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by Eugene J. Fisher

Any discussion of the current controversies between Catholics and Jews over issues related to the Shoah must be set within the much larger context of the astounding progress in Catholic-Jewish relations in the final third of the 20th century. Indeed, I would argue that the current high-voltage Jewish criticism of contemporary actions of the Holy See is itself a reflection of that progress.

> **When Jews look at a Vatican text, they probe it for weaknesses, dissecting its logical and moral vulnerabilities. This is what they do to their own texts.**

In no previous century since the church assumed vast political power following the conversion of Constantine have Jews felt secure enough in Christian-dominated societies to speak as freely and frankly as they do today. While the framers of the Second Vatican Council"s "*Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*" (1965) might not have foreseen such a result, this unintended but certainly lively by-product of the renewal of Catholic teaching on the church"s relationship with the Jewish people is to be welcomed. It signals a dialogue that allows the participants to bare their souls to one another without inhibition or fear of intimidation.

The controversies range from Jewish concerns over who the Pope meets (Waldheim, Arafat) and where cloistered convents and crosses should be located (Auschwitz/Birkenau), to who the church should declare a saint (Edith Stein, Cardinal Stepinac, Pope Pius XII), Many Catholics are understandably confused as to why some in the Jewish community feel constrained to second guess so many of what are, after all, internal matters in the life of the church. Catholic confusion is compounded when the complaints come at a time of rapid progress in the dialogue vigorously led by Pope John Paul II. This pope"s active promotion of Catholic-Jewish relations is unprecedented in the history of the church. And why beat up on Catholics all the time? Why not go after somebody

else once in a while? We don"t go around setting up Messianic Jewish "synagogues," or saying that God doesn"t hear the prayers of Jews or opining that the Anti-Christ will be a Jew. Why us? (Many Jews are surprised to learn that there is such a thing as "Catholic paranoia," but there is.)

The answers, on reflection, are not too difficult to discern. First, Roman Catholicism is by far the largest church within the community of the baptized. Its pope, certainly in our time, is thus the most visible individual within that community. So Jews concerned about what that community might do (history has taught them all too well that such concerns are not by any means paranoid) will tend to watch very closely, even minutely, what the leadership of the Catholic Church does that might affect them. That great pioneer of the dialogue, Msgr. George G. Higgins, once likened the Jewish point of view in Catholic-Jewish relations to that of a mouse in bed with an elephant. The mouse gets little sleep, watching for any little tremor in the elephant"s body that might indicate that it is about to turn over.

Second, in my experience, many Jews have a heightened notion of the power and authority of the papacy. A major Jewish journal recently published without comment a letter to the editor that stated Pope Pius XII could have ended World War II just by telling the troops, most of whom were at least nominally Christian, to lay down their arms and go home. Would that it had been so! Popes have not even aspired to that kind of direct political clout over secular authorities and the laity in a long, long time.

Perhaps the single issue underlying all the controversies is memory. Jews wonder what the next generation of the world"s one billion Roman Catholics will be taught about Jews, Judaism and the Holocaust. Jews understand very well that how we Catholics define the past for the next generation will deeply influence the fate of future generations of Jews within Western civilization. One great strength of tradition-oriented institutions, like the church and rabbinic Judaism, lies in their ability to frame the issues of human continuity from generation to generation. Stalin was right. The Catholic Church has no troops. But it has a prodigious memory and a gift (we believe it comes from the Holy Spirit) to interpret for its followers the meaning of human history. It has preachers and teachers. The Jewish community, having, lived with and under us for much of the last two millennia, understands quite well the long-range significance of Catholic memory. That is why they worry about it so much. If I were Jewish, I might worry about us, too.

Sensitivities on both sides, spoken and unspoken, abound in each of the Holocaust-related controversies. Jews for an entire generation hesitated to talk very much even with each other about what had happened to them. It was only in the mid-1970’s, perhaps in response to the television miniseries "Holocaust," that survivors felt able to talk to their children and to other Jews. When they did, Holocaust "revisionists" popped up in colleges and on the media to deny that it ever really happened! So began the period of building Holocaust museums and promoting Holocaust education in public and private schools, twin efforts that have greatly enriched the educational and moral environment of the last remaining superpower, and thus, potential world bully. As Pope John Paul II has said, the Jewish witness to the Shoah is "a saving warning for all humanity, which shows [them] to be still the heirs of the prophets."

The Rabbinic Style

Yet even though the Holy See"s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops have on numerous occasions condemned Holocaust denial for the "great lie" that it is, still Jews worry. Jewish worry manifests itself a little differently than does Catholic worry. Most of the spokespersons for the worriers have grown up in New York City, which is not as sensitivity-conscious in its public discourse as, say, Virginia, or Michigan, or even California, and many of the spokespersons are rabbinically trained; or, if not they are nonetheless profoundly influenced by the rabbinical style of discourse. Anyone who has read a portion of the

Talmud will realize quickly that it is quite a different genre of religious literature from either the protracted ruminations of Augustine or the clipped logical framework of Aquinas. It is argumentative, not only among rabbis ("But, Rabbi X said...") but also with the biblical text itself. For example, the argument raged among rabbis over the centuries, "How could Joseph have been so morally callous? He knew for all those years of his opulent living in Egypt that his father mourned his death. Yet he could spare not one messenger to tell his grieving father that he lived and prospered? What a breach of the commandment to honor your father and mother!" I know of no Christian preacher who has ever raised this question. Yet arguing with the texts and with the most revered of Jewish ancestors is typical of rabbinic discourse.

So when Jews look at a Vatican text, they probe it for weaknesses, dissecting its logical and moral vulnerabilities. Here again they have done us Catholics a great service. The Jewish reception of every one of the statements of the Holy See, beginning with the declaration on non-Christian religions, which none other than Abraham Joshua Heschel panned as too little and too late, has been negative and even fractious. This is what Jews do to their own texts. It is an honor, perhaps oddly enough, when they do it to ours. The service is to hold our feet to the fire; to temper thereby our dross metal statements into solid steel capable of serving the ages. Consequently, one can discern in official church statements over the years a steady progress in Catholic teaching about Jews and Judaism. Since getting this teaching right has everything to do with authentic Catholic teaching (Vatican II noted wisely that it is when searching her own mystery that the church encounters the mystery of Israel), we should be grateful for the honor Jews pay us in disputing on their own terms with us.

Yet dispute is not dialogue. Dialogue seeks to know what is hurtful to the other and to avoid it. Its goal is not winning but understanding. It would be helpful, therefore, if our Jewish partners in dialogue would learn that using the level of rhetoric on Catholics that is common within the Jewish community can bloc understanding as often as it communicates to us legitimate Jewish concerns. I would say this is especially true when the subject is the papacy.

Papacy as Sore Point

Until quite recently, the history of Catholics, like that of Jews, in the United States was one, by and large, of immigration and discrimination, of being excluded from the "better" neighborhoods, schools, jobs and social clubs. Entire political movements were formed whose primary purpose was to keep Catholic immigrants out, first out of the country and then, failing that, out of the established economic and social system. We were numerous and unsavory. We would bring down social and educational standards, polluting American culture. Above all, we were dangerous subjects of blind obedience to the "whore of Babylon," the pope, and thus at once un-Christian, undemocratic and of uncertain loyalty to the American experiment.

Catholic discourse can strike Jewish ears as too soft, nuanced and hesitant on the big issues

The pope was the symbol of what was wrong with the poor, huddled, teeming ethnic masses of "papists" who swarmed into America, threatening all that was good and sacred about the great

"city set on a hill." If only Catholics would give up the pope, the mantra went, they could be socialized, Americanized, Christianized, sanitized and made fit for respectable company. But we would not and, by and large, we did not, which held back our assimilation and acceptance in this country for generations.

So the papacy, even now, when the century-long wave of Nativist, Know-Nothing bigotry has subsided to a trickle, remains for Catholics a symbol of who we are as Americans, and what it cost our parents and grandparents to remain Catholic in a land of legal equality and ethno-religious discrimination.

When Jewish leaders criticize the pope, whether Pius XII or John Paul II, even many of the "progressives" among us find ourselves a bit disoriented, because sensitivities are triggered that we may not have known we had. For Catholics with a historical memory, Jews are fellow immigrants who suffered from much the same set of discriminatory attitudes and systemic exclusions. It is not at all accidental that the names of the leaders of the labor movement tend to be "ethnic," Jewish and Catholic. Nor is it accidental that Catholics and Jews tended, again until recently, to cluster in the same urban ghettos. So how is it that when we recognize our American story in the Jewish-American story, many Jews seem to miss what is to us the obvious point that to attack the papacy is to raise up for us the specter of the Nativist bigotry we thought had been left behind after John F. Kennedy"s campaign for the Presidency.

In jumping all over the popes, many Jews do not seem to realize, they are by no means "speaking truth to power," as they themselves, I feel, sincerely believe. They are triggering the half-buried paranoia of the grandchildren of unwelcome immigrants. If Jews are to communicate with American Catholics, there will need to be a softening of the rhetoric until the volume is turned down enough so that we Catholics can hear what they are saying. Right now, the discourse is too loud to be comprehensible.

The Church Repentant?

The difficulty of communication is very much two-sided. If Jewish discourse tends to Catholic ears to be too disputatious, pointed and at times judgmental, Catholic discourse (especially that of Rome) can strike Jewish ears as too soft, nuanced and hesitant on the big issues, like the Holocaust. The recent statement of the Holy See, *We Remember.- A Reflection on the Shoah*, is a case in point. The Vatican document emanating from Rome and addressing at once all of the world"s one billion Catholics, was decidedly written in "Vaticanese," a sub-dialect that many American Catholics sometimes have difficulty comprehending. One of the characteristics of Vaticanese is its attempt not to say more than it actually wants to say. This can result in a plethora of caveats and distinctions, with which anyone familiar with medieval scholasticism will find themselves at home, but which in the larger world remains an acquired taste.

As I read the document for the first time on a charter bus going into Rome from DaVinci after a flight from Jerusalem with a distinguished group of U.S. bishops and their rabbinical counterparts from around the country, I could foresee that what made eminent sense to me was in a number of key areas going to cause my rabbi friends no end of difficulty. In retrospect, I think I underestimated the difficulty, but was not surprised by the reaction"s intensity.

The points at issue in the Vatican text are related essentially to its summary of the history of Jewish-Christian relations in only a few paragraphs. Naturally things were left out that from a Jewish point of view; needed to be said, but that the authors may have felt were implicit in the text and therefore did not need to be spelled out.

Two key distinctions illustrate this dynamic and the need for further dialogue. The first is the

distinction in the text between "the church as such," which is held blameless for the Holocaust and what led up to it, and "the sons and daughters" of the church, for whose teachings, actions and inactions over the centuries and especially during the Holocaust the church as a whole is called upon by the document to repent. This language struck many Jews as less than straightforward. In fact, it is traditional. Although it is not the most fashionable ecclesiology in certain academic theological circles today, it cannot be said (as some Jews feared) that it was invented just to get the church off the hook with regard to its historical responsibility for setting the stage for the Shoah. Indeed, to the authors of the document, which was after all essentially a ringing statement of repentance for past Catholic sins, the church"s acknowledgment of responsibility was obvious in the statement"s structure and very existence. But how and why repent if there was no sin?

Jews sometimes trigger the half-buried paranoia of the grandchildren of unwelcome immigrants.

Cardinal Edward Cassidy, who signed the document as president of the commission that authorized it has explained on various occasions that the distinction is made traditionally in Roman Catholicism between the church as a sacramental, saving institution, the body of Christ on earth, and the church as a human institution, which includes all levels o "the sons and daughters" of the church, from popes to newly baptized infants. The latter can indeed be, as an institution, guilty of sin, and therefore it needs constantly to repent (it is *"semper reformanda ").* The former sense of church, because it refers directly to the actions of Christ in heaven and on earth, and thus to the integrity and validity of the sacraments necessary for salvation, including the sacraments of Eucharist and reconciliation, cannot be said to be "sinful" without impugning the Godhead as sinful and the sacraments as corrupt and ineffective.

So the church as a human institution and as a whole must repent of its manifold sins against Jews and Judaism –sins which paved the way for something, namely genocide, that the church at its worst never contemplated as a possibility. This to me is the clear teaching of *We Remember.* Yet in explaining how this is so, the document makes a second distinction that again sounded to many Jews as a less than honest reckoning, but which I believe is vital to an accurate historical record of the period and any discussion of the church"s role in it. This is the distinction between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

"The Teaching of Contempt"

The church"s traditional polemic against Judaism, which was aptly named "the teaching of contempt" by Jules Isaac, whose theory was accepted by Pope John XXIII and formed the basis of Vatican II"s "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," was intended, as it manifested itself in the first and second centuries, to show Christianity"s superiority over the then equally young rabbinic interpretation of the texts common to Jews and Christians. (In the first century, one should recall, virtually all Christians were Jews, so the New Testament is properly read as an internal Jewish document, an argument by Jews directed to Jews about the most authoritative way to read the Jewish Scriptures, i.e. to understand what Judaism should become after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.)

Beginning already in the second century, as the Pope trenchantly pointed out in his address in November 1977 to the seminar on anti-Judaism/anti-Semitism sponsored by the Holy See, the need of Christians (increasingly gentile) to polemicize against rabbinic Judaism became so strong that a series of "misinterpretations" of the New Testament text were introduced. The

misinterpretations were wrongly but ultimately accepted by subsequent generations of gentile Christians as "the Gospel truth" about Judaism. These included the nefarious and insidious notion of collective Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus – as if all the Jews spread around the Roman Empire in Jesus" time had somehow learned of the trial of Jesus in time to go to Jerusalem to scream, "Crucify him!" Absurd, of course, but no more absurd than the Scripture-defying notion that such personal guilt could be handed down to succeeding generations of Jews by birth. Yet most Christians believed it. Perhaps it was comforting. If a Christian could blame "the Jews" for the death of Jesus, then one would not have to take responsibility for the real culprit, one"s own sins. The awesome phrase, "Christ died for your sins" could thus be domesticated and put aside. (No matter that one thus "put aside" one"s only chance for redemption and salvation, which theologically is dependent upon the extent to which one acknowledges one"s own responsibility as a sinner for Jesus" death, as the Council of Trent apparently in vain, tried to remind Catholics.)

Even more distinctions than are made in the Vatican document become necessary. While the teaching of contempt against Judaism was by the end of the third century so well developed and so widespread as to be uncontested among subsequent fathers of the church, it did not (save in far-away outposts like the Iberian peninsula) result in any large-scale violence or even forced conversions of Jews until the 11th century. In other words, the first millennium of Jewish-Christian relations, despite the accretion of absolute power over Jews by the church beginning with the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century, did not result in an attempt by the church to wipe out Judaism. On the contrary, thanks to St. Augustine and to St. Gregory the Great who as pope instituted Augustinian theory as papal canon law, Judaism alone among the myriad ancient cults of the Roman empire that pre-dated Christianity was allowed to survive and was accorded legal status (in virtue of which it could and did appeal to the popes for protection when civil authorities got out of hand).

So there exists for the first millennium of the Christian era not an unmitigated "anti-Judaism" but a half anti- and half philo-Judaism in Catholic theory and practice. Judaism was protected and denigrated at the same time. What word can we give to this highly ambiguous theoretical and practical posture by the church toward Jews and Judaism? Ambivalent anti-Judaism? Hesitant anti-Judaism? Certainly a qualifier is needed.

The Shift to Anti-Jewishness

In the 11th century, however, things took a decided and unequivocal turn for the worse. At the beginning of the century, or of the second millennium, apocalyptic fervor seems to have whipped up a rather large-scale "pogrom" against Jews in France. Jews were being blamed for holding back the return of the true Messiah by not acknowledging that he had already come. In 1096 the third wave of the first crusade, being leaderless because the nobility and the clergy already had gone with the first two waves, turned into a mob that massacred thousands of Jews in the Rhineland area of what is now Germany. This was over the protests of the pope who had launched the crusade and the local bishop and princes who felt an obligation since the time of Augustine and Gregory to protect the "ignorant" but theologically significant Jews. The Jews were significant because they witnessed to the authenticity of the divine revelation of Sinai, without which the New Testament would make little sense.

There are a number of theories to explain why, but what is important here is simply to note that things changed radically after the 11th century. The ambivalence on the popular level faded, replaced by an increasingly negative anti-Judaism that began to take on the tinge of an anti-Jewishness. Whereas before, as in the classic French cathedral of Strasbourg, the church and the synagogue were depicted as two equally beautiful women, with the former resplendent and triumphant and the latter downcast and defeated, with the tablets of the Law falling from her hands, the cathedral at Regensburg, Germany, has the infamous "Judensau" carved on its facade, with

Jews suckling at its teats. This disgusting image is qualitatively different from the theological triumphalism of the French cathedral. It seeks to dehumanize the Jews, not simply illustrate the superiority of Christianity.

But if this is anti-Jewishness, a new term needs to be confected for the next step in which the Jews are demonized. In this step, Jews are not just collectively guilty for the death of Jesus but are out to destroy all of "Christian civilization" and are in league with the Devil. Whereas for Augustine and the fathers of the church, the Jews were pitiable in their suffering, beginning in the 11th century they are seen as a threat to Christian society.

Passion plays, beginning in the 14th century, thus go well beyond the Gospels and even the fathers of the church in depicting Jews as part of a cosmic plot led by Satan to destroy Christendom and enslave all humanity. The Protestant Reformation did not seek to reform this aspect of medieval thinking, and the Enlightenment merely secularized it, the latter taking it to a new and even more insidious stage of development.

New Racialism

While the "logic" of medieval anti-Jewishness led to very serious crimes such as forced conversion and, in Spain, an Inquisition to test the sincerity of the forced conversions (all of which was against the Jewish policy established by the popes over the centuries), the new logic wedded pseudo-science with greed to create the theory of racialism. This theory appears to have been developed initially to justify the slave trade. If Africans are a different subordinate "race" they can be bought, sold and treated as chattel. With the breakdown of the God-centered Christian worldview, with its strong teaching from Genesis about the unity of all humanity as created in the image of God, racial theories could be acted upon without the moral constraints of traditional Christian teaching. The great tragedy inherent in the new racialist theory was that the sub-humans could not simply be baptized to become acceptable and full members of the secular, "enlightened" society. They were a different species.

Within Europe there was one group above all that many in society were pre-disposed to see as different, inferior and threatening all at once: the Jews. Voltaire thus argued that no matter what one did to or for the Jews, they could never assimilate into Western society. It was not in their nature to be full and productive citizens. In the 19th century, secular Jew-haters like Chamberlain and Gobineau began to pass their hatred off as "science," euphemistically disguising it as "anti-Semitism." Nazi ideology wedded racialist pseudo-science to its own neo-pagan, Romantic notion of Germany"s "Aryan" past, casting the now no longer fully human but still demonized Jews in the role of the great polluter of the purity of Teutonic bloodlines.

The Vatican statement"s distinction between the anti-Judaism of the fathers of the church and the anti-Semitism that rationalized genocide is thus a quite cogent one. The latter on several grounds rejects theological elements central to Christianity. The one did not simply slide into the other. More than 1,500 years of historical developments intervene between the two. We need not fewer distinctions but more to do even basic justice to the complex ambiguities of Western history with regard to the Jewish people. There is patristic anti-Judaism, which is distinct from but related to medieval anti-Jewishness. Centuries later there emerges a distinct new theory, historically related to its predecessors: modern, racial anti-Semitism, which owes its theoretical essence not to the Christian teaching of contempt but to the dark underside of the Europe of the Enlightenment becoming rich on the slave trade and colonialism.

Responsibility for the Shoah

As Professor Yosef Yerushalmi said a number of years ago, if the logic of Christian anti-Judaism

led directly to genocide, that would have happened many centuries ago when the church in much of Europe actually had the political power to carry out the logic of its beliefs. It did not. It only happened in our own secularized century, after the breakdown of the theocentric vision of Christendom and the moral restraints that vision imposed. Yet it is unlikely that the Jews of the 20th century could have been so easily pinpointed and scapegoated by Nazi theory were it not for the traditions of Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Jewishness that preceded the 19th-century invention of racial anti-Semitism. A Christian tradition of negative teaching about Jews and Judaism is thus a necessary cause for the Holocaust, Yerushalmi argued. But it is not a sufficient cause, because much more needs to be said to begin to explain the success of genocidal anti-Semitism in the first half of the 20th century in Europe. However one defines the distinctions and causal links, the Vatican document"s call for the whole church to repent its role in paving the way for the Holocaust is, at least to this reader, quite clear.

At the end of this millennium the Catholic Church desires to express her deep sorrow for the failures of her sons and daughters in every age. This is an act of repentance (*teshuvah*), since as members of the church we are linked to the sins as well as the merits of all her children. The church approaches with deep respect and great compassion the experience of extermination, the Shoah, suffered by the Jewish people during World War II. It is not a matter of mere words, but indeed of binding commitment.... We wish to turn awareness of past sins into a firm resolve to build a new future in which there will be no more anti-Judaism among Christians... but rather a shared mutual respect as befits those who adore the One Creator and Lord and have a common father in faith, Abraham.

This is the mandate of the Holy See"s statement that Catholics need to keep firmly in mind.

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(The full text of *We Remember* along with relevant statements from European and U.S. hierarchies, and the statement of Cardinal Edward Cassidy clarifying the intent of the Vatican document, is available in *Catholics Remember the Holocaust,* publication No. 5-290, Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1999).