



# Recognising Our Brothers and Sisters

| Palmieri-Billig, Lisa

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**by Lisa Palmieri-Billig**

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The positive injunctions of *Nostra Aetate* have born good fruit in our deepening dialogue. The conciliar document said, "Since Christians and Jews have such a common spiritual heritage, this sacred Council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation. This can be obtained, especially by way of biblical and theological inquiry and through friendly

discussions."

Christian-Jewish Dialogue groups engaged in theological discussion and in formulating the basis for a shared ethics rooted in our common heritage have multiplied nationally and internationally. The International Liaison Committee, composed of Vatican representatives and representatives of five major international Jewish organizations, has met regularly for the past twenty years. The International Council of Christians and Jews, born in Seelisburg in 1947, representing all the Jewish-Christian Friendship Federations of the world, also meets annually. Last year, a major meeting was held in Warsaw on Jewish and Christian ideas on "The Quest for an Ideal Society". The workshops, especially those on issues related to Polish-Jewish relations were painful, sincere and moving. To me, it was another step forward in a growing friendship. In July there was another ICCJ world

gathering in  
Budapest.

Two years ago in  
Jerusalem,  
Christian and  
Jewish leaders from  
all five continents  
gathered to discuss  
"Religious  
Leadership in a  
Secular Society."  
Perhaps we are  
close to achieving  
what Father Marcel  
Dubois, the  
Dominican Superior  
of Isaiah House in  
Jerusalem and a  
great pioneer of the  
Christian-Jewish  
dialogue, calls one  
of the basic  
necessities of our  
new friendship: the  
ability to "agree to  
disagree", about the  
divinity of Jesus, for  
example. The  
Jewishness of  
Jesus, he says,  
both separates and  
unites us in our  
common religious  
roots.

A Sister of Sion,  
recalled a significant  
episode that took  
place recently in the  
Philippines. She  
had been told there  
was absolutely no  
anti-Semitism. In  
fact there were  
practically no Jews  
living there. An  
American Jewish  
professor was thus  
invited to give a  
series of talks on  
Judaism in different  
Philippine churches.  
To her horror, after

his talks he was  
assailed by a host  
of hostile questions  
headed by "Why did  
you Jews kill Jesus  
Christ?"

Last Good Friday in  
Rome - in a gesture  
of ecumenism by  
the Catholic Church,  
a Protestant nun of  
the Grandchamp  
Community in  
Switzerland was  
entrusted with  
writing meditations  
for the Pope's "*Via  
Crucis*" procession  
to the Colosseum.  
She invited all  
Christians to ask  
God's forgiveness  
for having "rejected"  
and "shown disdain"  
for the Jewish  
people even in its  
liturgy.

"*Vita Pastorale*", the  
periodical of the  
Italian Bishops  
Conference,  
published an  
editorial around  
Easter which shows  
that it is too soon to  
ask forgiveness for  
theological anti-  
Judaism in the past  
tense, since it is still  
being practiced. The  
writer Luigi della  
Torre, suggested  
the removal of parts  
of the Roman Good  
Friday liturgy which  
still contained  
sections contrary to  
*Nostra Aetate*. He  
was referring to  
"The Lamentations  
of our Lord" which  
blames Jews for

ungratefulness, for having "repaid the Lord" for the blessings they received "by killing him". Many other issues still clutter the path of our dialogue.

## Saviours

During the last World War, Jewish perceptions of Christians were either sublime or abysmal. They were sublime with regard to those thousands of Christians who, under Nazi occupation all over Europe, risked their lives to save Jews, and the Jews who were saved began to seek out their saviours decades later, when they could begin to really talk about the terrible trauma they had lived through. They tried to express their gratitude, honouring their saviours by giving them medals, writing about them, making documentaries and planting trees in their names in the valley of "Righteous Gentiles" at the Yad Vashem Memorial to the Shoah in Jerusalem.

Poland had by far the largest pre-war Jewish population in

Europe; a total of 3.3 million, of which less than 300,000 survived and only 10,000 of whom live in Poland today. Over three million Christian Poles were also killed by the Germans, and in the midst of this immense suffering there were also exceptional people who risked their lives to save their brothers.

At Yad Vashem, by far the largest number of trees dedicated to "righteous gentiles", are dedicated to Polish saviours of Jews. The present Foreign Minister of Poland, Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, is one of the many glorious examples of the heroic altruism of individual Poles during the war, and a tree in his honour stands in Yad Vashem's "Alley of the Just".

### **Convert**

In contrast, Jewish perceptions of Christians were abysmal when they found indifference or even connivance with Nazi anti-Semitism amongst them. Examples of such "un-Christian" Christians, sadly, continue to emerge

from the past, just  
as examples of  
moral courage  
continue to emerge.

Another obstacle to  
dialogue is the  
largely prevailing  
and not entirely  
unjustified Jewish  
perception that  
Christians still await  
the day when Jews  
will convert to  
Christianity. Of  
course active  
proselytising is no  
longer practiced [by  
most mainline  
churches, ed.], but  
we all know that  
Christians in their  
hearts and through  
their very caring for  
us, continue to  
hope. As Pope John  
Paul II said in his  
book, "Crossing the  
Threshold of Hope",  
"The New Covenant  
has its roots in the  
Old. The time when  
the people of the  
Old Covenant will  
be able to see  
themselves as part  
of the New is,  
naturally, a question  
to be left to the Holy  
Spirit. We as human  
beings try only not  
to put obstacles in  
the way. The form  
this "not putting  
obstacles" takes is  
certainly dialogue  
between Christians  
and Jews, which, on  
the Church's part, is  
being carried  
forward by the  
"Pontifical Council  
for Promoting  
Christian Unity."

This is beautifully and very delicately put, but not quite according to the rules of our definition, not quite a dialogue between equals.

Jewish scholars with a strong Jewish religious identity, who are not new to our dialogue, will have no serious problems coping with this attitude. After all, we all secretly hope to convince the other with our ideas. On the other hand, religious Jews who are not updated on the progress of our dialogue and recall the history of mediaeval disputations, might become dissuaded from participating in the present Jewish-Christian dialogue for this reason.

A lovely means of bringing home to both Jews and Christians the human importance of our friendship and of combating the stereotypes we have of each other is to read the book by Gianfranco Svidercoschi, *"Letters to a Jewish Friend"*, now available in Polish from the "M" Publishing House. This book is the true story of the lifelong



friendship between the Pope, Karol Wojtyla, and his Jewish schoolmate, Jerzy Kluger, who now lives in Rome. The book has been translated into many languages - English, Spanish, German, French, Hungarian, Rumanian and Hebrew. It is a simple but moving and paradigmatic story, and I highly recommend it to you and your children.

This pope, the "Polish Pope", is particularly dear to Jews. He has proven on countless occasions that he deeply understands and feels sincere compassion for the suffering of Jews and for the decimation of our people as a result of the Shoah. He is to us, as to you, an important moral voice. Without such strong and sensitive moral leadership, we could not have arrived at today's point of irreversibility in the Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Religious relations between the Roman Catholic Church and world Judaism, and the political relations between the State of Israel and the Holy See have always been

inextricably  
intertwined. Political  
and religious  
conciliation walk  
hand in hand and  
neither would have  
come about without  
*Nostra Aetate*.

The now famous  
"Preamble" to the  
Agreement between  
Israel and the  
Vatican which led to  
the opening of  
official diplomatic  
relations last year,  
is certainly not the  
language of normal  
diplomacy. It goes  
far beyond, as  
behooves the  
ushering in of a new  
era of dialogue and  
friendship - the  
rediscovery of or  
common moral  
outlook based on  
the shared religious  
roots that unite us.

## **Unique Nature**

"Mindful of the  
singular character  
and universal  
significance of the  
Holy Land", the  
agreement opens,  
"aware of the  
unique nature of the  
relations between  
the Catholic Church  
and the Jewish  
people and the  
historic process of  
reconciliation and  
growth in the mutual  
understanding and  
friendship between  
Catholics and  
Jews..."

In this context, I  
would like to tell you  
a "midrash" from the  
Jewish tradition:  
One day, a rabbi  
asked his disciples,  
"How does one  
know the precise  
moment when the  
night disappears  
and the day dawns  
-- the moment when  
one must bless God  
for the creation of  
light?"

The disciple said,  
"When from afar  
one can distinguish  
between a palm tree  
and a fig tree."  
"No", replied the  
rabbi.

Another said,  
"When from afar  
one can distinguish  
between a dog and  
a goat."

"No", said the rabbi.  
"Then tell us When!  
When does the  
moment come when  
we must bless God  
for the creation of  
light?" Asked the  
disciples  
impatiently.

The rabbi then  
replied, "When from  
afar, in seeing a  
man, you recognise  
him as your brother,  
because then the  
night that was in  
your soul  
disappears and both  
your heart and his  
are filled with  
light."

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*Common Ground*  
1996/1. With kind  
permission.

