



The Future of Jewish-Christian Relations in the Light of the Visit of Pope John Paul II to the Holy Land

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A Keynote Address by Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy

1. The Visit of Pope John Paul II to the Holy Land

The celebration of the Jubilee Year 2000 in the Gregorian Calendar was primarily a Christian event. Yet there were two important moments in that year that have left, I believe, an indelible imprint on Jewish-Christian relations. I refer of course to the solemn act of pardon in St. Peter's Basilica on March 12th and the visit, just over a week later, of Pope John Paul II to Yad Vashem and to the Western Wall of the Temple.

These two events were at the same time the culmination of some 35 years of dialogue between the Catholic Church and Jewish organisations, and a challenge to Jews and Christians throughout the world to build together a new future for two faith communities closely linked by common spiritual roots and a long, but tragic history.

On March 12th, the first Sunday in the penitential season of Lent in the Jubilee Year, Pope John Paul prayed in the name not only of the thousands of pilgrims in the Basilica or in the Square outside, but on behalf of the whole Catholic Church throughout the world:

God of our Fathers

You chose Abraham and his descendants

To bring your Name to the Nations:

we are deeply saddened by the behaviour 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.

It was this prayer, with his signature upon it, that Pope John Paul II on March 26th 2000 placed in the Western Wall of the Temple. Three days earlier, His Holiness had laid a wreath on the tomb in the Mausoleum of Yad Vashem and lit the flame that recalls the six million victims of the *Shoah*. It was in the spirit of this act of pardon that he stated during that moving and unforgettable ceremony:

Here, as at Auschwitz and many other places in Europe, we are overcome by the echo of the heart-rending laments of so many. Men, women and children cry out to us from the depths of the horror that they knew. How can we fail to hear their cry? No one can forget or ignore what happened. No one can diminish its scale. We wish to remember. But we wish to remember for a purpose, namely to ensure that never again will evil prevail, as it did for the millions of innocent victims of Nazism.

It has been said that the simple, but moving ceremony at the Temple Wall was probably the strongest moment of the present Pope's pontificate. A Dominican biblical scholar and long-time resident of Jerusalem, Rev. Father Jerome Murphy-O'Connor pointed out:

By standing there [at the Western Wall], this symbolised the humility of the Church which has been viewed by Jews as arrogant. By standing there he transformed the relationship of Christianity towards Judaism. It is a complete reversal of history.

A poll taken in Israel immediately following the visit showed a dramatic change in attitudes of the Jewish people in this land towards Christianity. For those of us who had the immense joy and privilege of sharing those moments in person, there was the conviction that all that had been done in the second half of the last century to mend the broken and blood-stained fences between Christians and Jews had received the seal of God's blessing and could never be again undone.

2. A sign of progress achieved

Certainly, we did not arrive at the Western Wall on March 26th last year without having traversed a long and difficult road from the age-old mistrust and suspicion that characterised Jewish-Christian relations for so long. That we were able to do this in just some 35 years is due to the commitment made by the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council during its meeting in Rome in the period 1962-1965, and to the readiness of Jewish leaders and organisations to accept the outstretched hand offered in this period by Christians.

It is not my intention this evening to list names of those who contributed in a special way to this historic endeavour. There are here among us some who have been to the forefront in this great task. Others from both camps have already left us and I have no doubt that together they now rejoice in the progress made in our relationship.

In view of the title of this address, I take the liberty, however, of stressing the vital role that Pope John Paul II has had in maintaining and taking forward the Church's commitment to creating a new relationship with the Jewish people. As the young Archbishop of Krakow in Poland – he was only 45 at the time –, Karol Wojtyla signed the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions Nostra Aetate* on October 28th 1965, which solemnly declared that "the Jews remain very close to God [...] since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made". This statement, together with the other affirmations of the Declaration, signalled a radical new approach by the Catholic Church to the Jewish people, removing from the Church's teaching the old theory of "substitution" and making it clear that neither all Jews indiscriminately at the time when Jesus was put to death nor Jews today can be considered responsible for crimes committed during the passion. "Jews, the document added, should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from Sacred Scripture".¹

For some of the Catholic Bishops gathered in Rome on that occasion, this document was the cause of much concern as it made its way through the Council sessions. Certainly, the terrible experience of the *Shoah* – "the worst suffering of all"² – influenced the deliberations of the Council Fathers. For the young Archbishop of Krakow, however, the experience of his early years in Wadowice made this a logical conclusion. During his youth Karol Wojtyla had numbered among his closest friends the sons and daughters of the Jewish citizens of Wadowice. I should like to share with you just one incident that helps us to understand the extraordinary commitment of Pope John Paul II to Catholic-Jewish relations.

As his years at Wadowice were coming to an end, anti-Semitism began to emerge more publicly all over Poland. Economic boycotts of Jewish businesses were organised throughout the country and supported by newspapers and politicians manoeuvring for position. Karol Wojtyla had already been active in the theatre and one of the other aspiring young people of the town in that field was Ginka Beer. In 1937, she left for Palestine after an anti-Semitic disciplinary action forced her out of medical school in Krakow. Karol Wojtyla visited her before she left, and then walked with her to the station. Years later she remembered that, as her train left, Karol was too upset to say anything.³

In the 22 years since his election as Bishop of Rome, Pope John Paul II has constantly inspired and supported efforts to build and consolidate a new relationship between Jews and Christians. Shortly after his election, already in 1979, Pope John Paul made a visit to Poland, and included in his programme a pilgrimage to Auschwitz. Then on April 13th 1986, he drove from the Vatican to the Great Synagogue of Rome. "Throughout 1,900 years of a tortured relationship, no Pope had ever set foot in the Synagogue of Rome, although Pope John XXIII had once had his car stopped in front of the Synagogue so that he could greet the Roman Jews leaving their Sabbath worship"⁴ The present Pope's numerous interventions regarding Catholic-Jewish relations, his meetings with Jewish leaders in the Vatican and during his visits abroad, the Concert he hosted in the Vatican to commemorate the *Shoah* on April 7th, 1994, his strong endorsement and support for the document published by the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews in 1998, *We*

Remember: A Reflection of the Shoah, the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel in 1993, all played an important part in bringing the Catholic Church to the Western Wall on March 26th 2000.

Of course, Pope John Paul II did not do all this alone! As I have already mentioned, little progress would have been possible without the positive response of Jewish organisations and leaders. Much work had to be done also within the Catholic Church in order to change old, deeply imbedded mentalities and replace them with the new understanding expressed in *Nostra Aetate*. I would like to recall here on this occasion in particular the work done by the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, representing the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations and the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, the International and National Councils for Christians and Jews, and here on this special occasion the Interreligious Co-ordinating Council in Israel. Without such partners, little real progress could have been achieved.

Over all these activities, many of which have shed new light on Jewish-Christian relations, the experience of the *Shoah* has continued to cast a shadow. This terrible tragedy has challenged both Jews and Christians. It has made us reflect not only on those short but horribly evil years of Nazi rule in Germany, but on the almost 2000 years of Jewish-Christian relations. This has been a particular challenge for the Church in Europe, since it was there "in countries of long-standing Christian civilisation that the took place".⁵

Gradually the Catholic Church has sought to come to terms with this challenge. Statements have been made by the Hungarian, German, Polish, Swiss and French Episcopal Conferences (1994 to 1997). The Bishops of Italy and some of the Bishops of the United States have added their voice to these declarations.⁶ On March 16th, 1998, the Holy See published a document *We remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, with the approval of Pope John Paul II, in which the Catholic Church, with express reference to the *Shoah*, expresses sorrow for the failures of her sons and daughters in every age, and states that this is in the nature of "an act of repentance (*teshuva*), since, as members of the Church, we are linked to the sins as well as to the merits of all of her children."⁷

As we reflect on the progress made in our relationship, from "the past spirit of suspicion, resentment and distrust" to "a spirit which emphasises co-operation, mutual understanding and reconciliation, good will and common goals,"⁸ we are all conscious, I believe, of the work that remains to be done.

3. The future of Jewish-Christian relations

Let us then turn to consider the future. Our first aim must of course be to press forward. To stand still is to risk going backwards - and I feel absolutely confident in stating that there will be no going back on the part of the Catholic Church. At the same time, there can be a lessening of enthusiasm, a growing indifference or even a renewed spirit of suspicion and mistrust among members of the Catholic community should our efforts to keep up the momentum slacken.

Hence, I would suggest that we need above all to continue to build mutual trust between our communities. Mutual trust is a basic element of all true dialogue. It is this in particular that we have been seeking to achieve over the past 35 years. It means first of all getting to know the other as the other really is and seeking to understand the other more deeply. This is achieved especially when we are ready to take up seriously those problems that are troubling one or other of the parties and attempt together to find a solution. The commitment to achieve such understanding and mutual respect is a process that begins with a change in heart, in our own individual hearts, and spreads through our community out into the world in which we live.

I would submit that this is what we have been working at over the past 35 years. We have had, I believe, considerable success. But we still have much work to do. I do not need to bring before such a gathering examples of the times when even some of those taking part in our dialogue have failed to show the respect for the other or the due esteem for the other's intentions that are essential for successful dialogue.

Pope Paul VI, in an Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam Suam* described dialogue as "the simple exchange of gifts". It is such an approach to dialogue that will build trust and take us forward, not polemics and one-sided judgements. Surely, the visit of the successor of Pope Paul VI, the present Holy Father, to Jerusalem in March of last year was such an exchange of gifts, an expression of deep esteem and trust on the part of the leader of the Catholic world to the people of the Covenant.

In this connection, I would like to remind all those who are involved in Christian-Jewish dialogue to keep in mind that we are two distinct faith communities. There are fundamental questions on which we are unable to agree and we must respect the partner's conscience on such questions. Moreover, we have inherited a long history, in which the Jewish people "while bearing their unique witness to the Holy One of Israel and to the Torah have suffered much at different times and in many places."⁹

It is only natural that this past-history will influence and at times adversely affect our on-going dialogue. I was deeply moved when I listened to some words of Rabbi Raymond Apple, the Senior Rabbi of the Great Synagogue, Sydney, when we shared an evening together in that city to consider the document *We Remember* in July 1999:

The Jew must be forgiven for asking members of the Catholic and indeed the entire Christian community to understand that Jewish experience has very often echoed the words of Jeremiah: "Look and see if there be any pain like my pain!" More than fifty years have passed since the Holocaust, but we cannot help ourselves. Even those who were personally not there, even those born after the event, are part of a hurting people. We cannot think of the Holocaust without shuddering. The pain will not let us go.¹⁰

We cannot, and must not forget the past. In the Mausoleum at Yad Vashem, Pope John Paul II declared: "We wish to remember. But we wish to remember for a purpose, namely to ensure that evil will never again prevail, as it did for millions of innocent victims of Nazism". We remember, but we refuse to be tied down to the past by chains that hold us back from building a new future, a new partnership between Jews and Catholics, a future based on mutual trust and understanding.

4. What we have in Common

At the conclusion of the historic meeting between the two Chief Rabbis of Israel and Pope John Paul II, at the Hechal Shlomo not far from here on March 23rd 2000, the Pope did not hesitate to affirm:

There is much that we have in common. There is much that we can do together for peace, for justice, for a more human and fraternal world. May the Lord of heaven and earth lead us to a new and fruitful era of mutual respect and co-operation, for the benefit of all."¹¹

The more one is involved in Christian-Jewish relations, the more one comes to realise just how much we have in common. In the past, the emphasis was usually on what divides us, and even more on "erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament."¹² When we open the books most sacred to Jews and Christians alike, the Sacred Scriptures, we often open them at the same page as it were. We look to what we read there to provide us with the thoughts and aspirations that constitute the prayers we address daily to God. We have but one God, and we understand

ourselves as being in a covenant-type relationship with that one God. Our understanding of the fundamental questions of life is the same, based on that revelation received from God; our moral code rests firmly on the same commandments. We have together an understanding of the special dignity that belongs by right to every human being, as a consequence of that person being created in the image of God. As the Second Vatican Council stated, we Christians "draw sustenance daily from the root of the good olive tree of the Hebrew Scriptures onto which the Church has been grafted."¹³

All this has not been given to us just for ourselves or for our own personal sanctification. We are called to be a light to the nations or, as Pope John Paul II has affirmed:

As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing to the world. This is a common task awaiting us, It is therefore necessary for us, Christians and Jews, to be first a blessing to one another."¹⁴

Surely, the world today needs our common witnesses to the truths that God has made available to us. Jews and Christians alike, we are faced with a growing secularisation that either denies or simply ignores the existence of God. The advance in technology and the enormous effects on commerce and life of globalisation tend to make the creature once again arrogant and self-sufficient, as at the time our ancestors began to build a tower "with its top reaching heaven" which was named Babel (Genesis 11:4-9).

It is for us, Jews and Christians, to find ways to be a counter-witness to such arrogance, by means of our partnership. What is most important is being together, but there are steps we should take together wherever possible. In this connection, I recall the wonderful concert in 1994 in the Vatican to commemorate the *Shoah*, the lighting of the *Menorah* in the Vatican Gardens on the 50th anniversary of the State of Israel, the placing in the North American College in Rome of a *Menorah* on the occasion of *Yom Hashoah* in 1999.

These are but a few of the many steps that have been taken to consolidate the good work that has been done to create a new Christian-Jewish relationship. Much still can be done, especially in the fields of education and formation to further this worthy cause. We were made aware during the Pope's visit to Israel of the ignorance that still existed within the communities here regarding our relationship. That visit did much to educate Catholics and Jews everywhere about the present situation and the changes that have taken place.

Many of us in the Catholic Church have been greatly encouraged by the publication last September of a *Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity: Dabru Emet* (We Proclaim the Truth), signed by a large number of Jewish Rabbis in the United States of America, and by a new openness to what we may call theological discussions. In *Dabru Emet*, "an interdenominational group of Jewish scholars", seeking to respond to the changes that have taken place in Christian teaching and to public statements of remorse about Christian mistreatment of Jews and Judaism, offer "eight brief statements about how Jews and Christians may relate to each other". Let me indicate just the titles given to these statements:

- Jews and Christians worship the same God;
- Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book - the Bible (what Jews call "Tanakh" and Christians the "Old Testament");
- Christians and Jews can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel;
- Jews and Christians accept the moral principles of Torah;
- Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon;
- The humanly irreconcilable difference between the Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture;

- A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice;
- Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.

Just at the time *Dabru Emet* was published, an important document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith unfortunately created great tension within the Jewish community and dismayed many of our partners in dialogue. Part of the problem was due to the way in which the document was presented by the media, and many early negative reactions were the result not of reading what the document stated, but rather of what the media had given as its contents.

In fact, the Declaration *Dominus Jesus* did not deal at all with relations between the Christian revelation and the faith of Israel, but with the other religions of the world. The Catholic Church does not consider the faith of Israel *one* among the other religions of the world. Rather it has an absolutely special relationship to Christianity, and the document itself makes clear that the Hebrew Testament is considered by the Catholic Church, together with the New Testament, as inspired by God in the strict sense of the term.

In this context, I would mention the article published on the front page of *L'Osservatore Romano* on December 29th 2000, by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, entitled: *Abraham's Heritage -a Christmas Gift*. The Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith makes the following statement:

It is evident that, as Christians, our dialogue with the Jews is situated on a different level than that in which we engage with other religions. The faith witnessed to by the Jewish Bible is not merely another religion to us, but is the foundation of our own faith.

His Eminence in this short but very important article gives what has been called "a New Vision of the Relationship between the Church and the Jews"¹⁵. After tracing briefly the history of God's relationship with the Jewish people, the Cardinal expresses "our gratitude to our Jewish brothers and sisters who, despite the hardness of their own history, have held on to faith in this God right up to the present and who witness to it in the sight of those peoples who, lacking knowledge of the one God, 'dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death' (Lk. 1:79)".

The article has the following interesting comment on relations between Jews and Christians down through the centuries:

Certainly from the very beginning relations between the infant church and Israel were often marked by conflict. The church was considered by her own mother to be a degenerate daughter, while Christians considered their mother to be blind and obstinate. Down through the history of Christianity, already-strained relations deteriorated further, even giving birth in many cases to anti-Jewish attitudes that throughout history have led to deplorable acts of violence. Even if the most recent, loathsome experience of the *Shoah* was perpetrated in the name of an anti-Christian ideology that tried to strike the Christian faith at its Abrahamic roots in the people of Israel, it cannot be denied that a certain insufficient resistance to this atrocity on the part of Christians can be explained by the inherited anti-Judaism in the hearts of not a few Christians.

For the Cardinal, it is perhaps precisely this latest tragedy that has resulted in a new relationship between the church and Israel, which he defines as: "a sincere willingness to overcome every kind of anti-Judaism and to initiate a constructive dialogue based on knowledge of each other and reconciliation". If such a dialogue is to be fruitful, "it must begin with a prayer to our God, first of all that he might grant to us Christians a greater esteem and love for that people, the people of Israel, to whom belong *the adoption as sons, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises; theirs the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, is the Messiah* (Rom. 9:4-5), and this not only in the past, but still today, *for the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable* (ibid., 11:29)."

Cardinal Ratzinger suggests to Christians that they, in their turn, might pray to God "that he grant also to the children of Israel a deeper knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth, who is their son and the gift they have made to us"; and then goes on to draw the following conclusion, which reminds us at once of the sixth statement in *Dabru Emet*. "Since we are both awaiting the final redemption", writes the Cardinal, "let us pray that the paths we follow may converge".

It is on this thoughtful and optimistic note that I wish to conclude these reflections, once again extending my congratulations to The Interreligious Co-ordinating Council in Israel for the work that it has accomplished over the past ten years and expressing my best wishes for its endeavours in the years to come.

In conclusion, I can assure all present that Pope John Paul II recalls with joy and satisfaction his visit to Israel last year. I bring you his most cordial greetings and the assurance of his prayers. In the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, published on January 6th of this year, Pope John Paul II looks back on his visit to the Holy Land and writes:

I received an extraordinary welcome not only from the members of the Church, but also from the Israeli and Palestinian communities. Intense emotion surrounded my prayer at the Western Wall and my visit to the Mausoleum of Yad Vashem, with its chilling reminder of the victims of the Nazi death camps. My pilgrimage was a moment of brotherhood and peace, and I like to remember it as one of the most beautiful gifts of the whole Jubilee event. Thinking back to the mood of those days, I cannot but express my deeply felt desire for a prompt and just solution to the still unresolved problems of the Holy Places, cherished by Jews, Christians and Muslims together.¹⁶

1. Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, N° 4.
2. HOLY SEE'S COMMISSION FOR RELIGIOUS RELATIONS WITH THE JEWS, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 1998, II.
3. GEORGE WEIGEL, *Witness to Hope, the Biography of Pope John Paul II*. 1999, p. 38.
4. *Ibidem*, p. 484
5. *We Remember*, II.
6. These statements are published together with the Vatican Statement and Reflections by the Bishops' Conference of the United States of America in a booklet *Catholics Remember the Holocaust*, 1998.
7. *We Remember*, V.
8. Statement by the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, Prague September 6, 1990, in Information Service of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 75/IV (1990), 176.
9. *We Remember*, II.
10. Rabbi Raymond Apple, A.M., R.F.D., "A Remembrance and Reflection on the Holocaust" (Shoah), Sydney 29 July 1999, St. Thomas More Society and the N.S.W. Society of Jewish Jurists and Lawyers.
11. *L'Osservatore Romano*, 30 March 2000, VII.
12. *We Remember*, II.
13. *Nostra Aetate*, 4.
14. JOHN PAUL II, Warsaw on the 50th Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, *Information Service of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*, 84 (1991) 157.
15. *Origins CNS Documentary Service*, February 15, 2001, Vol. 30: N° 35, 565-566. My quotations are to be found there.
16. JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic Letter Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Vatican Press, Vatican City 2001, 13.