

Building on “Nostra aetate”: 50 Years of Christian–Jewish Dialogue¹

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I am honoured to be here today to present the John Paul II Lecture on Interreligious Understanding, the fifth in a series of prestigious annual lectures organised by the John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue held at the Angelicum University. In a special way, this University is committed to fostering ecumenical and interreligious dialogue at the academic level. The John Paul II Center is a partnership between the Angelicum and the Russell Berrie Foundation, and I am very pleased to acknowledge the presence of Angelica Berrie, President of the Foundation, whose name seems to reflect the joint aspirations that motivated the creation of the Center. I would like also to mention in this context the Russell Berrie Fellowship Program, which aims to develop the exchange of insights and the bonds of friendship and mutual understanding that we hope will resonate well beyond the academic environment. The focus of this presentation will be the historical developments in the Jewish–Catholic dialogue made possible by the Conciliar document “Nostra aetate”.

1. “Nostra Aetate”: YES to our Jewish roots, NO to anti–Semitism

On the Catholic side, the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the relationship of the church to the non–Christian religions, “Nostra aetate”, can be considered the beginning of a systematic dialogue with the Jews. Still today it is considered the “foundation document” and the “Magna Charta” of the dialogue of the Roman Catholic Church with Judaism, so my tour d’horizon of the Jewish–Catholic conversation must begin there.

It did not develop in a vacuum, since on the Christian side there had already been approaches to Judaism both within and outside the Catholic Church before the Council. But after the unprecedented crime of the Shoah above all, an effort was made in the post–War period towards a theologically reflected re–definition of the relationship with Judaism. Following the mass murder of the European Jews planned and executed by the National Socialists with industrial perfection, a profound examination of conscience was initiated about how such a barbaric scenario was possible in the Christian–oriented West. Must we assume that anti–Jewish tendencies present within Christianity for centuries were complicit in the anti–Semitism of the Nazis, racially motivated and led astray by a godless and neo–pagan ideology, or simply allowing it to run its course? Among Christians too there were both perpetrators and victims; but the broad masses surely consisted of passive spectators who kept their eyes closed in the face of this brutal reality. The Shoah therefore became a question and an accusation against Christianity: Why did Christian resistance against the boundless brutality of the Nazi crimes not demonstrate that measure and that clarity which one should rightfully have expected? Have Christians and Jews today the will and the strength for conciliation and reconciliation on the common foundation of faith in the one and only God of Israel? What significance does Judaism have in the future for churches and ecclesial communities, and in what theological relationship do we stand today in connection with Judaism?

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Soon after the end of the Second World War, the Christian side confronted the phenomenon of anti-Semitism at the International Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism which took place at Seelisberg from 30 July to 5 August 1947. About 65 persons, Jews and Christians from various denominations, met for wide-ranging reflection on how anti-Semitism could be eradicated at its roots. The meeting at Seelisberg aimed at laying a new foundation for the dialogue between Jews and Christians, and giving a stimulus towards mutual understanding. The perspectives which have become known as the “Ten Points of Seelisberg” have over time become path-breaking, and in one way or another found their way into the Council declaration “Nostra aetate”, even though in this text a decidedly theological framework was given to the relationship with Judaism. This declaration in fact begins with a reflection on the mystery of the church and a reminder of the deep bond which links the people of the New Covenant with the tribe of Abraham in a spiritual way. “Nostra aetate” and the “Ten Points of Seelisberg” both emphasise that the disdain, disparagement and contempt of Judaism must be avoided at all costs, and therefore the Jewish roots of Christianity are explicitly given prominence. At the same time the two declarations converge – each naturally in a different way – in rejecting the accusation which has unfortunately survived over centuries in various places, that the Jews were “deicides”.

In the Christian sphere, coming to terms with the Shoah is certainly one of the major motivations leading to the drafting of “Nostra aetate”. But other reasons can surely also be identified: Within Catholic theology following the appearance of the encyclical “Divino afflante spiritu” by Pope Pius XII in 1943, biblical studies were opened up – though with cautious beginners’ steps – to historical-critical biblical interpretation, which implies that one began to read the biblical texts in their historic context and within the religious traditions prevailing in their time. This process ultimately found its doctrinal expression in the Conciliar decree on divine revelation “Dei verbum”, or more precisely in the instruction that the exegete should carefully research what the authors of the biblical texts really intended to say: “Those who search out the intentions of the sacred writers must among other things have regard for literary forms. For truth is proposed and expressed in a variety of ways, depending on whether a text is history of one kind or another, or whether its form is that of prophecy, poetry or some other form of speech.”² The precise observation of historical religious traditions reflected in the texts of sacred scripture had as a consequence that the figure of Jesus of Nazareth was located ever more clearly within the Judaism of his time. In this way the New Testament was placed entirely within the framework of Jewish traditions, and Jesus was perceived as a Jew of his time who felt an obligation to these traditions. This view also found its way into the Council declaration “Nostra aetate”, when it states with reference to the Letter to the Romans (9:5), that “Jesus stems according to the flesh from the people of Israel, and the church recalls the fact that the apostles, her foundation stones and pillars, sprang from the Jewish people, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ to the world.”³ Since “Nostra aetate” it has therefore become part of the *cantus firmus* of Jewish-Christian dialogue to call to mind and to emphasise the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. During his visit to the Roman synagogue on 13 April 1986 Pope John Paul II expressed this in the vivid and impressive words: “The Jewish religion is not something ‘extrinsic’ to us but in a certain way is ‘intrinsic’ to our own religion.

² Dei verbum, No. 12.

³ Nostra aetate, No. 4.

With Judaism we therefore have a relationship we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and in a certain way it could be said, our elder brothers.”⁴

However, it was not only theological insights which led the Christian side to seek theoretical and practical rapprochement with Judaism. In fact, political and pragmatic reasons also played a not inconsequential role in this. Since the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, the Catholic Church sees itself confronted in the Holy Land with the reality that it has to develop its pastoral life within a state which decidedly understands itself as Jewish. Israel is the only land in the world with a majority Jewish population, and for that reason alone the Christians living there must necessarily engage in dialogue with them. In this regard the Holy See has consistently pursued two goals, that is enabling on the one hand unhindered pastoral activity of the Catholic congregations in the Holy Land, and on the other, free access to the sacred sites of Christians for Christian pilgrims. That requires in the first instance political dialogue with the ruling executive of the State of Israel, which from the Jewish perspective must naturally always be embedded in a dialogue with the religious authorities of Judaism. Christians seem to be rather inclined to differentiate and delimit political and religious affairs from one another, while Judaism strives to converge and integrate the two dimensions.

Whatever motives and factors may have individually led to the drafting of “*Nostra aetate*”, the declaration remains the crucial compass of all endeavours towards Jewish–Catholic dialogue, and after 47 years we can claim with gratitude that this theological re–definition of the relationship with Judaism has directly brought forth rich fruits throughout its reception history. It seems that as far as content is concerned the Council fathers at that time took into consideration almost everything which has since proved to be significant in the history of the dialogue. On the Jewish side it is particularly positively emphasised that the Conciliar Declaration took up an unambiguous position against every form of anti–Semitism. It is not least on that basis that the Jews are and remain borne up by the hope that they can rest assured that in the Catholic Church they have a reliable ally in the struggle against anti–Semitism.

With regard to the reception history of Conciliar documents, one can without doubt dare to assert that “*Nostra aetate*” is to be reckoned among those Council texts which have in a convincing manner been able to effect a fundamental re–orientation of the Catholic Church following the Council. This of course only becomes clear to us when we consider that previously there was in part a great reluctance regarding contacts between Jews and Catholics, arising in part from the history of Christianity with its discrimination against Jews extending even to forced conversions. The fundamental principle of respect for Judaism expressed in “*Nostra aetate*” has over the course of recent decades made it possible for groups who initially confronted one another with scepticism to step by step become reliable partners and even good friends, capable of coping with crises together and overcoming conflicts positively.

2. Other Vatican documents as follow–ups of “*Nostra aetate*”

The dialogue endeavours which developed gradually after the Council were entrusted in the Roman Curia to the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, for the understandable reason that the leader of this Secretariat, the German Curia Cardinal Augustin Bea, had in the year 1960 – before the Council – been commissioned by Pope John XXIII to prepare with his staff a draft for a Council document dealing with the new relationship of the Catholic Church with

⁴ John Paul II, Ringraziamo il Signore per la ritrovata fratellanza e per la profonda intesa tra la Chiesa e l’Ebraismo. Allocuzione nella Sinagoga durante l’incontro con la Comunità Ebraica della Città di Roma il 13 aprile 1986, in: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II IX*, 1 1986 (Città del Vaticano 1986) 1024–1031, cit. 1027.

Judaism.⁵ As is well known, this project led to the Council Declaration “Nostra aetate”, which of course focussed on the relationship of the Church with all non-Christian religions. This means that Article 4 of “Nostra aetate”, which deals with relations with Judaism, forms both the starting-point and the heart of this Declaration. Towards the end of the Council, a special secretariat was formed for inter-religious dialogue, with the task of promoting relations with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism and other non-Christian religions, so that today in the Roman Curia there is a Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, and within the Council for Promoting Christian Unity a Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. While this special Commission, which was founded by Pope Paul VI on 22 October 1974, is organisationally aligned with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, it is structurally independent and entrusted with the task of accompanying and promoting the religious dialogue with Judaism.⁶ This structure is in general positively assessed by the Jewish dialogue partners. It also makes good sense from a theological point of view to combine this Commission with the Council for Promoting Christian Unity, since the separation of Church and Synagogue can be considered the first schism in the history of the church, or as the Catholic theologian Erich Przywara has called it, the “primal rift”, from which he derives the later progressive loss of wholeness of the *Catholica*: “The rift between the Eastern and the Western church, the rift between the Roman church and the pluriversum of the Reformation (the countless churches and sects) form part of the primal rift between Judaism (the non-Christian Jews) and Christianity (the ‘Gentiles’ in the language of the Pauline letters).”⁷

Already in the year it was founded, on 1 December 1974, the Commission published its first official document with the title “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration “Nostra aetate” (No.4)”.⁸ The crucial concern of this document consists in giving expression to the high esteem in which Christianity holds Judaism and stressing the great significance of dialogue with the Jews for the church, as stated in the words of the document: “On the practical level in particular, Christians must therefore strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism: they must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.” On the basis of the testimony of faith in Jesus Christ, the document reflects on the specific nature of the dialogue with Judaism, reference is made to reciprocal connections existing in the liturgy, new possibilities for rapprochement in the spheres of teaching, education and training, and finally suggestions are made for common social action.

Eleven years later on 24 June 1985, the Commission was able to present a second document with the title “Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church”.⁹ This document has a stronger theological-exegetical orientation in so far as it reflects on the relationship of the Old and New Testaments, demonstrates the Jewish roots of Christian faith, explicates the manner in which “the Jews” are

⁵ Cf. A. Cardinal Bea, *Die Kirche und das jüdische Volk* (Freiburg i. Br. 1966), esp. 21–25: Hinweise zur Geschichte und Entwicklung des Konzilsdokuments.

⁶ Cf. Fratelli Prediletti, *Chiesa e Popolo ebraico. Documenti e fatti: 1965–2005*. A cura di P. F. Fumagalli (Milano 2005). Also: P. A. Cunningham, N. J. Hofmann and J. Sievers (Ed.), *The Catholic Church and the Jewish People. Recent Reflections from Rome* (New York 2007).

⁷ E. Przywara, *Römische Katholizität – All-christliche Ökumenizität*, in: J. B. Metz et al. (Ed.), *Gott in Welt. Festgabe für K. Rahner* (Freiburg i. Br. 1964) 524–528, cit. 526.

⁸ Published in French in: *AAS* 67 (1975) 73–79.

⁹ Published in French in: *La Documentation Catholique* 76 (1985) 733–738.

represented in the New Testament, points out the commonalities in liturgy, above all in the great festivals of the church year, and alludes to the relationship of Judaism and Christianity in history. As the title indicates, the focus of this document lies on the way Judaism is handled as a subject in preaching and catechesis in the Catholic Church. Of particular interest is the fact that this document also makes reference to the State of Israel, which has a special significance for observant Jews, but at the same time again and again provokes political tensions. With regard to this “land of the forefathers” the document emphasises: “Christians are invited to understand this religious attachment which finds its roots in biblical tradition without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship. The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged in a perspective which is not in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law”. The permanence of Israel is however to be perceived as an “historical fact” and as a “sign to be interpreted within God’s design”.¹⁰

The third and latest document of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews was presented to the public on 16 March 1998. It deals with the Shoah under the title “We remember. A reflection on the Shoah”.¹¹ The major impetus for this text came from the Jewish side. It delivers the harsh judgement that the balance of the 2000 year relationship between Jews and Christians is rather negative, it recalls the attitude of Christians towards the anti-Semitism of the National Socialists and focuses on the duty of Christians to remember the human catastrophe of the Shoah. In a letter at the beginning of this declaration Pope John Paul II expresses his hope that this document will really “help to heal the wounds of past misunderstandings and injustices. May it enable memory to play its necessary part in shaping a future in which the unspeakable iniquity of the Shoah will never again be possible.”

In the series of Vatican documents reference must finally also be made to that voluminous text which was published by the Pontifical Bible Commission on 24 May 2001 and which deals explicitly with Jewish–Catholic dialogue: “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scripture in the Christian Bible”.¹² This involves the exegetically and theologically most weighty document of the Jewish–Catholic conversation and represents a rich treasure–trove of common topics which have their basis in the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity. The Sacred Scripture of the Jewish people is considered as “the fundamental component of the Christian bible”, the fundamental themes of the Scripture of the Jewish people and their adoption in the faith in Christ are discussed, and the manner in which Jews are represented in the New Testament is illuminated in detail. In the Foreword the Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith at that time, Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, advocates a “new respect for the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament. On this subject the document says two things. First it declares that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Scriptures of the Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading, which developed in parallel fashion” (no. 22). It adds that Christians can learn a great deal from Jewish exegesis practised for more than 2000 years; in return Christians may hope that Jews can profit from Christian exegetical research.”

¹⁰ No. 25. (VI, 1).

¹¹ The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Ed.), *Information Service* 97 I–II (1998) 18–22.

3. Institutional dialogues at global level and their lines of development

Texts and documents, as important as they are, cannot replace personal encounters and dialogues face to face. In the first instance mention must be made of the many initiatives by individual Episcopal Conferences, local churches and academic institutions, which cannot of course be considered in detail here, although it is precisely in these places that concrete steps towards positive collaboration between Jews and Catholics are undertaken. The Holy See's Commission is however happy to support such initiatives which assist in intensifying our friendship with Judaism. In the present context I must however concentrate on the institutional dialogues which the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews assists in organising and conducting.

Even before the establishment of the Holy See's Commission, there were contacts and links with various Jewish organisations which were of course located within the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. Since Judaism is multi-faceted and not presented as an organisational unity, the Catholic side was faced with the difficulty of deciding with whom one should take up actual dialogue, because it was not possible to conduct individual and independent dialogue with all Jewish groupings and organisations who had declared their readiness to dialogue. To resolve this problem the Jewish organisations took up the suggestion by the Catholic side to establish a single organisation for the religious dialogue. The so-called International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) represents on the Jewish side the official partner for the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. It comprises almost all large Jewish organisations, of which not a few have their seat in the USA.

The IJCIC was able to commence its work in 1970, and organised already one year later the first joint conference in Paris. The conferences which have been conducted regularly since then are the expression of the so-called International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (ILC), and they shape the collaboration between the IJCIC and the Holy See's Commission. In February of 2011 at the 21st Conference of the ILC we were able to look back with gratitude on 40 years of institutional dialogue and celebrate this jubilee once more in Paris. Much has developed over the past 40 years: confrontation has turned into successful collaboration, the previous conflict potential has become positive conflict management, and the co-existence of the past has been replaced by a load-bearing friendship. The bonds of friendship forged in the meantime have proved to be stable, so that it has become possible to tackle even controversial subjects together without the danger of permanent damage being done to the dialogue. This was all the more necessary because over the past decades the dialogue had not always been free of tensions. We need only recall the crises provoked in the eighties by the so-called "Waldheim affair" or the planned "Carmel in Auschwitz". In most recent times one thinks of the so-called "Williamson affair" or also the very divergent opinions regarding a beatification of Pope Pius XII, whereby the attentive observer can hardly avoid the conclusion that on the part of the Jews the verdicts on this Pope have changed from the original profound gratitude to profound anxiety only since the drama by Hochhuth. In general however one can observe with appreciation that in Jewish-Catholic dialogue since the turn of the millennium above all, intensive attempts have been made to deal with any arising differences of opinion and conflicts openly and with a positive goal in mind, so that in this way the mutual relations have become stronger and the proverbial wisdom has been confirmed that when a torn bond is joined together again, the distance between the two ends becomes shorter,

Beside the dialogue with the IJCIC the institutional conversation with the Chief Rabbinate in Jerusalem should also be mentioned, which is clearly to be soon as a fruit of the encounter of

Pope John Paul II with the Chief Rabbis in Jerusalem during his visit to Israel in March 2000. The first meeting was organised in June 2002 in Jerusalem, and since then a total of 11 such meetings have been conducted, which have taken place in Rome and Jerusalem alternately. The two delegations are relatively small so that a very personal and intensive discussion on various subjects is possible such as on the sanctity of life, the status of the family, the significance of the sacred scriptures for communal life, religious freedom, the ethical foundations of human behaviour, the ecological challenge, the relationship of secular and religious authority and the essential qualities of religious leadership in secular society. Since those taking part in the meetings on the Catholic side are bishops and priests and on the Jewish side almost exclusively rabbis it is hardly surprising that the individual subjects are also examined from a religious perspective. This statement is astonishing because normally within Orthodox Judaism the tendency prevails to avoid religious and theological questions. The dialogue with the Chief Rabbinate has in this regard enabled a further opening of Orthodox Judaism with Roman Catholic Church at a global level. After each meeting a joint declaration is published which in each instance testifies how rich the common spiritual heritage of Judaism and Christianity is and what valuable treasures are still to be unearthed. In reviewing ten years of the dialogue we can gratefully affirm that an intensive friendship has resulted which represents a firm foundation for the path into the future.

The dialogue efforts of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews cannot of course be restricted to these two institutional dialogues. It is in fact intent on being open to all streams within Judaism and maintaining contact with all Jewish groupings and organisations that wish to establish links with the Holy See. The Jewish side shows a particular interest in private audiences with the Pope, which are in every instance prepared by us. Besides the direct contacts with Judaism the Commission also strives to provide impulses within the Catholic Church for dialogue with Judaism and to work together with individual Bishops' Conferences to support them locally in the promotion of Jewish–Catholic conversation. The introduction of the “Dies Judaicus” is a good example of this.

Over the past decades both the “dialogue ad extra” and the “dialogue ad intra” have led with increasing clarity to the awareness that Christians and Jews are dependent on one another and the dialogue between the two is as far as theology is concerned not a matter of choice but of duty. Jews and Christians are precisely in their difference the one people of God who can enrich one another in mutual friendship. I do not have the right to judge what Judaism may gain from this dialogue for its own purposes. I can only join Cardinal Walter Kasper in expressing the wish that it recognise that “separating Judaism from Christianity” would mean “robbing it of its universality”, which was already promised to Abraham.¹³ For the Christian church however it is certainly true that without Judaism it is in danger of losing its location with salvation history and in the end declining into an unhistorical Gnosis.

4. Pope John Paul II and Jewish–Catholic dialogue

When one envisages the ramifications of Jewish–Christian dialogue, it becomes apparent that it must again and again be testified by concrete and authentic persons in order to remain vital. Certainly the documents and dialogues which have already been mentioned were inspired, prepared and realised by authoritative witnesses to Jewish–Christian dialogue. But it was

¹³ Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Zwei Hinweise zu einer Theologie des Volkes Gottes*, in: Pontificia Università Lateranense (Ed.), *Festliche Eröffnung des Lehrstuhls für die Theologie des Volkes Gottes* (Urfeld 2009) 17–20, cit. 20.

always their goal that they should be translated into concrete reality by the personal engagement of further witnesses. One is reminded of John M. Oesterreicher, who as a convert dedicated his whole life and work to Jewish–Christian dialogue and also participated decisively in the drafting of “Nostra aetate”. Many fruitful initiatives towards the promotion of Jewish–Christian conversation which took place after the Council in various local churches must also be mentioned with gratitude. But for the Roman Catholic Church the signal effect emanating from the papacy is and remains of particular significance.¹⁴

Although Pope Paul VI had already taken decisive steps towards rapprochement with Judaism, the engagement in this issue by the leadership of the Catholic Universal Church was only really apprehended by the wider public in the form of Pope John Paul II. His passionate endeavours for Jewish–Christian dialogue surely have their roots initially in his personal biography. Karol Wojtyła grew up in the small Polish town of Wadowice which consisted to at least one quarter of Jewish. Since everyday contact and friendship with Jews was taken for granted already in his childhood it was for him as Pope an important concern to maintain his friendship with a Jewish school friend, and to intensify the bonds of friendship with Judaism in general.

Beyond that, John Paul was able to give visible expression to his concern for reconciliation with Judaism through grand public gestures. Already in the first year of his pontificate on 7 June 1979 he visited the former concentration camp of Auschwitz–Birkenau, where in front of the memorial stone with its Hebrew inscription he recalled the victims of the Shoah in a particular manner with the moving words: “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. Rom 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.”¹⁵ Even more attention was paid by the public media to the visit by Pope John Paul II to the Roman synagogue on 13 April 1986, which is also accorded special significance because there was a Jewish community in Rome long before the Christian faith was brought to Rome. The historical significance of this event however is based above all on the fact that it was the first time in history the Bishop of Rome has visited a synagogue, to bear testimony to his respect for Judaism before the whole world. The gesture of the embrace of the Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff and Pope John Paul II remains an indelible memory.

Also to be seen against the background of the document “We remember. A reflection on the Shoah” is the prayer for forgiveness with which the Pope on 12 March in the Holy Year 2000 prayed for forgiveness of guilt towards the people of Israel in a public liturgy: “We are deeply saddened by the behaviour of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness we wish to omit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.”¹⁶ In a slightly altered form Pope John Paul inserted this prayer for forgiveness as a written petition between the stones of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem during his visit to Israel on 26 March 2000. The visit to the State of Israel by the

¹⁴ Cf. John Paul II – Benedict XVI, *Ebrei, fratelli maggiori. La necessità del dialogo fra cattolicesimo ed ebraismo nei discorsi di Papa Wojtyła e di Papa Ratzinger*. A cura di Santino Spartà (Roma 2007).

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Vittoria della fede e dell’amore sull’odio. Al Campo di Concentramento di Brzezinka il 7 giugno 1979*, in: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II II 1979 (Gennaio–Giugno) (Città del Vaticano 1979) 1482–1487, cit. 1484.*

¹⁶ John Paul II, “Perdoniamo e chiediamo perdono! La giornata del perdono nella prima domenica di quaresima del Grande Giubileo, in: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II XXIII, 1 2000 (Città del Vaticano 2002) 351–355.*

Pope must therefore be evaluated not simply as an historic event, especially since the diplomatic recognition of the State of Israel by the Holy See had taken place in December 1993. The pope's visit to Israel represented instead a unique stimulus for the promotion of Jewish–Catholic conversation. As the Pope visited the Holocaust Memorial Yad–Vashem, he commemorated the victims of the Shoah and prayed for them, he met with survivors of this incomparable tragedy and he entered into contact for the first time with the Jerusalem Chief Rabbinate. Later he met the two Chief Rabbis once more on 16 January 2004 in the Apostolic Palace. In addition, John Paul II repeatedly received Jewish personalities and groups, and during his numerous pastoral journeys his obligatory program always included an encounter with a local Jewish delegation wherever there was a sizeable Jewish community.

When one reviews in retrospect the great engagement of Pope John Paul II for Jewish – Catholic dialogue, one can without hesitation pronounce the judgement that during his long pontificate the course was set for the future of this necessary conversation and there can be no going back behind that which was then achieved. It is therefore not surprising that to this day John Paul II is held in high esteem by the Jewish dialogue partners and the admiration for him and his work of reconciliation remains unbroken.

5. Pope Benedict XVI and dialogue with the Jews

There can be no doubt that the great endeavours by Pope John Paul II for Jewish–Catholic dialogue was theologically legitimated and supported by the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. In the course of his duties at that time he himself maintained personal contact with Jews and published groundbreaking articles on the specific relationship of Christianity to Judaism within the context of world religions.¹⁷ The foundation for this view of Ratzinger the theologian lies in his conviction that Sacred Scripture can only be understood as *one* single book as he explains himself in a biographical note: “So the decisive step for me was to learn to understand the connection between the Old and the New Testament, which is the foundation of all patristic theology. This theology depends on the interpretation of the scripture, the core of patristic exegesis is the *concordia testamentorum* mediated by Christ in the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸ On this basis it is axiomatic for Joseph Ratzinger that there can be no access to Jesus and therefore no entry of the nations into the people of God without the acceptance in faith of the revelation of God who speaks in the Sacred Scripture which Christians term the Old Testament. It is therefore a core concern for him to demonstrate the profound connections of New Testament themes with Old Testament message, so that both the intrinsic continuity between the New and the Old Testament and the innovation of the New Testament message are clearly illuminated. Joseph Ratzinger's verdict on the trial of Jesus in his book on Jesus of Nazareth for example, which has been acknowledged with particular gratitude on the part of the Jews,¹⁹ namely that the biblical report of the trial of Jesus cannot serve as the basis for any assertion of collective Jewish guilt, was already clearly perceived by the theologian Ratzinger: “Jesus' blood raises no call for retaliation but calls all to

¹⁷ J. Cardinal Ratzinger, *Die Vielfalt der Religionen und der Eine Bund* (Urfeld 1998).

¹⁸ Preface to the new edition of J. Ratzinger, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche* (St. Ottilien 1992) XI–XX, cit. XV.

¹⁹ Cf. J. Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth. Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco 2011), particularly 167–201: The Trial of Jesus.

reconciliation. It has become as the letter to the Hebrews shows, itself the permanent Day of Atonement of God.”²⁰

Against the background of these theological convictions it cannot surprise us that Pope Benedict XVI carries on and progresses the conciliatory work of his predecessor with regard to Jewish–Catholic conversation. He not only addressed the first letter in his pontificate to the Chief Rabbi in Rome but also gave an assurance at his first encounter with a Jewish delegation on 9 June 2005 that the church was moving firmly on the fundamental principles of “*Nostra aetate*” and he intended to continue the dialogue in the footsteps of his predecessors. In reviewing the seven years of his pontificate we find that he has in this short space of time taken all those steps which Pope John Paul took in his 27–year pontificate: Pope Benedict XVI visited the former concentration camp Auschwitz–Birkenau on 28 May 2006; during his visit to Israel in May 2009 he too stood before the Wailing Wall, he met with the Chief Rabbinate of Jerusalem and prayed for the victims of the Shoah in Yad Vashem; and on 17 January 2010 he was warmly received by the Jewish community in Rome in their synagogue. His first visit to a synagogue was of course made already on 19 August 2005 in Cologne on the occasion of World Youth Day, and on 18 April 2008 he visited the Park East Synagogue in New York. So we can claim with gratitude that no other Pope in history has visited as many synagogues as Benedict XVI.

All of these activities are indeed marked by his own personal style. While Pope John Paul II had a refined sense for grand gestures and strong images, Benedict XVI relies above all on the power of the word and humble encounter. That was given particularly clear expression during his visit to the memorial Yad Vashem when he deliberately referred to the name of this place and meditated on the God–given inalienability of the name of each individual person: “One can weave an insidious web of lies to convince others that certain groups are undeserving of respect. Yet try as one might, one can never take away the *name* of a fellow human being.”²¹ Also deserving of special mention is the inimitable spiritual meditation by Pope Benedict XVI on the Decalogue, which he acknowledged as the “pole star of faith and of the morality of the people of God”²², during his visit to the Chief Synagogue in Rome. In this way Pope Benedict XVI endeavours again and again through the power of his words and his spiritual profundity to highlight the multi–faceted riches of the common spiritual heritage of Judaism and Christianity and to add theological depth to the guidelines set down by the declaration “*Nostra aetate*”,²³ to which we will return again in conclusion.

6. Open theological questions in Jewish–Catholic dialogue

The Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on Judaism, that is the fourth Article of “*Nostra aetate*”, stood, as has surely become clear, in a decidedly theological framework. That

²⁰ J. Cardinal Ratzinger, *Jesus von Nazareth, Israel und die Christen. Die Beziehung und ihr Auftrag nach dem Katechismus der katholischen Kirche von 1992*, in: Ders., *Evangelium – Katechese – Katechismus. Streiflichter auf den Katechismus der katholischen Kirche* (München 1995) 63–85, cit.81.

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Nessuno neghi o dimentichi la Shoah. La visita al Memoriale di Yad Vaschem il 11 maggio 2009*, in: *Insegnamenti di Benedetto XVI V, 1 2009* (Città del Vaticano 2010) 787–789, cit.787.

²² Benedict XVI, *Un cammino irrevocabile di fraterna collaborazione. Incontro con la Comunità Ebraica nel Tempio Maggiore degli Ebrei di Roma il 17 gennaio 2010*, in: *Insegnamenti di Benedetto XVI VI, 1* (Città del Vaticano 2011) 86–92, cit.90.

²³ Cf. A. Buckenmaier / R. Pesch / L. Weimer, *Der Jude Jesus von Nazareth. Zum Gespräch zwischen Jacob Neusner und Papst Benedikt XVI.* (Paderborn 2008).

is not meant to claim that all theological questions which arise in the relationship of Christianity and Judaism were solved there. They did receive there a promising stimulus, but require further theological reflection. That is also indicated by the fact that this Council document, unlike all other texts of the Second Vatican Council, could not in its notes refer back to preceding doctrinal documents and decisions of previous councils. Of course there had been earlier magisterial texts which focussed on Judaism, but “Nostra aetate” provides the first theological overview of the relationship of the Catholic Church to the Jews.

Because it was such a breakthrough, the Council text is not infrequently over-interpreted, and things are read into it which it does not in fact contain. To name an important example: That the covenant that God made with his people Israel persists and is never invalidated – although this confession is true – cannot be read into “Nostra aetate”. This statement was instead first made with full clarity by Pope John Paul II when he said during a meeting with Jewish representatives in Mainz on 17 November 1980 that the Old Covenant had never been revoked by God: “The first dimension of this dialogue, namely the encounter between God’s people of the Old Covenant which has never been revoked by God and that of the New Covenant is at the same time a dialogue within our church, as it were between the first and second book of her bible.”²⁴

This statement too has given rise to misunderstandings, for example the implication that if the Jews remain in a valid covenant relationship with God, there must be two different ways of salvation, namely the Jewish path of salvation without Christ and the path of salvation for all other people, which leads through Jesus Christ. As obvious as this answer seems to be at first glance, it is not able to solve satisfactorily at least the highly complex theological question how the Christian belief in the universal salvific significance of Jesus Christ can coherently be conceptually combined with the equally clear conviction of faith in the never-revoked covenant of God with Israel.²⁵ That the church and Judaism cannot be represented as “two parallel ways to salvation”, but that the church must “witness to Christ as the Redeemer for all” was established already in the second document published by the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews in 1985. The Christian faith stands or falls by the confession that God wants to lead all people to salvation, that he follows this path in Jesus Christ as the universal mediator of salvation, and that there is no “other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved” (Acts 4:12). The concept of two parallel paths of salvation would in the least call into question or even endanger the fundamental understanding of the Second Vatican Council that Jews and Christians do not belong to two different peoples of God, but that they form one people of God.

On the one hand, from the Christian confession there can be only one path to salvation. However, on the other hand, it does not necessarily 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. Such a claim would find no support in the soteriological understanding of St Paul, who in the Letter to the Romans definitively negates the question he himself has posed, whether God has repudiated his own people: “For the grace and call that God grants are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). That the Jews are participants in God’s salvation is theologically

²⁴ John Paul II, *La ricchezza della comune eredità ci apre al dialogo e alla collaborazione. Incontro con gli esponenti della Comunità Ebraica a Magonza il 17 novembre 1980*, in: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II III*, 2 1980 (Città del Vaticano 1980) 1272–1276, cit. 1274.

²⁵ Cf. the differentiated study by T. Söding, *Erwählung – Verstockung – Errettung. Zur Dialektik der paulinischen Israeltheologie in Röm 9–11*, in: *Communio. Internationale katholische Zeitschrift* 39 (2010) 382–417.

unquestionable, but how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery. It is therefore no accident that Paul's soteriological reflections in Romans 9–11 on the irrevocable redemption of Israel against the background of the Christ–mystery culminate in a mysterious doxology: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways” (Rom 11:33). It is likewise no accident that Pope Benedict XVI in the second part of his book on Jesus of Nazareth allows Bernard of Clairvaux to say in reference to the problem confronting us, that for the Jews “a determined point in time has been fixed, which cannot be anticipated”.²⁶

This complexity is also attested by the re–formulation of the Good Friday Prayer for the Jews in the extraordinary form of the Roman rite which was published in February 2008. Although the new Good Friday prayer in the form of a plea to God confesses the universality of salvation in Jesus Christ within an eschatological horizon (“as the fullness of the peoples enters your church”),²⁷ it has been vigorously criticised on the part of Jews – and of course also of Christians – and misunderstood as a call to explicit mission to the Jews.²⁸ It is easy to understand that the term ‘mission to the Jews’ is a very delicate and sensitive matter for the Jews because in their eyes it involves the very existence of Israel itself. On the other hand however, this question also proves to be awkward for us Christians too, because for us the universal salvific significance of Jesus Christ and consequently the universal mission of the church are of fundamental significance. The Christian church is naturally obligated to perceive its evangelisation task in respect of the Jews, who believe in the one God, in a different manner from that to the nations. In concrete terms this means that – in contrast to several fundamentalist and evangelical movements – the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews. In his detailed examination of the question of so–called mission to the Jews Cardinal Karl Lehmann rightly discerned that on closer investigation one finds “as good as no institutional mission to the Jews in Catholic mission history”. “We have an abundant share in other forms of inappropriate attitudes towards the Jews and therefore have no right to elevate ourselves above others. But in respect to a specific and exclusive ‘mission to the Jews’ there should be no false consternation or unjustified self–accusation in this regard.”²⁹ The in–principle rejection of an institutional mission to the Jews does not on the other hand exclude that Christians bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews, but they should do so in an unassuming and humble manner, particularly in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah.

²⁶ J. Ratzinger – Jesus of Nazareth. Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection (San Francisco 2011) 44.

²⁷ Pope Benedict XVI has explained that he altered the Good Friday prayer in such a way “to express our faith that Christ is the Savior for *all*, that there are not two channels of salvation, so that Christ is *also* the redeemer of the Jews, and not just of the Gentiles. But the new formulation also shifts the focus from a direct petition for the conversion of the Jews in a missionary sense to a plea that the Lord might bring about the hour of history when we may all be united.” Benedict XVI, *Light of the World. The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times. A Conversation with Peter Seewald* (San Francisco 2010), 107.

²⁸ Vgl. W. Homolka / E. Zenger (Hrsg.), „... damit sie Jesus Christus erkennen“. Die neue Karfreitagsfürbitte für die Juden (Freiburg i. Br. 2008).

²⁹ K. Cardinal Lehmann, „Judenmission“. Hermeneutische und theologische Überlegungen zu einer Problemanzeige im jüdisch–christlichen Gespräch, in: H. Frankemölle / J. Wohlmuth (Eds.), *Das Heil der Anderen. Problemfeld „Judenmission“* (Freiburg i. Br. 2010) 142–167, cit. 165.

7. Prospects

It must be obvious that within the framework of this conference it is not possible to delve more deeply into these open theological questions. That a good deal more effort in theological reflection is required is also affirmed by the project published in 2011, “Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today“, produced as an initiative of the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews by an informally convoked international group of Christian theologians, to which individual Jewish experts and friends were invited to participate as critical observers.³⁰ No matter how worthwhile this attempt may be to examine anew the specific question of how to conceptually reconcile the Christian confession of the universal soteriological significance of Jesus Christ with the equally Christian faith conviction that God steadfastly stands by his covenant with Israel with historical–soteriological faithfulness, Cardinal Walter Kasper states realistically in his preface, that even this conversation has in no way arrived at a conclusion: “We are only standing at the threshold of a new beginning. Many exegetical, historical and systematical questions are still open and there will presumably always be such questions.”³¹

Jewish–Catholic dialogue will therefore never be unemployed, especially at the academic level, particularly since the epoch–making new course set by the Second Vatican Council regarding the relationship between Jews and Christians is naturally constantly being put to the test. On the one hand the scourge of anti–Semitism seems to be ineradicable in today’s world; and even in Christian theology the age–old Marcionism and anti–Judaism re–emerge with a vengeance again and again, and in fact not only on the part of the traditionalists but even within the liberal strands of current theology. In view of such developments the Catholic Church is obliged to denounce anti–Judaism and Marcionism as a betrayal of its own Christian faith, and to call to mind that the spiritual fraternity between Jews and Christians has its firm and eternal foundation in Holy Scripture. On the other hand, the demand by the Second Vatican Council to foster mutual understanding and respect between Jews and Christians must continue to be accorded due attention. That is the indispensable prerequisite for guaranteeing that there will be no recurrence of the dangerous estrangement between Christians and Jews, but that they remain aware of their spiritual kinship. We will therefore be grateful for every contribution made here to expand the dialogue with Judaism on the foundation of “Nostra aetate”, and to arrive at a better understanding between Jews and Christians so that Jews and Christians as the one people of God bear witness to peace and reconciliation in the unreconciled world of today and can thus be a blessing not only for one another but also jointly for humanity.

³⁰ P. A. Cunningham, J. Sievers, M. C. Boys, H. H. Hendrix & J. Svartvik (Ed.), *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today. New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships* (Cambridge 2011).

³¹ *Ibid.* XIV.