



# Christian-Jewish Relations – The Legacy of Pope John Paul II

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**Rabbi David Rosen, director of Department of Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee, reviews the weighty contributions of Pope John Paul II to the 'revolution in Catholic-Jewish relations' in recent decades.**

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[David Rosen](#)

The revolution in Catholic-Jewish relations came in the wake of the Shoah, although I believe that the suggestion that the Church's historical "teaching of contempt" towards the Jews was directly responsible for this great tragedy is untenable. Indeed as the great American Jewish intellectual Maurice Simon wrote, already before the commencement of World War II, Nazi ideology was also very much an attack against Christianity itself. Nevertheless there can be little doubt that the Final Solution would not have succeeded to the extent that it did, without the terrain having been so fertilized over the centuries by the Church's encouragement – active and passive – of the demonization and dehumanization of the Jew.

Precisely for this reason, while the Shoah was devastating beyond all measure for Jewry, it also had profound implications and ramifications for Christianity.

As the author and Christian cleric, Rev. David L. Edwards puts it, "Righteous Gentiles, including some bishops, did save tens of thousands of Jews, but their efforts were small in comparison with the fact of six million murders, a colossal and cold-blooded crime which would have been impossible without a general indifference to the fate of the victims. The Holocaust became European Christianity's most terrible source of guilt – of course, not because the murderers were pious or because church leaders had been entirely silent about the laws and actions of the Nazis over the years, but because of the undeniable record of anti-Semitism in the churches' teaching over the centuries. Not only ignorant peasants or monks but also eminent theologians and spiritual teachers, had attacked the Jews as the 'killers of Christ', as a people now abandoned by God. Not only had the Jews of Rome been forced to live in a ghetto until popes no longer governed that city; not only had Luther allowed himself to shoot inflammatory words at this easy target; but almost everywhere in Europe, Jews had been made to seem strange, sinister and repulsive. A long road of disgraceful preaching was one of the paths across the centuries which led to the Nazis' death camps and in the end, not Judaism but Christianity was discredited."

But as Edwards acknowledges, there were nevertheless Christian heroes who stood out as exceptions in these most horrific of times. One of them was the nuncio – the Papal Ambassador – in Turkey during the period of the Shoah and was one of the earliest western religious personalities to receive information on the Nazi murder machine. This man of course was Archbishop Angelo Roncalli who helped save thousands of Jews from the clutches of their would-be killers and was deeply moved by the plight of the Jewish people.

Within little more than a decade and the demise of Pope Pius XII, he was elected as the new

pontiff taking the name, John XXIII. As we know, contrary to popular perception of him as something of a simple man, Pope John proved to be nothing less than a visionary for his time, convening the historic Second Vatican Ecumenical Council with its far-reaching implications for the Catholic Church.

Arguably the most historic of its documents was the one that dealt with relations with other religions, which we know by its two opening Latin words, *Nostra Aetate*. There can be no doubt that this document, only promulgated in 1965 after Pope John XXIII's death, was profoundly influenced by the impact of the Shoah and transformed the Catholic Church's teaching concerning Jews and Judaism.

It admonished against the portrayal of Jews as collectively guilty for the death of Jesus at the time, let alone in perpetuity (in direct contradiction with the explicit words of authorities like Origen and Pope Innocent III); it affirmed the unbroken covenant between God and the Jewish People (quoting from Paul in Romans II v. 29) and in so doing, *Nostra Aetate* eliminated in one stroke, as it were, any theological objections to the idea of the return of the Jewish people to its ancestral homeland and to sovereignty within it. The document thus explicitly refuted any suggestion that the Jews are rejected or accursed by God, declaring the contrary to be the case; and it also categorically condemned anti-Semitism.

## Karol Wojtyla

As we know, the youngest bishop present at that historic council, was Karol Wojtyla who was later to become Pope John Paul II; and this was a formative experience in his own *Weltanschauung* with the example and leadership of Pope John XIII impacting enormously upon him. However we also know that Wojtyla was quite atypical among the bishops gathered there, precisely in terms of his own personal experience, both of living Jewry as well as of the tragedy that befell it.

His childhood experiences and friendships with members of the Jewish community in Wadowice had actually impacted upon his own personal religious outlook long before he even contemplated entering the priesthood. In the interview John Paul II gave to Tad Szulc published in *Parade* magazine in 1994, he refers to the effect upon him as a boy of listening to Psalm 147 being sung during evening Mass

*“O Jerusalem, glorify the Lord, praise your God O Zion For He has made the bars of your gates strong and blessed your children within you.”*

(Incidentally, this psalm is an integral part of Jewish daily morning prayers). John Paul II makes it clear in his interview with Szulc, that he fully identified the verse with the Jewish people that he knew. “I still have in my ears these words and this melody which I have remembered all my life” he declared.

In other words, already as a child, Karol Wojtyla had perceived the Jewish people as blessed by God, not cursed and rejected. However in Gianfranco Svidercoschi's notable little book “Letter to his Jewish Friend” which recalls Wojtyla's Jewish friendships of his youth – in particular one which still continues today – we discover another insight into his formative understanding of the relationship with the Jewish people emanating, interestingly, from Polish culture itself. This was conveyed to him by his respected teacher Mr Gebhardt who inspired in him an appreciation of the best intellectual heritage of Poland including the writings of Adam Mickiewicz. At the recent Papal concert for reconciliation among the Abrahamic Faiths, the major piece of music was Mahler's Second Symphony, known as the Resurrection Symphony. Mahler's inspiration in writing this work

was Mickiewicz's dramatic epic, *Dziady*. In his conductor's notes in the program, Gilbert Levine observed that "Mickiewicz is to Polish literary history and to the Polish nation, what Shakespeare and Lord Byron are to the English; Chateaubriand and Victor Hugo to the French; Dante and Ugo Foscolo to the Italians; or Goethe and Frederick Schiller are to the German speaking world. (Mickiewicz) is and has been the inspiration for many of the great movements in Polish letters and in Polish nation building." Svidercoschi's book narrates how, on the day after anti-Semitic rioting in Wadowice, Gebhardt read out the words of Mickiewicz written in 1848, which he explained had been "prepared (as) a sort of political manifesto, which was intended to inspire the constitution of the future independent Slav States." Inter alia Mickiewicz wrote "in the nation everyone is a citizen. All citizens are equal before the law and before the administration. To the Jew, *our elder brother*, (we must show) esteem and help on his path towards eternal welfare and in all matters, equal rights."

## John Paul II and the Jews

It is surely no coincidence that Pope John Paul II made precisely this term of reference to the Jewish people – "elder brother", his own coin of phrase, to reflect not only a historical vision of the relationship, but also a theological one.

In the introduction to the English version of Svidercoschi's book, the late Cardinal John O'Connor stated his conviction that Pope John Paul II "is unselfconsciously shaped by his fundamental gratitude for Judaism as the very root of his Catholicism . . . (and) . . . he seems simply to assume that his love for (Jews) and for Judaism itself is so strong that his good intentions should be recognized. . ."

In the aforementioned interview that appeared in *Parade*, John Paul II continued "And then came the terrible experience of World War II, the (Nazi) occupation and the Holocaust, which was the extermination of Jews just for the reason that they were Jews. . . . Afterward, whenever I had the opportunity, I spoke about it everywhere."

So we may say that long before his Pontificate, Wojtyla's approach towards Jews and Judaism was defined by both a positive historical and theological attitude towards them, as well as by the trauma of the Shoah and its implications.

These experiences were clearly seminal in leading Pope John Paul II to what Cardinal Edward Cassidy describes as his "special dedication to the promotion of Catholic-Jewish relations . . . (which today reflect) . . . a new spirit of mutual understanding and respect; of good will and reconciliation; of cooperation and common goals between Jews and Catholics; and much of the credit for this goes to the Pope who not only has opened the doors of the Vatican to Jewish leaders coming to Rome, but has visited them on his pastoral journeys throughout the world and taken every possible occasion to address in his speeches, questions of concern to the two faith communities."

## John Paul II – Master of Grand Gestures

However what has typified the Pontificate of John Paul II has been not only grand gestures and initiatives, but their communication on a grand scale as well.

It is something of a paradox that it has been a Polish Pope emerging from a rigid Communist society who almost intuitively understood the advertising language of Madison Avenue, communicating to vast numbers through the modern media. Aside from his profound theological insights into and formulations concerning Christianity's relationship with Judaism; his condemnation of the evil of anti-Semitism and his expressions of a profound desire for Christian-

Jewish reconciliation, upon all of which I will elaborate; two events have conveyed these messages with a power and force unparalleled – his visit to the synagogue in Rome in 1986 and his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the year 2000.

His address at the synagogue of Rome is amongst the most important texts in this revolution in Catholic-Jewish relations but it was, above all, the image of the Pope embracing Rabbi Toaff and demonstrating evidently genuine fraternal love for the Jewish community that remained in the public mind and reached millions who would not and even could not, be reached by his words. Indeed in assessing the major events of 1986 the Pope singled out his visit to the Jewish community in the Rome synagogue as the most significant and expressed his conviction that it would be remembered “for centuries and millennia . . . and I thank Divine Providence that the task was given to me” (National Catholic News Service, Dec. 31, 1986). No less of impact was the Pope’s visit to Israel which had an enormous effect upon Israeli Jews in particular.

Most Israeli Jews and especially the more traditional and observant among them have never met a modern Christian. When they travel abroad they meet non-Jews as non-Jews – rarely as Christians. Thus their prevailing image of Christianity has been drawn from the negative tragic past.

The Papal visit to Israel opened their eyes to a changed reality. Not only was the Church no longer the enemy, its head is even a sincere friend To see the Pope at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial, in tearful solidarity with Jewish suffering; to learn of how he himself had helped to save Jews at that terrible time and subsequently as a priest returned Jewish children from their Christian foster homes back to their Jewish families; to see the Pope at the Western Wall in respectful reverence for Jewish tradition, placing there the text of the prayer that he had composed for a liturgy of repentance held shortly beforehand in St. Peter’s, asking Divine forgiveness for the sins Christians had committed against Jews down the ages; all had a profound impact upon a very wide cross section of Israeli society.

These gestures and their visual message have impacted tremendously upon the way Jews have viewed the Church but they have impacted no less if not more upon the way Catholics in particular and Christians in general have viewed Jews, Judaism and the Jewish State.

In both these historic events, as throughout his Pontificate, Pope John Paul II articulated the development of the central themes of his legacy for Catholic-Jewish relations – themes that, as we have mentioned, may be traced back to his youth; both concerning the tragic past and its implications, as well as the nature and purpose of the Christian-Jewish relationship.

## **John Paul II on Anti-Semitism**

Already at his first audience with Jewish representatives in March 1979, the Pope reaffirmed *Nostra Aetate*’s repudiation of anti-Semitism and described the latter “as opposed to the very spirit of Christianity”. In November 1986, he described acts of discrimination or persecution against Jews as “sinful”; and in August 1991 described anti-Semitism in particular and racism generally, “as a sin against God and humanity.

Moreover, for John Paul II, the tragedy of Jewish suffering and in particular the Shoah, is not something to just be acknowledged. In 1985 he issued a call based on the recently released Vatican document, the “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church”, to fathom the depths of the extermination of many millions of Jews during World War II and the wounds thereby inflicted on the consciousness of the Jewish people”: For this, he declared, “theological reflection is also needed.”

Teaching about the Shoah has been a preoccupation for John Paul II and in this regard he has emphasized the specificity of Jewish victimhood in the Shoah. In a letter to Archbishop John May in August 1987, he stated that an authentic approach towards the teaching of the Shoah must first grapple with the specific Jewish reality of the event and that it is from this particularity that the universal message of the Shoah may be derived.

In keeping with this educational theme, that same year on his visit to the U.S., the Pope called on Christians to develop together with the Jewish community “common educational programs which . . . will teach future generations about the Holocaust so that never again will such a horror be possible. Never again ”

Indeed his aforementioned reference to the theological perversity of anti-Semitism was articulated in a pedagogic context, when he declared in August 1991 that “in the face of the risk of a resurgence and spread of anti-Semitic feelings, attitudes and initiatives, of which certain disquieting signs are to be seen today and of which we have experienced the most terrible results in the past; we must teach consciences to consider anti-Semitism and all forms of racism as sins against God and humanity.” As he has most recently stated, this call lamentably has as much relevance today as ever. His message of the crucial need to keep the memory of the Shoah alive as a moral education and warning, is one which the Pope has reiterated time and again, as I was privileged to hear it from him personally when he greeted me on the occasion of the gathering of prayers for peace in the Balkans in Assisi in early 1993.

But surely the most remarkable aspect of the Pope’s focus on anti-Semitism has been his willingness to confront the role that Christians have played down the ages in the tragedy of anti-Semitism and the implications of this. I think it fair to say that this was a gradual process. However at the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of *Nostra Aetate* he embraced the impressive words of Cardinal Edward Cassidy making them his own and declared that “the fact that anti-Semitism has found a place in Christian thought and teaching requires an act of *teshuva*; repentance.”

Almost immediately thereafter in November 1990, John Paul received the new German ambassador to the Holy See. In his address the Pope declared that “for Christians, the heavy burden of guilt for the murder of the Jewish people must be an enduring call to repentance: thereby we can overcome every form of anti-Semitism and establish a new relationship with our kindred nation of the original Covenant.”

The Holy See’s document on the Shoah “*We Remember*” issued in 1998, also acknowledged the prejudices that led Christians to fail in resisting evil against the Jews and the following year the International Theological Commission under the presidency of Cardinal Ratzinger issued a text on the subject of “*Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*”, in which it reiterated that this failure requires “an act of repentance (*teshuva*).” Indeed in his Apostolic exhortation to the Church in Europe for the new millennium, Pope John Paul II declared that “acknowledgement (needs to) be given to any part which the children of the Church have had in the growth and spread of anti-Semitism in history; forgiveness must be sought for this from God, and every effort must be made to favor encounters of reconciliation and of friendship with the children of Israel.”

However I would think that it was John Paul II’s liturgy of repentance at St. Peter’s in the year 2000 that posterity will recall above all in this regard. The sentences asking Divine forgiveness for the sins Christians committed against Jews down the ages were, as we all know, transcribed onto a sheet of paper that John Paul II placed in the crevices of the Western Wall on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem some weeks thereafter. The text declared:

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

## **On Judaism**

Indeed as the phrase “the people of the Covenant” reveals, Pope John Paul II fully appreciated that what has perverted Christian-Jewish relations in the past was not only a negative attitude towards the Jew, but no less towards Judaism. Already in Mainz in November 1980 he addressed the Jewish community as “the people of God of the Old Covenant, which has never been revoked by God (in keeping with *Nostra Aetate*’s emphasis on *Romans II v 29*) emphasizing the “permanent value” of both the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish community. Moreover in citing a passage from a declaration of the German Bishops calling attention to “the spiritual heritage of Israel for the Church”, he most notably added the word “living”, to emphasize the ongoing vitality, validity and integrity of Judaism.

Two years later addressing delegates from Bishops Conferences around the world who gathered in Rome to discuss ways to promote Catholic-Jewish relations, the Pope affirmed that both reconciliation with the Jewish people as well as a better understanding of aspects of the life of the Church require Christians to study and show “due awareness of the faith and religious life of the Jewish people as they are professed and practiced still today.” . . . “We should aim, in this field, that Catholic teaching at its different levels in catechizing to children and young people, presents Jews and Judaism, not only in an honest and objective manner, free from prejudices and without any offenses, but also with full awareness of (this) heritage . . .”. This sentiment he reiterated at his aforementioned visit to the synagogue in Rome in 1986 where he used the phrase “elder brothers”, subsequently combining it with the language he had used previously, to describe the Jewish people as “our elder brothers of the Ancient Covenant never broken by God and never to

be broken”.

## On Israel

John Paul II also came to appreciate the inextricable religious and national elements in Judaism that render the State of Israel of such importance for contemporary Jewry.

In 1984 in his Apostolic Letter, *Redemptionis Anno*, he declared that “for the Jewish people who live in the State of Israel and who preserve in that land such precious testimonies of their history and faith, we must ask for the desired security and due tranquility that is the prerogative of every nation and of progress for society.”

Full relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel would have at least been a moral and morale boost in this regard. However I believe it fair to say that the Vatican Secretariat of State’s caution on this matter held sway over the Pope’s inclination and desire. Nevertheless in the end, I may divulge as one involved in the negotiations on the establishment of full relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel, that it was John Paul II’s determination to establish these relations that overcame the various objections of the Secretariat of State, not ideological, but technical – that would have further delayed the diplomatic process.

In the 1994 interview with Tad Szulc which was published in *Parade* after the establishment of these relations, he stated “It must be understood that the Jews, who for two thousand years were dispersed among the nations of the world, had decided to return to the land of their ancestors. This is their right. . . . The act of establishing diplomatic relations with Israel is simply an international affirmation of this relationship.”

The establishment of these relations facilitated his historic visit to Israel. The State reception and farewell, as well as his visit to the residence of President Weizman, very much served to testify to the culmination of a remarkable process and a sign of the genuine respect of the Pope for the identity and integrity of the Jewish people reflected in its reestablished sovereignty in its historic homeland.

## On Christianity’s Rootedness in Judaism

Arguably though, the most important theological aspect of the legacy of Pope John Paul II for Christian-Jewish relations has been his development of the concept of Christianity’s rootedness in Judaism and what *Nostra Aetate* refers to as “the spiritual bond” that binds them together.

In his first Papal audience with Jewish representatives he expounded upon the above phrase to mean “that our two religious communities are connected and closely related at the very level of their respective identities.”

He also used the phrase “fraternal dialogue” to describe the goal of Christian-Jewish relations. Dr. Eugene Fisher has pointed out that the use of the term “fraternal”, and addressing one another as “brothers and sisters”, reflect ancient usage within the Christian community and imply an acknowledgement of a commonality of faith with liturgical implications.

Indeed the Pope has deepened the idea of a spiritual bond by describing it, in March 1984, as “the mysterious spiritual link which brings us close together in Abraham, and through Abraham, in God who chose Israel and brought forth the Church from Israel.”

The following year on the twentieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, he described this spiritual “link” as “the real foundation for our relationship with the Jewish people – a relationship which could well

be called a real 'parentage' and which we have with that (Jewish) religious community alone . . . This 'link' can be called a 'sacred' one, stemming as it does from the mysterious will of God."

In 1986 in Australia, John Paul II declared to leaders of the Jewish community, that "the Catholic Faith is rooted in the eternal truths of the Hebrew Scriptures and in the irrevocable covenant made with Abraham. We too gratefully hold these same truths of our Jewish heritage and look upon you as our brothers and sisters".

This statement not only reflects the remarkable maturation of the Pope's theological understanding of the Christian-Jewish relationship, but also his sensitivity regarding Jewish integrity, reflected in his replacing the previous use of the term "Old Testament" with the term "the Hebrew Scriptures".

In that same year during his historic visit to the synagogue in Rome he declared, "the Jewish religion is not extrinsic to us, but in a certain way is 'intrinsic' to our own religion. With Judaism therefore we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers".

As already mentioned, he subsequently combined this term with reference to the eternal Divine covenant with Jewry, describing the Jewish people as "the dearly beloved elder brothers of the ancient covenant never broken and never to be broken" and I was privileged to be greeted by him with these words when he received me in Assisi in 1993.

## **Mutual Responsibilities**

This unique relationship also brings with it expectations. In the Pope's words of address to the representatives of the American Jewish Committee in 1990 he stated that "our common spiritual heritage . . . include(s) veneration of the Holy Scriptures, confession of the One Living God; love of neighbor; and a prophetic witness to justice and peace. We likewise live in confident expectation of the coming of God's kingdom and we pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. As a result we can effectively work together in promoting the dignity of every human person and in safeguarding human rights especially religious freedom. We must also be united in combating all forms of racial, ethnic or religious discrimination and hatred, including anti-Semitism."

During John Paul II's Pontificate, a number of remarkable official Vatican documents have been published; notable among them are the aforementioned 1985 "Notes on Preaching and Catechesis"; the 1988 document entitled "The Church and Racism" which not only condemns anti-Semitism but also the anti-Zionism that serves as a guise for anti-Semitism; the 1998 document on the Shoah "We Remember" also mentioned above; and the 2001 Pontifical Biblical Commission on "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible"; and this is not to forget the "Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel" which also has significant theological as well as diplomatic aspects and implications.

These official teachings of the Magisterium have enshrined in perpetuity much of Pope John Paul II's unique and historic legacy for Christian-Jewish relations in general.

All this is not to deny that there have been issues of tension between the Pope and the Jewish community and sometimes there have been actions that he has taken that have caused distress to the latter. Some of these have related to the role of the Church and its leadership during the Shoah and there have been actions like the beatifications of Edith Stein, a Jewish convert to Catholicism, murdered by the Nazis; and Pope Pius IX, remembered in Jewish historical memory for having supported the abduction of a young Roman Jew, Edgardo Mortara.



However I am convinced that none of these have ever been motivated in the slightest by any intentional insensitivity on the part of the Pope – on the contrary. Inevitably, historical memory and its interpretation are very subjective. Moreover the Pope's first commitment and responsibility are to his faith and Church as he sees them; and all his actions are determined accordingly. If in the process of pursuing these goals he may tread upon any Jewish sensitivities, I am sure that this is something he regrets. However it does not prevent him from doing what he thinks is right for the Church. Nevertheless his genuine concern for the wellbeing of Jewry, for the promotion of respect for Judaism and for Catholic Jewish reconciliation is one of the pillars of his pontificate.

In conclusion let me return to another statement of the Pope's to the American Jewish Committee in 1985, which itself may be seen as an accurate description of his own remarkable contribution towards Catholic-Jewish reconciliation and understanding.

"I am convinced, and I am happy to state it on this occasion, that the relationships between Jews and Christians have radically improved in these years. Where there was ignorance and therefore prejudice and stereotypes, there is now growing mutual knowledge, appreciation and respect. There is above all, love between us; that kind of love, I mean, which is for both of us a fundamental injunction of our religious traditions. . . . Love involves understanding. It also involves frankness and the freedom to disagree in a brotherly way where there are reasons for it." Assuredly, these words testify so powerfully to the remarkable journey of transformation and reconciliation since the dialog of the deaf between Herzl and Pius X.

Indeed, to the extent that there is today – in these words of the Pope – love, understanding and frankness, in Christian-Jewish relations in general and Catholic-Jewish relations in particular; we owe him, Pope John Paul II, an enormous debt of gratitude for a remarkable legacy. Even if it turns out that Catholic-Jewish relations will not be blessed with a successor to Pope John Paul II who will demonstrate quite the same degree of commitment to these relations, I believe that what has been achieved in this regard especially under John Paul II's Pontificate, has guaranteed firm and resolute foundations for Catholic-Jewish relations that they may continue to only go from strength to strength.

Address given by Rabbi David Rosen at Georgetown University on February 2, 2004