

POPE JOHN PAUL II: JEWISH PERSPECTIVES

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The passing of Pope John Paul II triggers a flood of reflections and observations among Jews as well as Catholics and with good reason. A distinguished Catholic scholar friend observed to me some years ago that when the papacy of John Paul II is evaluated by scholars, they will conclude that perhaps his greatest achievement was his repairing relations with the Jewish people. No other pope in history has devoted so much time and attention to Jews, whom he described as "our elder brother," and Judaism as the late and lamented John Paul II.

Undoubtedly, that is the result of his unique background. Karol Wojtyla, as he was then known, grew up in the Polish town of Wadowice whose population of 10,000 included 2,000 Jews. He lived with them, knew them well, played soccer with them. Indeed, I had lunch with one of his close soccer buddies who had survived the Holocaust and was fascinated by his observations and reminisces of his old friend.

The future pope knew the Holocaust first hand as he watched his friends and neighbors disappear into the maw of the death machine that wiped out 6-million Jews.

When he ascended the throne of the papacy in 1978, one of his priorities was to continue the work of building a new relationship with Jews begun by Pope John XXIII at Vatican Council II and carried on by Pope Paul VI. Clearly he was determined to turn a new page in Catholic-Jewish relations, to rectify some of the wrongs, to expunge the teaching of contempt from Catholic doctrines and catechisms, and to chart a new course for the two siblings. One of his first foreign visits was to Auschwitz in 1979 where he prayed for the victims of the Nazi Holocaust and begged forgiveness for Christianity's role in that tragedy. In 1986, he became the first pope ever (so far as we know) to visit a synagogue—the great synagogue in Rome where he and the Chief Rabbi sat together before the Holy Ark containing the Torah and chatted amiably. He denounced anti-Semitism as "a sin against God and humanity," calling for "the purification of memory" and insisting that Christians must perform "teshuvah—repentance" for the 19-centuries of hatred that prepared the soil for the Holocaust. The Holocaust memorial concert he convened in the Vatican in 1994 with the Krakow Philharmonic conducted by Maestro Gilbert Levine was particularly memorable in this regard.

A series of important papers and documents was issued in the wake of Pope John Paul II's initiative. These documents were designed to clarify and amplify the revolutionary teachings of *Nostra Aetate* part 4, the landmark statement on relations with the Jews issued by the Second Vatican Council in October of 1965.

They include statements on how to implement the teachings of Vatican II on the Jews (1974), notes on the correct way of teaching and preaching about Judaism (1985), reflections on the Shoah (Holocaust) (1998), and the place of the Sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people in the Christian Bible (2002). In December 1993, the Vatican extended official diplomatic recognition to the State of Israel. In explaining his reason for this diplomatic initiative, the Pope stated, "It must be understood that Jews, who for 2,000 years, were dispersed among the nations of the world have decided to return to the land of their ancestors. This is their right."

Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of Pope John Paul II's concern for the Jewish people came in 2000 with his memorable visit to Israel. He paid homage to the victims of the Holocaust at Yad Vashem, begging forgiveness for the indifference or complicity of so many Christians in that tragedy. Then he went

to the Western Wall, the holiest site of Judaism, the remnant of the outer wall that ringed Jerusalem's Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., and inserted a note in a crevice in the Wall which stated, "God of our fathers, You chose Abraham and his descendants to bring Your name to the nations. We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who, in the course of history, have caused these children of Yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the covenant."

Somehow, he always found time in his impossible schedule to meet Jewish leaders and rabbis whether it was Israel's Chief Rabbi Lau in 1993 or a group of American Jews just a few weeks ago. I had the privilege of meeting with him in New York in October 1995 in an intimate gathering at the residence of the late Cardinal John O'Connor. It was an unforgettably poignant moment.

Unquestionably, the long pontificate of John Paul II has bequeathed many legacies to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. But the one that will stand out in my mind forever, and with good reason, was his sincere and passionate campaign to undo the many centuries of hatred and suspicion that marked Catholic-Jewish relations and his dogged determination that we must enter a new era of mutual respect, dialogue and trust. He summarized his views in these words: "As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing for the world. This is the common task awaiting us. It is therefore necessary for us Christians and Jews, to be first a blessing to one another." May his memory be an eternal blessing.

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