

Catholic Teaching on Jews and Judaism

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One of the great stains on the history of the Catholic Church is the contempt—and sometimes worse—that some Catholics, including some leaders of the Church, have over the centuries expressed for Jews and Judaism. Catholics were never required as a matter of doctrine to hold anti-Jewish attitudes or support, much less participate in, the persecution of Jews. For centuries, however, the posture of the Church as an institution toward the Jewish faith and the Jewish people was decidedly negative—often hostile.

In the wake of the Holocaust, this began to change. No doubt part of the explanation is that Catholics, especially those in leadership positions in the Church, rightly perceived that, though the Nazis were anti-Catholic and anti-Christian, the long history of European Christian hostility to Jews helped to shape the conditions that made the murder of Jews on an industrial scale by Hitler and his thugs possible.

To their credit, Catholics and Church leaders were represented among those who courageously protected, and in many cases rescued, Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Many of the Jews who survived attribute their survival to Catholics, ranging from peasants and laborers who took in Jewish neighbors to the Pope himself, on whose orders Jews were hidden in convents and other religious houses.

The post-Holocaust period leading up to the Second Vatican Council became a time of deep reflection for the Church and the occasion for a profound examination of conscience—and the historical record. This bore fruit in the sections on Jews and Judaism of the conciliar document known as *Nostra Aetate*, the declaration on the Church's understanding of, and relationship with, non-Christian religions.

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Nostra Aetate once and for all repudiated the idea of Jewish collective guilt and the outrageous slander that “the Jews” killed Christ or were “accursed” or “rejected by God,” because the Jewish people as a whole did not accept Jesus as the *Messiah*. It condemned, categorically, all forms of anti-Semitism and discrimination against Jews. What's more, it expressly affirmed that there is a “common patrimony” and, indeed, a “spiritual bond”—something not merely historical, though rooted in historical reality—uniting Christians (“the people of the New Covenant”) with Jews (“Abraham's stock”). Perhaps most importantly, quoting the Jewish Christian St. Paul, it refers to the Jewish people as the “good olive branch onto which has been grafted the wild shoot, the Gentiles.”

Nostra Aetate turned out to be only the beginning of the development of Catholic teaching on Jews and Judaism. Within a decade and a half of its ratification and promulgation by Pope Paul VI as the official teaching of the Church, Karol Wojtyła, the Archbishop of Cracow in Poland, would become Pope. As John Paul II, he would use *Nostra Aetate* as the foundation for further elaboration of the Church's teaching, working out the fuller implications of the Vatican Council's declaration.

It is important to understand that what concerned John Paul in this matter was above all *theological*, not sociological or political. He sought to understand, and to teach, the truth about how the Church properly understands and relates herself to Jews and Judaism. There were options on the table here—judgments to be made, if the topic was to be addressed at all. And John Paul made his judgments, exercising his full authority to declare the mind of Christ as Christ's Vicar, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church.

One option would have been to say that God's covenant with the Jews had been abrogated when the Jewish people as a whole did not join the Christian Church, but we should be nice to Jews anyway, and avoid speaking disparagingly of their religion, since after all, we've been awfully cruel to them over the centuries, and we'd have a better chance of winning them over by being kind.

This was not the path he took or the judgment he made. This was not the mind of Christ.

Rather, he spoke of the Jews as “the people of the original Covenant.” Indeed, his exact words were “our *kindred* nation of the original Covenant.” To make himself even clearer, he formally declared that God’s covenant with the Jews “has never been revoked.” In 1986, speaking to leaders of the Australian Jewish community during a visit to that country, John Paul went still further, declaring the covenant to be not only still in force, but *irrevocable*.

The Catholic faith is rooted in the eternal truths of the Hebrew Scriptures and in the irrevocable covenant made with Abraham. We too gratefully hold these same truths of our Jewish heritage and look upon you as our brothers and sisters.

The references to “our Jewish heritage” and to the Jewish people as “our brothers and sisters” are particularly noteworthy.

In one of the most important acts of his long and remarkably consequential pontificate, both those concepts would again be center stage when John Paul made his historic visit, also in 1986, to the Great Synagogue of Rome—the first by any pope—where he made the following profound declaration:

The Jewish religion is not extrinsic to us, but in a certain way is intrinsic to our own religion. With Judaism we have a relationship we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers, and in a certain way our elder brothers.

Driving the point home, John Paul greeted Jewish rabbis in a meeting in Assisi in 1993 as “our dearly beloved brothers of the ancient covenant *never broken and never to be broken*.”

Benedict XVI and Francis have, of course, stood by the teachings of *Nostra Aetate* and of John Paul II—the teachings of the Church. So will their successors. These are magisterial teachings—declarations of the mind of Christ.

Obviously, contemporary Judaism and Christianity have important differences—above all the question whether Jesus of Nazareth is or is not the Messiah promised to Israel, the incarnate son of God who suffered and died in atonement for our sins and who by his cross and resurrection triumphs over sin and death. Neither the Second Vatican Council nor John Paul II and his successors deny these differences, paper them over, or treat them as insignificant.

They have led some Catholics to suppose that if, as Catholics of course believe, the Church is right on these questions then Judaism as such, as it is practiced today, is of no special spiritual standing or importance, that “living Judaism” has no role or mission, that God is no longer in that special form of relationship called “covenant” with the Jews, that the Jewish religion has been “superseded” by Christianity.

No faithful Catholic, no Catholic who believes, and is loyal to, the gospel as proclaimed by the Church, will bear in his or her heart any hostility to people because they are Jewish or any contempt for the Jewish people and their religion.

This is not the teaching of the Catholic Church—and faithful Catholics, by definition, want to be guided by the teaching of the Church. Faithful Catholics will therefore affirm, with the Council and with the papal magisterium, that the Jewish people are indeed “the good olive tree onto which the wild shoot of the Gentiles has been grafted,” that God’s original Covenant with his chosen people is unbroken and unbreakable, that our bond with the Jewish people is a spiritual bond, rooted in a common spiritual patrimony, and that our Jewish neighbors are indeed our brothers and sisters in faith.

What is more, no faithful Catholic, no Catholic who believes, and is loyal to, the gospel as proclaimed by the Church, will bear in his or her heart any hostility to people because they are Jewish or any contempt for the Jewish people and their religion. Nor will he or she quietly tolerate expressions of animosity or hatred for Jews and Judaism.

Obviously, this does not mean that a faithful Catholic may not criticize individuals who happen to be Jewish on the same grounds that he would criticize anyone else. Nor does it mean that Catholics must agree with, or may not criticize, policies of governments of Israel. Jews themselves, including Israeli Jews, do not refrain from criticizing such policies when they believe criticism is merited. At the same time, a faithful Catholic will be very careful never to accept anti-Jewish animus masquerading as policy differences with governments of the Jewish state.

Once again I quote John Paul II:

In the face of the risk of a resurgence and spread of anti-Semitic feelings, attitudes and initiatives, of which disquieting signs are to be seen today, . . . we must teach consciences to consider anti-Semitism and all forms of racism as sins against God and humanity.

It was under John Paul II that the Catholic Church established full diplomatic relations with the State of Israel, something Israel had sought from the founding of the modern state in 1948, but had not been achieved due to disputes over non-theological questions. Here is what the Pope said when interviewed by Tad Szulc for an American magazine:

It must be understood that the Jews, who two thousand years ago were dispersed among the nations of the world, decided to return to the land of their ancestors. This is their right . . . recognized from the outset by the Holy See, and the act of establishing diplomatic relations is simply an international affirmation of that relationship.

Does the Pope’s teaching here bind the consciences of Catholics to agree with him that the Jewish people have, strictly speaking, a right to establish a modern state in their ancestral homeland? Like John Paul II, I myself support the state of Israel. But I cannot claim that Catholics are bound by his words to agree. In this context, he was speaking as

a head of state, not proclaiming theological truths. He himself would, I have no doubt, acknowledge that, and with it the right of Catholics who in good conscience see that matter differently to dissent.

Even for such Catholics, however, I reiterate the point I made a moment ago. While criticism of Israel, or any political entity, is in bounds, hostility or contempt for Jews and living Judaism, masquerading as mere political differences with the Israeli government or state is out of bounds.