



# Anti-semitism: A wound to be healed

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**Together with the faith of the Fathers and of the Torah, the Temple of Jerusalem - at least until Titus destroyed it in the year 70 - was the heart of Judaism, with the exception of certain groups such as the Essenes and the Samaritans.**

The Temple was also one of the places for meeting and prayer of the first disciples of the Risen One, who were regarded by the authorities at times with suspicion, but with esteem by the people, with whom they shared their faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Sarah and Rebecca, of Rachel and Leah. They were all aware that they belonged to the one people of God with whom the Most High had made a Covenant with his promise to the Fathers which, after the Red Sea crossing, was sealed on Sinai and open to the promise and hope of universal renewal and redemption, in accordance with the messianic announcement of the prophets.

The Pharisee Gamaliel had wisely advised the Sanhedrin not to attempt to use force to quell a new spiritual movement which in Simon Peter and James had two charismatic leaders, and that may have interpreted correctly the Jewish tradition and the hope of Israel. Another Pharisee, a disciple of Gamaliel, young Saul of Tarsus, at first violently persecuted the followers of Jesus, but after an exceptional experience of conversion, held fast to the Gospel and became Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, who travelled around the Mediterranean and the empire until his martyrdom in Rome.

Upon Israel, the one people of God, the Apostle grafted the wild olive of the Gentiles, and the Church of Christ slowly acquired a concrete form "upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph 2: 20), in the two branches of *Ecclesia ex circumcisione* and *Ecclesia ex gentibus*, as admirably shown in the Paleo-Christian mosaic in the Church of Santa Sabina on the Aventine.

The corpus of the Sacred Scriptures - the Jewish ones of the *TaNaKH* (*Torah, Nevi'im and the Ketuvim*), which in the Christian canon came to be known as the Old Testament, as well as those of the New Testament - agrees in witnessing that God did not abandon his Covenant with the Hebrew (or "Judaic") people of the 12 tribes of Israel. Of course, what can appear to be a dangerous, exclusivist particularism is balanced, in the Scriptures themselves, by a twofold messianic universalism, both *ad intra*, in the tension between the Jewish Diaspora and the Jews of the Land of Israel (*Erez Israel*), and *ad extra*, in the tension between the Jewish people (*'am Israel*) and all the peoples called to enter into the same communion of peace and redemption of the first-born people of the Covenant.

Consequently, as a "messianic people", the Church does not replace Israel, but is grafted onto it, according to the Pauline doctrine, through adherence to Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, who died and rose; and this link forms a spiritual bond that is radical, unique and insuppressible for Christians. Although the contrasting concept - of an Israel *once (olim)* pre-chosen but later rejected by God for ever and now replaced by the Church - may have had widespread dissemination for almost 20 centuries, it does not in reality represent a truth of the faith, as can be seen both in the ancient Creeds of the early Church and in the teaching of the most important Councils, especially of the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 16; *Dei Verbum*, nn. 14-16; *Nostra Aetate*, n. 4). Moreover, neither Hagar nor Ishmael were ever rejected by God, who made them "a great nation" (Gn 21: 18); and Jacob, the astute "usurper", received Esau's embrace in the end. The most recent document published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission on *The Jewish People and*

*Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001), after recognizing the "surprising strength of the spiritual bonds that united the Church of Christ to the Jewish people" (n. 85), concludes by noting that "in the past, the break between the Jewish people and the Church of Christ Jesus might at times have seemed complete in certain periods and in certain places. In the light of the Scriptures, this should never have happened, because a complete break between the Church and the Synagogue is in contradiction to Sacred Scripture" (*ibid.*).

Thus, in the contemporary context, which cannot ignore the appalling slaughter of the Shoah in the 20th century, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, introducing this document, asks the question: "Did not the presentation of the Jews and of the Jewish people, in the New Testament itself, contribute to creating a hostility to this people which the ideology of those who wanted to suppress it has encouraged?". The document honestly admits that many passages in the New Testament that are critical of the Jews "served as a pretext for anti-Jewish sentiment and, effectively, have been used for this purpose" (n. 87). A few years earlier, Pope John Paul II himself had said that "in the Christian world - I do not say on the part of the Church as such - erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability have circulated for too long, engendering feelings of hostility towards this people" (*Address to Participants in a Symposium on "The Roots of Anti-Judaism in the Christian Milieu"*, n. 1, 31 October 1997; ORE, 5 November 1997, p. 1). So it was that "sentiments of anti-Judaism in some Christian quarters, and the gap which existed between the Church and the Jewish people, led to a generalized discrimination" towards the Jews over the centuries, in particular in Christian Europe (Holy See Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, 16 March 1998; ORE, 18 March 1998, n. III, p. 6).

During the 19th century, in a changed historical context that was bent on toppling the old regime that united Church and State, "there began to spread in varying degrees throughout most of Europe an anti-Judaism that was essentially more sociological and political than religious" (*ibid.*). This development of anti-Jewish feeling, with the addition of confused theories on evolution and the superiority of the "Aryan race", resulted in what was then called "anti-Semitism" characterized by explosions of violence, *pogroms* and the publications of anti-Jewish libel, such as the *Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion* (*Protocolli dei Savi Anziani di Sion*). It was in this mindset, permeated by contempt and hatred for the Jews who were accused of dreadful crimes such as ritual homicide, that the unspeakable tragedy of the *Shoah* matured, the horrible plan of extermination programmed by the Nazi Government that struck down the European Jewish communities during the Second World War. The ideological premises of the *Shoah*, already widely divulged before the war in such works as *Mein Kampf* and *Der Mythos des zwanzigste Jahrhunderts* (the latter was put on the *Index*), did not encounter sufficient opposition, neither at the cultural level nor in the juridical context, nor among the Christian communities, even if reactions were registered, such as those of G. Semeria, G. Bonomelli or of the young A. Bea. Unfortunately, however, between the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th, even very authoritative Catholic journals published articles in an anti-Semitic vein, and "more generally fanned anti-Jewish prejudices; they stemmed from the Medieval 'teaching of contempt', that was a source of stereotypes and popular hatred" (J. Willebrands), so that it can be said, in this regard, that such an attitude offered a favourable context for the spread of modern anti-Semitism. It should also be noted that as the responsibility for these roots of hatred, in various ways and with rare exceptions, can be ascribed to both Western and Eastern Christendom, a combined ecumenical reaction is called for today.

The Vatican document *We Remember* (n. II) also declares: "The fact that the *Shoah* took place in Europe, that is, in countries of long-standing Christian civilization, raises the question of the relation between the Nazi persecution and the attitudes down the centuries of Christians towards the Jews" (*We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, n. II). Although there were, before and during the *Shoah*, episodes of condemnation and reactions to anti-Semitism, both at a personal level with acts of heroism to the point of martyrdom, such as in the case of the Provost of Berlin, Bernhard Lichtenberg, and at the institutional level, with the condemnation of anti-Semitism (for

example, on the part of the Holy Office in 1928 and on the part of Pope Pius XI in 1938), on the whole, "the spiritual resistance and concrete action of other Christians was not that which might have been expected from Christ's followers" (*ibid.*, n. IV). In this case too, indeed especially with regard to anti-Semitism and to the Shoah, we can justifiably speak of the need to embark on acts of repentance (*teshuvà*), which ends in exemplary and concrete acts in which, "as members of the Church, we are linked to the sins as well as the merits of all her children" (*ibid.*, n. V). Certainly one of these acts was the one the Pope solemnly made on 12 March 2000 in St Peter's Basilica, and which he sealed on 26 March in Jerusalem at the Western or Wailing Wall of the Temple. We are all, therefore, called to share in our inner attitudes, prayers and actions in this same journey of conversion and reconciliation, because it is a question of the need to live *in capite et in membris*, not limited merely to a few authoritative, meaningful gestures or even high level documents.

This first fundamental engagement, of a spiritual and moral kind, concerns all of us as Christians, hence, we can say it has a marked ecumenical dimension. A second consequence, also of a theological kind, is the one that springs from the deep, radical and particular connection that unites the Church and the Jewish people "first-born of the Covenant" (Universal Prayer of Good Friday).

On the one hand, this bond impels us to respect and love the Jewish people, and on the other, it enables us to perceive in anti-Semitism a further dimension, in comparison with the general one of racism or religious discrimination, which anti-Semitism has in common with other forms of ethnic, cultural or religious hatred, as described in the document *The Church and Racism, Towards a More Fraternal Society* (Pontifical Commission *Iustitia et Pax*, 3 November 1988, I, n. 15; ORE, 13 February 1989, p. 7). It is not only a question of the cultural, social, political or ideological, and in a more general way "secular", dimensions of anti-Semitism which must also be a cause of concern to us, but of a specific aspect of it that was firmly condemned in 1928 by the Apostolic See when it defined anti-Semitism as "odium adversus populum olim a Deo electum" (AAS XX/1928, pp. 103-104). Today, 75 years later, the only modification we feel duty bound to make is the elimination of the word "olim" ("once"): this is no small thing, because in recognizing the perennial timeliness of the Covenant between God and his people, Israel, we in turn will be able to rediscover, with our Jewish brethren, the irrevocable universality of the vocation to serve humanity in peace and in justice, until the definitive coming of his kingdom. This is what the Pontiff also recommends to us in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* of last 28 June, recalling the "relationship which binds the Church to the Jewish people and of Israel's unique role in salvation history" (n. 56). Pope John Paul II continues, observing that "there is need for acknowledgment of the common roots linking Christianity and the Jewish people, who are called by God to a covenant which remains irrevocable (cf. Rom 11: 29) and has attained definitive fullness in Christ. Consequently, it is necessary to encourage dialogue with Judaism, knowing that it is fundamentally important for the self-knowledge of Christians and for the transcending of divisions between the Churches" (*ibid.*). Dialogue and collaboration between Christians and Jews "also implies that "acknowledgment be given to any part which the children of the Church have had in the growth and spread of anti-Semitism in history; forgiveness must be sought for this from God, and every effort must be made to favour encounters of reconciliation and of friendship with the sons of Israel" (*ibid.*). In this spirit of rediscovered brotherhood a new springtime for the Church and for the world can bloom once more, with the heart turned from Rome to Jerusalem and to the land of the Fathers, so that there too a just and lasting peace may quickly germinate for all and mature like a banner flying in the midst of the peoples.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, former President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. This article first appeared 2003 (L'Osservatore Romano English Weekly Edition, n. 40) and is now available via [Vatican's homepage](#).