



# Pope Francis and the Jews

All those who know the new pope affirm that he is a true friend of the State of Israel and the Jewish People

**PRIOR TO** the conclave, which chose Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the 266th head of the Catholic Church, a prominent commentator on Vatican affairs predicted that a major shift in the priorities of the Catholic Church would be a move away from a preoccupation with the Jews to a greater focus on Islam.

Several other “experts” claimed that the next pope would not only have been born after the Shoah, but would, accordingly, lack a deeply felt sensitivity to its ramifications. Moreover, it was widely claimed that a pope from the southern hemisphere would inevitably have less interest in Jewry than a pope from Europe.

All these “expert insights” proved not only wrong, but the very contrary of what has actually happened. The conclave chose a Latin American with a profound background in and commitment to Catholic-Jewish relations. Indeed, there has never been a pope who has had so much personal experience, engagement and involvement with a contemporary living Jewish community as Pope Francis.

True, the late Pope John Paul II had longstanding friendships with individual Jews, even from his childhood. But by the time he was a priest, let alone a bishop, there was no living, vibrant Jewish community

in Poland with which he might have interacted. Polish Jewry has undergone something of a revival in recent times, but under communism it was little more than a shadow of its once glorious past.

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In contrast, Pope Francis was archbishop in the city with the largest Jewish community in Latin America, and his involvement with Buenos Aires Jewry was substantial. He regularly visited Jewish houses of worship, religious celebrations and commemorations. After the 1994 terrorist bombing of the AMIA Jewish center in which 85 people were killed and hundreds injured, he expressed deep personal solidarity with the community. And in 2005, he was the first public figure to sign a petition entitled “85 victims, 85 signatories,” demanding belated justice.

His close friendships with leading

rabbis in the city are well known and, appropriately, much has been made of the book he published together with the president of the Buenos Aires Rabbinical Seminary, Rabbi Abraham Skorka, which examines a range of issues from Jewish and Catholic perspectives.

On ascending the throne of St. Peter, he declared his commitment to continuing to deepen the Catholic-Jewish relationship. He sent letters to the Chief Rabbi of Rome and to the Chief Rabbis of Israel expressing this commitment. And he invited Jewish leaders to attend his inauguration ceremony.

I was privileged to be one of the dozen Jewish representatives at this ceremony, along with the director general of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and religious and lay leaders from Italy, Argentina and the US. After thanking the representatives of the various Christian communities that were in attendance, the new pope expressed special appreciation for the presence of “the Jewish representatives and those from the other religions,” highlighting the former’s special importance. The following day, when he received us for an audience in the Vatican, he quoted from the Second Vatican Council’s declaration “*Nostra Aetate*,” emphasizing that the Christian faith’s own self-understanding depends upon its



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appreciation of its Jewish roots.

The transformation in Catholic attitudes and teaching towards the Jewish People is without parallel in human history. A people once presented as cursed and rejected by God – even in league with the Devil – is now described (in the words of Pope John Paul II) as the “dearly beloved elder brother of the Church of the Covenant never broken and never to be broken.”

**IN FACT,** Pope Benedict XVI suggested that just in case anyone might interpret the term “elder brother” in any negative way – as in the Hebrew Bible, where the elder brother is often surpassed by the younger – it might be more appropriate to refer to the Jewish “parentage” of the Church.

While this transformation began with the pontificate of Pope John XXIII (1958-1963), it reached heights during the last two pontificates that could never have been imagined. One can, in fact, aspire to little more for Francis’s pontificate than that he live up to his commitment to continue the path of his predecessors.

However, there is one area where much still remains to be done: the transmission of this revolution in attitudes to the Jewish people into Catholic education at all levels and in all places. In the United States, where

vibrant Catholic and Jewish communities live side by side, both as minorities but feeling fully part of the larger society, there has been a successful internalization of this transformation in Catholic schools and seminaries.

But in places with no strong Jewish community and where Jews and Judaism hardly feature on the Catholic radar screen – as in many parts of Latin America, Africa and Asia – attitudes often remain as negatively prejudicial as in the past. The very fact of Francis’s provenance as well as his personal commitment give grounds for optimism that there might be progress toward making the transformation truly universal.

Relations between the Vatican and Israel have also never been as good as they are today. And this despite the fact that Israel has not yet fully delivered on the promises it made in the Fundamental Agreement of December 1993 that established full diplomatic relations between the two, under which Israel was to resolve the legal and fiscal status of the Church and its institutions in the Holy Land under Israeli law within two years, a work, 17 years later, still in progress.

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of Israel and will certainly raise his voice against those who seek its destruction and delegitimization. However, any head of the Catholic Church has to take full account of the needs and circumstances of the local faithful, who, in Israel as well as under the Palestinian Authority, are Arab Christians and who, in East Jerusalem, north of Jerusalem and Bethlehem and its environs in particular, are disproportionately and negatively affected by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the steps Israel takes to protect itself, such as the separation barrier.

This has an inevitable effect on Vatican diplomacy as well. Nevertheless, we have every reason to anticipate that Pope Francis will literally walk in the footsteps of his predecessors and visit the Holy Land – the State of Israel and the Palestinian Territories – in the not-too-distant future. For him, this will provide another opportunity to reaffirm his sincere sense of a special bond between the Catholic Church and the Jewish People. ■

*Rabbi David Rosen, the American Jewish Committee’s International Director of Interreligious Affairs, received a papal Knighthood in 2005 for his contribution to Jewish-Catholic reconciliation.*