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20th Anniversary of the Vatican Document on the Shoah (Holocaust)

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20th Anniversary of the Vatican Document on the *Shoah* (Holocaust)

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20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE VATICAN DOCUMENT ON THE *SHOAH* (HOLOCAUST)

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Anniversaries are important occasions to render thanks for milestones of the past and for a reassessment ordered toward the future. What have we learned in the meantime as we prepare for the challenges that lie ahead?

In a recent address to participants in a Conference on the Responsibility of States, Institutions and Individuals to Fight Anti-Semitic Hate Crimes, Pope Francis drew attention to “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah” (March 16, 1998). Among his remarks he stated that “we need a common memory, living and faithful, that should not remain imprisoned in resentment but, though riven by the night of pain, should open up to the hope of a new dawn.”¹ This imagery recalls the trilogy of Eli Wiesel with the French titles *Night, Dawn and Day* (English title “The Accident”), rooted in the Biblical invitation to accept God’s call to move from darkness to light. As Christians continue to develop a positive relationship with the Jewish people, we learn as well to grapple with new forms of anti-Jewish bigotry.

Returning to the theme of indifference that he has stressed other occasions, the Pope exhorted all people of good will “to grow a culture of responsibility, of memory and of closeness, and to establish an alliance against indifference.” The younger generations must be educated “to become actively involved in the struggle against hatred and discrimination, but also in the overcoming of conflicting positions in the past.”² This theme of education is the main reason for the document on the Holocaust.

The Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued “We Remember” as the fulfillment of a promise made by Pope John Paul II in Miami during the papal visit to the United States in 1987. Like the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the third instruction by this Commission was presented for Catholics throughout the world. The focus this time was to instruct them about the horrendous manifestation of human wickedness in the Nazi persecution of the Jewish people. “The fact that the *Shoah* took place in Europe, that is, in countries of long-standing Christian civilization, raises the question of the relation between the Nazi persecution and the attitudes down the centuries of Christians toward the Jews.”³ The text should be studied in the context of the statements made by the Catholic Bishops of eight countries between 1994 and 1998.⁴ Each nation in continental Europe has a particular history that complements the experience of the Holy See. The messages of Pope St. John Paul II have a special pertinence because of his personal memories of the Second World War.⁵ The intra-eclesial conference in the Vatican on Anti-Judaism in the Christian Environment (October 31-

¹ Francis, “Address of his Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the International Conference on the Responsibility of States, Institutions and Individuals to Fight Anti-Semitic Hate Crimes,” Vatican Website, January 29, 2018, accessed April 12, 2018, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/january/documents/papa-francesco_20180129_lotta-antisemitismo.html. A description of the conference held in Rome on January 29, 2018 may be of interest and found on the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Website at www.osce.org/chairmanship/368071, accessed April 12, 2018.

² Ibid.

³ *Catholics Remember the Holocaust* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998) p. 49.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 7-40.

⁵ See the collection of his statements on Catholic-Jewish relations in Eugene Fisher and Leon Klenicki, *The Saint for Shalom: How Pope John Paul II Transformed Catholic-Jewish Relations: The Complete Texts 1979-2005* (New York: Crossroad, 2011).

November 2, 1997) contributed to a review of the background within the life of the Church for this document and helped to prepare for the Church's commemoration of the Jubilee year 2000, but it seems to have received little attention among educators.⁶

"We Remember" was presented by Edward Cardinal Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, which houses the Commission of Religious Relations with the Jews; he held this position from 1990-2001. As with the Council's Declaration of the Church's Relationship to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra aetate*),⁷ texts addressed to Catholics received much careful and critical attention in the Jewish community. No text, whether long or short, can deal with all dimensions of the *Shoah* which would enhance the education of Catholics, let alone meet approval from the Jewish community and its leaders.⁸ The purpose of "We Remember" was to help Catholic teachers through the world, including those whose history and geography is far from Europe, to learn the spirit in which the Second Vatican Council's teaching about the Jewish people and their faith is to be taken into the liturgy and moral stance of the Church.

As Ms. Judith Banki, a veteran member of the American Jewish Committee remarked, all who read this text see that the Church contradicts deniers of the *Shoah*. When Pope John Paul II met with the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, the latter expressed doubt about the *Shoah*. The Pope replied: "I was there!"⁹

The incorporation of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Church's relation to the Jewish people into the life of Catholic Christians is reviewed in the Commission's Reflection for the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra aetate*, issued on December 10, 2015. "The dark and terrible shadow of the *Shoah* over Europe during the Nazi period led the Church to reflect anew on her bond with the Jewish people."¹⁰ The documents of the Second Vatican Council were not frank to acknowledge this shadow as were declarations of the World Council of Churches in 1948 (Amsterdam) and 1961 (New Delhi). The first Commission document to deal with the *Shoah* is "We Remember," which is recalled in the fiftieth anniversary Reflection "The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable," along with Pope John Paul II's hope that the 1998 text would "help to heal the wounds of past misunderstandings and injustices. May

⁶ Georges Cottier (ed), *Radici Dell'Antigiudaismo in Ambiente Cristiano* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000). See Cardinal Etchegaray's preface (my translation from French).

⁷ Paul VI, *Nostra aetate* [Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions], Vatican Website, October 28, 1965, accessed April 12, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

⁸ Cardinal Cassidy reviewed the history of *Nostra aetate* and its subsequent developments in his book, *Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue: Unitatis Redintegratio, Nostra Aetate* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2005) pp. 201-207 and in his autobiographical book, *My Years in Vatican Service* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2009) pp. 154-156.

⁹ The text of Cardinal Cassidy's "Reflections Regarding the Vatican's Statement on the *Shoah*," originally published in *Origins*, is included in *Catholics Remember the Holocaust*, pp. 61-76. See also Don Clemmer, "'We Remember' Holocaust statement turns 20," *OSV Newsweekly*, Our Sunday Visitor Website, February 28, 2018, accessed April 12, 2018, <https://www.osv.com/TheChurch/Article/TabId/563/ArtMID/13751/ArticleID/24299/'We-Remember'-Holocaust-statement-turns-20.aspx>.

¹⁰ Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "'The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable' (Rom 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, No. 4," Vatican Website, December 10, 2015, para. #1, accessed April 12, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20151210_ebraismo-nostra-aetate_en.html.

it enable memory to play its necessary part in the process of shaping a future in which the unspeakable iniquity of the *Shoah* will never again be possible.”¹¹

In Judaism and Catholicism twenty years is a short period in history. However, this anniversary should become an occasion for educators in the Church to evaluate the degree of success that has been achieved in instructing the future generation of Catholic leaders. In 2001 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued *Catholic Teaching on the Shoah: Implementing the Holy See's "We Remember"* (Washington, D.C.: NCCB, 2001). It points to Pope St. John Paul's pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 2000 and his commemoration of the *Shoah*. In some places, from universities and seminaries to secondary levels of Catholic schools, teachers have made great efforts to introduce "Holocaust and Genocide Education" to youth. In the United States the legislation in five states (New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Florida) requires that educators be qualified to offer this perspective in public schools. Several universities offer programs to provide this foundation in the undergraduate and graduate levels. The challenge remains for people of good will to combat the upsurging of new forms of antisemitism in many parts of the world.

In naïve enthusiasm some people have suggested that the concerted and continuing efforts of Christians over the past seventy years should bring an end to anti-Jewish bigotry. But Christian anti-Judaism is only one form of this protean monster! Indeed, Christians must strive to teach that the Church's relationship with the Jewish people and their tri-millennial faith is integral to our own faith and its practice. This positive heritage should prevail over Christians' assessment of the part that religious leaders in Jerusalem played in the trials of Jesus.

This manifestation of mutual goodwill between Christians and Jews also demands that we stand together to unmask all forms of anti-Jewish bigotry in our time. Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin have rendered an important service in the revised edition of *Why the Jews? The Reason for Antisemitism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).¹²

In 2001 the Pontifical Biblical Commission published *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*. The preface to this book-length document is by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. He notes:

In its work, the Biblical Commission could not ignore the contemporary context, where the shock of the Shoah has put the whole question under a new light. Two main problems are posed: Can Christians, after all that has happened, still claim in good conscience to be the legitimate heirs of Israel's Bible? Have they the right to propose a Christian interpretation of this Bible, or should they not instead, respectfully and humbly, renounce any claim that, in the light of what has happened, must look like a usurpation? The second question follows from the first: In its presentation of the Jews and the Jewish people, has not the New Testament itself contributed to creating a hostility towards the Jewish people that provided a support for the ideology of those who wished to destroy Israel? The Commission set about addressing those

¹¹ *Catholics Remember the Shoah* p. 43. See also the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah," Vatican Website, accessed April 12, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html.

¹² See also John Mann, *Antisemitism: The Oldest Hatred* (London: Bloomsburg, 2015). The collector of this panoply of messages spanning several centuries is the Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group against Antisemitism in England.

two questions. It is clear that a Christian rejection of the Old Testament would not only put an end to Christianity itself as indicated above, but, in addition, would prevent the fostering of positive relations between Christians and Jews, precisely because they would lack common ground. In the light of what has happened, what ought to emerge now is a new respect for the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament. On this subject, the Document says two things. First it declares that “the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Scriptures of the Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading, which developed in parallel fashion” (no. 22). It adds that Christians can learn a great deal from a Jewish exegesis practised for more than 2000 years; in return, Christians may hope that Jews can profit from Christian exegetical research (*ibid.*). I think this analysis will prove useful for the pursuit of Judeo-Christian dialogue, as well as for the interior formation of Christian consciousness.¹³

Cardinal Cassidy’s successor, Walter Cardinal Kasper pointed to “We Remember” when he offered Reflections for the Fourth European Day of Jewish Culture under the title “Antisemitism: A Wound to be Healed”.¹⁴ The attitude prevalent in the Church “offered a favorable context for the spread of modern antisemitism.”¹⁵ Kasper continued that because the roots of such hatred “can be ascribed to both Western and Eastern Christendom, a combined ecumenical action is called for today.” Not waiting for this laudable examination of conscience to be made jointly by all Christian communities, Pope John Paul II led the Church of Rome to make this act of repentance on behalf of Catholics on March 12, 2000 in St. Peter’s Basilica. Then the petition for divine forgiveness was taken by the Pope to Jerusalem and the Western Wall on March 26th during his pilgrimage.¹⁶ Those texts of prayer, speech and gesture had a profound impact on those who saw reports of the pilgrimage, especially among Protestant communities in northern Europe. The Evangelical Sisters of Darmstadt organized a pilgrimage to Jerusalem from April 17-22, 2001, with the title “Changing the Future by Confronting the Past.” More than 700 Christians from 25 countries were participants in the events, culminating with a repentance service on Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day.

These events and the quiet work of communities and individuals of good will provide signs of hope that teaching about the *Shoah* and a new climate in Christian-Jewish relations are having an impact on large segments of society in many places. However, the counter-signs are blatant in other times and places!

¹³ The Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,” Vatican Website, accessed April 12, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html. A paper text is available from Pauline Book (Boston, 2002).

¹⁴ Walter Kasper, *Anti-semitism: A wound to be healed* [Reflections for the Fourth European Day of Jewish Culture], Vatican Website, January 10, 2003, accessed April 12, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20030908_kasper-antisemitismo_en.html. Cardinal Kasper also drew attention to the document of the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace in “The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society,” *The Catholic Lawyer*: Vol. 32: No. 4, Article 2. This article is available on St. John’s University Website, accessed April 12, 2018, <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/tcl/vol32/iss4/2>.

¹⁵ See *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, edited by Tivka Frymer-Kensky and others (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000) for a dialogue on this and related topics between Jewish and Christian scholars in the United States.

¹⁶ Lawrence Boadt and Kevin di Camillo (ed) *John Paul II in the Holy Land: In His Own Words: With Christian and Jewish Perspectives by Yehezkel Landau and Michael McGarry, CSP* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2005) pp. 98-101.

Prayer and vigilance are needed to offer the response that manifests the commitment by people of good will everywhere.