



## The Irrevocable Gifts and the Calling of God: Continuity and Discontinuity in Jewish–Christian Dialogue

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### 1. Introduction

In a pluralist democracy, dialogue between different religions is essential, not only for the sake of social peace and harmony and for dealing with possible conflicts, clashes, and disagreements, but also for making it possible to engage in a deeper, multi-perspective, almost synoptic discussion about the issues within the sphere of religions (Nagypál 2013).

Jewish–Christian relations have changed significantly over the last century in both the scholarly and theological literature. Historically, there had been ongoing anti-Semitism and long-standing theological teachings in Christian sacred history, doctrine, and liturgy that had been employed to refute Judaism over the centuries. Beginning in the 1960s, a dramatic shift took place in Jewish–Christian relations; this shift came from the Roman Catholic Church in its declaration on the relationship between the Church and non-Christian religions, which rejected the charge of deicide against the Jewish people and urged reconciliation and dialogue between Christians and Jews (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions “*Nostra Aetate*” 1965).

Although the number of elaborations and reflections on this new trend in the realm of Jewish–Christian balance is consistently increasing, a comparison of how the post-*Nostra Aetate* Popes have promoted this new relationship with Jews, at least in this form, has not been performed. This paper aims to fill such a gap by providing an analysis of the teachings and gestures of the post-Vatican II Popes, from St. John Paul II to Francis, by referring to their common attitudes toward the two religions and to their common approaches. Nevertheless, Norbert Hofmann, Secretary of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, has already noted during the “*Giornata dell’Ebraismo*” that these Popes, as sons of *Nostra Aetate*, have adopted different nuances and styles shaped by their individual personalities, emphasizing that this dialogue is and remains, by its very nature, something living, dynamic, and unfinished (Hofmann 2017). Nonetheless, this paper is primarily concerned with the theological aspects of Jewish–Christian dialogue, with special emphasis on Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, whose life’s work spans the last 60 years: as peritus, he was present at the birth of Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions “*Nostra Aetate*” (1965); as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, working under Pope John Paul II, he was responsible for doctrinal (theological) clarity, presiding over the church’s theological policy (1981–2005); then, he served as Roman Pontiff (2005–2013); finally, as Pope Emeritus (2013–2022), he further enriched Jewish–Christian relations with his insights. This in itself is a significant resource, indicating continuity in post-*Nostra Aetate* theological and pastoral trends.

In parallel, an additional aim of this study is to explain whether the teachings and gestures of these three revered Popes express a form of continuity or a form of discontinuity of the stance of the Roman Catholic Church towards the Jewish people, as this stance is formulated up to and after the end of the Second Vatican Council. Furthermore, this study seeks to deliver a distinct and detailed analysis of the opinions and behaviors exhibited by each of the three religious leaders under

consideration. Additionally, through a comparative approach, it aims to offer a more thorough and comprehensive understanding of the examined facts and circumstances, as well as of the dynamics of the relationship between the two religions in focus. Finally, this article is intended as an overview of Jewish–Christian relations, aiming to provide a broad framework rather than an in-depth theological analysis. Unfortunately, the constraints on length did not allow for a more extensive exploration of key theological concepts—such as covenant, or Benedict XVI’s nuanced contributions—but we emphasize the importance of addressing them with greater depth; we highlight the bibliography as a resource for readers who wish to engage further with these discussions.

## 2. Jewish–Christian Encounter in the Context of Interreligious Dialogue

### 2.1. The Context of Interreligious Dialogue

First of all, it is significant to discuss the encounter between Christian denominations, that between trends within Roman Catholicism, and that between the two religions, Judaism and Christianity, including a discussion of the contrasts between the two and the dialogue itself.

The importance of interreligious dialogue is particularly significant for these two religions that are absolutely inseparable, namely *Judaism* and *Christianity*. In terms of religious history, there are those who consider Judaism to be the direct mother religion of Christianity, but perhaps a more accurate formulation is to consider rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem (70 CE) and the dispersion and diaspora, as two great branches of the same tree, blood sisters of each other (Nagypál 2011). However, the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the early centuries is a highly complex topic, as shown by the scholarly discussion and reconsideration of the historical concept of “parting of the ways”; nevertheless, the origins of what we now refer to as “Christianity” were deeply rooted in early Judaism during the first century CE (Tiwald and Öhler 2024). For the Roman Catholic tradition, this bilateral dialogue is so significant that it is not dealt with by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, but by the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, which fosters ecumenical, interdenominational relations (Kasper 2011).

The objective of interreligious dialogue between Judaism and Christianity should never be to bring about some kind of unity or fusion of the two religions, nor to bring about some degree of convergence in teaching, for example in dogmatics, between the two great religious traditions and doctrines. This would be unnecessary, impossible, and in many cases even scandalous. Interreligious dialogue is more about clarifying misunderstandings, getting to know each other better, setting common goals, eliminating any inappropriate, offensive, or insulting language used against each other, and, in the area of doctrine, partly about recognising the importance of the other and partly about correcting and deepening theological understanding of the other in a suitable way (Nagypál 2009).

Theologically speaking, a serious dialogue with another (world) religion can be said to be a must for a given religion if, historically, the other religion is in some way indispensable for understanding and interpreting that religion’s own religious doctrines. For Christianity, this one religion is Judaism itself: Christianity, therefore, is unintelligible without thorough, in-depth, intimate knowledge of the first and original part of God’s history with humanity. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the current scholarship on the “within Judaism” perspective emphasizes that the early Jesus movement was not a separate religion but rather a Jewish sect deeply embedded in first-century Jewish beliefs and practices. Scholars argue that Jesus and his earliest followers operated entirely within the framework of Judaism, engaging with Jewish scriptures, traditions, and debates. This view challenges earlier narratives that depict Christianity as a distinct and opposing movement from the start. Instead, researchers highlight the rather fluid boundaries between Jewish and early Christian

identities, with the eventual separation occurring gradually over time due to historical, theological, and social factors. This reconsideration is tangible in the new perspectives, like the “Paul within Judaism” approach (Bird et al. 2023).

*Old Testament* scholarship (now including the continued rejection of the Marcionite temptation to think that Christianity can stand on its own feet without the foundations of Judaism, without the Jewish Jesus and the Jewishness of Jesus) in Christianity has been fulfilling this dialogical theological task for some time now, not only on its own but also in collaboration with Jewish scholars and researchers over the last hundred years or so.

Perhaps the most glaring shortcoming of interreligious dialogue so far is that the parties involved rarely reach the deepest level of encounter, which is the *spiritual dialogue*. Apart from the joint study of the spiritual literature, such as the mystical literature (in Judaism, the peak of this is the Hasidic tradition), this may include mainly joint prayer occasions and symbolic acts.

This is precisely the level of interreligious dialogue where the other side, in our case Judaism, is taken seriously not only as a piece of the past, the most important antecedent of Christianity, but also in its own present reality, as a flourishing, fruitful, and living community and tradition.

## 2.2. Some Observations Regarding the History of Jewish–Christian Relations

The Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, “*Nostra Aetate*”, the fourth article of which is dedicated to Judaism, was approved with an almost unanimous consensus by the Council Fathers and promulgated by Pope Paul VI on 28 October 1965. The Council peritus Joseph Ratzinger made the evaluation that, first and foremost, the fourth article opened “a new page in the book of reciprocal relations” between the Church and Israel (Ratzinger 1966, p. 254). As we will see, the Popes in question (John Paul II, Benedict XVI, Francis) graciously accepted the invitation of the declaration not only through their contribution of important theological reflections, but also through symbolic gestures, friendly dialogue, and trusting collaborations that were rooted theologically mainly in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews published a new document entitled “*The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable*” (Rom 11: 29). This document was presented to the public with the aim of being “a starting point for further theological thought with a view to enriching and intensifying the theological dimension of Jewish–Christian dialogue” (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews 2015).

At the same time, we must acknowledge the continuities between the history of theological anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. As the document *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews 1998) states, “erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people” contributed to “feelings of hostility towards this people”, but such interpretations have been “totally and definitively rejected by the Second Vatican Council” (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews 1998). Indeed, religious hatred based on theological misconceptions of the role of the Jewish people in God's plan of salvation may have contributed to discrimination against Jewish people throughout history. The question, of course, arises of “to what extent New Testament was anti-Jewish from the beginning or whether it was only interpreted as such by the church fathers several centuries later” (Laqueur 2008, p. viii). Nevertheless, it led to the teaching of contempt, as it was coined by Jules Isaac (Isaac 1964), which could be responsible for anti-Semitic conditioning and for distorted theological observations, like supersessionism and the charge of deicide. Cardinal Augustin Bea had a leading role in the theological re-evaluation of Judaism (Bea 1966), and he exercised significant influence on the creation of important Council documents, such as *Nostra Aetate* and the Magna Charta of Jewish–Christian dialogue (one of the documents to achieve the greatest historical effect), which categorically rejected anti-Semitism and the accusation of deicide,

remembered the Jewish roots of Christianity (emphasizing the common spiritual heritage), and developed a “teaching of respect” towards the Jewish people (International Catholic–Jewish Liaison Committee 2019). Despite of all the advances in Jewish–Christian relations, thinkers like John Pawlikowski and Marianne Moyaert do still assert that “thus far the roots of antisemitism in the Catholic Church have [not] been fully erased from Catholic consciousness” (Moyaert 2022, p. 374). Nowadays, these questions and observations regarding Jewish–Christian relations are important and have influences in different dimensions: socially, i.e., how the theological tension between Roman Catholic teachings on Jews and the concept of universal fraternity can be interpreted in the light of the war in Gaza (Dziuszczowska 2024), or theologically, i.e., how the Council’s conciliatory rhetoric can be adopted in the Roman Catholic teaching (using key concepts such as fulfilment, salvation, and mission; Mor 2024) and in the partnership (cultural and ethical, social and political issues) in the hope of achieving good cooperation.

The Popes succeeding the Second Vatican Council, as principal architects, played a central role in the extensive development and promotion of the promising perspectives established in *Nostra Aetate*. Consequently, these Popes can be regarded as the primary agents and protagonists of the implementation of the declaration. The four documents issued by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (1974; 1985; 1998; 2015), established by Pope Paul VI in 1974 to oversee and foster interreligious dialogue with Judaism, also serve as further interpretations and subsequent developments of Article 4 of *Nostra Aetate*. Following these observations, it is apparent that a new spirit of dialogue has been emerging, which—based on the rapprochement—explores a new way of thinking in the case of exegesis, profoundly enriching encounters and fostering mutual interest about common purpose (Kessler 2010). Therefore, it is noteworthy to explore the continuities and occurrent discontinuities in the works of the recent Popes concerning Jewish–Christian relations.

### 3. The Performative Theology of Pope John Paul II: Healing Through Gestures

Former Cardinal Karol Wojtyła became Pope John Paul II in 1978. His election introduced a new era of Jewish–Christian relations. He broke decisively and irrevocably with the negative, sometimes hostile anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism of the pre-Second Vatican Council Church. John Paul II embraced Jews and reached out to them in an unprecedented way. He was also the first Pope ever to visit a synagogue, doing so in Rome in 1986. He prayed and laid the groundwork for the establishment of the Holy See’s diplomatic relations with Israel in 1993 and 1994 and was the first Pope to have spent time in the State of Israel (Nagypál 2009, pp. 80–88). Through his mission, deeds, and visits, John Paul II moved far beyond *Nostra Aetate* and its aftermath and enhanced the spirit of the declaration, transforming its words into powerful apostolic deeds.

This “new chapter” of Jewish–Christian relations had many key landmarks. In 1986, the Bishop of Rome visited the Great Synagogue of Rome, where, in his memorable speech, he called Jews “our elder brothers” and said that Christianity is rooted in the people of the Covenant made with Abraham. Furthermore, he said: “this gathering in a way brings to a close, after the pontificate of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, a long period which we must not tire of reflecting upon in order to draw from it the appropriate lessons” (John Paul II 1986). His actions, words, and deeds have left an unforgettable mark on Jewish–Christian relations, and they carried a powerful message of hope to the world’s Jews. In 2000, John Paul II visited Israel and addressed the Jews at the Old City of Jerusalem, at the Western Wall, placing a letter into the Wall which apologized for past Roman Catholic sins against the Jewish people (John Paul II 2000). This action was interpreted as the fulfilment of the message and understanding of the Church, contained in the *Nostra Aetate* document, that the horrors of Shoah (Holocaust) should not repeat themselves in future times. Pope John Paul II’s position was clear regarding anti-Semitism. The Shoah initiated the Pope’s newfound mission of outreach to the Jewish people. John Paul II visited the former concentration camp Nazi death camp Auschwitz in 1979, where he touchingly prayed to God for

forgiveness and reconciliation, and gave testimony about the drama of humanity which had taken place there (John Paul II 1979). In 2004, Pope John Paul II became the first Pope to be declared an honorary citizen of Israel. Pope John Paul II grounded this historic revolution in his theological vision and argued convincingly that God had not replaced the Jews, nor had the Church replaced Israel.

Pope John Paul II fully endorsed the new attitudes toward the Jewish past and present represented by the alterations in Catholic teachings accomplished by *Nostra Aetate* and other documents of the Second Vatican Council. In his famous speech in Mainz, the Pope emphasized that it is not enough to correct false religious views of the Jewish people, and that, rather, we should have a dialogue based on our common spiritual and living heritage. This dialogue would have three dimensions: (a) the meeting between the Old and the New Covenants as a dialogue within our Church, since Jewish religion is in a certain way “intrinsic” to our own religion; (b) mutual understanding and knowledge with tact and prudence which tries to learn the fundamental elements of the religious tradition of Judaism according to their own understanding; (c) the understanding that there are tasks which we have in common (attaining peace and justice among all persons and people) and that the crises of the morality (the individual and social ethics) call us to a common reflection and collaboration. The most important statement is that, since the Covenant has never been revoked by God, Jews are not repudiated or cursed, but beloved by God, Who has called them with an irrevocable (perennial) calling. The Pope remarked, paraphrasing the Epistle to the Romans, “the first dimension of this dialogue, that is, the meeting between the people of God of the old covenant never revoked by God and that of the new covenant, is at the same time a dialogue within our Church, that is to say, between the first and second part of her Bible. (. . .) A second dimension of our dialogue—the true and central one—is the meeting between present-day Christian Churches and the present-day people of the Covenant concluded with Moses” (John Paul II 1980).

Interestingly, Karma Ben-Johanani observes that this statement was “pregnant with theological associations”, but that the never-revoked Sinai covenant as soteriological covenant would imply that the commandments (Jewish law) are a valid means to salvation, which seems to be in contradiction with the statements in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* about the Church’s uniqueness and about Jesus Christ as the sole saviour of humankind. As she claims, “John Paul II never refuted other theological interpretations when directly addressing Jews or when discussing Christian–Jewish relations. He did not spell out the theology implied by his words but rather allowed its overtones to echo freely” (Ben-Johanani 2022, p. 90). Furthermore, she argues that both Jews and Christians reached a consensus, acknowledging that the Church’s readiness to apologize for its historical wrongs was adequate, even without it delving into the more intricate aspects of doctrine. “It appeared that both Jews and Christians had agreed to abandon their complex theological polemics around the Jewish refusal to recognize Christ, divine election, the covenant, and salvation, and befriend each other on a human and diplomatic basis, with religious tradition adding an aspect of dignity to this setting, which largely transcended its original language” (Ben-Johanani 2022, p. 107). Her approach, making distinction between the Pope’s conservative and Christocentric theology and his “another” engagement with symbolic progressiveness (purposely separated from the doctrinal realm), which “caused a certain overshadowing of the importance of theology to Christian–Jewish relations altogether and blurred the theological tensions that remained unaddressed” (Ben-Johanani 2022, p. 83), was criticized by Hyacinthe Destivelle. Considering his critique and reevaluating the original distinction (between the “theological” and the “symbolic” languages), a more accurate distinction was introduced by Ben-Johanani between “authoritative” and “performative” theology, reflecting the dynamic between intrinsic and extrinsic perceptions. The latter, assuming intentional dialogues between these two theological realms, frames the Jewish–Christian relationship not by intricately dissecting complex theological tensions between Jewish and Christian truth claims, but through liturgical practices—such as prayers at Auschwitz, addresses in synagogues, and notes placed in the Western Wall—where the performative context and setting play as significant a role in shaping the

“message” as the text itself (Ben-Johanan 2023).

Nevertheless, given his thinking, we can firmly state that John Paul II’s legacy, for both Jews and Christians, was also a mandate, launching a new epoch regarding pastoral relations of the Church with Jews. Although John Paul II was not responsible for the birth of interreligious dialogue, nor, specifically, of Jewish–Christian dialogue, he did much to support and promulgate its progress. Furthermore, Pope John Paul II’s theological vision regarding Jews and the proposed dialogue “within our Church”, i.e., between the Old and the New Covenants (the two parts of the Christian Bible), brought about a new vision of Jewish–Christian relations. As a result, all future Catholic Popes and bishops have embraced his vision and turned to the historic and sacred legacy of Pope John Paul II. Through the efforts of Pope John Paul II, the Catholic Church developed a vocation of outreach and reconciliation with the Jewish people, a vocation that, ever since, has been carried on by Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis.

#### 4. Pope Benedict XVI: Bridging Doctrine and Dialogue

This section intends to explore the life’s work of an important great thinker and church leader, Joseph Ratzinger, from theological, social, and public perspectives. As Karma Ben-Johanan noted, “Ratzinger’s most important contribution to Jewish-Christian relations” is “his unparalleled ability to integrate the questions of Jewish-Christian relations into the whole body of Catholic theology, that is, to bring the Catholic theology of Judaism into conversation with liturgy, Christology, theology of faith and reason, secularism, etc.” (Ben-Johanan 2023). We may say that Ratzinger engages with “Judaism” as a favourable conceptual framework, situating it within the broader context of his intellectual struggles against opponents who hold as much significance to him as the process of Jewish–Christian rapprochement itself.

##### 4.1. Joseph Ratzinger as the Head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

After the Shoah, Jewish–Christian dialogue was given a great new impetus and has borne unprecedented fruits. As was already mentioned, the decisive turning point was in fact—in retrospect, this can now be said without any doubt—the famous fourth point of the 1965 *Nostra Ætate* declaration, which was issued while Joseph Ratzinger was still serving as a theological adviser to the Second Vatican Council (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions “*Nostra Ætate*” 1965). To a significant extent, Ratzinger was the last active representative of the theologians who had been influential at the Council. Whilst John Paul II had shifted the focus of Jewish–Christian relations from theological (theoretical) discourse to symbolic gestures, as a result of which the previously vibrant theological discussions within the Church concerning Jews and Judaism had notably dwindled, Joseph Ratzinger made a unique contribution to the theological discussion on Judaism. It was primarily situated in a broader discussion about the problems of faith in the (post)modern world, at which time, in this light, it was paradigmatically important to reconnect Christianity with its Jewish roots. At the end of the 20th century, his book *Many Religions—One Covenant* sought to deepen our understanding of the Bible’s most fundamental principle and to propose a bridge for contemporary theology (Ratzinger 1999). This book is not free of difficulties, but it lays solid foundations upon which further work can be done. As the author says, “the encounter of the religions is not possible by renouncing the truth but only by a deeper entering into it” (Ratzinger 1999, p. 109), and Ratzinger takes some clear stands in this book, which is helpful and contributes well to the discussion among Jews and Christians.

He entered into the Jewish–Christian dialogue with a forceful impact on the universal Church when he became prefect of the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* in 1981. It was at this time that the Congregation, which he headed, issued its declaration *Dominus Iesus* in 2000, which (especially in points 13–14 and 21–22) deals with various questions of salvation, soteriology, and theology of grace, although it does not once specifically mention Judaism as a religion

(Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000).

Important questions of the *Dominus Iesus* document are, for example, how the grace of the Holy Spirit is at work in other religions; how and in what way other religions can prepare us to receive the good news, the Gospel; what the proclamation of faith, the duty of mission, consists in because of the universality of salvation history; what is meant by the equality of the parties involved as persons of equal dignity; and how the duty and responsibility of interreligious dialogue is increasingly present in the life of the Church.

The text has also been subjected to a great deal of attacks and criticism, which are often quite exaggerated, because it does not express the whole, the totality of the teaching, instead mainly formulating a moderate response to certain religious excesses and thus remaining somewhat one-sided in tone. For the full picture, it is therefore always worth reading the document together with the text of the declaration of the Council, *Dominus Iesus* with *Nostra Ætate*, which praises almost only the forward-looking aspects of other religions and denominations.

Also, during Joseph Ratzinger's ministry as prefect, the Pontifical Biblical Commission issued its 2002 declaration entitled *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*. Although he himself was not directly involved in its drafting, he was actively involved in the development of the final version, in accordance with his office (Pontifical Biblical Commission 2002).

It is a great virtue of this text that it not only narrows down the understanding and interpretation of Scripture to the perspectives and perceptions of pre-Christian Judaism, but also includes the vivid and living perspectives of contemporary Judaism. Not only does this reveal the historical significance of our "older brothers and sisters", but it also frames them as standing before us as a living, functioning, spiritually productive community in the present, whose parallel understandings and interpretations of the text can certainly have a fertilizing effect on various Christian approaches—and this is exactly what interreligious dialogue is all about.

#### **4.2. The Petrine Ministry of Pope Benedict XVI**

Not as a prefect but certainly as a Pope, a church leader, Joseph Ratzinger has had the opportunity to effectively exercise symbolic actions and gestures towards other religions, including Judaism, in addition to addressing certain theological issues and maintaining various professional relationships. In the Roman Catholic Church, as was shown, John Paul II was the grand master of very powerful acts, actions, and speeches which were etched in the memory and heart of the participants and spectators, and which were also deeply embedded in their perceptions. Through his acts, Pope John Paul II also created a tradition for his successors. One of the very first things Pope Benedict XVI did was to pay his respects at the synagogue in Köln (Cologne) in 2005 (Benedict XVI 2005); then, in 2006, he went to the Auschwitz camp, a much more special and moving act than that of the Polish-born Pope, given, to say the least, the troubled German past (Benedict XVI 2006).

During his trip to the United States of America in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI did not fail to visit a synagogue in New York City (Benedict XVI 2008). Likewise, in 2009, he visited the Holy Land and Jerusalem (Benedict XVI 2009), and, in 2010, he visited the Grand Synagogue of Rome (Benedict XVI 2010). We may have suspected, and the example of Pope Francis proves it, that all subsequent Roman Catholic Heads of Church will try to include all these occasions in their travel and visitation calendar in due time. However, although Pope Benedict XVI did his best to follow in the footsteps of John Paul II's visit to the Holy Land, his reception—presumably because of his personal history and German background (for instance, while John Paul II had developed personal friendships with Jews during his childhood, Benedict XVI was remembered for his membership in the Hitler Youth, albeit as an unwilling participant)—was utterly different, with his words being

perceived as an abstract intellectual speech and the gestures of conciliation and friendship being missed.

However, in the various personal acquaintanceships and friendships that they developed, both Popes did much to foster the ever-closer ties between the two religions. Until his death, Pope John Paul II maintained relations with rabbi friends from his Polish homeland and other Jewish thinkers. Pope Benedict XVI, in particular, maintained a deep and good professional relationship with Rabbi Jacob Neusner, whose book *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, published in 1993, he considered to be one of the most outstanding books of the whole Jewish–Christian rapprochement (Neusner 1993).

History has always left its mark on the bilateral relations between religions, and there are, let us be honest, very few more troubled connections than the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Suffice it to think here of the ghettos, the various recurrent pogroms, the religious and secular anti-Jewish hostility (anti-Judaist and anti-Semitic), the long centuries of the Crusades, and the teaching of contempt.

It is no coincidence that three major issues in particular, namely anti-Semitism, the Shoah, and the State of Israel, dominate much of the public discourse on bilateral relations—but, as theologians, we have to content ourselves with merely mentioning these important political issues.

As Pope and Head of the Church, Benedict XVI, among other things, ran into the issue of a very troubled common history when he oversaw the long-lasting beatification of Pope Pius XII, who was Pope during the Second World War: in 2009, Pius XII was given the title of “Blessed” in the Roman Catholic Church. As the historical perception of this Head of the Church is, to put it mildly, far from unanimous, this move was the subject of a rather heated and sensitive debate, even among the Jews themselves.

Benedict XVI also had some problems with another Pius, the X, when he finally revoked the excommunication of four bishops of the traditionalist *Society of St Pius X* in 2009 (Congregation for Bishops 2009). This has caused no small amount of tension in the Church’s relationship with Judaism, as some of the more prominent members of this traditionalist religious line do not support interreligious dialogue, oppose the theology of the double covenant, still promote accusations of deicide, allow certain conspiracy theories to run rampant, and even include Shoah deniers.

And in 2007, the official church statement *Summorum Pontificum* (Benedict XVI 2007), in which Pope Benedict XVI allowed the so-called Tridentine Latin Mass, so dear to traditionalists, to be celebrated in the church, caused various controversies. In the liturgy of this Holy Mass, a language was used that portrayed Judaism in an unfavourable light, but following strong protests the references to blindness and darkness were removed from the solemn text altogether.

The book of Pope Benedict XVI on *Jesus of Nazareth*, published in three volumes, has corrected several theological doctrines and claims about Judaism, in particular the terrible—and long-standing—accusation of deicide (that it was the Jews as a collective entity who killed God), which is no longer theologically tenable (Ratzinger [2007] 2013). It is further agreed that neither Judaism as a whole, in history, nor any representative of contemporary Judaism can be held corporately or collectively responsible for the crucifixion and death of one of their most authoritative members, namely the teacher Jesus of Nazareth.

### 4.3. Pope Emeritus

Pope Benedict XVI resigned from the papal throne in 2013 after much deliberation. He was already Pope Emeritus when—in 2015—the work of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, which had begun many years earlier, came to an end, and on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the fourth point of *Nostra Ætate*, reflections on certain theological issues concerning

Jewish–Christian relations were published (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews 2015). This document takes its title from the text of Romans 11: 29: “*the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable*”. However, since it was issued during the pontificate of Pope Francis, this document is analysed in the next section.

The Pope emeritus published very few texts after his final retirement. His essay of 2018, however, published in the pages of the journal *Communio* (Benedict XVI 2018), stands out among them. In this essay, Pope Benedict XVI analyses in depth the important passage of the *Nostra Ætate* declaration, already mentioned above, in the context of the whole of Jewish–Christian dialogue.

This treatise reflects on how reading of the Old Testament has led into two different interpretations and paths, Judaism and Christianity, and tries to give further critical consideration of the basic theses of the *Nostra Ætate* declaration (rejection of supersessionist ecclesiology, conviction of the unrevoked covenant of God with Israel), which are noted to be basically correct, but in many ways (theologically) imprecise. The central promise of the great promises of God to Israel is considered and understood in an entirely new way by Christians, which is neither a repeal nor a substitution but a deepening of unaltered validity: the covenant is depicted as a dynamic reality that is concretized in an unfolding series of covenants, which is codetermined by the whole drama of human error.

Accordingly, in his text, he refutes the doctrine of *substitution* (the idea that Christianity has now replaced Judaism in everything, making it as if it were superfluous in the history of religion as regards both the temple rite and the laws relating to ritual and morality), pointing nevertheless to the radical novelty of Christianity in all these areas.

The doctrine of the irrevocable covenant, or in other words the *double covenant*, is not yet in the text of the *Nostra Ætate* but was first used by Pope John Paul II in 1980 in Mainz. Since then, it has been incorporated into the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published in 1997, in the compilation in which Joseph Ratzinger played a key role: “The Old Testament is an indispensable part of Sacred Scripture. Its books are divinely inspired and retain a permanent value, for the Old Covenant has never been revoked.”, says point 121 of this compilation (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1992).

This idea goes back precisely to the New Testament scriptural tradition, based mainly on the *Letter to the Galatians*, according to which God makes a series of covenants with humanity. Thus, for example, the Abrahamic covenant is followed in history by the Mosaic covenant between God and humanity. It is noteworthy that the Old Testament and the New Testament are not called covenants but *testaments*. According to this emphasis, God’s covenant with Christians does not in any way invalidate the previous covenant: “If we become unfaithful, God remains faithful, for God cannot deny Godself”, as the second letter to Timothy puts it (2:13).

Regarding his ambivalent reception we can observe that Benedict XVI lacked the charisma of John Paul II, and his theological subtlety largely went unappreciated by the public, which was “deaf” to his intellectual finesse (Ben-Johanan 2023). As a theologian, Ratzinger aimed to advance Jewish–Christian relations on a doctrinal and intellectual level, aligning with the original vision of Vatican II. He sought to address the questions raised by *Nostra Ætate*, anchoring its theological insights within the framework of Holy Scripture, purging the tradition of anti-Jewish sentiment without compromising core articles of faith, and providing the Catholic faithful with a coherent and consistent doctrine on the Jews. Ratzinger’s significant contribution in the Jewish context was his effort to integrate Article 4 of *Nostra Ætate* into the broader Roman Catholic tradition, ensuring that it became an organic component of Church teaching rather than a peripheral theological anomaly. We can see that Ratzinger’s contributions to Jewish–Christian dialogue emerged at a time when the prominence of theological discourse had already waned, with both Christians and Jews having shifted their focus to alternative approaches to mending their relations. The global trajectory of

Christian–Jewish dialogue repeatedly demonstrated a preference for broad expressions of goodwill over explicit doctrinal statements, which were frequently perceived as confrontational or even polemical. At the same time, Ratzinger’s profound insights and theological reflections represent a huge legacy in Judeo–Christian relations, the full reception (and possible continuation) of which will perhaps only come in the coming decades.

## 5. Pope Francis: Relational Warmth and Fraternity

This section seeks to evaluate the impact of Pope Francis’s pontificate on Jewish–Christian relations, noting that there are several scholarly works that analyse Pope Francis, the Jews, and interreligious relations today (Merrigan 2019). As Noam E. Marans noted at the beginning of his pontificate: “With Pope Francis, Jewish–Christian relations have entered a new stage, normalization. It is all very natural, without premeditation. It is therefore most appropriate that the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* will be commemorated and celebrated during Francis’ pontificate, emblematic of the maturity of this cherished interreligious relationship between sibling faiths” (Marans 2015). Of course, if one intends to understand both the Pope’s style and the nature of his dialogue, they will find that it echoes concerns that were shaped already during his ministry in Argentina, and his book *On Heaven and Earth* (first published in Spanish in 2010), written with his close friend Rabbi Abraham Skorka, gives evidence to that, covering 29 (theological and social) topics with thoughtful attentiveness (Ruiz 2014).

Regarding his approach, we can observe that learning and dialogue define Francis’s perspective on Jewish–Christian interreligious dialogue. As Paul Valley observes, Francis is “a pope of paradox, a man who is a radical but not a liberal, an enabler with an authoritarian streak, a self-confident man in constant need of forgiveness, and a churchman who combines religious humility and political wiles” (Valley 2013, p. 190). This paradox, which is extended in his theology, is most notably reflected in his approach to the “theology of interreligious dialogue”. Pope Francis has a reputation as a man of dialogue who is committed to interreligious dialogue aimed at consolidating positive relations and achieving peaceful coexistence. In short, most religions are rooted in the two fundamental principles of love and the common good, which are undeniable evidence of the common ancestry of the two main monotheistic faiths. Life itself has made Pope Francis witness the pain of other people and, gradually, face, with simple paths and less theoretical thinking, problems of which some were disdainful. In his heart, Pope Francis sets the stage for a theology of reconciliation and a respectful pastoral approach, and he knows how important empathy is to sending context-sensitive messages about religion. At the same time, the Pope’s commitment to maintaining Jewish–Christian relations—reaffirming Christians’ special relationship with Jews—is part of a broader agenda aimed at opening the door to peaceful coexistence between people from different religious, social, and cultural backgrounds. As John Pawlikowski points out: “In the development of Christianity’s dialogue with other world religions, especially Islam, the new perspective on Christian self-understanding emerging from the scholarship involved in the Christian–Jewish dialogue needs to take centre stage. We cannot conduct these other dialogues as if the dialogue with Judaism has not significantly altered Christianity’s classical self-perception and self-expression” (Polish 2016). This rests on a new paradigm, introduced by the declaration of *Nostra Aetate*, regarding the theology of religious humility.

John Paul II’s footsteps to Israel and to Auschwitz, and his visit to the Great Synagogue, were followed also by Pope Francis (very early in his papacy, in 2014 and in 2016) to deepen the message of these pilgrimages, to express his feelings through what the Vatican called the “silence of sorrow”, and to reconcile tensions with unique gestures, like his visit the grave of Theodor Herzl, the Budapest-born founding father of political Zionism. Another symbolic significance is that Pope Francis has named Marc Chagall’s powerful Shoah image as his favourite work of art, which depicts a crucified Jewish Jesus with his Tallit, i.e., prayer shawl, symbolizing the millions that were being murdered.

Substantial progress has been made regarding Jewish–Christian dialogue since Vatican II, and this unique relationship was strengthened not only by compellingly personal terms but also by his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, dedicating a separate section to relations with Judaism and saying that we “hold the Jewish people in special regard because their covenant with God has never been revoked” (Pope Francis 2013). In his encyclical letter on fraternity and social friendship, *Fratelli tutti* (Pope Francis 2020), Pope Francis recalls the image of St. Francis of Assisi; as Saint Francis simply spread the love of God (did not wage a war of words aimed at imposing doctrines), thus the approach to the others means not drawing them into our own life, but helping them become ever more fully themselves. Diversity poses a question about the others, neighbours, and brothers: “love shatters the chains that keep us isolated and separate; in their place, it builds bridges; love enables us to create one great family, where all of us can feel at home”, and all these are based on an authentic openness to God. In the case of dialogue, we must promote, which unites us and regards our differences as opportunities to grow in mutual respect: it means approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, and coming to know and understand one another to find common ground. Finally, Pope Francis declares “the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard” (Pope Francis 2020).

However, there were documents and statements which not only fostered dialogue between religions, but, when heard with Jewish ears, caused some offenses to Jews. Rabbi Burton Visotzky (in his lecture “Fratelli Tutti, the Good Samaritan, and the Rabbi”), for example, expresses concerns regarding some statements made by Pope Francis, particularly a reference to Jewish law in the context of *Galatians* (Pope Francis 2021), which has sparked controversy and feelings of grievance in the Jewish community regarding the devaluation of Torah. Another point was the interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan in his encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti*, where, emphasizing its implications for neighbourly love, the interpretation by Pope Francis may inadvertently suggest Jewish insularity regarding caring for others (Pope Francis 2020). As Visotzky says, “with these mistakes (. . .) Pope Francis has offended the Jewish community in ways that we normally associate with pre-Vatican II Catholic anti-Semitism”. These unintentional “mistakes”, since Pope Francis has always intended to address these issues with great sensitivity, call attention to the necessity of the theological evaluation of dialogue, demonstrating that even well-intentioned theological moves can be very sensitive (Visotzky 2022).

The Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews published its most recent document, entitled *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable (Rom 11:29)*, in 2015, being convinced that the time is ripe to deepen the Jewish–Christian discussion of these theological issues (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews 2015). The document reaffirms the Catholic Church’s commitment to the Christian–Jewish dialogue and considers this to be not a matter of choice but of duty of the representatives of the two religions. The document emphasises that Christianity possesses Jewish roots, so Judaism cannot to be considered simply as another religion (“dialogue between Jews and Christians then can only be termed ‘interreligious dialogue’ by analogy, that is, dialogue between two intrinsically separate and different religions”, rather ‘intra-religious’ or ‘intra-familial’ dialogue *sui generis*): two siblings who have developed in different directions. Certainly, the primary topic of theological debates between the two is the statement that although Judaism and Christianity are two religions, there cannot be different paths or approaches to God’s salvation, for the Jews are not excluded from salvation just because they do not believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah but are still included in God’s plan of salvation (God has never revoked God’s covenant with God’s people of Israel). How this could be interpreted if there is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ (“salvation through an explicit or even implicit faith in Christ”) is not answered in the text: “that the Jews are participants in God’s salvation is theologically unquestionable, but how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery” (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews 2015). In addition to the commitment to continue the dialogue, there are also some shifts in emphasis. Above all, it is a more open and acknowledging tone than before, as it speaks of the

significance of the Jewish religion and, on the other hand, the courage to take on sensitive theological issues, as in the case of the salvation just mentioned above. Another important point is the rejection of the missionary efforts to convert Jews, that is, the fact that the Catholic Church cannot seek to convert Jews at the institutional level—to do so would invalidate the statement that Jews are included in the divine plan of salvation because of the irrevocable Covenant with them. As was shown, the proclamation of the faith and the mission to the Jews is now also given a considerably different light in the wake of all these insights. In modern missionary theology, missiology, three very distinctive attitudes towards Judaism as a religion and as a people can be distinguished. On the one hand, there are those who see the conversion of Judaism to Christianity as crucial to the ultimate fulfilment of the historic journey of salvation. On the other hand, there are those who consider the conversion of Judaism to Christ to be exactly as important as that of any other people in the past, present, and future. Thirdly, there are those who believe that the Jewish religion and community is not at all a target for the proclamation of the faith, as they are already in a very special relationship with God. This third view and position is strongly represented in this 2015 text.

Despite the considerable progress described in the papacy of Pope Francis regarding Jewish–Christian relations, there are still challenges that cannot be ignored. The theological pains seem to have been somewhat overcome, but they have not completely disappeared and still serve as limits to dialogue. Matters related to supersessionism, mission, and how the two religions relate to Jesus of Nazareth constitute a significant difference between the two religions. Questions of moral theology are yet another painful issue among Catholics and many practicing Jews. Anti-Semitism and the resurging question of nationalism remain an important, new problem in a world that has still “not learned anything from history”. The lack of experience and education in both faith communities is another serious shortcoming that needs to be addressed. Continuous growth in empathy, study, education, and deep learning about each other’s religion “from the inside” is key to overcoming the many painful issues that divide us. Today, the older generation has experienced significant improvement, but many are still stuck in the past, as witnessed by some of their enemies on both sides of the Jewish–Christian dialogue.

Through our analysis of a variety of documents, speeches, and actions taken during the papacy of Pope Francis, we can uncover the achievements of his interreligious efforts. Pope Francis has played a pivotal role in encouraging respect and dialogue between Judaism and Christianity. His support for interreligious dialogue is characterized by an ‘apophatic’ logic that values (dignified) silence, contemplation, and a focus on love and justice. In this way, he initiates a new direction in the discussion on the nature of dialogue between Christians and Jews, which may be linked to and seen as continuation of John Paul II’s “performative” theology. This logic is also apparent in the initiatives he has pursued during his pontificate, all of which have the ultimate aim of fostering respect between Jews and Christians. He reinforces that, despite theological differences, the mutual enrichment of dialogue can be seen in a positive way. As Peter Pahn puts it, “there is then a reciprocal relationship between Christianity and Judaism and the other religions. Not only does Christianity complement the non-Christian religions, but also the other religions complement Christianity. In other words, the process of complementarity, enrichment, and even correction is two-way, or reciprocal. This reciprocity in no way endangers the Christian confession that the church has received from Christ the fullness of revelation, since it is one thing to receive the definitive gift of God’s self-revelation in Jesus, and quite another to understand it fully and live it completely. Indeed, it is only in a sincere and humble dialogue with other religions that Christianity can come to a fuller realization of its own identity and mission and a better understanding of the constitutive revelation that it has received from Christ” (Pawlikowski 2017, pp. 7–8).

## 6. Conclusions

The core conviction of *Nostra Aetate* is perhaps most aptly articulated in the words of Pope John

Paul II: “The Jewish religion is not something external to us; rather, in a way, it belongs to the inner realm of our religion” (John Paul II 1980). This fruitful and prophetic declaration is widely regarded as the foundational text and a reliable compass for fostering reconciliation between Jews and Christians. This holds true not only despite the declaration’s notable brevity but also because of its relatively general nature, which allows for diverse interpretations and necessitates interpretive engagement which draws on its inherent richness of meaning. Retrospectively, its adaptability has proven to be a key strength in the history of its reception (Koch 2016).

As was demonstrated, all three Popes have been committed to condemning anti-Semitism, fostering mutual respect, and acknowledging the unique relationship between Judaism and Christianity. They share a commitment to healing historical wounds and promoting a cooperative future. At the same time, each Pope’s approach reflects his personal experiences and leadership style—John Paul II’s groundbreaking outreach and forgiveness-seeking gestures, Benedict XVI’s doctrinal and theological precision, and Francis’ relational, action-oriented emphasis on shared moral action and brotherhood. They have all advanced Jewish–Christian relations with a shared vision but diverse methods, each deepening the relationship in a unique way. We can observe key continuities, such as the commitment to dialogue, the condemnation of anti-Semitism, and the recognition of Judaism’s enduring, ongoing, and unique Covenant with God, which rejects any notion of Judaism as merely a precursor to Christianity. On the other hand, we can also identify discontinuities concerning their tone and approach to Jewish–Christian relations, as well as different theological emphases and symbolic gestures: John Paul II’s approach was groundbreaking in making use of gestures and advocacy, using his own experiences in Nazi-occupied Poland; Benedict’s approach was more scholarly and doctrinally cautious, which sometimes led to tensions (for instance, in the case of his changes to the Good Friday prayer in the Latin Mass which raised concerns in the Jewish community, since it was perceived as a return to a supersessionist theology). From this perspective, John Paul II’s “performative theology” appears to have been more favourably received within both Jewish and Catholic circles compared to the systematic theological approach of Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, which we posit without denying its valuable contribution and without suggesting disapproval of Ratzinger’s ideas or his chosen medium of expression. Finally, Francis has re-emphasized relational warmth and solidarity, i.e., his pastoral, relational approach, which minimizes doctrinal emphasis in favour of emphasizing shared ethical commitments and moves away from doctrinal complexities towards mutual pastoral care.

As was shown, the three most recent Popes built on the legacy of the *Nostra Aetate* and contributed to its reception, implementation, and theological-pastoral deepening, unfolding new perspectives which represent legitimate and positive evolutions of its basic convictions. With great appreciation, it can be noted that documents addressing Jewish–Christian dialogue have also been issued from the Jewish perspective. The document *Dabru Emet* (“Speak the Truth”), published in 2000 by relatively liberal Jewish scholars in the United States, was followed in 2017 by the significant Orthodox Jewish document *Between Jerusalem and Rome*. The latter serves as a response to the Conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate*, which is widely recognized as a pivotal moment in the relationship between Judaism and the Roman Catholic Church. The analysis of the aforementioned document reveals that Jewish–Christian dialogue has placed less emphasis on religious and theological dimensions, focusing instead on cultural, ethical, social, and political issues to foster effective cooperation between Jews and Christians. Notably, the document explicitly states that “the differences in teaching are considerable and cannot be discussed or negotiated” (Conference of European Rabbis et al. 2017). In contrast, the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, in its recent document *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable (Rom 11:29)*, expresses the conviction that the time is ripe to delve deeper into theological discussions. These include topics such as the significance of revelation and the relationship between the Old and New Covenants, which are implicitly present but not explicitly addressed in *Nostra Aetate*. These kinds of (theological) insights are fostered by Pope John Paul II (esp. by referring to the never-revoked calling by God in his speech in Mainz), who reflects also on the questions of replacement theology, and, later, by Pope Benedict XVI (esp. by continuing the

post-conciliar theological reflection to refine two key terms, “substitution theory” and “unrevoked covenant”) and Pope Francis, who, with great sensitivity, has emphasized that, “despite fundamental theological differences”, Jews and Christians share “common core beliefs” (Pope Francis 2017). These insights, accompanied by encounters and symbolic gestures, come from the unfolding of the “intra-religious” or “intra-familial” dialogue between Jews and Christians. By grounding the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the framework of salvation history, as we have seen, the Council underscored that this relationship transcends being merely a subset of interreligious dialogue, thereby safeguarding its distinct and unparalleled significance (Ratzinger 1998). The legacy and mission of Jewish–Christian dialogue lie, indeed, in deepening the shared core beliefs, while simultaneously respecting the theological distinctions between the two faith traditions.

As we can see, and which insight we have tried to develop in more detail in our paper, the almost 60 years, or six decades, that Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis spent at the very forefront of the Church are in fact the most exciting and active period of inter-traditional, and within that, Jewish–Christian, dialogue.

As we went through their work, we were also confronted with the most important key theological concepts: the proclamation of faith (mission), the end of times (eschatology), messianism, scriptural (or biblical) theology, philosophy of understanding and interpretation (hermeneutics), covenant theology, substitution, salvation (soteriology), philosophy of history, morality (ethics), and asking for and providing forgiveness.

In this way, we can also see the whole picture of this bilateral dialogue, which is so fundamental to Christian identity, and we can also link the life’s work of these Popes to each of these key points, who, based on their “creative fidelity” to the legacy of *Nostra Aetate*, first as theologians and pastors, then as church leaders, and finally as authorities, made their marks in a decisive way in the key area of Jewish–Christian dialogue.

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