



ICCJ's Address to Pope Francis

31.08.2015 | Philip A. Cunningham, President of ICCJ

Your Holiness, Pope Francis, it is a great honor for me to present to you the 250 participants in the 2015 meeting of the International Council of Christians and Jews.

From dozens of countries we have come to Rome to consider: "The 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*: The Past, Present and Future of the Christian-Jewish Relationship." As President of the ICCJ, I offer on behalf of all of us our heartfelt thanks for welcoming us to the Vatican as we celebrate what you have movingly called "our journey of friendship"^[1] over the past five decades.

Pope Francis, the ICCJ came into being immediately after the Second World War as a result of a historic 1947 gathering in Switzerland called "An Emergency Conference on Antisemitism." Its famous "Ten Points of Seelisberg" not only served as a forerunner of *Nostra Aetate* but also gave birth to the ICCJ. Today, the ICCJ is an association of forty national organizations in over thirty countries on five continents, promoting mutual respect and enrichment at every opportunity. One national member organization networks 80 grassroots dialogue groups. Another is a collaboration of dozens of university research and educational centers. Others support official interactions among Jewish and Christian rabbis and clergy. Our diversity can be seen in the members of our Executive Board, which includes Jews and Christians from Australia, Chile, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Israel, and the United States. We also sponsor the Young Leadership Council to bring the importance of interreligious dialogue to coming generations and the International Abrahamic Forum to promote trilateral relations among Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Our conference is focusing on the past, present, and future of "our journey of friendship." We feel the journey has only just begun. A legacy of about eighteen centuries of estrangement and animosity cannot be overcome in a mere 50 years. Old habits of suspicion and caricature have to be unlearned. New theologies of our spiritual relationship have to be developed together. We've shared with you a statement on "Celebrating and Deepening the New Christian-Jewish Relationship" that we have composed as part of our conference.

However, today is a day to celebrate the blessed rapprochement that we are experiencing together. So, Pope Francis, to thank you for your own inspirational contributions on our historic journey of friendship, we'd like to offer you three small symbolic gifts that relate to the past, present, and future structure of our conference. Each gift will be presented by a Jew and a Christian to symbolize our ongoing work together.

The past has certainly taught us that friendly conversations were crucial to reach across the divisions between Christians and Jews. To mention only one example: In the 1940s, theologian Karl Thieme struggled after the Shoah to overcome the pervasive Christian belief that Jews were under God's wrath. Due to his correspondence with several Jews, most notably with Martin Buber, he experienced the love between the Holy One and the Jewish people and so came to reread Romans 11 with new eyes. Karl Thieme's insights were later incorporated into *Nostra Aetate*, 4, a key contribution that was the direct result of his talking with and learning from Jews.

Today, it is easy to forget the uncertainties and risks that accompanied such efforts. And we cannot forget, as Cardinal Kurt Koch has stated, "that only the unprecedented atrocity of the Shoah was able to effect a real turning point in thinking."^[2] That is why, Pope Francis, our first gift to you

reminds us that although the nightmarish world of the Shoah will always demand true conversion of our hearts, even then human decency did not totally vanish. I ask ICCJ's two vice-presidents, Ms. Liliane Apotheker from France and Rev. Michael Trainor from Australia, to present a very personal cup of blessing. It commemorates the rescue of Max Ostro by Catholics during the Shoah in 1942, a deed that continues to inspire his children, present here today, in the work in prudence and love of national and international Christian-Jewish dialogue and collaboration. May the memory of such selfless acts in that horrific reign of hatred always inspire us on our journey of friendship.

Pope Francis, as we turn to the present, from 1965 until today, we ponder the growing friendship we've experienced on our journey. Sister and Prof. Mary C. Boys, who is with us here today, has written of her long collaboration with Jewish educator Sara Lee: "Over the years, Sara and I have discussed many demanding and delicate questions—but the conversations themselves have not been difficult. To the contrary, our friendship allows us to probe in sensitive areas."^[3] "including facing Auschwitz in one another's presence.

Likewise, Rev. Hanspeter Heinz, who is also here today, has written tenderly about his more than twenty year friendship with Rabbi Michael Signer of blessed memory—a friend of many of us here as well: "The joy we shared as friends was no less important than our projects together. ... During our long walks ... we regularly lost our way because we were so absorbed in our discussions. ... Without our deep theological discussions, our friendship would have surely lacked seriousness and depth."^[4]

Their informal camaraderie resonates with the famous I-Thou paradigm of Martin Buber, the fiftieth anniversary of whose death we also mark this year. Martin Buber has a special place in the hearts of the ICCJ family because his former residence in Heppenheim, Germany is now the ICCJ's headquarters. And so, Pope Francis, I ask ICCJ Treasurer Dr. Abi Pitum and ICCJ's General Secretary Ms. Anette Adelman, both from Germany, to present you with our second small gift. It is a first edition copy of a volume of essays composed by Prof. Buber, signed by the author himself, and published in 1936 – a year of personal significance to you. To paraphrase slightly, the inscription states that only by spending time together can we meet the challenge to gain insights needed for our times. May Prof. Buber's words inspire Jews and Christians to work together in meeting the needs of *our* times.

And finally, we come to the future. In thinking about how to describe the emerging Christian-Jewish relationship, Rabbi Daniel Lehmann has proposed the following:

I suggest ... the metaphor of what in Aramaic we [Jews] call a *chavruta*, that is a learning partner. A learning partner is someone with whom you study texts, biblical or other kinds of traditional texts, but you study it in order to have a dialogue—an interlocutor, with whom truth can emerge as you play out your different perspectives on the texts. And it's a kind of relationship which is very intimate, in which there is a sense of shared texts, and even a covenantal relationship, but in which the partners are not just trying to agree, but in fact, trying to see how their different perspectives can enhance the other person's understanding.^[5]

Rabbi Lehmann's words recall those of Pope Benedict XVI: "[W]e now see it as our task to bring these two ways of rereading the biblical texts—the Christian way and the Jewish way—into dialogue with one another, if we are to understand God's will and his word aright."^[6]

And, Pope Francis, you yourself have written: "Dialogue and friendship with the children of Israel are part of the life of Jesus' disciples. ... There exists a rich complementarity between us which allows us to ... help one another to mine the riches of God's word."^[7] Your insight is surely indebted to your own exchanges with Jewish friends, especially Rabbi Abraham Skorka, chair of the planning committee of ICCJ's meeting last year in Buenos Aires. He has movingly written in the book of your dialogues together: "To have a conversation is to bring one's soul nearer to

another's in order to reveal and illuminate his or her core. The Divine Breath, which both possess, knows to unite the two and then form a link with G-d that will never weaken."^[8]

Pope Francis, these and many other similar experiences suggest that the new relationship between Jews and Christians, fifty years after *Nostra Aetate*, may well be maturing to the point that we are becoming able to discuss topics we have been unable to discuss since literally the era of the New Testament! Because genuine affection has grown between us, "In Our Time" we can at last freely speak to each other about our interrelationship before God. "In Our Time" we can begin to explore religious questions of such profundity that they can only be addressed by us working together for extended periods of time as learning partners, in mutuality and friendship. And so, it is only fitting that our third gift is one we would also like to present to Rabbi Skorka. Your well-known friendship is both a sign of our hopeful times and an invitation to a future full of even greater possibilities.

Pope Francis, as you know, depictions on dozens of medieval cathedrals used feminine figures to show Ecclesia, the Church, as majestic, crowned, and powerful; triumphing over a defeated, crownless, and blindfolded Synagoga. Such inimical portrayals, of course, today directly contradict the teaching of the post-*Nostra Aetate* Church. Therefore, Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia has commissioned an original sculpture entitled, "Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time" to celebrate through art our journey of friendship since *Nostra Aetate*.

As ICCJ's gift symbolizing the future, my colleague and *chavruta* at Saint Joseph's, Prof. Adam Gregerman and I will present you and Rabbi Skorka with two small replicas of this sculpture to be dedicated in September. The full-size version will show Synagogue and Church depicted with nobility and grace, enjoyably studying their sacred texts together as friends. Pope Francis, the ICCJ believes it is our duty before God in these blessed times to actively seek out each other as friends and fellow learners, to truly be, in the words of Pope Saint John Paul II, "a blessing to one another."^[9] Such shared study will deepen our covenantal life with the Holy One and bring hope to the rest of the world.

Pope Francis, on behalf of the International Council of Christians and Jews, please accept these three tokens of our gratitude, esteem, and admiration. Please pray for us as our many different member organizations pursue our diverse missions and roles on our "journey of friendship" together.

Shalom!

^[1] Pope Francis, "Address to the Chief Rabbis of Israel" (May 26, 2014).

^[2] Kurt Cardinal Koch, "Theological Questions and Perspectives in Jewish-Catholic Dialogue," address delivered at the annual meeting of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations, Seton Hall University, East Orange, NJ, USA, October 30, 2011, §1.

^[3] Mary C. Boys, "Learning in the Presence of the Other: My Friendship with Sara Lee," forthcoming in James L. Fredericks and Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, eds., *Interreligious Friendship after Nostra Aetate* (New York/London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

^[4] Hanspeter Heinz, "Your Privilege: You Have Jewish Friends," Philip A. Cunningham, Joseph Sievers, Mary C. Boys, Hans Hermann Henrix, and Jesper Svartvik, eds. *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 4.

^[5] Daniel Lehmann, quoted at 07:18-8:32 in "Metaphors for a Unique Relationship," *Walking God's Path: Jews and Christians in Candid Conversation* [video series] Episode 5. Produced by Philip A. Cunningham, John Michalczyk, and Gilbert Rosenthal (Boston: Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, 2004).

^[6] Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Part Two, *Holy Week: from the entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 35.

^[7] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), §248-249.

^[8] Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth: Pope Francis on Faith, Family, and the Church in the Twenty-First Century* (New

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York: Image Books, 2013), ix.

[9] Pope Saint John Paul II, "Address on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising," (April 6, 1993).