Pope Francis and the Jews

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by Bill Wallen

For the Jewish perspective, it’s important that we look back to the Second Vatican Council and Nostra Aetate. Actually I want to begin with a personal experience.

Around 1960 when I was a teenager, I met a girl who happened to be Catholic and we began talking. When she realized that I was Jewish, she blurted out indignantly “you killed our Lord”. I was taken aback, but managed to respond “I never even met him”.

As foreign and erroneous as that sounds to Catholics and other Christians today, that had been the teaching of many Christian Churches for almost 2000 years. It went along with the teaching that all Jews were cursed for their deicide and failure to accept Jesus as the messiah, and that God had revoked the covenant with the Jews and superseded it with the “New Covenant” with the Christians.

It was not until the Second Vatican Council convened by “caretaker Pope” John xxiii that these teachings were drastically and forever changed. Good Pope John wanted a positive statement on the Jews and Judaism- but it wasn’t easy to obtain. There was strong resistance from conservative bishops and from the Arab bishops.

Additionally changing the interpretation of Scripture and content of the mass and prayer were difficult tasks. American bishops Cushing and Spellman joined liberal Europeans- some of whom were Jewish converts who later became priests.

They developed a way to make the changes and drafted paragraph 4-re the Jews in “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non- Christian Religions” also known as Nostra Aetate- “in our time”. It was the most debated and among the last to be approved.

Although not specifically stated, it recognized that the previous teachings of the Church helped prepare the seedbed for the attempted genocide of Christian Europe’s Jews during WWII.

We believe that Popes John and Paul (who followed through after John’s death) were truly doing God’s work (Christians would say that they were imbued with the Holy Spirit). They are considered heroes by the Jewish people.

Nostra Aetate: and later follow ups

1. Unequivocally affirmed the eternal Covenant between God and the Jews
2. Clearly stated that most Jews then and none now are guilty for the death of Jesus
3. As the Jews are not guilty of deicide they are not a people cursed by God doomed to wander the earth without a homeland.
4. The Church decried anti-Semitism and persecution of Jews at any time by anyone.

The 15 sentences in Paragraph 4 in Nostra Aetate, were revolutionary in changing the relationship between the Jews and the Catholic Church. It initiated a dialogue that in the past 50 years has reversed the preceding 2000 years.

Pope John Paul II continued and deepened the dialogue and positive relationship and now **Our** Pope Francis has championed interfaith dialogue as an important mission.

We do consider him **Our** Pope- I’ve asked before “Are you sure that he isn’t Jewish?”

Holocaust survivor, Judy Meisel, during her visit last year, thanked God for Francis- for his humility, his emphasis on both acts of loving kindness and social justice- especially for the poor.

We Jews celebrate his 20 year close friendship with Rabbi Abraham Skorka in Buenos Aires when Francis-i.e., Bergoglio was the archbishop. They shared a radio program and then co-authored a book in 2010, “On Heaven and Earth” Their work together was founded first in friendship, affection and brotherhood. His relationship with the Jews of Argentina was a different model- based on warmth and closeness rather than formal and intellectual

Francis sees dialogue as “an opening of the heart”, a “vulnerability”. It then can produce change. Skorka says that Francis doesn’t consider himself an expert on everything. He expects his partner in dialogue to have something of value to teach him. He talks of building a connection to God through respecting your neighbor. In their dialogue they search for common ground without compromising their different identities and core beliefs.

Some areas of common ground include Francis’ frequent reference to life as a “journey”- a concept often stated in Jewish prayers. In “Joy of the Gospel’” he reinforces all Christians responsibility for building a better world, what we in Judaism call- “Tikkun Olam”- repair of the world. In “Joy”, he stresses social justice for the poor.Francis quotes Hebrew scripture about righteousness and mercy along with almsgiving as atoning for sin- all Jewish concepts – prominent in our Atonement prayers.

Pope Francis continues his close friendship with Rabbi Skorka, taking him on his trip to the Holy Land. He also hosted Skorka in his apartment in Rome during our Fall Holidays where he provided Kosher food. Skorka gave the Jewish prayers before the meal – in Hebrew and English. Francis gave the prayers after the meal.

In “Joy,” Francis reinforces the concepts in Nostra Aetate that Judaism is one of the sacred roots of Christian identity and mentions our common beliefs about shared ethics. He offers his own apologies for the persecutions that Jews have suffered- especially those involving Christians.

We Jews consider Pope Francis as our brother and partner in creating a better world for all.