

The Fundamental Agreement - the culmination of Nostra Aetate

AJC/Kantor Center Nostra Aetate 50th Anniversary Conference

Tel Aviv December 14-15, 2015

David Rosen

Shortly after the 1897 Basle Conference, the semi-official Vatican periodical (edited by the Jesuits) *Civiltà Cattolica* gave its *biblical-theological* judgement on political Zionism: "1827 years have passed since the prediction of Jesus of Nazareth was fulfilled ... that [after the destruction of Jerusalem] the Jews would be led away to be slaves among all the nations and that they would remain in the dispersion [diaspora] until the end of the world."

"According to the Sacred Scriptures, the Jewish people must always live dispersed and wandering among the other nations, so that they may render witness to Christ ... by their very existence" .

Despite this negative, scornful judgement in Rome, Theodore Herzl hoped for direct papal goodwill and support for the Zionist dream and program. In late January 1904 - six months before his death - Herzl first met the Secretary of State, Cardinal Merry del Val. According to Herzl's private diary notes, the Cardinal replied that "the history of Israel is our own history, it is our foundation. But in order that we should come out for the Jewish people in the way that you desire, they should first have to accept conversion." Three days later Herzl met Pope Pius X (Jan. 25 – a public holiday in Rome celebrating the Conversion of St. Paul!). As is well known according to Herzl's record in his diary , the Pope's reply to his request for support for the Zionist project was that "We are unable to favor this movement. We cannot prevent the Jews going to Jerusalem, but we could never sanction it ... The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people."

While in 1917 Nahum Sokolov was received warmly by Pope Benedict XV who appeared to be sympathetic to Jewish aspirations, the Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Gasparri indicated the Vatican opposition to a Jewish state in Palestine clearly on December 18, 1917, to the Belgian representative, Jules Van den Heuvel stating : "The transformation of Palestine into a Jewish state would not only endanger the Holy Places and injure the feelings of all Christians, it would also be very harmful for the country itself."

On March 10, 1919, the Pope convened a secret consistory in the Vatican and declared that "it would be a terrible grief for us and for all Christians if infidels [in Palestine] were placed in a privileged and prominent position: much more if those most holy sanctuaries of the Christian religion were given into the charge of non-Christians." As Gasparri explained some days later: "The danger that we most fear is the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. We would have found nothing wrong in Jews entering that country, and setting up agricultural colonies. But that they be given the rule over the Holy Places is intolerable for Christians."

In January 1919 Cardinal Francis Bourne of England sent a letter to the British prime minister and to the foreign secretary, writing that Zionism had not received the approval of the Holy See, and if the Jews would “ever again dominate and rule the country, it would be an outrage to Christianity and its Divine founder.”

On July 20, 1920, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Msgr. Luigi Barlassina, also published a pastoral letter strongly protesting against the Great Powers’ decision to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine. He added: “Let Palestine be internationalized rather than someday be the servant of Zionism.”

In 1922, the *Civiltà Cattolica* complained that Zionists returning to Palestine had “forgotten that more than 1,800 years had passed since their faith, smitten by the divine malediction, or if this sounds unpleasant, subjugated by a hand stronger than theirs, were expelled and dispersed over the whole earth.”

In addition to the theological reason, the Vatican opposed Zionism on other grounds. There was concern that the Zionists were antireligious, causing radical changes in the traditional life-style of the local population and damaging moral values; and also that Zionist immigration would sweep the Christians out of Palestine and destroy the Christian presence in the land.

Cardinal Maglione, Secretary of State during World War II, wrote in May 1943 to his apostolic delegate in the United States, that it would not be difficult “if one wants to establish a ‘Jewish Home’, to find other territories [besides Palestine] which could better fulfill this aim, while Palestine, under Jewish predominance, would bring new and grave international problems.”

Cardinal Maglione wrote in the same month that “Catholics would be wounded in their religious sentiments and would rightly fear for their rights if Palestine became the exclusive property of the Jews.”

As late as May 1948 the official Vatican newspaper *Osservatore Romano* stated that ‘Modern Zionism is not the true heir of Biblical Israel, but a secular state... Therefore the Holy Land and its sacred sites belong to Christianity, the True Israel’.

In the meantime, the persecution of Jewry had reached its terrible zenith with the Shoah. While this was primarily a Jewish tragedy, it was a Christian scandal in as much as it was perpetrated overwhelmingly by baptized Christians in ostensibly Christian lands. The 1998 Vatican document on the Shoah “We Remember” acknowledges the prejudices that led Christians to fail in resisting evil against the Jews.

The following year the International Theological Commission under the Presidency of Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) issued a text on the subject of “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past,” in which it reiterated that this failure concerning the persecution of the Jews requires “an act of repentance (teshuva).”

However amidst the terrible failures there were some shining examples of daring righteousness. One of those who should be recognized as one of the greatest “righteous among the nations” was Angelo Roncalli who, as the apostolic delegate of the Vatican in Istanbul, spared no efforts to save as many Jews as possible from the Nazi extermination. In addition to dispatching “certificates of immigration” to Palestine via the Vatican’s diplomatic courier, he also overtly intervened in favor of Slovakian and Bulgarian Jews.

After the war, as papal nuncio in Paris, Cardinal Roncalli assisted in efforts to enlist Catholic countries to support the United Nations resolution on Partition and the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine.

Elected as Pope after Pius XII, he took the name John XXIII and convened the Second Vatican Council to address the place role and teaching of the Catholic Church in the modern world. Unquestionably the need to change the approach of the Church towards the Jews was a matter of deep concern to him. As is well known, he took the unprecedented gesture of ordering the erasure from the Good Friday Prayer of the derogatory reference to the Jews as “perfidious”. However his historic meeting in 1960 with the French Jewish historian Jules Isaac led to the assignment given to Cardinal Augustin Bea to prepare a document that would reflect a transformation in the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish People.

As is well known, resistance to the draft almost brought about its demise. While this came from theologically conservative quarters, one of the major sources of opposition was from the Arab world (and thus the churches in the Arab world) who feared its political interpretation (and even consequences) in favor of Zionism.

Cardinal Bea had to go out of his way to reassure those elements within and outside the Church, that the document would avoid any reference to Israel. In the end it was only through placing the passage De Judaeis in a broader context of the relations of the Church to non-Christian religions that John XXIII’s initiative succeeded.

While *Nostra Aetate* importantly repudiated any attempt to present the Jews as collectively guilty at the time let alone in perpetuity for the death of Jesus, this was in fact a confirmation in this regard of the Council of Trent. Its important condemnation of Antisemitism was also not new. Even the affirmation of the eternal Divine Covenant with Israel did not preclude a supersessionist ideology, on the contrary.

But what was most significant about section 4 of *Nostra Aetate* was that it ushered in the first positive approach towards Judaism. In this light the eternal nature of the Divine Covenant takes on new meaning; and the repudiation of the idea that the Jewish people has been rejected and replaced by the Church becomes enormously powerful.

The transformation in the Church’s approach towards the Jewish People ushered in by *Nostra Aetate* is without parallel in human history precisely because this relationship was so

uniquely chronic and is now so blessed. A people previously seen overwhelmingly as guilty of the most heinous of crimes and thus rejected and condemned by God to wander until the end of times – even as being in league with the Devil - is now seen in the words of Saint John Paul II as “the dearly beloved elder brother of the Church of the original Covenant never broken and never to be broken” and “with whom Christianity has a relationship that is intrinsic” to its very being. Whereas Judaism had been portrayed as fossilized and irrelevant, *Nostra Aetate* led to a dramatic reversal reflected in Pope Francis’ words in *Evangelii Gaudium* “God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant and to bring forth treasure of wisdom which flow from their encounter with His word..... There exists as well a rich complementarity which allows us to read the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures together and to help one another mine the riches of God’s word.”

According to Bishop Loris Capovilla, now over one hundred years old, and who served as Pope John XXIII’s personal secretary, it was John’s intention after dealing with the relationship with the Jewish People to establish diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. However John XXIII did not live to see the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* which took place under his successor Paul VI.

There are those who claim that Paul VI’s intention when visiting Israel unofficially in 1964 was precisely to test the waters in this regard, and that negative reactions increased his natural circumspection; and then historic events in the local conflict took their course. Nevertheless Cardinal Johannes Willebrands confirmed at the *Nostra Aetate* 25th anniversary that the only obstacle preventing the Vatican from establishing diplomatic ties with Israel was concern for the welfare of the Christian communities and churches in the Arab world.

Bishop Pietro Rossano of Rome and Rector of the Pontifical Lateran University, also publicly affirmed at that time that *Nostra Aetate* had eliminated any theological objections to the establishment of full relations with the State of Israel.

However despite the remarkable changes that took place in Jewish-Catholic relations following on from *Nostra Aetate*, the absence of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the Jewish State continued to be an obstacle in the relationship between Jewry and the Catholic Church. Many if not most within the Jewish community – and I dare say not a few Catholics – viewed this absence as an indication that the Holy See still did have theological problems with the idea of a Jewish sovereign state in the Holy Land and above all in Jerusalem, notwithstanding such above statements to the contrary

In 1970, very much with the encouragement of the Vatican, an umbrella organization had been established by the name of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) to provide a central address for the different Jewish representative bodies and religious denominations in their relations with the Vatican. This led to regular meetings which continue to be held every two years.

During the seventies and eighties the issue of formal ties between the Vatican and Israel was continuously raised in this forum. The Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jewish People always replied that this “political” matter was “outside their field of

competency”, but expressed sympathy for the call and promised to pass it on to the highest echelons in the Vatican.

The pontificate of Pope John Paul II saw Catholic-Jewish relation take a quantum leap. Very much the master of the bold visual gesture, his visit to the Great Synagogue in Rome was arguably the most dramatic public confirmation of the new era in Catholic-Jewish relations. There he referred to the Jewish People as “the dearly beloved elder brother” of the Church and subsequently elaborated the phrase to describe Jewry as the dearly beloved elder brother of the First Covenant never broken and never to be broken.”

His words and writings further confirmed the revolution in Catholic teaching in particular his frequent condemnations of Antisemitism which he described as “a sin against God and man”.

Receiving the new German ambassador to the Holy See in 1990 he declared that “for Christians, the heavy burden of guilt for the murder of the Jewish people must be an enduring call to repentance: thereby we can overcome every form of Antisemitism and establish a new relationship with our kindred nation of the original Covenant.”

Saint Pope John Paul II was the first pontiff to specifically refer to the State of Israel. In his 1984 Apostolic letter "Redemptionis Anno," he declared that “for the Jewish people who live in the State of Israel and who preserve in that land such precious testimonies of their history and faith, we must ask for the desired security and due tranquility that is the prerogative of every nation and of progress for society.”

And in his 1994 interview with Tad Szulc which was published in Parade after the establishment of these relations, he stated “It must be understood that the Jews, who for two thousand years were dispersed among the nations of the world, had decided to return to the land of their ancestors. This is their right ... The act of establishing diplomatic relations with Israel is simply an international affirmation of this relationship.”

Nevertheless this relationship was hardly ever simple; and ultimately reflected the stunning transformation ushered in with *Nostra Aetate*.

Accordingly, the preamble to the ‘Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel’ signed on December 30th 1993 was not simply that of standard diplomatic agreements. It located the bilateral accord in the context “of the unique nature of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people, and of the historic process of reconciliation and growth in mutual understanding and friendship between Catholics and Jews.”

It accordingly has implications not just for the citizens of the State of Israel and the small population of the Vatican City State, but for Catholics and Jews globally and for the ongoing *rapprochement* between the two.

This was further demonstrated by the words of Monsignor Claudio Celli, then Vatican Undersecretary of State who signed the agreement on behalf the Holy See, who stated that this event had “a fundamental religious and spiritual significance, not only for the Holy See and the State of Israel, but for millions of people throughout the world’.

Dr. Yossi Beilin Israel's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time and co-chair of the Israeli-Vatican commission with Archbishop Celli, described the agreement as "a triumph for Zionism".

The Fundamental Agreement not only paved the way for the historic papal pilgrimages to the Holy Land and thus to the establishment of the bilateral commission with the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, but arguably reflected more than anything else the fact that the Catholic Church had truly repudiated its portrayal of the Jewish people as condemned wanderers to be homeless until the final advent. Accordingly it may truly be seen as a culmination of *Nostra Aetate*