

## Forty years of revolution

By David Rosen

On October 28, 1965, a declaration was published by the Catholic Synod of Bishops (known as Vatican II) that changed in a revolutionary way the attitude of the Catholic Church towards the Jewish people, Judaism and ultimately the state of Israel. This declaration is known by the name taken from the two Latin words with which it begins: "Nostra Aetate," which means "In our time."

To appreciate the dimension of the change, it must be noted that the historical approach of Christianity, almost from its very beginnings, had been that because the Jews had failed by not recognizing the person whom Christianity had declared to be the Messiah, and were also responsible for the death of Jesus, their Temple was destroyed, they were expelled from their land and they were condemned to wander the earth until the end of days.

Therefore the blessings and the destiny of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were taken from them and given to the Church, which since then was "the true new Israel." This traditional attitude towards Judaism and the Jews is known as the "teaching of contempt."

By the first part of the 20th century in certain circles a reevaluation had begun of the Catholic doctrine with regard to the Jews, but a fundamental change took place only under the influence of the Holocaust. Although there is no basis to the argument that Christianity was directly responsible for the Holocaust, there is no doubt that the "Final Solution" would not have succeeded to the same extent had the ground in Europe not been prepared to absorb the seeds of hatred for Jews, in the wake of the "teaching of contempt" and many centuries during which the Church, actively or passively, had encouraged the demonization and dehumanization of the Jew.

Although many Christian leaders failed during the Holocaust, and there were those who cooperated outright with the Nazis, there were also sterling figures who stood out for the good. One of them was the Papal nuncio in Turkey, Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, who helped rescue hundreds of Jews from the Nazi claws, and who was deeply affected by the disaster suffered by the Jewish people.

Within a bit more than a decade, after the death of Pope Pius XII, Roncalli was elected Pope and chose for himself the name John XXIII. Contrary to the opinion that prevailed at the time, that he was a man without any exceptional qualities, Pope John XXIII was a visionary and trailblazer in his time, no more and no less. He is the man who convened the Vatican II synod, which had far-reaching effects on the Church. Among the key issues with which it dealt was the Church's reevaluation of the Jews and Judaism.

In the end, the promulgation dealt with relations with other religions in general, but there is no doubt that the most dramatic and historic section of the declaration is the one that relates to the Jews and Judaism. The document attacked the approach that had prevailed in the Catholic Church in the past, which attributes to the Jews collective blame for the death of Jesus, in his time and throughout the generations. The document also declared that it is prohibited to depict the Jews as cursed by the Creator or to claim that the Church has taken their place. Moreover, it affirmed that the covenant between God and the Jewish people is eternal, and has not and will not be broken.

Thus "Nostra Aetate" with a wave of the hand revoked the theological basis of the opposition to the idea that the Jewish people will return to the land of its forefathers and live there as a sovereign nation. The document also clearly and firmly condemned anti-Semitism.

The declaration's path was not an easy one. It had many opponents for various reasons, both theological and political, but in its wake the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews published further documents that reinforced and clarified the Church's positive new doctrine. Furthermore, this Vatican Council took upon itself the responsibility for promoting the dialogue with the Jewish people. To this end, a body was established to represent the Jewish people, the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC). The members of this council are the World Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee, B'nai Brith International and the organizations of the three main streams of Judaism in the United States, Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. In addition to these organizations, representatives of Israeli Jewry and the Anti-Defamation League have been brought in.

This committee and the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews meet every two years for official consultations. During the past decades they have issued a number of important declarations that stress the values held in common by the two religious heritages, without blurring the essential differences between them.

It was the last Pope, John Paul II, who gave tremendous impetus to continuing the process that began with "Aetate Nostra." His acquaintance with Jews and Judaism during his childhood in Wadowice, Poland and his difficult experiences during the Holocaust period were key elements in this. The pontificate of John Paul II was noteworthy for initiatives and dramatic gestures by means of which he wanted to spread messages throughout the world. In addition to his stern condemnations of anti-Semitism, which he defined as a sin against Heaven and against man, there were two events that spread his message better than anything else - his visit to the Great Synagogue in Rome in 1986 and his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the millennium year, 2000.

The speech that John Paul II delivered at the Great Synagogue in Rome is among the most important texts in the revolution in Catholic-Jewish relations. But the sight of the pope embracing Rabbi Elio Toaff, thereby demonstrating true brotherly love for the Jewish community, is what remains engraved in the popular consciousness and has reached millions of believers who could not or did not want to read the official documents.

Indeed, in his enumeration of the important events of 1986, the Pope noted his visit to the Great Synagogue in Rome as the most important event of that year, and expressed his opinion that this event would be remembered "for hundreds of thousands of years - I thank

Divine Providence that this role has been granted to me."

No less important than that was the Pope's visit to Israel in 2000, which was made possible by the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Vatican at the end of 1993, which itself was the fruit of the revolution in "Nostra Aetate." The Pope's visit to Israel had a tremendous effect, especially on Israeli Jews. Most of the Jews who live in Israel, and especially the most observant, were hardly aware at all of the profound changes that had occurred in the Church with respect to its attitude towards Judaism and Israel. The Pope's visit opened the eyes of many Israelis to discover that not only was the Church no longer the enemy, but also that it was headed by a true friend.

The sight of the Pope at Yad Vashem, in a tearful demonstration of solidarity with the suffering of the Jewish people; the discovery that he himself had helped in the rescue of Jews during and after that terrible period, that in the context of his position as priest he had returned to Jewish families their children who had been adopted by Christian families, and the sight of the head of the Catholic Church at the Western Wall, in a gesture of respect to Jewish tradition, inserting into a crack between the stones the prayer of repentance that had been delivered a short while previously at Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, in which he had included a plea for forgiveness for the sins committed by Christians against the Jews throughout the generations - all these had a profound influence on Israeli society, the Jewish world and the Christian world. They exemplified and embodied the revolution that had occurred with the "Nostra Aetate" declaration.

During his visit to Israel the Pope, at his request, met with the Chief Rabbinical Council of Israel, and following this meeting he asked to establish a joint committee of the Vatican and the rabbinate. This bilateral committee, headed by the chief rabbi of Haifa, Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen, and Cardinal Jorge Maria Mejia, has already met five times, alternately in Jerusalem and Rome, and has published important joint statements on moral and social challenges of our times. A joint commission of the Vatican and the Chief Rabbinate would have sounded like a wild dream only a few years ago, and today it is a key part of the dialogue between the Church and the Jewish people.

There is no doubt that there is still a long way to go until the effect of this amazing turnaround in the approach of the Catholic Church toward Judaism and Israel reaches every individual and every parish in the Church, but there is definitely reason to mark 40 years since the publication of "Aetate Nostra," a document that has led to one of the most dramatic ideological revolutions in history.

The writer was the chief rabbi of Ireland and is now president of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC).