

Changing the way Catholics and

By David Rosen

As Israel prepares to welcome Pope John Paul II on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, observers are divided over what the historic voyage symbolizes. Some see the beginning of a new relationship between Israel and the Vatican. Some see the opening of a new era in Jewish-Catholic relations. Others see the culmination of John Paul's efforts to reconcile the relationship between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church. But regardless of what the Pope's visit means, there is little doubt as to where the road ending in John Paul's arrival began.

At the beginning of the 1994, a month after the conclusion of the historic fundamental agreement between the State of Israel and the Vatican, a remarkable international Jewish-Christian conference on religious leadership in secular society" took place in Jerusalem. It was attended by hundreds of Christian leaders from some 90 countries, including the Archbishop of Canterbury and a number of the most prominent cardinals in the Catholic Church.

The representation from the Jewish Diaspora was of a high quality and included a number of chief rabbis from around the world. While originally there was going to be a significant Israeli rabbinic representation, including representatives of the highest official

level, a campaign of intimidation was launched from Haredi ultra-Orthodox quarters, and it succeeded in keeping away the majority of those Israeli rabbis who had planned to attend.

At the time, I thought that I might be able to reason with those who opposed the conference and I met with one of the most prominent of those Israeli rabbis who was publicly condemning the conference. However, as I sat down in his office, he didn't even give me an opportunity to talk about the conference and instead launched into a tirade against me for having anything to do with the Catholic Church and especially for having been part of the Israeli team that negotiated the agreement with the Vatican.

"Don't you know that the Catholic Church is the enemy of the Jewish people?" he exclaimed. "How can you, especially as an Orthodox rabbi, have anything to do with those whose only intent is to seduce us away from observance of the commandments in order to believe in their heresies?"

Of course, such a view of Christianity is substantially a product of the Church's attitude toward the Jews throughout the ages. Its "teaching of contempt" toward the Jews not only portrayed us as religiously blind and moribund, but as the enemies of Christianity. Indeed Vatican opposition at the time to the idea of Jewish sovereignty in the Holy Land included phrases

warning against the danger of the holy sites falling into the hands of "the enemies of Christian civilization" (*Civita Cattolica*, March 1919).

But the transformation in the Church's attitude toward Jews and Judaism during the last 40 years or so since the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council has been revolutionary. Pioneered by Pope John XXIII and substantially developed by Pope John Paul II, the Catholic Church has not only forcefully repudiated that "teaching of contempt" and any such anti-Jewish ideas, let alone anti-Semitic ideas, but has produced documents and developed materials to promote the respect and appreciation of the Jewish people; it has eschewed proselytization among the Jewish people and has greatly encouraged Christians to deepen their knowledge of the Jewish roots of Christianity.

Indeed, the text of the agreement that established full relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel declares that the accord took place in the context "of the historic process of reconciliation and growth in mutual understanding and friendship between Catholics and Jews." Moreover, later in the agreement, "The Holy See reiterates its condemnation of hatred, persecution and all other manifestations of anti-Semitism directed against the Jewish people and individual Jews anywhere, at any time and by anyone" and commits itself to cooperating with the State of Is-

rael in "combating all forms of anti-Semitism."

These amazing developments in the Church's attitude and teaching toward Jews and Judaism are not very well known among Israelis. Moreover, the less open that segments of Jewish society are toward the modern world at large, the less aware and interested they are in such changes, such as in the case of the colleague who I referred to above. However, even within the more modern religious community and even within secular society there is widespread ignorance and skepticism toward these changes.

Of course, the relevance of the modern sociological context is even more pertinent to whether or not these developments are really internalized within Catholic society itself. Accordingly, it is precisely in the United States where recent decades have seen the greatest degree of success in this process of change in attitudes and relationships. This is evidenced not only in the extent of Catholic-Jewish cooperation in social and philanthropic areas, but above all in the excellent quality of the educational materials dealing with Jews and Judaism in Catholic parochial schools.

While extremely warm relationships have developed in many parts of the world between the Catholic hierarchy and leaders of the Jewish community, nowhere is this more in evidence than in the United States. Indeed, many American

Jews view each other

Catholic leaders took the opportunity of the turn of the millennium to send remarkable letters to their Jewish colleagues. Cardinal John O'Connor sent a letter out for the High Holy Days in which he announced that "March 8 has been especially set aside as a day for Catholics to reflect upon the pain inflicted on the Jewish people by many of our members over the last millennia." In relation to such conduct, the cardinal wrote: "We most sincerely want to start a new era. I ask this Yom Kippur that you understand my own abject sorrow for any member of the Catholic Church, high or low, who may have harmed you or your forbears in any way."

Such remarkable statements have been facilitated in no small part by Pope John Paul II himself, who, as mentioned above, has made an enormous contribution to the process of Catholic-Jewish reconciliation. In addition to condemning anti-Semitism as a sin against God and man, he called on Catholics to engage in a process of repentance for sins perpetrated in the name of Christianity against the Jewish people. His visit to a Rome synagogue in 1986 confirmed the positions he had already articulated extensively. In addition, he gave the full weight of his authority to moving ahead with the negotiations that led to the establishment of full relations between Israel and the Vatican.

His own childhood experiences

undoubtedly had a significant impact on him. These have been well presented by Giancarlo Svidercoschi in his book "Letter to a Jewish Friend." This publication reveals the extent of young Karol Wotyli'a's strong involvement with members of the Jewish community of Wadowice before World War II. It was the period of the war itself, however, when Wotyli'a was a young seminarian, that had a most profound influence on him.

I was able to personally sense the extent to which the Holocaust had an impact upon his heart and soul when meeting with him in Assisi in January 1993. While I had met him on a number of occasions before that, this was the first time that I had the opportunity for a proper conversation, in the course of which he said to me, "Jews and Christians have a special obligation to keep that memory of the Holocaust alive for the sake of all humankind."

The Pope's appreciation of the enormity of the tragedy of the Holocaust is a major factor in his own commitment to Catholic reconciliation with the Jewish people and his passionate opposition to anti-Semitism, as well as to all other kinds of racism. Yet his view of the tragic period of World War II has highlighted some of the problems that remain in Catholic-Jewish relations, especially concerning the Holocaust. At the core of John Paul's own experience is his sense of the suffering of the Polish people

and the Catholic Church in Poland.

It is in such a light that he perceives the role of Poland and its Church during the Holocaust - not as accomplices, but as victims. Accordingly, as far as the Pope is concerned, any willing collaborators with the Nazis were exceptions to the rule. In the Jewish mind, however, the Holocaust is inextricably linked to the Church's traditional "teaching of contempt" toward the Jews that generated the anti-Semitism that Jews perceive as having saturated Polish society, facilitating easy collaboration with the Germans as far as their policy toward the Jews was concerned.

While there have been and will continue to be differences and disagreements between the Vatican and the Jewish people over the role of the Church and its leadership during that period, for the Pope it is nevertheless an epoch of tragedy that simply confirms the importance of Jewish-Christian reconciliation and cooperation.

As a master of symbolic acts, he appreciated the importance of his historic visit to the synagogue in Rome in 1986 as confirmation of this new era of reconciliation. Understanding as he does that for Judaism there is an inextricable relationship between religion and nationality, he knows full well that his visit to Israel and official meetings with the leadership of the Jewish state will be the ultimate symbolic affirmation of a new era in Catholic-Jewish relations.

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