of immigrants, arriving mainly from Muslim countries. Terrorism and antisemitism have been on the rise for the last decade. Radical Muslim circles have been



greatly concerned by the process of rapprochement between the Church and the Jewish people, and the December 2015 document was no exception.<sup>[15]</sup> Is the current pope looking to form something of a Jewish-Christian coalition that would form a barrier against violence and terror originating from extreme Islamism? Or will he have to find a way to preserve co-existence with the Muslim world in order to maintain some balance in the Vatican's foreign relations? The Pope's visit to Budapest in September 2021 exemplifies the dilemma: he came (but for seven hours only) to demonstrate that his views on Judaism and the refugee problem are opposite to those of prime minister Victor Orbán, telling Jewish and Christian leaders in an ecumenical meeting that he thinks "of the threat of antisemitism still lurking in Europe and elsewhere. This is a fuse that must not be allowed to burn. And the best way to defuse it is to work together, positively, and to promote fraternity." Subsequently, he travelled for a three-day visit to Slovakia, where he said that the "horrors of the Holocaust must not be forgotten."<sup>[16]</sup>

Another problem concerns politics: today, half of all Catholics reside in countries of the third world, where political leadership traditionally supports the Palestinian cause. Moreover, prior to 1989 these leaders had for decades been under the Soviet umbrella and now President Putin's Russia is trying to maintain its influence – not necessarily or specifically with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but more generally. Given all this, is the Vatican taking a political risk when issuing such pro-Jewish declarations? Part of the answer lies in the wish and duty of the Church to defend and protect its followers in the Middle East, especially on Israeli territory, where the holy sites are located. Christian communities, living as a minority under the daily pressure from radical Islamists around them, are dwindling and good relations with Israel are needed, since the Israeli authorities are their main source of support and security.

Perhaps one can find a hint elsewhere. Israel is bound to defend all of its citizens, with or without Papal declarations. The Vatican's statements are intended for internal Catholic use – they are part and parcel of the theological debate taking place among the high echelons of the Church. Since such discourse is defined as being theological, rather than political, it does not need to take the Arab and Muslim world into consideration. In fact, documents do not mention Israel as a state (except, naturally, for the basic agreement signed in late 1993 by the Holy See and State of Israel). Instead, they refer to the Jewish people as elder, beloved brothers, as they indeed reflect inner theological exchange. Still, Pope Francis told members of the World Jewish Congress delegation very clearly that "to attack Jews is antisemitism, but an outright attack on the State of Israel is also antisemitism. There may be political disagreements between governments and on political issues, but the State of Israel has every right to exist in safety and prosperity."<sup>[17]</sup> Such words suggest the Pope combines Israel and the Jewish people into one entity.

The third issue concerns implementation: the documents are not distributed to the outside world, beyond the realm of the Catholic believers – nor are they translated to many vernaculars so as to be accessible to non-Catholic audiences. This at least partly explains why these astonishing documents, imbued with respect and well-wishing for the Jewish world, are almost unknown, even in Israel or among Jews. To the extent that this information does filter into the Jewish and Israeli public's knowledge, it is met with suspicion caused by previous experiences. However, implementation is not only an external problem affecting the non-Christian world. It is also relevant to the Vatican's primary audiences. It remains to be seen how much of the message trickles down to the Christian population at large (be it Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox), including, for instance, small villages and conservative communities in Latin America and Eastern Europe. We also do not know how long it will take for the process and its good intentions to be understood and fully accepted by large audiences.

In order to try and tackle some of these problems, a number of personalities, from both the Jewish and the Catholic sides, were interviewed by the author of this article. Among the representatives of the Church: Cardinal Koch; Msgr. Tomasz Grysa; and Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa; on the Jewish side: Rabbi David Rosen; Rabbi Avraham Skorka; and Dr. David Stolov.

## The Catholic Side

Cardinal Kurt Koch and Msgr. Tomasz Grysa are of the same opinion. When asked in January 2020 about the Vatican's efforts to implement the changes and instill them in believers, Koch – the person in charge of the matter as head of the International Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews – pointed out the many documents, including the above-mentioned ones, that were issued and distributed as the Pope's binding words.<sup>[18]</sup> In addition, similar to Msgr. Grysa, the First Counsellor in the Apostolic Nunciature in Israel, he emphasized the cooperation between two key bodies appointed first within the Vatican and then with participation of Jewish representatives. Chronologically, the first one was the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, set up in the Vatican in October 1974. The International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee was established a few years before, in November 1970, but only started actual work in 1973–74. Addressing the opening ceremony of a Liaison Committee session in Rome, on 13 May 2019, Koch expressed his great satisfaction and pride: this was the twenty-fourth meeting in 54 years [*Nostra Aetate*, dated 1965, is always the milestone, D.P.] – “we have written history,” he told his listeners.<sup>[19]</sup> In other words: here is an ongoing effort to maintain contacts that can further the changes, as we meet every other year and constantly carry out work in this regard.

The second body is a permanent bilateral commission for dialogue between the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. It was proposed by John Paul II and established in 2002, in the wake of the Pope's very successful visit to Jerusalem in 2000. Despite the suspicion and the initial reluctance, a request of a pope who was eager to come for a visit (as opposed to Paul VI, who would not even set foot in Israeli Jerusalem in 1964) could not have been refused. The commission meets annually, alternating between Rome and Jerusalem, which means that its members have already met almost 20 times. When asked about whether he sees a change among the participating Rabbis, Cardinal Koch emphatically answered that relations are warmer and friendlier each year, with personal friendships created and maintained.

Msgr. Grysa added an important point.<sup>[20]</sup> When asked in July 2021 about practical ways to spread the Church's message against antisemitism, he answered that papal addresses are taken up by the bishops, for whom they are binding and who are tasked with finding ways to implement them into practice. In Israel, he says, the Latin Patriarchy in Jerusalem is active, as are the Benedictine Brothers in Abu-Gosh, the Neocatechumenal believers in the Galilee, the Community of Beatitude in Latrun, and many others. Msgr. Grysa was optimistic – he said a lot of work was being done and some progress was already visible, with Cardinal Koch leading the effort.

Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the newly appointed Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, is less optimistic. In a candid interview in December 2021, he stated that the change was very slow, with the Catholic public at large knowing almost nothing about it and not familiar with papal documents. Most believers did not search for them, even though they were available on the Vatican's website. Only those interested in Catholic-Jewish relations were familiar with their contents. In fact, he went on, there was an increasing distance and disconnect between the Catholic establishment, the high echelons and officials, and the public at large, as the younger generations of believers were no longer keen to hear about Catholic morality and ethics – in every respect, not just with regard to relations with the Jewish people.

Since the change is very slow, it will take at least two generations – it is an extremely sensitive issue with heavy historic baggage. Archbishop Pizzaballa said he felt people were tired of hearing that Jesus, Maria, and the apostles were all Jewish. His saw a need for a fresh approach: “something new should be built by a courageous religious leadership on both sides.” As a member of the joint Rabbinate-Vatican commission, he saw similar developments among Jewish activists (he mentioned the intense efforts of Rabbi David Rosen, to be discussed later): they were trying to

further the dialogue with the Church, but they also needed a public that would trust and follow them. As far as he could observe having lived in Israel for decades, the Israeli public at large was not aware of the change and the documents – in that observation, he is quite right. Moreover, relations with the Jews are not currently considered an urgent or central issue. It is the Muslim immigrants arriving in large numbers to Europe and North America that, being a far larger group, are now much more relevant to the Christian way of life and its future. Nonetheless, Pizzaballa was keen to identify an appropriate topic that he, together with his own staff and the public in Jerusalem, could place in the right context and elaborate on from a Jerusalemite perspective.<sup>[21]</sup>

## The Jewish Side

There is an unusual, less known initiative taking place in Israel. In order to discuss it, I approached Dr. David Stolov, the executive director of the Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) which this year celebrates 20 years of its activity.<sup>[22]</sup> This Jerusalem-based association, working to bring together Jews, Christians, and Muslims living in Israel, is a perfect example of a grassroots undertaking. Led by a triple advisory council made up of representatives of the three religions, it has so far formed 112 groups numbering 10–15 participants each, consisting of Jews and Christians who meet regularly, four to five times a year, to study the new Testament. A Dutch priest positioned in Israel, Aart Brons, organized these meetings for a number of years on behalf of the Netherlands-based Center for Israel Studies and the IEA. Archbishop Pizzaballa used to frequent them when he still served as the Franciscan Custos of the Holy Land; other people who have participated in the meetings include Russell MacDougal, rector of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute (located between Gilo and Beth Lechem) as well as a few Rabbis, e. g. David Stav and Dan Eisik. The former Latin Patriarch, Michelle Sabach, met with both the participants and the activists, while the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, hosted the activists for a visit. In addition, IEA has been in constant contact with the Austrian hospice in Jerusalem.

All in all, one can say this interfaith initiative has been welcomed by the main Christian leaders and Jewish Rabbis in Israel. However, when interviewed in September 2021, Dr. Stolov said contacts with religious leaders were intermittent and did not result in any kind of practical or formal support. There were no approaches to or from the Israeli ministry of education, although the headmasters and staff of several Arab and Jewish high schools partnered with the Association to create programmes that would enrich their students' knowledge about Islam and Christianity.

“We are unknown,” summed up Dr. Stolov and I quote him, “we are not political, we threaten no one's position, we live on donations and grants from foundations, and try to do the best we can, and to hold as many activities and encounters as possible besides the study groups.”

Rabbi David Rosen, the international director for interreligious affairs in the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and honorary president of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ), represents the institutional side among stakeholders involved in the process. He is a key figure to the development of Christian-Jewish relations. Honoured by the Holy See and Elizabeth II, he is even more critical in his assessment and points to a number of problems.<sup>[23]</sup> Regarding efforts to implement the changes in the Vatican, he argues that their success varies depending on socio-economic conditions. Those who live close to Jews, mainly in large urban centres, as well as those who enjoy higher education, especially in the USA, internalize the change better than the population in Europe (particularly the eastern part) and the less educated parts of society in general. Rosen makes a reference to studies on American Catholic religion textbooks, conducted in the 1970s (and re-published in the 1990s) by two American scholars inspired by the legendary Sister Rose. The research charted a dramatic reversal in Catholic teachings about the Jews which began with *Nostra Aetate*, to the extent that Jews may now also use these textbooks.<sup>[24]</sup> However, said Rosen, most people still had “pre-conciliar perceptions,” by which he meant perceptions forged long before the 1965 change brought about by the Second Vatican Council. Although syllabi



for clerical students incorporate the changes, in most seminars worldwide knowledge about the post-Council shift is not a required part of the studies and the topic itself is covered in a rather vague manner. Rosen met bishops – most notably in Far East Asia and Latin America – who, astonishingly, had never heard about *Nostra Aetate*.

Formal Jewish reaction to the changes is no less challenging. First of all, it took a long time to come. Rosen pointed out two major statements – both of which he was involved in – that reflect the attitude on the Jewish side. The first one, written and issued in 2002, entitled [\*Dabru Emet \(Speak the Truth\). A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity\*](#), was initiated and signed by 250 US-based Reform and Conservative Rabbis as well as Jewish scholars and leaders. It called upon Jews and Christians to work together towards justice and peace. The second one was written in 2015. Entitled [\*La'asot Retzon Avinu Shebashmaim – to do the will of our Father in Heaven: Toward a partnership between Jews and Christians\*](#), it constitutes a significant step forward. It was presented to Pope Francis on 31 August 2017, with the subtitle reading *Between Jerusalem and Rome: Reflections on 50 Years of Nostra Aetate*.<sup>[REMARK]</sup> It was authored and signed by three bodies: the Conference of European Rabbis (CER), the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, and the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA). It marked a wider reaction to the changes. The signatories, including Rabbi Rosen, admitted that many Jewish leaders were skeptical of the sincerity of the Church's overtures towards the Jewish community due to the long, painful history between Christians and Jews. However, over time, it became clear to them that the Church's teachings were sincere and increasingly profound. The Orthodox Jewry – i. e. those who still consider Christianity outright paganism – has remained skeptical and suspicious, in line with their deep concern that by accepting the hand extended by the Vatican, liberal, Reform and Conservative Jews weaken the unity and power of Judaism.

The letter presented to the Pope included the following key sentence: “Despite the irreconcilable theological differences, we Jews view Catholics as our partners, close allies, friends and brothers in our mutual quest for a better world, blessed with peace, social justice and security.”<sup>[25]</sup> Such words, coming from three organisations representing a large number of Rabbis across three continents, demonstrate that a change is gradually occurring also on the Jewish side.

Rabbi Avraham Skorka, a close personal friend of Pope Francis (both were born in Buenos Aires and lived there for many years) sent his remarks in writing. He is now a faculty member of Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, where a sculpture, showing the Ecclesia and the Synagoga sitting together as equal friends, was located in front of the local chapel to celebrate 50 years since *Nostra Aetate*.<sup>[26]</sup> While answering the questions in his written interview, Rabbi Skorka referred to many of the documents mentioned above, which he considers a testimony to the “unfolding theological developments, including a re-evaluation of traditional approaches to Jews and Judaism.” He draws special attention to an international research project that was supported by the Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, resulting in a volume of essays, with an introduction by Cardinal Kasper, then president of the Commission.<sup>[27]</sup> More research and educational programmes, wrote Skorka, add to the emergence of a new relationship, similar to the “Sant'Egidio” and “Focolare” movements within the Catholic Church which made important contributions to the interfaith dialogue.

Nevertheless, Rabbi Skorka, just like Rabbi Rosen, raises a number of troubling points. Published sermons and suggested themes for homilies regularly include inaccurate and even polemical presentations or assumptions about Jews and Jewish practice. Although there are Vatican instructions to assign Jews and Judaism a central place in theological teachings, this has not happened yet. Skorka is also aware of analogous problems on the other side: the same holds true in educational Jewish settings and curricula in most Jewish day schools in the US. Rabbinical seminaries give little, if any, attention to Christianity. It is hard to disagree with his concluding remark that Jews and Catholics are merely taking their first steps on a long path to overcoming history.<sup>[28]</sup>

Having taken one more look at the documents and the interviews, the question at stake is whether the time has come to offer concluding remarks, insights, and expectations for the future of Jewish–Catholic relations? It seems that the effort, which started in 1965, to change these relations and start a genuine dialogue of mutual respect handled by both sides has been continued along a number of decades, and is gaining momentum in recent years. Since the beginning of the 2000s a number of open letters and statements were formulated and published by the Jewish side, stating the readiness to accept the extended hand; Pope Francis has emphatically expressed his warm wish to further and deepen the dialogue; and there has been common work by the bi-lateral committees, active since the 1970s, as well as the joint committee established following the visit of John Paul II in Jerusalem, to keep the dialogue ongoing.

Still, as we have above mentioned, major questions are still centre stage: the process is a slow one, especially the instilling of these positive developments in the hearts and minds of the vast number of Catholic believers worldwide, who carry centuries long convictions; and, parallelly, instilling trust among Jews, especially the more religious ones, who carry deep suspicions against the Church, in the good intentions of the Church, especially given the complex reality in the Middle East. Therefore let us end by re-emphasizing that both sides have still a long journey to take, and therefore the issue should be re-visited in a number of years, by both researchers and activists.

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