

15. JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE SINCE THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

The meeting between Jules Isaac and John XXIII on 13 June 1960 marked a turning point in Jewish-Christian relations. The Pope took the study materials given to him by Isaac and gave them to Cardinal Augustin Bea. He asked Bea's secretariat to use the materials to prepare working papers that formed the basis of the Council declaration *Nostra Aetate* (1965). The Second Vatican Council has shown the way forward for the promotion of a close bond of fraternity between Christians and Jews. But there is still a long way to go. In the conclusion of the first document published in 1974, the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews reads: "The problem of Jewish-Christian relations concerns the Church as such, since it is when 'pondering her own mystery' that she encounters the mystery of Israel. Therefore, even in areas where no Jewish communities exist, this remains an important problem. There is also an ecumenical aspect to the question: the very return of Christians to the sources and origins of their faith, grafted on to the earlier Covenant, helps the search for unity in Christ, the cornerstone. In this field, the bishops will know what best to do on the pastoral level, within the general disciplinary framework of the Church and in line with the common teaching of her magisterium. For example, they will create some suitable commissions or secretariats on a national or regional level, or appoint some competent person to promote the implementation of the conciliar directives and the suggestions made above. On 22 October 1974, the Holy Father instituted for the universal Church this Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, joined to the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. This special Commission, created to encourage and foster religious relations between Jews and Catholics - and to do so eventually in collaboration with other Christians - will be, within the limits of its competence, at the service of all interested organizations, providing information for them, and helping them to pursue their task in conformity with the instructions of the Holy See. The Commission wishes to develop this collaboration in order to implement, correctly and effectively, the express intentions of the Council."

In 1964, Pope Paul VI made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It was the first time in history that a pontiff visited the biblical Holy Places. From then on, the Catholic world changed its attitude and vision.

A large number of documents have been drafted and published for the advancement of Jewish-Christian dialogue. On the Catholic side, the most important are the following:

- Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* (No. 4) (1974);
- Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman*

Catholic e Bible in the Church (1993);

- Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *We Remember. A Reflection on the Shoah* (1998);
- International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation. The Church and the Faults of the Past* (2000);
- Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001);
- Christian Scholars Group on Jewish-Christian Relations, *A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking the Christian faith in relation to Judaism and the Jewish people* (2002);
- Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable* (2015).

On the Jewish side, mention should be made of:

- ‘*Dabru Emet*’: *A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity* (2000), signed by Jewish scholars and leaders from all branches of Judaism.
- *Doing the Will of Our Father in Heaven* (2015), signed by 28 prominent Orthodox Rabbis;
- *Between Jerusalem and Rome. Reflections on 50 years of Nostra Aetate*, signed by the Conference of European Rabbis (CER), the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) and the Rabbinat of Israel (2017)

Numerous documents were published by the Churches of the Reformation. These include:

- *Willowbank Declaration on the Christian Gospel and the Jewish People* (1989), by the World Evangelical Fellowship;
- *The Gospel and the Jewish People, An Evangelical Statement* (2008), written by the World Evangelical Alliance;
- *Martin Luther and the Jews. A necessary reminder on the occasion of the Reformation anniversary* (2015), written by the Evangelical Church in Germany;
- *God’s Unfailing Word. Theological and Practical Perspectives on Christian– Jewish Relations* (2019), by the Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England.

There have also been a number of Declarations issued by the Orthodox Churches, most notably those written by His Holiness Bartholomew I, Ecumenical Metropolitan Patriarch of Constantinople: *Greetings of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the Third Academic Meeting between Orthodoxy and Judaism* (1993), *Religion and Peace in Light of Abraham* (2004), *The Necessity and Goals of Interreligious Dialogue* (2007), *Address to the Jewish Community of Park East Synagogue, New York* (2009).

Beyond the official documents - whose dissemination and knowledge outside the narrow circles of experts and scholars is debatable - Pope John Paul II’s historic visit to the Rome Synagogue in 1986, where he was welcomed by Rav Elio Toaff, along with his visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories in the year 2000, were extremely meaningful events. His prayer at the Kotel, where he left a handwritten note, stirred up deep emotions. The note said: “God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your Name to the Nations: 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 commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.”

Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have continued along this path, with regular visits to the Great Synagogue in Rome and pilgrimages to Israel and the territories of the Palestinian Authority.

The International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCCJ), founded in 1947 after the Seelisberg meeting, convenes every year. The International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (ILC) was set up in 1970 and holds meetings on a regular basis. Its five Jewish representatives are appointed by the five founding bodies of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC), also established in 1970, while the Catholic members are appointed by the Holy See.

Following the diplomatic relations established between the State of Israel and the Holy See in 2002, a dialogue was established between the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. The two delegations met in Jerusalem and since then regular meetings have taken place on an annual basis.

The activities of the Jewish-Christian Friendship Association (AEC) in Italy (Florence, Ancona, Rome, Naples, Turin, Livorno, Romagna, Upper Garda, Liguria, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Palermo), united in a Federation which is a member of the ICCJ, are carried out on a regular basis. For 40 years now, the most important national event has been held at the beginning of December in the monastery of Camaldoli. Other dialogue initiatives, such as those promoted by the Sisters of Sion (SAE) in Milan, the *Sefer Group*, the *Qol Group*, the *Cardinal Bea Centre* of the Pontifical Gregorian University and others, are promoted alongside the meetings organised by the AEC.

However, in spite of these numerous initiatives, it sometimes seems as if the momentum of those first decades of Jewish-Christian dialogue has waned, along with the persistent and painful feeling that various forms of anti-Semitism/anti-Judaism continue to spread and that for most Christians and Jews dialogue plays only a minor role.

All the documents of the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council, from *Nostra Aetate* to the Pontiffs' declarations in the Synagogue of Rome, from John Paul II to Francis, point to the uniqueness of the Jewish-Christian relationship. Throughout these many years, much emphasis has been placed on highlighting their common roots. This is clearly underlined in *The Jews and their Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, which reaffirms the permanent value of the Hebrew Scriptures for catechesis and theological reflection. In fact, the pronouncements of the Church's Magisterium have not always been incorporated into Catholic catechesis and pastoral care. The First Covenant has never been revoked, as Pope John Paul II said in Mainz in 1980: Since Ha-Shem is faithful to His covenants, let us also be faithful, helping to prepare for the day when He will convert the nations to a clear language, “so that all may call on the name of the Lord and serve Him shoulder to shoulder” (Zeph 3:9), different but united.

On the Jewish side, see the document *Dabru Emet* or the recent *Between Jerusalem*

and Rome. Jewish reflection on Christianity can be found in the scholarship of the forerunners of dialogue, such as Elijah Benamozegh and Franz Rosenzweig, or more recently, Eugene Korn. Just as apparently irreconcilable divisions have been bridged on the Christian side, so too, on the Jewish side, the earlier assessment of Christianity as *avodah zarah*, i.e. “foreign worship” with “idolatrous connotations”, seems to have been overcome, at least by a section of Judaism.

More recently, the publication of the three volumes of the Friendship Bible (*la Bibbia dell’Amicizia*), which contains pericopes with annotated commentaries by Jews and Christians, has encouraged a re-reading of the shared Scriptures from different perspectives.

Bibliography

The documents are available for consultation and download on a number of institutional websites: <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/it/commis-sione-per-i-rapporti-religio-si-con-l-ebraismo.html>, www.ccjr.us.

F. Capretti, *La chiesa italiana e gli ebrei. La recezione di Nostra Aetate 4 dal Vaticano II a oggi*, Emi, Bologna 2010.