



Can Pope Leo XIV Revive the Catholic-Jewish Relationship?

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Relations between the Catholic Church and Jews are in deep crisis, caused not only by reactions to the war in Gaza, but above all by the radical changes that have transformed both the Church and the Jewish community in recent decades. In this new globalised and multicultural context, relations between Catholics and Jews must be revitalised and taken to a new level.

We still do not know much about Leo XIV. As a man with one foot planted in North America—his homeland—and the other foot in South America, where he served the Church for two decades, he brings with him a message of unity, a message for which the Catholic Church, increasingly global in scope, is very thirsty. So far, we know nothing of Leo XIV's attitude toward interreligious dialogue, or of his stance on Judaism and the Jews in particular.

The Catholic Theological Union, the Chicago institution where he received a significant portion of his academic formation, is a liberal-oriented Catholic establishment in which he surely was educated on the legacy of the Second Vatican Council, including its emphasis on the relationship between the Church and the Jews. Chicago is known as an American locale with a most vibrant Jewish-Catholic dialogue, and the United States overall has proven to be the most successful setting of all for relations between the two communities. Nevertheless, Jewish-Christian dialogue is today stretched to its limit, and restoring it will require great effort on the part of all concerned.

Only time will tell whether Leo XIV will wish to undertake that effort. As a scholar of the history of Jewish-Catholic relations, I see this moment as an opportunity to ponder how, after some sixty years of fruitful dialogue between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church, we have fallen into so deep a crisis. On the face of it, the most evident cause of the current crisis in Jewish-Catholic relations is the dreadful war raging in Israel, Gaza, and across the Middle East—a war that arouses bitter sentiments both among its many opponents worldwide, who view Israel as a brutal war machine, and among its supporters, who see harsh criticism of Israel as an oversimplification of a complex moral and military reality. Pope Francis took a distinctly pro-Palestinian stance and, in effect, led left-wing opinion worldwide against the war in Gaza. The State of Israel, for its part, expressed resentment at the Vatican's one-sided position. The tension escalated into what is probably the gravest diplomatic crisis since the 1993 Israel–Vatican agreement: after the Pope's death, Israel's Foreign Ministry banned its ambassadors from sending condolences to the worldwide Catholic community, and only Israel's ambassador to the Holy See Yaron Zeidman was present at the Pope's funeral.

On the surface, this appears to be a diplomatic crisis between two states, not a crisis in Church-Jewish relations. Yet the similarity between Israel and the Vatican lies precisely in the far-reaching significance each holds for two global communities—the Jewish people and the Catholic faithful, respectively.

In truth, the origin of this crisis runs deeper, embedded in the sweeping changes that have transformed both communities in recent decades. When the Catholic Church sought reconciliation with the Jewish people after generations of hostility and enmity, it was still a largely European

Church whose historical consciousness was deeply rooted in the events of World War II and the Holocaust—and which identified Jewish integration in the West as a fundamental condition for the rebirth of a sustainable liberal democracy, that is, for the West's recovery from the devastation it had wrought upon itself in two world wars. Since then, the center of gravity of the Catholic Church has shifted to other regions—Africa, South America, and Asia—areas whose formative memories are those of Western imperialism, colonialism, and economic oppression, and where the principal “Other” is not Jews but followers of other faiths, especially Muslims. Today, more than half of the world's Catholics live in the Global South.

The Jewish community has also changed beyond recognition: alongside the large American and smaller European Jewish community, Israeli Judaism has grown in strength, and for it too, the Other of primary concern is not Christianity, and among Christians, certainly not the Catholic Church. Like Catholic believers in the Global South, Israeli Jews in the Middle East have an ambivalent attitude toward the West, which represents, on the one hand, values of democracy, liberty, and equality, and carries, on the other hand, a history of oppression, exploitation, racism, and antisemitism, too often expressed in the very name of those lofty values.

Thus, two communities that once found common ground have drifted apart. Jewish-Christian dialogue has gradually become a signifier of the “old” West—diasporic, from the Israeli perspective, and Euro-centric and overly liberal, from the global Catholic viewpoint. Both communities have accordingly decided that they have other fish to fry.

This neglect of Catholic-Jewish relations surfaced dramatically during Francis's pontificate. At the outset, he was seen as a friend of the Jews. There was a sense among many Jews that, with the arrival of an Argentine pope, we could finally have a Jewish-Christian dialogue unburdened by the pain, guilt, and anger over the fate of European Jewry in the Holocaust. Now there could be a dialogue rooted in a different historical consciousness, a fresh page in Jewish-Christian relations. Because of his warmth and good will, controversial remarks Francis made in the past—outdated New Testament readings tinged with anti-Jewish undertones, such as describing the “Pharisees” (often seen in Christian tradition as a prototype of the rabbinic tradition) having misunderstood the Torah because they did not read it in light of Christ, or claiming that rabbis treated children as little servants until Jesus came and changed attitudes toward childhood—were readily forgiven.

Everyone assumed, rightly, that Francis's slips stemmed from ignorance of the history of Jewish-Christian relations, a topic outside his expertise. After all, he had not inherited Europe's deep-seated legacy of antisemitism, and he therefore lacked a contemporary European sensitivity to New Testament statements that might be construed as anti-Jewish. But that is precisely the point: without continuous investment in a Christianity free of anti-Jewish bias, issues can easily resurface—not out of antisemitism, but simply out of ignorance of the explosive material carried within the tradition, and the ease with which that tinder can ignite.

In the decades preceding his papacy, relations with Judaism had been a top priority for the Church's engagement with other faiths, both because of the fresh memory of the Holocaust and the intense attention the Church devoted to rebuilding and reshaping Europe after the war. Francis, a man of the Global South, reordered these priorities and made a concerted effort to draw the Catholic Church closer to Islam—through visits to Muslim countries, statements against Islamophobia, and above all by signing a joint document with the Grand Imam of al-Azhar in Egypt, Ahmed al-Tayeb, a figure known for extremely controversial remarks regarding Jews, to say the least. In contrast, Francis assumed that maintaining the friendly status quo between Jews and Christians required little effort on the Church's part.

Jewish communities—and Israeli Jewry in particular—have likewise neglected relations with the Catholic Church in recent years. Secular Jews are rarely invested in what is called “Jewish-Christian dialogue,” an initiative shaped primarily by the Catholic Church as a religious-theological

activity, which, apparently, has no room for their type of Jewishness. Orthodox communities, for their part, view the Church and its motives with considerable suspicion and also have refrained from entering such dialogue. As the secular and Orthodox constitute Israel's two largest publics, meaningful bonds between Israeli Jewry and the Catholic Church have simply failed to materialize in the way that they exist in the diaspora. In addition, Israel's systematic neglect of its relations with the Christian world did not remain at the diplomatic level but also impacted questions of education. In recent years, this neglect has manifested in the disgraceful phenomenon of radicalized Israeli Jews spitting on churches in Jerusalem's Old City, and sometimes worse—acts now addressed by law enforcement but desperately in need of action to raise awareness of Christianity among Israeli Jews and to uproot violence and hatred.

In other words, alongside the face-value narrative of historic reconciliation between the Church and the Jews, steadfast Catholic opposition to antisemitism, and Israel's firm protection of holy sites and religious freedom, a jungle of renewed hostility is growing beneath our feet—stemming, above all, from neglect. Today, neither community places its relations with its counterpart high on its agenda. In my view, this is a mistake. Precisely because both the Church and the Jewish people are now global and multicultural, each has real potential to appreciate the complexity of the other and to build upon the foundation laid since the 1960s to erect a new, more diverse global level of relations atop the historic repair that has already begun. I hope that Pope Leo XIV will lead the construction of such a level.

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