



# Sicut Judaeis' and beyond - The Popes and the Jewish People

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## **“Sicut Judaeis” and beyond - The Popes and the Jewish People**

**by David J. Levy**

Bernard of Clairvaux was an inspired and practical man. Spiritual leader of the second crusade (1144), Clairvaux took the time to study the mistakes made during the first crusade (1096). One of those mistakes was the slaughter of more than five thousand members of the Jewish community of Europe. That mistake was so serious that Pope Calixtus II, in 1120, had issued a papal bull, that is an official declaration, entitled *Sicut*

*Judaeis* in which he forbade the mistreatment of Jews.

The words *Sicut Judaeis* were first used by Pope Gregory I (590-604) in a letter addressed to the Bishop of Naples. Even then the Pope emphasized that Jews were entitled to "enjoy their lawful liberty." Yet, neither Bernard's inspired leadership, nor centuries of papal teaching, could prevent Rabbi Jacob b. Meir Tam from being set upon by a mob of crusaders. They proceeded to stab him five times, in memory of the wounds suffered by Jesus. Again, hundreds were murdered.

In fact, from the 12th century on, *Sicut Judaeis* was reissued by many a pope, with similarly unimpressive results. Among other things, the history of medieval Christian-Jewish relations reveals the impotence of the Popes to protect the Jews.

On Friday, October 31, 1997, the latest Pope issued the latest Papal statement regarding

the Jews. Jewish leaders and organizations welcomed the Pope's comments as positive reflections on the Holocaust and on the history of Christian anti-Judaism. His remarks were consistent with the new spirit of Christian-Jewish relations. But what did Catholics hear? Thank God, Jews no longer need Papal protection. But was Pope John Paul II's statement, nevertheless, simply another in the long history of ineffective Papal statements?

The Pope addressed 60 Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox scholars, participants in a French symposium whose topic was "The Roots of Anti-Judaism in the Christian Milieu." The Pope remarked, "erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability have circulated for too long, engendering feelings of hostility towards this people." This was another assault in

the battle against a form of anti-Judaism justified by the infamous "deicide" charge, a battle which began with *Nostra Aetate* in 1964. The campaign has had mixed results. Outside of North America and parts of Europe, many Christians still believe that it's o.k. to hate Jews because "grandpa says that the Jews killed Jesus". The continuing effort is appreciated, but insufficient. Something is still missing.

The campaign to purge Christianity of anti-Judaism leaves a theological vacuum. If Christians are not opposed to Judaism then what is their relationship to Judaism, and to Jews? Does the new spirit of Christian-Jewish relations amount to nothing more than improved humane interaction? Is the new spirit naught but an upgraded *Sicut Judaeis*, a promise not to hit, kick, bite and scratch? Should Catholics, while exercising proper conduct, continue to feel the need to pray for the conversion of the

Jews, albeit in a politically correct manner? Does the new spirit leave intact, explicitly or implicitly, the teaching that the one and only route to heaven is via Jesus? If the Pope's remarks do nothing more than address the negative, that is hatred, we suggest that his latest comments will be no more effective than *Sicut Judaeis*.

The vacuum is not filled by interfaith efforts to coordinate good works. As positive as those efforts are they are not theological statements. Nor is it filled by Vatican Council II's *Lumen Gentium*, referred to by Gary MacEoin in the November 7 NCR. *Lumen Gentium* teaches that "Men and women who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ and of his church... can win eternal salvation." That statement is so weak that it can easily be read as blatantly ethnocentric and suspiciously condescending. "Poor, unfortunate you who do not know the gospel. Fret not, we'll let

you into heaven  
anyway."

The Pope's  
October 31<sup>st</sup>  
comment on racism  
illustrates the  
dilemma. He says,  
"Racism is thus a  
negation of the  
deepest identity of  
the human being,  
who is a person  
created in the image  
and likeness of  
God." The history of  
humanity's  
inhumanity proves  
that being in the  
image and likeness  
of God is a poor  
defense in the face  
of those who  
proclaim "I am more  
in God's image  
than you are." So  
long as one group  
can justify feelings  
of superiority  
towards other  
groups, it can, and  
likely will, justify  
racist behavior  
towards those other  
groups. So long as  
Christianity blatantly  
teaches that  
salvation can only  
be attained through  
the vehicle of  
Christianity, or so  
long as she subtly  
teaches that  
salvation can best  
be attained through  
the Church,  
condemnations of  
racism will lack the  
clout needed to  
move humanity  
forward.

However, there is  
room for hope. In

his remarks the Pope says, "The fact of divine election is at the origin of this small people... This [Jewish] people perseveres in spite of everything because they *are* the people of the Covenant, and despite human infidelities, the Lord is faithful to his Covenant." That statement invites commentary. What does he mean when he says that Jews are the people of the Covenant?

As a Jew I dearly wish that he means this. "Are", being in the present tense, might be intended to include today's contemporary Jewish community. The Pope might mean that, notwithstanding the dynamics of the Jewish people's relationship with God, dynamics that on occasion resulted in Divine condemnation, the covenant between the Jews and God is alive, intact, and healthy. The Pope has previously made similar comments. On October 15, 1991, while addressing the Jewish leaders of Brazil, he said, "As the Bible says, 'The Lord has loved

Israel forever' (1 Kings 10:9), He has made a covenant with it which has never been broken, placing in it the messianic hope of the whole human race."

If so, there is, to begin with, no need for the conversion of the Jews. Judaism, on her own, is able to, and does, serve as a vehicle enabling Jews to achieve salvation. Jews, through Judaism, are able to, and do, enter into a relationship with the Creator that is entirely satisfying in the eyes of the Creator. Jews and Christians are, thus, partners fulfilling the Creator's mandate for human existence. Rather than leaving a vacuum where once there was the negative, a positive appraisal of contemporary Jewish existence begins to emerge. If that's what the Pope meant then he's gone well beyond *Sicut Judaeis*.

Furthermore, if that is the intended significance behind the Pope's remark then there is much work to be done. Some of it is simple. Pastors will need to



inform their congregations that Hebrew Scriptures are far more than a collection of writings forecasting the ministry of Jesus. Seminaries will need to instill in their graduates an appreciation of the ongoing richness of the Jewish relationship with God as expressed through the fulfillment of those Scriptures. We can celebrate the fact that some have already begun working on these tasks.

Some of the work to be done is difficult. Pastors will need to teach that the life and death of Jesus is God's reaching out to a community other than the Jewish community. Though there is an enriching that occurs for the Jewish partners involved in Christian-Jewish dialogue, the Christ of Christianity makes no personal spiritual contribution to those same Jewish partners. For some time, Christian theologians have reflected upon Judaism and Christianity as expressions of a single covenant or of two separate covenants. Those

reflections will need to be nurtured and molded such that they satisfy the questions of believing Christians.

Some of the work to be done is painful. Catholics will find themselves opposing brother and sister Christians who continue to call for the conversion of the Jews. Certainly, Southern Baptists are not going to rescind their recent call for mass Jewish conversion simply because of the Pope's latest comment.

Of course, that all assumes the best of the Pope's remarks. There is also room for doubt. In the same paragraph he says, "The Scriptures cannot be separated from the people and its history, which leads to Christ..." "The people and its history" has, in fact, led well beyond Christ, to the modern state of Israel. Or did Jewish history end with Christ, in effect, superseded by Christianity? He quotes Romans 11:28-29, "For the sake of their forefathers" they are beloved of God. That same

reference appears in *Nostra Aetate* 4. Yet, am I not in my own right, beloved of God? If not, welcome back *Sicut Judaeis*.

Ambiguity appears elsewhere in Pope John Paul II's writings. For example, in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, issued August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1993, the Pope distinguishes between the old Law, and its fulfillment in the new Law. He quotes St. Ambrose, "In the same way that there is an Old Testament, but all truth is in the New Testament, so it is for the Law." Thus, Kings David and Solomon, prophets Isaiah and Ezekial, all lived unfulfilled lives. Later he states that, "The different ways in which God acting in history cares for the world and for mankind are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they support each other and intersect." If so, the lives of David, Solomon, Isaiah and Ezekial are fulfilled. The ambiguity remains.

In fact, the Anti-Defamation League has compiled a 200 page book of Pope

John Paul II's statements on Jews, about Judaism, and about Israel. Ambiguities are common. To the Pope's credit, there is a warmth and sincerity that attests to a man imbued with the spirit of God. However, as soon as one moves beyond the warm fuzzies and into the cold arena of the theological the doubts return.

The year 2,000 can herald important advances in Christian-Jewish relations. The Jewish community looks forward to a papal statement on the church, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust, expected to be issued before the turn of the millennium. While others look for apologies, I pray for a statement that will reflect, in clear and unambiguous terms, the best possible interpretation of decades of Papal statements and Vatican proclamations. And I pray, in this era of mass-communication, that the statement will be listener-friendly and that people will listen. If so, Pope John Paul II will have accomplished more in one lifetime

than centuries of  
*Sicut Judaeis*.

Considering all the work that needs to be done, attending to important distractions becomes a challenge. The debate over Pius XI's hidden encyclical is probably unnecessary. Some are of the opinion that contemporary Christian-Jewish relations would be better if the encyclical had been published. Other disagree. What purpose does that debate serve? Meantime the real work is waiting to be completed.

Debates about the Holocaust are purposeful so long as they teach. The ongoing debate about Pius XII's silence during the Holocaust is stoked by the Pope's referral to him in this address, though attempting to defend Pius XII by referring to his *Summi Pontificatus* is a questionable strategy at best. Likewise, the Pope's claim that Christians "did everything to save the persecuted even at the risk of their lives" is misleading. The reality is that

Christians willing,  
and happily,  
cooperated with the  
Nazi genocide and  
indeed, felt no  
contradiction  
between Nazism  
and Christianity.  
Both of these  
debates generate  
implications that  
further Christian-  
Jewish relations.

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