

# Reflections on Anti-Semitism and the Church

The first half of the 20th Century was arguably the most violent and tragic period in human history. Two World Wars devastated much of the globe. Advances in technology enabled totalitarian regimes to destroy entire populations. Indeed, a new vocabulary with words such as “genocide” and “Holocaust” had to be developed to describe the horrors visited on whole peoples in so many parts of the world.

The second half of the 20th Century saw new beginnings and renewed hopes as new nations arose and democratic principles began to spread to lands long suffering under oppression. Among Christians, the ecumenical movement articulated the deep longing for unity. Between Christians and people of other religions, dialogue began to replace disputation, a quest whose spirit was embodied in the gathering at Assisi in 1986 of the leaders of the world’s great religions to pray for reconciliation and peace. Similarly, the prayerful visit of Pope John Paul II to the Great Synagogue of Rome earlier in the same year vividly exemplified the Church’s attitude of respect for the Jewish People and for Judaism, as did his Liturgy of Repentance in St. Peter’s in Rome and his subsequent visit to Yad va Shem and the Western Wall (Kotel) in Jerusalem in 2000.

For Catholics, the impetus for involvement in these movements of the Spirit came chiefly from the Second Vatican Council in the 1960’s, which condemned both anti-Semitism and Christian theological polemics, and called for “fraternal dialogues” with Jews. The Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews was established after the Council to implement this vision, and has issued three major statements. Also, it has co-sponsored a series of international dialogues with representatives of the Jewish people.

At the same time, episcopal conferences around the world have issued statements and guidelines to foster understanding of Jews and Judaism among Catholics. Central in all of these official Catholic reflections, including *Nostra Aetate*, as the 1985 Notes affirmed, has been the necessity to preserve “the memory of the persecution and massacre of Jews which took place in Europe just before and during

the Second World War.”

Pope John Paul II has repeatedly called upon Catholics “to see where we stand” in our historic relationship with the Jewish People. In doing so, we must remember how much the balance (of these relations) over two thousand years has been negative. This very long period, “which we must not tire of reflecting upon in order to draw from it the appropriate lessons,” has been marked by many manifestations of anti-Semitism and, in the last century, by the terrible events of the Shoah. In meeting with Jewish leaders at the beginning of his September 1987 pastoral visit to the United States, the Pope referred to the Shoah and called for the development of “common educational programs” to “promote mutual respect and teach future generations about the Holocaust so that never again will such a horror be possible. Never again!”

“There is no future without memory.” Memory and memories are crucial for understanding Jewish-Christian relationships in the past and for the future. They need to be approached with great sensitivity and care for the truth, which is often complex and ambiguous. How did European civilization, largely Christian for so many centuries, reach the point where there could emerge and prevail such a profoundly un-Christian and, indeed, anti-Christian idea as dividing the one human race, into groups perceived as subhuman? “Anti-Christian” I say, because of the Christian teaching that every man and woman is infinitely precious as made in “the image of God.” And then slate those groups for elimination as though they were less than human? Why the fanatical focus on the Jews? Why was the opposition of civil, intellectual and religious leaders so ineffectual? Why did the rest of the world look on and, with very few exceptions, refuse l