

## “Catholic-Jewish Relations: *Nostra Aetate* and Beyond”

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### Introduction

Jesus was a Jew. His mother, Mary, whom we rightly honor with the title *Theotokos*—Mother of God—also was a Jew. All twelve of Jesus’ original apostles were Jews. Consequently, Jesus and his apostles all worshipped in the Jewish temple; observed Shabbat (the weekly Sabbath); and celebrated the Jewish feasts, including Passover, the Feast of Tabernacles, and Shavuot (the Jewish Pentecost). In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus presents himself *not* as a non-Jew—who rejects the importance of the Mosaic Law—but as the son of David and the obedient Son of God: who serves as the Law’s correct interpreter, by showing forth the law’s original meaning (as God intended from the beginning) in both word and deed. Matthew 5:17-20:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven. I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.<sup>1</sup>

Mark’s gospel identifies Jesus as Israel’s messiah through his powerful words and deeds; Jesus authentically interprets God’s will, he obeys God’s commandments, he exorcises a demon from far away without even touching it, and he heals many people: even those who merely touch the

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<sup>1</sup> See also Luke 16:17: “It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for the smallest part of a letter of the law to become invalid.”

tassel on his cloak (Mark 6:56).<sup>2</sup> In Luke's gospel, Jesus deepens the teachings of the Hebrew prophets who preceded him. He serves as a prophetic messiah, one who has come to preach the good news most definitively to the marginalized: the poor, the sick, the blind, sinners in need of repentance, and those who have been bound by Satan.<sup>3</sup> Luke even takes pains to emphasize Jesus' circumcision, thus presenting him fundamentally as a Jewish messiah.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper, I will do two things. First, I will illuminate official Catholic teaching regarding Judaism: beginning with Vatican II's document *Nostra Aetate*, and extending through the pontificates of Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis. Second, I will provide pastoral insights regarding how Catholic-Jewish relations can be further deepened—a task especially pressing given the recent rise of antisemitism—by highlighting some of my own experiences (both successes and challenges) while participating in the Catholic-Jewish dialogue in the Archdiocese of Chicago.

## Official Catholic Teaching Since Vatican II

### I. Vatican II

Among the sixteen documents issued by the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate: On the Relation of the [Catholic] Church to Non-Christian Religions*, is the shortest.<sup>5</sup> In section 4, the council recalls the spiritual bond between Catholics (“the people of the New Covenant”) and Jews (“Abraham's stock”).<sup>6</sup> It acknowledges explicitly that “according to God's saving design, the beginnings of [the Church's] faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets.” Accordingly, “all who believe in Christ” are sons of Abraham “according to faith.” It is from the Jewish people that we Gentiles received “the revelation of the Old Testament”; metaphorically, we are “the wild shoots” who continue to draw “sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree” onto which we have been grafted (a reference to

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<sup>2</sup> Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Christology* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 10-11, 15-16, and 24-25.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Luke 4:16-21 and Luke 7:20-22.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 2:21-32.

<sup>5</sup> John Garvey, “Introduction,” in *Nostra Aetate: Celebrating 50 Years of the Catholic Church's Dialogue with Jews and Muslims*, ed. Pim Valkenberg and Anthony Cirelli (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), xiii.

<sup>6</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate: On the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html), no. 4.

Romans 11:17-24). By means of the cross, “Christ, who is our peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles,” uniting them in himself, a reference to Ephesians 2:14-16. The council further reminds us that Jesus, “the Son of the Virgin Mary,” descended from the Jewish people “according to the flesh” (Romans 9:4-5), and that both the Apostles and the majority of Jesus’ first disciples “sprang from the Jewish people.”<sup>7</sup>

Although the majority of the Jews in Jesus’ time did not accept the Gospel, “nevertheless, God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers.” As Paul proclaims (Romans 11:28-29), God “does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues.” All of us, including the apostle Paul and the Hebrew prophets, await “that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and ‘serve him shoulder to shoulder.’”<sup>8</sup> In light of this shared spiritual patrimony, the council recommends biblical and theological studies, along with fraternal dialogues, so as to foster mutual understanding and respect between Christians and Jews.<sup>9</sup> Notably, as religious historian Karma Ben-Johanan explains, “The council fathers chose to omit from the final version of *Nostra Aetate* any mention that the Jews would be required to join the church or acknowledge Christ as a precondition to their salvation.”<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the council acknowledges that “the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead” advocated for Jesus’ death, but explicitly declares that “what happened in [Jesus’] passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.” Although we refer to the Church as “the new people of God,” the Jews “should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures,” and we should ensure that neither catechesis nor preaching ever deviates from this; both must “conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.” Christ died for everyone—for the salvation of all human beings—and the cross must continue to signify “God’s all-embracing love” and the source of all graces, rather than becoming an occasion to persecute some human beings. The Church thus “decries hatred, persecutions, [and] displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.” In articulating this stance, the Church “is moved not

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<sup>7</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Zephaniah 3:9. See also Isaiah 66:23, Psalms 65:4, and Romans 11:11-32.

<sup>9</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Karma Ben-Johanan, *Jacob’s Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations After Vatican II* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022), 71.

by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love [and] mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews.”<sup>11</sup>

In accord with this declaration (issued in October 1965), in 1970 the Church modified the liturgy for Good Friday, replacing the post-Tridentine “Prayer for the Conversion of the Jews” (according to which “the faithless Jews” must acknowledge Christ to be saved) with “Prayer for the Jews” which states, “Let us pray for the Jewish people, the first to hear the Word of God, that they may continue to grow in the love of his name and in faithfulness to his covenant. Almighty and eternal God, long ago you gave your promise to Abraham and his posterity. Listen to your Church as we pray that the people you first made your own may arrive at the fullness of redemption. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”<sup>12</sup> This prayer implies that the Jews could be saved by remaining faithful to their own covenant, but how this was to be understood theologically remained open and undefined.<sup>13</sup>

Pope Paul VI's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ) subsequently clarified (in 1974) that Catholics still need to witness their faith to the Jews, but advised that they should do so with great sensitivity: attentive not only to Jews' religious freedom but also to widespread Jewish suspicion of Christians stemming from past proselytization efforts, which unfortunately had been intertwined with antisemitism.<sup>14</sup> It also recommended joint social action between Christians and Jews. Because both traditions are based upon the Word of God, understand the human person as the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), and love the same God, this shared foundation “must show itself in effective action for the good of mankind.”<sup>15</sup>

## II. Pope John Paul II

Let us now turn to the pontificate of Saint Pope John Paul II. According to United States Cardinal Timothy Dolan, it was John Paul's “dream that Christians and Jews could return to the theological conversations between one another so rudely interrupted 1,945 years ago when the Roman army leveled Jerusalem.” Dolan explains that “beliefs cherished by each of us—

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<sup>11</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ben-Johanan, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Ben-Johanan, 76.

<sup>14</sup> Ben-Johanan, 77; and Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ), “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (n.4)” (1974), section I, <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crrj/documenti-della-commissione/en3.html>.

<sup>15</sup> CRRJ, “Guidelines and Suggestions,” section IV.

creation, election, covenant, promise, redemption, the law, grace, and revelation, to name a few—were kitchen table talk, or arguments, between Jews and Christians in the decades right after Jesus but faded in 70 A.D. when another priority—survival!—took over,” a dialogue that *Nostra Aetate* helpfully put back on the agenda.<sup>16</sup>

John Paul’s personal friendships with Jews began in childhood, while living in Wadowice where a quarter of the residents were Jewish. Throughout his pontificate, he “repeatedly received Jewish personalities and groups,” and greeted local Jewish delegations wherever he traveled. In terms of public visibility, he performed many “grand public gestures.”<sup>17</sup> In 1979, his first year as pope, he visited the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. Standing in front of a memorial stone inscribed in Hebrew, he proclaimed,

This inscription awakens the memory of the People whose sons and daughters were intended for total extermination. This People draws its origin from Abraham, our father in faith (cf. Romans 4:12) as was expressed by Paul of Tarsus. The very people that received from God the commandment “Thou shalt not kill,” itself experienced in a special measure what is meant by killing. It is not permissible for anyone to pass by this inscription with indifference.<sup>18</sup>

In 1986, John Paul visited a Jewish synagogue in Rome and prayed with the Jewish community there, marking the first time in history (since St. Peter) that a Catholic pope had done so, showcasing his respect for Judaism across the globe.<sup>19</sup> In his allocution there he stated, “The Jewish religion is not ‘extrinsic’ to us...but in a certain way is ‘intrinsic’ to our own religion.

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<sup>16</sup> Timothy Cardinal Dolan, “*Nostra Aetate* and the Church’s Dialogue with Jews: Fifty Years and Forward in the United States,” in *Nostra Aetate: Celebrating 50 Years of the Catholic Church’s Dialogue with Jews and Muslims* (2016), 208.

<sup>17</sup> Kurt Cardinal Koch, “The International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Jews since *Nostra Aetate*,” *Nostra Aetate: Celebrating 50 Years of the Catholic Church’s Dialogue with Jews and Muslims* (2016), 172.

<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, “Homily of his Holiness John Paul II: Holy Mass at the Concentration Camp,” Apostolic Pilgrimage to Poland (Auschwitz-Birkenau, June 7, 1979), [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19790607\\_polonia-brzezinka.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790607_polonia-brzezinka.html).

<sup>19</sup> Koch, “The International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Jews since *Nostra Aetate*,” 172; and Garvey, “Introduction,” xiv.

With Judaism...we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers...our elder brothers.”<sup>20</sup>

This special relationship also necessitated solidarity with Jewish victims of the Holocaust. In Vienna in 1988, John Paul decried those “whose intentions of extermination were openly directed against the Jewish people, but also against the faith of those who worship the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, the Savior of the world.”<sup>21</sup> Although as Christians “every human suffering finds its ultimate meaning in the Cross of Jesus Christ...this does not hinder us, but urges us to sympathize much more in solidarity with the deep wounds which were inflicted on the Jewish people in the persecutions, especially in this century, due to modern antisemitism.”<sup>22</sup> Unpacking the significance of such statements by John Paul, Ben-Johanan explains that “since the Jews were no longer perceived as the crucifiers of Jesus, but to the contrary, as his closest kinsmen, the murderousness toward them was now construed to have emerged from their persecutors’ deep anti-Christian drive to crucify Christ. Thus, Christian antisemitism became impossible by definition.”<sup>23</sup> The subsequent 1993 diplomatic agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel then codified into law the Catholic commitment to assist Jews in combatting “all forms of antisemitism,” alongside other pursuits of mutual interests.<sup>24</sup>

In 2000, bearing in mind the tragic history of Christian antisemitism toward Jews over the past two centuries, John Paul prayed during a public liturgy “for forgiveness of guilt toward the people of Israel,” declaring that “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.” He subsequently made this prayer for forgiveness into a written petition, which he inserted “between the stones of the Western Wall in Jerusalem” on his visit to Israel. He also visited Yad Vashem, to commemorate Holocaust victims and meet with survivors, and he made first contact with the

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<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, “Allocution in the Great Roman Synagogue” (April 13, 1986); and Ben-Johanan, 98.

<sup>21</sup> Ben-Johanan, 90.

<sup>22</sup> Ben-Johanan, 91.

<sup>23</sup> Ben-Johanan, 91.

<sup>24</sup> Msgr. Claudio Celli (Vatican assistant secretary of state) and Yossi Beilin (Israel's deputy minister of foreign affairs), *Fundamental Agreement Between the Holy See and the State of Israel* (Dec 30, 1993), art. 2, par. 1, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/fundamental-agreement-between-the-holy-see-and-the-state-of-israel-2517>.

chief rabbi of Jerusalem.<sup>25</sup> While at Yad Vashem, John Paul made Christian responsibility for past sins even more explicit: “I assure the Jewish people that the Catholic Church, motivated by the Gospel law of truth and love, and by no political considerations, is deeply saddened by the hatred, acts of persecution, and displays of antisemitism directed against the Jews by Christians at any time and in any place. The Church rejects racism in any form as a denial of the image of the Creator inherent in every human being.”<sup>26</sup> According to Ben-Johanan, “This unequivocal expression of remorse proved a turning point in Jews’ feelings toward the Catholic Church.” Public opinion reveals that “within three short days, the pope seemed to have done more for Christian-Jewish reconciliation than had been accomplished in three decades of cautiously articulated statements.”<sup>27</sup>

By means of these and other public gestures, John Paul set forth a new paradigm, one in which Catholicism represents the fulfillment of Judaism rather than its replacement. However, “instead of reformulating the new paradigm via theological arguments, John Paul II formulated it performatively,” as Ben-Johanan aptly describes it.<sup>28</sup> Of course, this novel perspective on Christian-Jewish relations is not really new; arguably, this was the perspective espoused by Jesus himself in his Sermon on the Mount, when he announced that he had come not to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them.

John Paul’s high regard for both Jews and Judaism was further exemplified by his last testament, wherein he “expressed explicit gratitude to only two people...his loyal priest secretary and spiritual son, Stanislaus Dziwicz, and Rabbi [Elio] Toaff,” the former chief-rabbi of Rome, with whom John Paul II had enjoyed a “deep companionship.”<sup>29</sup>

### III. Pope Benedict XVI

Pope Benedict XVI continued John Paul’s performative theology in regard to Judaism. In 2006, Benedict visited Auschwitz-Birkenau. Notably, he delineated the tragedy there not only as an attack on human dignity, and an attack on the Jewish people, but also as an attack on God:

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<sup>25</sup> Koch, 172-173.

<sup>26</sup> John Paul II, “Speech of John Paul II: Visit to the Yad Vashem Museum,” Jubilee Pilgrimage of His Holiness John Paul II to the Holy Land (Jerusalem – Yad Vashem, March 23, 2000), [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/travels/2000/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20000323\\_yad-vashem-mausoleum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/travels/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20000323_yad-vashem-mausoleum.html). See also Genesis 1:26.

<sup>27</sup> Ben-Johanan, 106.

<sup>28</sup> Ben-Johanan, 93.

<sup>29</sup> Dolan, “Nostra Aetate and the Church’s Dialogue with Jews,” 208.

All these inscriptions speak of human grief, they give us a glimpse of the cynicism of that regime which treated men and women as material objects, and failed to see them as persons embodying the image of God...The rulers of the Third Reich wanted to crush the entire Jewish people, to cancel it from the register of the peoples of the earth. Thus the words of the Psalm: “We are being killed, accounted as sheep for the slaughter” were fulfilled in a terrifying way. Deep down, those vicious criminals, by wiping out this people, wanted to kill the God who called Abraham, who spoke on Sinai and laid down principles to serve as a guide for mankind, principles that are eternally valid.<sup>30</sup>

Reflecting on this statement with deep appreciation, Yehiel Poupko, an orthodox Jewish rabbi and rabbinic scholar at the Jewish United Fund in Chicago, wrote in a Catholic periodical, “This is an astonishing statement...Pope Benedict XVI declared that the genocide of the Jewish people...was a deicide. It was an attempt by the German Nazis to murder not just the Jewish people, but...to murder God himself.” Rabbi Poupko continues, “It is impossible to overstate the theological significance of Benedict’s statement. Benedict gives witness to the world that 2,000 years after the Jewish people did not accept Jesus of Nazareth as their redeemer, nonetheless, God’s Presence is manifest in this world in People Israel.”<sup>31</sup>

In 2009, Benedict traveled to Israel, visited the Western Wall in Jerusalem, and spent time at Yad Vashem where he prayed for Holocaust victims.<sup>32</sup> He expressed “deep compassion for the victims,” stemming from the Church’s commitment to Jesus’ teachings and in imitation of Jesus’ own love for all people.” He then affirmed that the Church would continue to work tirelessly to

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<sup>30</sup> Benedict XVI, “Address by the Holy Father: Visit to the Auschwitz Camp,” Pastoral Visit of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI in Poland (Auschwitz-Birkenau, May 28, 2006), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060528\\_auschwitz-birkenau.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060528_auschwitz-birkenau.html).

<sup>31</sup> Yehiel E. Poupko, “On Holocaust Remembrance Day: Lessons from Three Popes’ Visits to Auschwitz,” *National Catholic Reporter* (January 27, 2022), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/holocaust-remembrance-day-lessons-three-popes-visits-auschwitz>.

<sup>32</sup> Koch, 173.



ensure that such hatred would never again reign in human hearts, because “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the God of peace.”<sup>33</sup>

In 2010, Benedict spent time with the Jewish community in Rome. At their synagogue, he reiterated the Church’s “irrevocable commitment to pursue the path of dialogue, fraternity and friendship” with Judaism; he begged “forgiveness for all that could in any way have contributed to the scourge of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism”; and he then lauded the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments, found at Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:1-21) for being “a shining light for ethical principles, hope and dialogue, a guiding star of faith and morals for the people of God” which “enlightens and guides” both “the path of Christians” and “all humanity.” He then delineated some of its key teachings: to worship the one God (and avoid idolatry); to respect human life, and protect human beings from all injustices and abuses that violate their dignity; “to preserve and to promote the sanctity of the family”; and above all, to love both God and neighbor, with a “special generosity towards the poor, towards women and children, strangers, the sick, the weak and the needy.”<sup>34</sup>

In addition to this performative theology, Pope Benedict also sought to advance doctrinal understanding of the relationship between Judaism and Catholicism, beyond just emphasizing their shared spiritual heritage. However, this task proved challenging, even for such a skilled theologian as himself. First, in 2000, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) under John Paul II, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger published the declaration *Dominus Iesus*, according to which the Church founded by Jesus Christ is “the instrument for the salvation of all humanity.” Although “followers of other religions can receive divine grace,” a position already set forth in the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* (no. 16), “objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI: Visit to Yad Vashem Memorial,” Pilgrimage of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Holy Land (Jerusalem, May 11, 2009), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20090511\\_yad-vashem.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090511_yad-vashem.html). See also Psalm 85:9.

<sup>34</sup> Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI: Visit to the Synagogue of Rome” (January 17, 2010), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/january/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20100117\\_synagoga.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/january/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100117_synagoga.html).

<sup>35</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), *Declaration “Dominus Iesus”: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (June 16, 2000), no. 22, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-)

Because the document did not engage Judaism directly, however—aside from a passing comment that the first Christians had showed the Jewish people “the fulfillment of salvation that went beyond the law”—both Catholic and Jewish readers of the document were left perplexed as to whether Judaism itself retained salvific power (even while acknowledging that all grace comes from Christ) or whether Jews needed to become Catholic in order to be saved.<sup>36</sup> A partial clarification was provided later on by an interview that Ratzinger gave to a German journalist, in which he asserted that “Christ is the Messiah of Israel” but the Jews do not need to be missioned at this point in history. “It is in God’s hands...when and how the reuniting of Jews and Gentiles, the reunification of God’s people will be achieved,” he explained, and in the meantime, the Jews serve in the world as God’s witnesses, alongside Christians.<sup>37</sup>

Then in 2001, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, chaired by Cardinal Ratzinger, published the document, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*.<sup>38</sup> According to the PBC document, the New Testament fulfills the Jewish scriptures but does not replace them, so the Old Testament can be read legitimately in two ways: according to its meaning for Jews at the time it was written, and as pointing toward Christ. However, the document did not delineate “what value...the Jewish traditional reading [has] for Christians,” resulting in some confusion after its publication.<sup>39</sup>

Another controversy occurred from 2007-2008, when now-Pope Benedict XVI extended permissions to Catholics to celebrate the Tridentine (traditional Latin) Mass, and provided a modified Good Friday prayer for the conversion of Jews, expressing hope that the Jews “will recognize Jesus Christ [as] the Savior of all men,” rather than simply translating the 1970 *Novus Ordo* Good Friday prayer into Latin.<sup>40</sup> Some readers wondered whether Benedict was proposing

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[iesus\\_en.html](#); and Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (1964), no. 16, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

<sup>36</sup> CDF, *Dominus Iesus*, no. 13; and Ben-Johanan, 127.

<sup>37</sup> Ben-Johanan, 127-128; and Joseph Ratzinger, *God and the World: Believing and Living in Our Time. A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 148-150. Originally published in German in 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,” [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20020212\\_popolo-ebraico\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html).

<sup>39</sup> Ben-Johanan, 112.

<sup>40</sup> Ben-Johanan, 134-140; and “Pope Benedict XVI issues new Good Friday prayer for the Jews,” *Catholic News Agency* (February 5, 2008), <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/11692/pope-benedict-xvi-issues-new-good-friday-prayer-for-the-jews>.

a return to the traditional task of proselytizing Jews. This worry was finally set to rest a few years later, when Benedict published the second volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*. There he explained that missionary activity only needed to target Gentiles, not Jews.<sup>41</sup> Building on Romans 11:25—according to which all of Israel would be saved only after “the full number of Gentiles comes in,” Benedict confidently proclaimed, “Israel is in the hands of God, who will save it, ‘as a whole,’ at the proper time.”<sup>42</sup>

#### IV. Pope Francis

Pope Francis’ papacy has affirmed and deepened Catholic-Jewish relations in important respects. He has continued the performative theology undertaken by his predecessors—John Paul II and Benedict XVI—and this has been received warmly by Jews. According to Cardinal Kurt Koch, Francis had “fostered close contacts with the Jewish community and above all with Rabbi Abraham Skorka” back when he served as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, and Francis “continues to do so as pope.”<sup>43</sup> One month after being elected pope in 2013, the two men jointly published a book entitled, *On Heaven and Earth: Pope Francis on Faith, Family, and the Church in the Twenty-First Century*, chronicling their personal conversations on a wide range of topics.<sup>44</sup> Prominent Jewish representatives from Israel, Argentina, Rome, and the United States attended Francis’ papal inauguration, and he has received many Jewish visitors in the Vatican.<sup>45</sup>

In 2014, Francis traveled to Israel and formally met with the two chief rabbis. He called on Jews and Christians not only to “establish reciprocal and respectful relations on a human level” but also “to reflect deeply on the spiritual significance of the bond existing between us.”<sup>46</sup> He also prayed at the Western Wall, inserting a handwritten copy of the *Pater Noster* (the Lord’s

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<sup>41</sup> Ben-Johanan, 140.

<sup>42</sup> Benedict XVI, “Prophecy and Apocalyptic in the Eschatological Discourse,” in *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), 46.

<sup>43</sup> Koch, 174. Skorka is a prominent Jewish rabbi in Buenos Aires, who serves as professor of biblical and rabbinic literature and rector emeritus at the Jewish rabbinic seminary there.

<sup>44</sup> Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth: Pope Francis on Faith, Family, and the Church in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Image, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> Koch, 174.

<sup>46</sup> Francis, “Address of Pope Francis: Courtesy Visit to the Two Chief Rabbis of Israel,” Pilgrimage to the Holy Land on the Occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Meeting Between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem (May 26, 2014), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140526\\_terra-santa-visita-rabbini-israele.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140526_terra-santa-visita-rabbini-israele.html).

Prayer) in Spanish.<sup>47</sup> That same day, Francis visited Yad Vashem. There he prayed, “Grant us the grace to be ashamed of what we men have done, to be ashamed of this massive idolatry, of having despised and destroyed our own flesh which you formed from the earth, to which you gave life with your own breath of life. Never again, Lord, never again!”<sup>48</sup>

In 2016, Francis visited Auschwitz-Birkenau. There he prayed in silence; his only public utterance was to write in the guest book there, “Lord, have pity on your people. Lord, forgive so much cruelty.”<sup>49</sup> Reflecting on the significance of Francis’ visit—and those of his papal predecessors—Rabbi Yehiel Poupko wrote the following:

This man, Francis, came to Auschwitz in silence. He stood and sat in Auschwitz in silence and solitude...He sought to become one with those whose voices were silenced, with those whose voices still come to us from beyond the storm...Mark well the pattern of these three papal witnesses. John Paul II identified the victim, singled out for particular measure of evil, the Jewish people. Benedict named and taught the nature of the sin. The Holocaust was not just genocide. It was deicide, an attempt to “murder” the God of Israel, if one dare speak thus. The first papal visit identified the victim. The second papal visit defined the sin. The third papal visit taught the way of remembrance.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Stuart Winer, “Pope’s Western Wall Note Leaked to Press,” *The Times of Israel* (May 29, 2014), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/popes-western-wall-note-leaked-to-press/>.

<sup>48</sup> Francis, “Address of Pope Francis: Visit to the Yad Vashem Memorial,” Pilgrimage to the Holy Land on the Occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Meeting Between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem (May 26, 2014), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140526\\_terra-santa-memorale-yad-vashem.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140526_terra-santa-memorale-yad-vashem.html).

<sup>49</sup> Claudio Lavanga and Corky Siemaszko, “Pope Francis’ Auschwitz Visit Said to Represent ‘Universal Lesson’ for Church,” *NBC News Digital* (July 29, 2016), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/pope-francis-auschwitz-visit-said-represent-universal-lesson-church-n619851>.

<sup>50</sup> Poupko, “On Holocaust Remembrance Day” (2022).

Five years later, in 2021, Francis met personally with a survivor of Auschwitz, the Hungarian author Edith Bruck, thanking her for her testimony and paying “homage to the people martyred by the insanity of Nazi populism.”<sup>51</sup>

As to doctrine, in 2015, the CRRJ (the Vatican’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews) commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* by publishing the document, *The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable*, a reference to Romans 11:29. Though classified technically as a “reflection” rather than as “a magisterial document or doctrinal teaching of the Catholic Church,” the document explicitly aims to “[enrich] and [intensify] the theological dimension of Jewish–Catholic dialogue.”<sup>52</sup> To that end, the commission unpacks the difficult concepts of covenant and salvation, asserting that “there can only be one history of God’s covenant with mankind...consequently Israel is God’s chosen and beloved people of the covenant which has never been repealed or revoked.”<sup>53</sup> Moreover, “since God has never revoked his covenant with his people Israel, there cannot be [two distinct] paths to God’s salvation,” either (1) the Jewish path without Christ, or (2) the path with Christ, “the universal and therefore also exclusive [mediator] of salvation.” Rather, there only can exist one path to salvation: “Christ is the savior for all, so that he must be the Redeemer of the Jews in addition to the Gentiles.” “However,” the commission continued, “it does not in any way follow that the Jews are excluded from God’s salvation because they do not believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah of Israel and the Son of God.” The CRRJ thus concludes, “That the Jews are participants in God’s salvation is theologically unquestionable, but how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery.” In confronting this “mystery of God’s work,” Catholics are called not to “missionary efforts to convert Jews,” but to hopeful expectation “that the Lord will bring about the hour when we will all be united.”<sup>54</sup>

### Catholic-Jewish Dialogue: The Pastoral Context

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<sup>51</sup> “Pope Francis meets with Auschwitz survivor,” *Vatican News* (February 20, 2021), <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-02/pope-francis-meets-with-auschwitz-survivor.html>.

<sup>52</sup> CRRJ, “Preface,” *The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable* (Rom 11:29): *A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic–Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Nostra aetate* (no. 4), Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crre/documenti-della-commissione/en.html>.

<sup>53</sup> See Romans 9:4 and 11:29.

<sup>54</sup> CRRJ, *The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable*, par. 34-37.

I will share some anecdotes from my own experience, to help you generate ideas about how to promote deeper relationships between Catholics and Jews in your respective dioceses and religious communities. On the level of theory, it is self-evident that every religious tradition possesses its own unique worldview, its particular understanding of divine revelation, and specific principles of reasoning and reflection by which its theological tradition progresses. When dialogue occurs between representatives of various traditions, at least five outcomes are possible: (1) greater intellectual clarity about differences that are incommensurable; (2) mutual respect precisely because of those differences; (3) common ground over shared beliefs about the content of revelation, similar experiences as human beings, shared work in promoting social justice, or similar challenges (either inside one's own tradition or outside when confronting secular culture); (4) harm (either intentional or unintentional); and (5) genuine friendship.

Over the past five years, in various Jewish-Catholic dialogues in the Archdiocese of Chicago, I have witnessed all five of these outcomes *except for* intentional harm: due to the fortuitous fact that each individual involved has been a good person of good will. *Unintentional* harm has occurred at times, either when someone said something that caused offense (on either side) or triggered an unhealed wound (especially those rooted in centuries of historical discrimination against Jews by Christians). But even when such *unintentional* harm occurred, the strong relationship that was built painstakingly over several decades by positive interactions between Catholics and Jews in Chicago was strong enough to withstand such slights without being broken or even damaged.

I am a relative newcomer to this dialogue; my own involvement began recently, in the spring of 2019. My then-academic dean, the Very Reverend Thomas A. Baima, was an international expert on ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. Tom had been involved personally in the Jewish-Catholic dialogue in Chicago since the 1970s. Among his long-term dialogue partners was Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, whom he also counted as a personal friend. One day, Tom phoned me and asked me to consult with Yehiel on a topic of mutual interest: a corporation in which both Jewish and Catholic board members were uncertain as to whether their continued involvement in the business would be immoral because of gravely unethical behavior on the part of the company's founders that recently had come to light. Yehiel already knew how he would analyze the situation from the perspective of Orthodox Jewish tradition, but he was

curious as to how a Catholic moral theologian would approach it. I proposed an initial analysis based upon certain principles in Catholic tradition, including the common good, the distinction between formal and material cooperation with evil, and the moral obligation to avoid scandal (where possible) through practical measures. Yehiel was intrigued by the fact that we each arrived at similar conclusions regarding what was morally appropriate, and that some of our reasoning patterns were parallel, despite having relied upon disparate theological resources. He also was intrigued to learn that I was an adult convert to Catholicism, from the New Age movement in which I was raised, but that my ethnic heritage was Jewish (on both my mother's and father's sides).

Yehiel and I subsequently met for lunch, to deepen our acquaintance, and he suggested that I join the local Jewish-Catholic scholars' dialogue. After being granted formal permission by the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago to participate, I planned to attend the first in-person meeting: in March of 2020. That meeting, and all subsequent meetings, took place on Zoom, due to the Covid pandemic, so getting to know people was more challenging than normal. But it still proved fruitful. The roughly twenty-five participants are a mix of both Jews and Catholics. The Jews range from Orthodox to Reform and include both rabbis and professors. The Catholics also represent a variety of perspectives (some more traditional, and some more liberal), and include both priests and lay men and women, who either work for the Church or teach as professors at Catholic institutions.

Despite this diversity, we share much in common. For example, I quickly became friends with one of the Orthodox Jewish women in our dialogue, Dr. Malka Simkovich, a professor of Jewish studies who was teaching at a Catholic institution. Malka and I found common ground as female academic theologians who take Biblical revelation very seriously in both belief and practice, and who must navigate an ecclesial milieu that is predominately male and clerical (with leadership roles filled by rabbis and priests respectively).

I also feel privileged to have formed a friendship with Yehiel, forged over bi-monthly meetings online, in which we meet for mutual learning. Over the past few years, Yehiel and I have been reading the Hebrew Psalms together. In our time together, I read aloud from an English translation (by Robert Alter) approved by Yehiel, although he still corrects the English

translation occasionally in consultation with the Hebrew text before him.<sup>55</sup> Our discussion of the Psalms follows a familiar pattern: I read a line or two, and then assuming that the translation is not in dispute, Yehiel asks me what I think the verses mean. I respond with what I think is the correct answer, or something close to it, and then Yehiel inevitably replies that I am wrong: either just a little bit off, or gravely mistaken, but always wrong. I then handwrite notes in my text so as to remember the salient points of interpretation for the future.

This process leads organically to a variety of discussions. Sometimes Yehiel apprises me of the historical, cultural, or political context to which the scriptural verse refers, or how it has been interpreted in subsequent Orthodox Jewish/rabbinic tradition, or how it is enacted in Jewish public liturgy, or how it is incorporated into Jewish prayer at home (especially in relation to specific Jewish foods that properly accompany certain prayers). Other times we compare Jewish interpretations of the Psalm with Catholic interpretations, typically by analyzing the sayings of Jesus in the New Testament on the same topic. I learn both where we agree, and where we disagree, but even our disagreement is illuminating because the rationale behind his differing interpretation always is logical and internally coherent, which sometimes challenges me to rethink my own theological presuppositions. This opens space for me to develop Catholic tradition in a way that is both constructive and true to divine revelation.

Still other times, we divert to analyzing contemporary issues in our respective ecclesial institutions, or in American culture, or in global politics. Despite some political differences, we share much in common as religious believers in a secular culture that does not hold—and sometimes vehemently rejects—our traditional moral values. Throughout the process, I arrive at a deeper understanding of what it means (for him) to be a faithful Jew, and I also learn (for myself) how to be a better Christian: not only by accessing significant theological content from the riches of Jewish tradition, but also by means of Yehiel's personal witness as a man of God in every aspect of his life.

In my career as a professor, I exclusively teach graduate students, the majority of whom are preparing for ordination to the Catholic priesthood. In the past three years, I invited Yehiel to be a guest lecturer in my seminary course on Catholic social doctrine: to speak about the problem

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<sup>55</sup> See Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 3, *The Writings* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2019).



of antisemitism, about the challenges of living as a Jew in contemporary American culture, about the historical relationship between Christians and Jews, about his personal experience with the Jewish-Catholic dialogue in Chicago, and about anything else that the seminarians want to ask him. My students have found the exchange to be illuminating, insightful, inspiring, and even entertaining (due to Yehiel's sharp wit).

I also have told my students about my own work in the local dialogue, including my individual learning sessions with Yehiel. All of them were intrigued: so much so that in 2022, five of them asked if they could learn with Yehiel as well. At the time, three of them were taking our required seminary course in Psalms and Wisdom literature, from a Catholic professor of scripture, and they conjectured that it would be useful to learn the Jewish interpretations of the same texts at the same time. Yehiel agreed to sessions with them twice a month as a group, and this exchange has borne fruit for them as well, both intellectually and existentially. This experience will decisively shape their future priesthood in positive ways.

Their learning culminated in a Shabbat dinner in the spring of 2023, to which all of us were invited, at the home of Yehiel and his wife Tzivia. During dinner, Yehiel and Tzivia gave us the privilege of witnessing their sacred prayers, and of tasting the appropriate food at the appropriate time. But we also had to perform intellectual work as Yehiel quizzed us during dinner about the core theological insights contained within the last five chapters of the book of Deuteronomy in the Torah. It was a unique combination: prayer, food...and suffering. The following academic year, many more students participated in the twice-a-month study sessions, culminating in a second Shabbat dinner this past spring (2024).

Our formal scholars' dialogue has borne fruit as well. We have discussed topics of mutual interest (such as the political situation in Israel, or the problem of antisemitism); we have unpacked how theological claims shape political voting in our respective traditions; and we have analyzed the historical relationship between Catholic and Jews since Vatican II (following the Council's promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*) through our joint reading of the same historical account: to discern whether we agree about the facts of what happened and why. This latter analysis was illuminating for me because I could see how present wounds, caused by historical discrimination of Jews by Christians, sometimes led Jews to interpret current actions of

individual Catholics through a negative lens, as explicitly intended to express rejection of Jews, even in cases where something else was occurring.

However, even those touchy discussions proved to be constructive. Our mutual relationship is strong enough, healthy enough, that the Jews felt comfortable being vulnerable and expressing hurt; the Catholics responded to their hurt with sensitivity and compassion; and when an alternative account was offered by Catholics, the Catholics were believed because the Jews trust them. Trusting another person, giving them the benefit of the doubt, when facts on the ground seem to point in the other direction, does not come easily for any human being. It is counter-intuitive and can seem irrational. But such fruit is the treasured outcome of countless hours spent together dialoguing with openness, attentive listening, appreciation for our common humanity and rational nature, a genuine desire to understand those who are different than oneself, and above all, heartfelt compassion.