



The new Pope was my student: will he be good for the Jews?

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Pope Leo XIV was my student while he prepared for a degree and priestly ordination at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Given my longstanding participation in Catholic-Jewish dialogue, people have been asking me: “Will he be good for the Jews?”

The new Pope’s acquaintance with Jews and Judaism is not extensive, although I am sure he is aware of Chapter Four of Vatican Council II and its revolutionary change in Catholic attitudes regarding the Jewish tradition – what the late Canadian scholar Gregory Baum termed the most profound change in the ordinary teaching of the church to emerge from that council.

Pope Leo XIV has already committed his papacy to furthering the conciliar path pursued by all popes since Paul VI. That path includes reliance on key statements as Pope John Paul’s iconic remark on a visit to Mainz, Germany, where he said that when Christians look to the heart of their faith they find Judaism. Also the text issued for the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* in 2015 by the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, which affirmed Jewish continued inclusion in the ongoing covenant with God.

Pope Leo XIV has already proclaimed that conciliar documents, including *Nostra Aetate*, will form the foundation for his papacy. Even though he lacks the experience Pope Francis garnered through his ongoing personal encounter with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, he certainly is aware of the of the current authoritative teaching of Catholicism on its understanding of Judaism.

Pope Leo XIV’s ordination program at Catholic Theological Union was framed within a setting in which the teachings of Vatican II, including *Nostra Aetate*, played a decisive role.

Founded in 1968, the school had Vatican II and its outlook on Jews and Judaism at the core of its self-identity. It was one of the first Catholic theological schools to hire a Jewish scholar for its faculty. Rabbi Hayim Goren Perelmutter was the first of the school’s Jewish hires. I myself also included issues such as antisemitism and the Holocaust in required courses on Catholic social teaching in which Pope Leo XIV enrolled.

In addition, Rabbi Perelmutter enjoyed informal conversations with students and faculty over lunch in the school’s cafeteria. This afforded Rabbi Perelmutter the opportunity to help students understand Judaism today beyond the boundaries of the more formal classroom. It was an example of the culture that prevailed at the school during Pope Leo XIV’s formative years as a student working towards priestly ordination.

It is my hope that Pope Leo XIV will jumpstart the still necessary investigation into use of biblical texts in the lectionary of the Eucharist, the Divine Office (the chief prayer book for the church), and papal homilies and other statements.

The Divine Office needs special attention as it has never been revised in light of the teachings of Vatican II. These issues may not be currently on the papal priority list. But he has the reputation of a good listener. So hopefully he will respond positively to the urgings of both Jews and Christians

in some areas as Pope John XXIII responded to the plea of French Jewish historian Jules Isaac and placed Catholic-Jewish relations on the agenda of Vatican II.

Hopefully, he will receive proposals from experts in the Catholic-Jewish dialogue. Work on the development of a new positive theology of the Christian-Jewish relationship has lagged in recent years and requires rejuvenation.

The one area of the Catholic Jewish relationship under Pope Leo XIV that may remain somewhat conflicted is that of Israel-Gaza and the ongoing military response. Pope Francis reached out in particular in light of the attack by Hamas. But he felt he also had to reach out to Palestinians, especially those who are Catholic.

Pope Leo XIV will likely follow the same path. Pope Leo XIV has already shown his commitment to the vision of a Pope as a pacemaker.

This vision rooted in the teachings of all the recent popes since Pope John XXIII, with Pope Leo XIV including it in his regular Sunday address this past Sunday. This will undoubtedly raise some tension in the Jewish response to the Vatican. Pope Francis attempted to speak words of support to both Israelis and Palestinians.

Pope Leo XIV will most likely follow the same line raising some tension between the Vatican and the international Jewish leadership. Who he selects as the position of Vatican secretary of state will be an important influence on papal views on Israel-Gaza.

I hope that Pope Leo XIV will further advance Catholic-Jewish relations following his predecessors in the papacy since Vatican II. This includes further developments in the theological and liturgical areas and speaking out forcefully against the growing tide of antisemitism.

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