



Catholic-Jewish Relations: Portentous Anniversaries

01.03.2019 | Lisa Palmieri-Billig

2018 was a year of significant anniversaries, conjuring up memories of the past, bearing portentous messages for the present and the future: 100 years since the end of World War One; 80 years since Mussolini's racist antisemitic laws; 80 years from the German-Nazi Anschluss of Austria; the State of Israel's 70th birthday; the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – (the last two events democratically determined by the votes of the United Nations.)

Commemorative events and symposiums were organized by municipal, regional, national and religious authorities, by Catholic and Jewish organizations and communities, by educational and cultural institutions. Regarding all things connected with the Shoah, there were honest and sincere examinations of both the positive and negative roles played by the Italian government, the Italian Catholic Church and the Vatican. New facts were brought to light by conscientious and well-prepared scholars. Extreme contrasts within Roman Catholicism were evidenced, from widespread pre-Vatican II anti-Semitic and anti-Judaic attitudes, to the heroic acts of priests, nuns and common people in saving the lives of persecuted Jews.

The cornerstone of transition into a new era, however, was laid in 1965 with "Nostra Aetate", the Vatican II document regarding Catholic relations with Jews, with Islam, with non-Christian religions and with the world in general – a document whose moral authority today leads to the conclusion that there is no turning backwards. Appropriately, on the 50th anniversary of the death of the man entrusted by Pope John XXIII to carry out the special mission of writing and fighting for the passing of this document during the Second Vatican Council, the Pontifical Gregorian University's Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies is observing the academic "Year of Cardinal Bea" (2018 – 19). A series of public study sessions regarding the life and work of Augustin Bea, namesake of the Centre, has been organized by its director Fr. Etienne Vetò.

Bea was truly a great pioneer in the realization of John XXIII's vision of an "aggiornamento" of the Catholic Church. In 1960 Pope Roncalli called on him to head, as its first president, the newly formed "Secretariat" (today known as "the Council") for Promoting Christian Unity, and simultaneously work on the projected "paper on the Jews", destined to become the fourth paragraph in "Nostra Aetate".

The driving force inspiring both Angelo Roncalli and Augustin Bea to carry through this mission involved their personal experiences and sensitivities during the years of the tragedy of the Shoah. Each in his own way felt impelled to repair in some way the unspeakable horrors they had witnessed. As if by divine plan, they came to combine forces, thus providing the impetus for pushing through the groundbreaking "Nostra Aetate" document despite mounting hostility and boycotting efforts by both the ultra-conservative wing of Council Fathers (for theological anti-Judaic reasons) and the Arab Council Fathers (for political anti-Zionist reasons).

During World War II, Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII, served in Istanbul as apostolic Delegate to Turkey and Greece and later as papal nuncio to France. He is quoted as having written, "Poor children of Israel. Daily I hear their cries around me. They are relatives and fellow countrymen of Jesus. May the Divine Savior come to their aid....". In those years, he helped save the lives of tens of thousands of Jews fleeing from Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Greece, Turkey,

etc. through tireless behind the scenes diplomacy, and by sponsoring the writing and distribution of both real and false baptism and immigration certificates plus visas. He used diplomatic couriers, papal representatives and the Sisters of Zion to distribute them.

Augustin Bea, a German Jesuit, graduated from the Pontifical Gregorian University in 1914, became professor of Holy Scripture in 1924, then rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute as well as Confessor of Pius XII from 1945 until his death in 1958. On the fatal day of October 16, 1943, during the Nazi-Fascist raid on the Roman ghetto, searches were ordered throughout the city to round up and deport the city's Jews. When Nazi officials of the occupying German forces knocked on the doors of the "Biblicum" (a the Pontifical Biblical Institute is familiarly called) its Rector, Fr. Augustin Bea prevented their entry by insisting on the institution's "extraterritoriality", thus saving the lives of a group of Jews hidden in the building's basement.

Another insight regarding Augustin Bea's commitment was revealed by Elio Toaff, the former Chief Rabbi of Rome. In his 1986 autobiography, recalling his close friendship with Augustin Bea, Toaff wrote "One day, monsignor Bea confided to me that as a native German he felt all the weight of the evil committed by his people against the Jews and wanted to do something to atone, even if it be a minimal gesture. Thus he conceived the idea of an ecumenical Council which would approve a document on the Jews. He himself wanted to be its promotor and writer."

Yet the idea of producing a "document on the Jews" had also presented itself to Pope Roncalli, following the audience, June 13, 1960 granted to the French historian and Holocaust survivor, Jules Isaac. Presented with the professor's famous notes on the history of the Church's "teaching of contempt" throughout the centuries and the consequent anti-Semitism of Christian Europe that provided fertile ground for the Holocaust, Pope John XXIII was determined to correct the manner in which Jews were presented in Catholic teaching.

To carry out this groundbreaking work for the Second Vatican Council, John XXII's chosen delegate, Cardinal Augustin Bea, was instructed to turn to Jewish leaders for advice. In her paper on "Augustin Bea's commitment to Jewish-Christian relations", presented by Dr. Saretta Marotta at the 18th annual Brenninkmeijer-Werhahn Lecture that opened the "Year of Cardinal Bea", the names of several Jewish leaders and organizations are mentioned including an Israeli representative, and Nahum Goldmann, President of the World Jewish Congress, with whom Bea consulted during his initial contacts.

However, it was Abraham Heschel, a rabbi and scholar of international renown, personally committed to improving post-war relations between Christians and Jews, who became the prime source of inspiration for the contents of Bea's draft.

In his research paper on "Abraham Joshua Heschel and Nostra Aetate: Shaping the Catholic Reconsideration of Judaism during Vatican II", Joshua Furnal (of Radboud University, the Netherlands) asserts "...without Rabbi Heschel it is doubtful that 'Nostra Aetate' would have taken the shape that it did."

On behalf of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and as its representative, Heschel was already in conversation with Bea since 1961. He was a close friend of both Cardinals Bea and Willebrands, then Secretary of the Pontifical Secretariat. In May, 1962, Heschel sent Bea a Memorandum outlining the proposed agenda for a meeting to discuss what he considered the main points that needed to be included in the final document. He hoped in the achievement of a reconciliation that would forever banish "the teaching of contempt" from the Catholic Magisterium and promote respectful dialogue, free of missionary aims. The suggestions by Heschel that were incorporated in the final version of "Nostra Aetate,"⁴ and elaborated in subsequent Vatican documents included, most importantly, the delegitimization of the "Deicide" accusation that had been used as an excuse for massacres and pogroms in past centuries. "True, the Jewish

authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ, still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today”, the document stated.

Heschel’s ardent request for a condemnation of anti-Semitism was considered, but weakened in the final version because of pressure by the opposition Council Fathers. The word “condemn” was downgraded to “deplore” – a very far cry from the evolution of this document in post Council years, culminating in John Paul II’s outcry in 1991 that “Antisemitism is a sin against God and Humanity” and the repeated affirmations by Pope Francis that “a Christian cannot be an anti-Semite.”

A further significant concession to the politicized atmosphere of the Council and the Arab Fathers’ anti-Israel obsession was the insertion into the text of the phrase that the Church deplores all manifestations of anti-Semitism, “not for political reasons, but for evangelical religious charity”.

Another point made by Heschel which received attention in the final text was: the resolve to maximize efforts to “enhance religious literacy among Christians and Jews, through public discussions, research projects and publications”. And his plea for a “high level commission at the Vatican regarding Christian-Jewish relations” has been actualized in several forms. In addition to the “Commission for Religious Relations with Jews” under the auspices of the “Council for Promoting Christian Unity” we have today, the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee constituted of ICJIC (the umbrella organization for world Jewish organizational representatives, both religious and secular) and experts appointed by the Vatican. Furthermore, subsequent to the diplomatic recognition of Israel by the Holy See in 1993, regular meetings are held between Israel’s Chief Rabbinate and the Pontifical Commission.

During this 2018 – 19 academic year, the Cardinal Bea Institute is sponsoring a series of events covering all main aspects of Augustin Bea’s commitment to Catholic-Jewish, as well as intra-Christian ecumenical relations with participation by distinguished Catholic, Protestant and Jewish scholars. Here are some titles: the previously mentioned opening Brenninkmeijer-Werhahn Lecture concerned a challenging topic: Rewriting Nostra Aetate Today. Highly diversified and provocative thoughts were contributed by Israeli, German and Italian professors Israel Yuval, Renè Dausner, and Saretta Marotta, respectively from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Hildesheim University and the Catholic University of Leuven. A panel followed, on The Bible from Three “Points of View”: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish. Two more panels, in February and April, will concern “Ecumenism”, and “Reading scripture together”.

Lisa Palmieri-Billig is representative in Italy and to the Holy See of AJC - the American Jewish Committee.

First published in: Vatican Insider, 09/01/2019. Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).