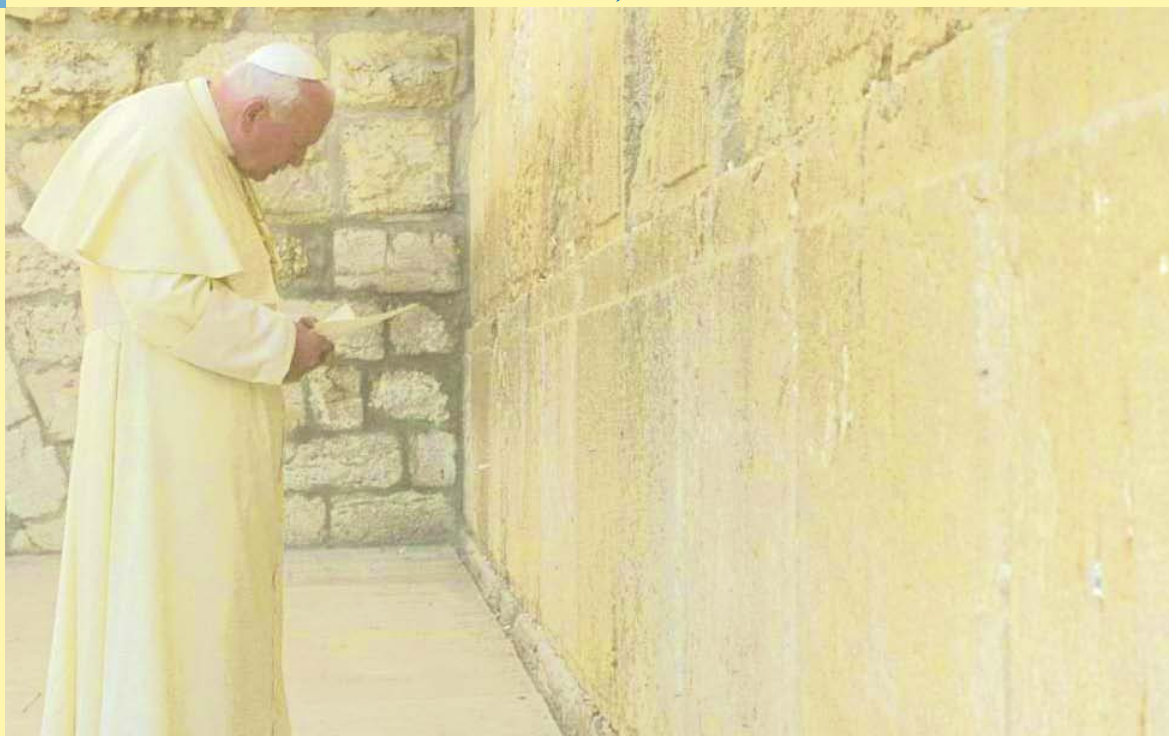


POPE JOHN PAUL II



VISIT TO JORDAN, ISRAEL
AND THE
PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY:
A PILGRIMAGE OF PRAYER,
HOPE AND
RECONCILIATION





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by
Rabbi Leon Klenicki

Introduction by
Abraham H. Foxman



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.

Jerusalem, 26 March 2000

Joannes Paulus II

INTRODUCTION

Pope John Paul II of blessed memory was a man of God deeply concerned about people and the world. He was sensitive to the other person of faith, especially to Jews and the Jewish people. Since his youth in Poland, he had related to Jews who were his neighbors and friends. Interested in the religious heritage of Judaism, he condemned anti-Semitism in all of its manifestations. His prayer at Auschwitz in the days of the communist domination recognized Jewish martyrdom under the Nazis, a reality denied by the Polish Communist government, indifferent to the destiny of the Jewish people.

His visits to Israel and the synagogue in Rome were gestures of friendship and spiritual support. His trip to Jerusalem in the year 2000 fulfilled his dream of many years to pray at holy Christian places as well as at the Wall where he placed a message following the Jewish tradition. His words at the Mass and the message placed in the Wall reflected the Pontiff's recognition of and remorse for Jewish suffering at the hands of Christians. It was the same text requesting forgiveness from the Jewish people that he had declaimed at a Mass on March 12, the first Sunday of Lent, except for one significant difference. During the Mass, John Paul asked for forgiveness "through Christ our Lord." He deleted this phrase from the message he left in the Wall, a demonstration of his respect for Jewish sensibilities.

The Pope's visit to Yad Vashem was a moment of great personal anguish. He prayed silently and, in moving words, spoke with survivors who had lived in his neighborhood before being deported to Auschwitz. They spoke Polish with the Pope and many wept and embraced him. It showed the world a united front against the horror and possibilities of evil.

Pope John Paul II's outreach to the Jewish Community will remain part of his legacy. Pope Benedict XVI has indicated in his meetings with Jewish leadership and his visit to the Cologne synagogue that the unique interfaith testimony of John Paul II will continue and deepen in its meaning and obligations. The new Pope is interested in the theological conversation as well as in the social concerns of both communities.

This publication includes selected passages from the speeches and presentations made during Pope John Paul II's visit to Israel and the Middle East compiled by Rabbi Leon Klenicki, Director Emeritus of Interfaith Affairs of the Anti-Defamation League. The selected texts are of special interest to Jewish readers and all those interested in Christian-Jewish dialogue and are supplemented by Rabbi Klenicki's comments and explanations.

We hope that the message of Pope John Paul II will inspire the Catholic-Jewish dialogue, supported by the commitment of Pope Benedict XVI to witness God together in a world in need of spiritual strength and faith.

Abraham H. Foxman
National Director

POPE JOHN PAUL II VISIT TO JORDAN, ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY: A PILGRIMAGE OF PRAYER, HOPE AND RECONCILIATION

By Rabbi Leon Klenicki

As no other Pope in history, Pope John Paul II will be forever recognized as the Pilgrim of Peace and the Apostle of Reconciliation to the whole world. Strong and vital, sick and frail, he visited innumerable countries, bringing with him a spirituality cherished by Catholics and much appreciated by those who were neither Catholic nor even Christian. Wherever he went, he preached the Word of God, sharing his experience of God's Presence, projecting the example of a committed religious life in an ideologically stormy and complicated spiritual time. His visit to the Middle East was such a testimony of faith and spirituality for all.

Pope John Paul II and the Centrality of Pilgrimage in the Time of the Great Jubilee

Pope John II's trip to the Middle East was a pilgrimage framed within the context of the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus — the Great Jubilee. The sacred experience of a pilgrimage was of special significance to Pope John Paul II's spirituality. In his letter of June 29, 1999, "Concerning Pilgrimage to the Places Linked to the History of Salvation," he stresses the unique meaning of the Promised Land:

In relation to this common religious tendency, the Bible offers its own specific message, setting the theme of "sacred space" within the context of the history of salvation. On the one hand, Scripture warns against the inherent risks of defining space of this kind, when this is done as a way of divinizing nature: here we should recall the powerful anti-idolatrous polemic of the Prophets in the name of fidelity in Yahweh, the God of the Exodus. On the other hand, the Bible does not exclude a cultic use of space, in so far as this expresses fully the particularity of God's intervention in the history of Israel. Sacred space is thus gradually "concentrated" in the Jerusalem Temple, where the God of Israel wishes to be honored and, in a sense, be encountered. The eyes of Israelite pilgrims turn to the Temple and great is their joy when they reach the place where God has made his home: "I rejoiced when I heard them say. 'Let us go to God's house.' And now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!" (Psalms 122: 1-2).

John Paul II envisions his trip as a numinous moment, saying:

It is in this spirit, God willing, that I intend on the occasion of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 to follow the traces of the history of salvation in the land in which it took place.

The starting point will be certain key places of the Old Testament. In this way I wish to express the Church's awareness of her irrevocable links with the ancient people of the Covenant. For us too Abraham is our "Father in faith" *par excellence* (cf. Romans 4; Galatians 3:6-9; Hebrews 11:8-19). In the Gospel of John we read the words which one day Christ said of him: "Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad" (8:56).

The first stage of the journey which I hope to make is linked to Abraham. In fact, if it be God's Will, I would like to go to Ur of the Chaldees, the present-day Tell el-Muqayyar in southern Iraq, the city where, according to the biblical account, Abraham heard the word of the Lord which took him away from his own land, from his people, from himself in a sense, to make him the instrument of a plan of salvation which embraced the future people of the Covenant and indeed all the peoples of the world: "The Lord said to Abraham, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. . . . By you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves' " (Genesis 12:1-3).

With these words, the great journey of the People of God began. It is not only those who boast physical descent from him who look to Abraham, but also all those, and they are countless, who regard themselves as his "spiritual" offspring, because they share his faith and unreserved abandonment to the saving initiative of the Almighty.

The Pope describes the unique experience of the Jewish people, God's Call, the Exodus, and the Land:

The experience of the people of Abraham unfolded over hundreds of years, touching many places in the Near East. At the heart of this experience there are the events of the Exodus, when the people of Israel, after the hard trial of slavery, went forth under the leadership of Moses towards the Land of freedom. These moments mark that journey, each of them linked to mountainous places charged with mystery. There rises first of all, in the early stage, Mount Horeb, as Sinai is sometimes called in the Bible, where Moses received the revelation of God's name, the sign of His mystery and of His powerful saving presence: "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14). No less than Abraham, Moses was asked to entrust himself to God's plan, and to put himself at the head of his people. Thus began the dramatic event of the liberation, which Israel would always remember as the founding experience of its faith.

John Paul II also refers to Christian relations with the Jewish people:

While this focus on the Holy Land expresses the Christian duty to remember, it also seeks to honor the deep bond which Christians continue to have with the

Jewish people from whom Christ came according to the flesh (cf. Romans 9:5). Much ground has been covered in recent years, especially since the Second Vatican Council, in opening a fruitful dialogue with the people whom God chose as the first recipients of His promises and of the Covenant. The Jubilee must be another opportunity to deepen the sense of the bonds that unite us, helping to remove once and for all the misunderstandings which, sad to say, have so often through the centuries marked with bitterness the relationship between Christians and Jews.

He also addresses the political realities in the region:

Nor can we forget that the Holy Land is also dear to the followers of Islam, who look to it with special veneration. I dearly hope that my visit to the Holy Places will provide an opportunity to meet them as well, so that, without compromising clarity of witness, there may be a strengthening of the grounds for mutual understanding and esteem, as well as for cooperation in the effort to witness to the value of religious commitment and the longing for a society more attuned to God's designs, a society which respects every human being and all creation.

His letter ends with a hope for unity:

In this journey through the places where God chose to pitch his "tent" among us, great is my desire to be welcomed as a pilgrim and brother not only by the Catholic communities, whom I shall meet with special joy, but also by the other Churches which have lived uninterruptedly in the Holy Places and have been their custodians with fidelity and love of the Lord.

More than any other pilgrimage which I have made, the one I am about to undertake in the Holy Land during the Jubilee event will be marked by the desire expressed in Christ's prayer to the Father that his disciples "may all be one" (John 17:21), a prayer which challenges us more vigorously at the exceptional time which opens the Third Millennium. For this reason, I trust that all our brothers and sisters in faith, in a spirit of openness to the Holy Spirit, will see in my pilgrim steps in the land traveled by Christ a "doxology" for the salvation which we have all received, and I would be happy if we could gather together in the places of our common origin, to bear witness to Christ our unity (cf. *Ut. Unum Sint*, 23) and to confirm our mutual commitment to the restoration of full communion.

Memory and Reconciliation as a Prelude to Pope John Paul II's Visit to Israel

Pope John Paul II's visit to Israel was the culmination of decades of Catholic soul-searching into the tumultuous history of the Church in relationship to Judaism, and the Jewish people.

On March 12, 2000, Pope John Paul II issued a document prepared by the Holy See International Theological Commission called “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past.” The document deals with faults of the Church vis-à-vis religious and human rights. It asks forgiveness for past sins of members of the Catholic Church and Catholic institutions, including Christians’ treatment of Jews. On that day in March, the first Sunday of Lent, Pope John Paul II celebrated Mass with the Cardinals. He recognized that wrongs had been done to the Jewish people and asked forgiveness for the sins, past and present, of the sons and daughters of the Church. The emphasis was on the sins of the members of the Church, rather than the Church itself. Pope John Paul II wanted this document to be a powerful sign in the Jubilee Year, which for the Catholic commitment is a moment of spiritual renewal.

During the Mass, John Paul II stated:

As the successor of Peter, I asked that in this year of mercy, the Church, strong in the holiness which she received from her Lord, should kneel before God and implore forgiveness for the past and present sins of her sons and daughters. All have sinned and none can claim forgiveness before God (cf. 1 Kings 8:46).... Christians are invited to acknowledge, before God and before those offended by their actions, the faults which they have committed. Let them do so without seeking anything in return, but strengthened only by the “love of God which has been poured into our hearts” (Romans 5:5).

The idea of forgiveness is an important dimension of Pope John Paul II’s pastoral teaching. In the 1980 document, *Dives in Misericordia* (“Rich in Mercy”), the Pope declared:

Forgiveness demonstrates the presence in the world of the love which is more powerful than sin. Forgiveness is also the fundamental condition for reconciliation, not only in the relationship of God with man, but also in relationship between people. A world from which forgiveness was eliminated would be nothing but a world of cold and unfeeling justice, in the name of which each person would claim his or her own rights vis-à-vis others.

In 1984, John Paul II reminded his fellow Catholics of the value of forgiveness in the relationship with God in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (“Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church Today”) when he wrote:

It must be emphasized that the most precious result of the forgiveness obtained in the sacrament of penance consists in reconciliation with God, which takes place in the inmost heart of the son who was lost and found again, which every penitent is. But it has to be added that this reconciliation with God leads, as it were, to other reconciliations which repair the breaches caused by sin. The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being, where he regains his own true identi-

ty. He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way attacked, and wounded. He is reconciled with the Church. He is reconciled with all creation.

In his commentary on a collection of the writings and speeches of John Paul II, Greg Burke examined the Pope's concept of forgiveness:

In his 1997 *Message for Peace*, "Offer Forgiveness and Receive Peace," the Pope said that offering and accepting forgiveness are essential conditions for authentic peace. He admits that forgiveness — either asking for it or getting it — can seem contrary to human instinct, in which revenge often prevails: "But forgiveness is inspired by the logic of love, that love which God has for every man and woman, for every people and nation, and for the whole human family." If the Church dares proclaim what from a human standpoint might appear to be sheer folly, it is because of her confidence in God's intimate love and mercy.¹

Pope John Paul II's mission to make his trip to the Middle East a pilgrimage of prayer, peace, and reconciliation was evident when he visited Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority. This was not merely an opportunity to sightsee; it was a pastoral, spiritual visit, a testimony of faith. He did not, however, disregard the political dimensions of his visit. John Paul II had this trip in mind for many years and projected its unique spiritual dimensions in many of his writings.

For the Pope, the commemoration of the Jubilee was a question of memory and repentance, entailing a process called in Catholic theology, a "conversion of the heart," which would lead to a reconciliation of all religious people. This belief was evident in his remarks to King Abdullah of Jordan during his visit to that country.

The Pilgrimage to Jordan

On March 20, 2000, Pope John Paul II arrived in Jordan where he began his weeklong visit to the Holy Land. At the welcoming ceremony at the Queen Alia Airport in Aman, the Pope greeted the people of Jordan, saying:

In a spirit of profound respect and friendship, I offer greetings to all who live in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the members of the Catholic Church and the other Christian Churches, the Muslim people whom we followers of Jesus Christ hold in high esteem, and all men and women of good will.

My visit to your country and the entire journey which I am beginning today is part of the religious Jubilee Pilgrimage which I am making to commemorate the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ. From the beginning of my ministry as Bishop of Rome, I have had a real desire to mark this event by praying in some of

the places linked to salvation history — places that speak to us of that moment's long preparation through biblical times, places where our Lord Jesus Christ actually lived, or which are connected with his work of redemption. My spirit first turns to Ur of the Chaldeans where Abraham's journey of faith began. I have already been to Egypt and Mount Sinai, where God revealed his name to Moses and entrusted to him the tablets of the Law of the Covenant.

Today I am in Jordan, a land familiar to me from the Holy Scriptures: a land sanctified by the presence of Jesus himself, by the presence of Moses, Elijah and John the Baptist, and of saints and martyrs of the early Church. Yours is a land noted for its hospitality and openness to all. These are qualities of the Jordanian people which I have experienced many times in conversations with the late King Hussein, and which were confirmed anew in my meeting with Your Majesty at the Vatican in September last year.

The Pope addressed the King, saying:

Your Majesty, I know how deeply concerned you are for peace in your own land and in the entire region, and how important it is to you that all Jordanians — Muslims and Christians — should consider themselves as one people and one family. In this area of the world there are grave and urgent issues of justice, of the rights of peoples and nations, which have to be resolved in the good of all concerned and as a condition for lasting peace. No matter how difficult, no matter how long, the process of seeking peace must continue. Without peace, there can be no authentic development for this region, no better life for its peoples, no brighter future for its children. That is why Jordan's proven commitment to securing the conditions necessary for peace is so important and praiseworthy.

The Papal concern for peace was an invitation to ecumenical and interfaith cooperation, and he told the King:

Building a future of peace requires an ever more mature understanding and ever more practical cooperation among the peoples who acknowledge the one true, indivisible God, the Creator of all that exists. The three historical monotheistic religions count peace, goodness and respect for the human person among their highest values. I earnestly hope that my visit will strengthen the already fruitful Christian-Muslim dialogue which is being conducted in Jordan, particularly through the Royal Interfaith Institute.

The Catholic Church, without forgetting that her primary mission is a spiritual one, is always eager to cooperate with individual nations and people of goodwill in promoting and advancing the dignity of the human person. She does this partic-

ularly in her schools and educational programs, and through her charitable and social institutions. Your noble tradition of respect for all religions guarantees the religious freedom which makes this possible, and which is in fact a fundamental human right. When this is so, all citizens feel themselves equal, and each one, inspired by his own spiritual convictions, can contribute to the building up of society as the shared home of all.²

From the very beginning of his pilgrimage, Pope John Paul II expressed his concern for peace. On March 21, during Mass in a soccer stadium in Amman, Jordan, he spoke to 20,000 Jordanian Catholics. The Mass was celebrated shortly before Pope John Paul II departed for Israel. The emphasis of his homily was on unity and friendship.

The Pope noted that, over the past five years, “the church in this region has been celebrating the pastoral Synod of the churches in the Holy Land. All the Catholic churches together have walked with Jesus and heard his call anew.” The Pope said that “the Synod had made clear that your future lies in unity and solidarity.” He prayed that the Synod “will bring a strengthening of the bonds of fellowship and cooperation between the local Catholic communities in all their rich variety, between all the Christian churches and ecclesial communities, and between Christians and the other great religions which flourish here.”

Pope John Paul II began his homily with a quote from Isaiah 40:3:

“A voice cries out. In the wilderness prepare ye the way of the Lord! Make straight in the desert a highway for our God!”

The words of the Prophet Isaiah, which the Evangelist applies to John the Baptist, remind us of the path which God has traced through time in his desire to teach and save his people. Today, as part of my Jubilee Pilgrimage to pray in some of the places connected with God’s saving interventions, Divine Providence has brought me to Jordan. I greet His Beatitude Michael Sabbah and thank him for his kind words of welcome. I cordially embrace the Greek Melkite Exarch Georges El-Murr and all the members of the Assembly of the Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land, as well as the representatives of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities. I am grateful to the civil authorities who have wished to honor our celebration with their presence.

The Successor of Peter is a pilgrim in his land blessed by the presence of Moses and Elijah, where Jesus himself taught and worked miracles (cf. Mark 10:1, John 10:40-42), where the early Church bore witness in the lives of many saints and martyrs. In this year of the Great Jubilee the whole Church, and especially today the Christian community of Jordan, are spiritually united in a pilgrimage to the origins of our faith, a pilgrimage of conversion and penance, of reconciliation and peace.

The Pope then spoke of John the Baptist:

We look for a guide to show us the way. And there comes to meet us the figure of John the Baptist, a voice that cries in the wilderness (cf. Luke 3:4). He will set us on the road that we must take if our eyes are to “see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:6). Guided by him, we make our journey of faith, in order to see more clearly the salvation which God has accomplished through a history stretching back to Abraham. John the Baptist was the last of the line of Prophets who kept alive and nurtured the hope of God’s People. In him the time of fulfillment was at hand.

Pope John Paul II continued, speaking of Abraham and God’s Call, of Moses and Mount Sinai, and the Prophets and their “defense of the law and the covenant against those who set human rules and regulations above God’s Will and therefore imposed a new slavery upon the people.”

The Pope then referred to the work of the Catholic Church in the area:

During the last five years, the Church in this region has been celebrating the Pastoral Synod of the Churches in the Holy Land.

...The Synod has made clear that your future lies in unity and solidarity. I pray today, and I invite the whole Church to pray with me, that the Synod’s work will bring a strengthening of the bonds of fellowship and cooperation between the local Catholic communities in all their rich variety, between all the Christian churches and ecclesial Communities, and between Christians and the other great religions which flourish here.³

Pope John Paul II Visit to the Palestinian Authority

On March 22, John Paul II met with Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat and other officials. He described Bethlehem as “a universal crossroads where all people can meet to build together a world worthy of our human dignity and destiny.”

Speaking at the site of the birth of Jesus, he said:

People everywhere turn to this unique corner of the earth with a hope that transcends all conflicts and difficulties. Bethlehem — where the choir of Angels sang “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men” (Luke 2:14) — stands out, in every place and in every age, as the promise of God’s gift of peace. The message of Bethlehem is the Good News of reconciliation among men, of peace at every level of relations between individuals and nations. Bethlehem is a universal crossroads where all people can meet to build together a world worthy of our human dignity and destiny. The recently inaugurated Museum of the Nativity shows how the celebration of Christ’s Birth has become a part of the culture and art of peoples in all parts of the world.

He ended his message with a hope for peace:

Dear Friends, I am fully aware of the great challenges facing the Palestinian Authority and People in every field of economic and cultural development. In a particular way my prayers are with those Palestinians — Muslims and Christian — who are still without a home of their own, their proper place in society and the possibility of a normal working life. My hope is that my visit today to the Deheisha Refugee Camp will serve to remind the international community that decisive action is needed to improve the situation of the Palestinian people. I was particularly pleased at the unanimous acceptance by the United Nations of the Resolution on Bethlehem 2000, which commits the international community to help in developing this area and in improving conditions of peace and reconciliation in one of the most cherished and significant places on earth.

The promise of peace made at Bethlehem will become a reality for the world only when the dignity and rights of all human beings made in the image of God (cf. Genesis 1:26) are acknowledged and respected.

Today and always the Palestinian people are in my prayers to the One who holds the destiny of the world in his hands. May the Most High God enlighten, sustain and guide in the path of peace the whole Palestinian people!⁴

Pope John Paul II's Mass in Bethlehem

On March 22, the Pope fulfilled a long-time dream to celebrate Mass at the cave of the Nativity. In his homily, he continued to spread his message of peace and good will to all humanity:

Today we look back to one moment 2,000 years ago, but in spirit we embrace all time. We gather in one place, but we encompass the whole earth. We celebrate one newborn Child, but we embrace all men and women everywhere. Today from Manger Square, we cry out to every time and place and to every person, "Peace be with you! Do not be afraid!"⁵

Pope John Paul II in Israel

The Pope's visit to Israel was part of his and the Church's Jubilee Year commitment. It was also recognition of the centrality of the Promised Land in the life of the Jewish people and Judaism. This is a fundamental concept in Judaism expressed in the Bible, Rabbinic theology, the Prayer Book, and Jewish religious thought of centuries.

Christianity is well aware of the relationship of the Promised Land in the covenantal experience of Judaism. Documents from the American and French Bishops have made reference to the special attention to the close relationship of the State of Israel and the Jewish people.

In November 1975, a document issued by the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops points out:

In dialogue with Christians, Jews have explained that they do not consider themselves a church, a sect, or a denomination, as in the case among Christian communities, but rather as a people that is not solely racial, ethnic, or religious, but in a sense of composite of all these. It is for such reasons that an overwhelming majority of Jews see themselves bound in one way or another to the Land of Israel. Most Jews see this tie to the Land as essential to their Jewishness. Whatever difficulties Christians may experience in sharing this view, they should strive to understand this link between Land and People which Jews have expressed in their writings and worship throughout two millennia as a longing for the assent to any particular religious interpretation of this bond. Nor is this affirmation meant to deny the legitimate rights of other parties in the region, or to adopt any political stance in the controversy over the Middle East, which lies beyond the purview of this statement.

In 1977, the French Bishops issued a document, “Declaration of Repentance,” that takes a broader view, discussing theological and political implications:

The dispersion of the Jewish people should be understood in the light of its history. Though Jewish tradition considers the trials and exile of the people as a punishment for infidelities (Jeremiah 13:17; 20:21-23), it is nonetheless true that, since the time when Jeremiah addressed his letter to the exiles in Babylon (29:1-23), the life of the Jewish people in the Diaspora has also held a positive meaning. Throughout its trials, the Jewish people have been called to “sanctify the name” amid the nations of the world. Christians must constantly combat the anti-Jewish and Manichean temptations to regard the Jewish people as accursed, under the pretext of its constant persecutions. According to the testimony of Scripture (Isaiah 53:2-12), being subjected to persecutions is often an effect and reminder of the prophetic vocation.

Today, more than ever, it is difficult to pronounce a well-considered theological opinion on the return of the Jewish people to “its” land. In this context, we Christians must first of all not forget the gift, once made by God to the people of Israel, of a land where it was called to be reunited (cf. Genesis 12:7; 26:3-4, 28:13, Isaiah 43:5-7; Jeremiah 16:15).

Throughout history, Jewish experience has always been divided between life among the nations and the wish for national existence on that land. This aspiration poses numerous problems even to Jews. To understand it, as well as all dimensions of the resulting discussion, Christians must not be carried away by interpretations that would ignore the forms of Jewish communal and religious life, or by political positions that, though generous, are nonetheless hastily arrived at.

Christians must take into account the interpretation given by Jews to their ingathering around Jerusalem which, according to their faith, is considered a blessing. Justice is put to the test by this return and its repercussions. On the political level, it has caused confrontations between various claims for justice. Beyond the legitimate divergence of political options, the conscience of the world community cannot refuse the Jewish people, who had to submit to so many vicissitudes in the course of its history. At the same time, this right and the opportunities for existence cannot be refused to those who, in the course of local conflicts resulting from this return, are not victims of grave injustice.

Let us, then, turn our eyes toward this land visited by God and let us actively hope that it may become a place where one day all its inhabitants, Jews and non-Jews, can live together in peace. It is an essential question, faced by Christians as well as Jews, whether or not the ingathering of the dispersed Jewish people — which took place under pressure of persecution and by the play of political forces — will, despite so many tragic events, prove to be one of the final ways of God's justice for Jewish people and at the same time for all the nations of the earth. How could Christians remain indifferent to what is now being decided in that land?

From the moment John Paul II's plane touched down in the Land of Israel, Jewish people all over the world, and especially in Israel, turned their attention to his presence there. His visit had a very special significance. It was not only the visit of one of the most important personalities of our time, it was a visit by the leader of the Catholic Church. This was a Pope who was visiting the State of Israel openly, acknowledging the reality of the State of Israel for all to see.

Ezer Weizman, President of the State of Israel, welcomed John Paul II, proclaiming:

In the name of the people of Israel, I welcome you with a traditional greeting: "Baruch Haba," "welcome."

Two hundred generations have passed since the beginning of our people's history, yet they seem to us like a short time. Only two hundred generations since the emergence on the stage of history of a man called Abraham, who left his home and native land and went to a place which is today my country. Only one hundred fifty generations have passed from the pillar of fire that signaled the redemption of the Exodus from Egypt until the pillars of smoke that signaled the destruction of the Holocaust.

President Weizman acknowledged the Pope's outreach to the Jewish people:

We appreciate Your Holiness' contribution condemning anti-Semitism by labeling it as a crime against God and humanity, and by the request for forgiveness for deeds carried out in the past by representatives of the Church against the Jewish

people. As you have noted, we must act together to fight the plague of racism and anti-Semitism all over the world.

We are mindful of the new emphasis in Catholic religious teaching that calls for acknowledging their Jewish roots of Christianity and recognizing the Jewish people as it defines itself.

The President added:

From its inception, the State of Israel has guaranteed freedom of religion and access to Holy Sites to all peoples, and you will certainly see the evidence of this, Your Holiness, throughout your visit in Israel.

President Weizman ended by quoting Isaiah:

In the words of the Prophet Isaiah: “The many people shall go and say, ‘Come and let us go to the mountain of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob, and He will teach us of his ways and we will walk in his path.’ For out of Zion will go forth the law and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”

The government of Israel and the people of Israel have done a great deed to guarantee a pilgrimage to the sites Holy to you, in the best tradition of hospitality of our forefather Abraham, and in the finest of that same tradition of commitment to freedom of religion and freedom of access to the Holy Sites to peoples of all religions, be it those who live among us or those who come to us from other places for this purpose.

We wish you many more years of good health. We welcome you here, Your Holiness, John Paul II.⁶

Pope John Paul II answered quietly, in a tone of voice that touched the hearts of all the inhabitants of Israel — Christians, Jews, and Muslims:

In this year of the 2000th anniversary of the Birth of Jesus Christ, it has been my strong personal desire to come here and to pray in the most important places which, from ancient times, have seen God’s interventions, the wonders He has done. “You are the God who works wonders. You showed your power among these peoples.”

Mr. President, I thank you for your warm welcome, and in your person I greet all the people of the State of Israel.

My visit is both a personal pilgrimage and a spiritual journey of the Bishop of Rome to the origins of our faith in “the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob.” It is a larger pilgrimage of prayer and thanksgiving which led me first to Sinai, the Mountain of the Covenant, the place of the decisive Revelation, which shaped this subsequent history of salvation. Now I shall have the privilege of visiting some of the places more closely connected with the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Along with every step of the way I move by a vivid sense of God who has gone before us and leads us on, who wants us to honor Him in spirit and in truth, to acknowledge the differences between us, but also to recognize in every human being the image and likeness of the One Creator of Heaven and earth.

Pope John Paul II clearly stated the purpose of his visit as a pilgrimage of peace:

My journey therefore is a pilgrimage, in a spirit of humble gratitude and hope, to the origins of our religious history. It is a tribute to the three religious traditions which co-exist in this land. For a long time I have looked forward to meeting the faithful of the Catholic communities in their rich variety, and the members of their various Christian churches and communities present in the Holy Land. I pray that my visit will serve to encourage an increase of interreligious dialogue that will lead Jews, Christians and Muslims to seek in their respective beliefs, and in the universal brotherhood that unites all the members of the human family, the motivation and perseverance to work for the peace and justice they yearn for so deeply. The Psalmist reminds us that peace is God’s gift, “I will hear what the Lord God has to say, a voice that speaks of peace, peace for His people, and for His friends, and those who turn to Him in their hearts.”

May peace be God’s gift to the Land He chose as His own! Shalom.⁷

A Visit to Hechal Shlomoh, Jerusalem

On March 22, Pope John Paul II met with the Chief Rabbis of Israel at Hechal Shlomoh, the House of Solomon, the seat of the Chief Rabbinate of Jerusalem. This was a unique moment in his pilgrimage. The Israeli people were astonished to see the Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church entering the Rabbinate of Jerusalem. His visit to the Rabbinate in Jerusalem was really a testimony of friendship rather than a necessity of his diplomatic relationship with the people of Israel.

The Chief Rabbis were aware of this and said:

The people of Israel who dwell in Zion and the Chief Rabbis of Israel welcome Pope John Paul II with the traditional greeting: “Blessed be your coming to Israel.”

From the Holy City of Jerusalem, about which the Prophet Zechariah said: “Sing and rejoice, oh daughter of Zion... And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day and shall be My people, and I will dwell in the midst of you” (Zechariah 2:14-15). We welcome one who saw fit to express remorse in the name of the Catholic Church for the terrible deeds committed against the Jewish people during the course of the past two thousand years and even appointed a commission for requesting forgiveness from the Jewish nation with regard to the Holocaust...

We appreciate as well his recognition of our right to return to, and live in, the Holy Land in peace and brotherhood within safe borders recognized by the nations of the world and especially by our neighbors. All these things were given expression in the prayer he offered at Auschwitz (June 11, 1999) for the success of the Israeli people's efforts for peace...

From Jerusalem, capital of the State of Israel, from Zion, the Holy City, we pray that we may be granted a good and long life, a life of peace and security, health and peace of mind, a life of human brotherhood. May it be His Will that the words of the prophet be fulfilled: “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4). May He who makes peace in His heavens bring peace to us and to all of Israel.⁸

Pope John Paul returned the Chief Rabbis' greeting warmly:

Very Reverend Chief Rabbis,

It is with deep respect that I visit you here today and thank you for seeing me at Hechal Shlomoh.

Truly this is a uniquely significant meeting which — I hope and pray — will lead to increasing contacts between Christians and Jews, aimed at achieving an ever deeper understanding of the historical and theological relationship between our respective religious heritages.

Personally, I have always wanted to be counted among those who work, on both sides, to overcome old prejudices and to secure ever wider and fuller recognition of the spiritual patrimony shared by Jews and Christians. I repeat what I said on the occasion of my visit to the Jewish Community in Rome, that we Christians recognize that the Jewish religious heritage is intrinsic to our own faith: “*You are our elder brothers*” (cf. “Address at the Synagogue of Rome,” April 13, 1986). We hope that the Jewish people will acknowledge that the Church utterly condemns anti-Semitism and every form of racism as being altogether opposed to the principles of Christianity. We must work together to build a future in which there will be no more anti-Judaism among Christians or anti-Christian sentiment among Jews.

There is much that we have in common. There is so much that we can do together for peace, for justice, for a more human and fraternal world. May the Lord of Heaven and earth lead us to a new and fruitful era of mutual respect and cooperation, for the benefit of all! Thank you.⁹

The theological anti-Judaism of centuries created an atmosphere that in many respects prepared the climate for the Holocaust. John Paul II was aware of the results of the teaching of contempt, and during October 30-November 1, 1997, he convened a meeting of Catholic New Testament scholars from Europe and the United States to discuss “The Roots of Anti-Judaism in the Christian Environment.”

The symposium reviewed elements of Christian teaching of the last two thousand years that might have contributed to disdain for Judaism and the Jewish people. In his address to the participants, Pope John Paul II said that “erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their presumed guilt circulated for too long” and “contributed to a lulling of many consciences at the time of World War II, so that, while there were ‘Christians’ who did everything to save those who were persecuted, even to the point of risking their own lives, the spiritual resistance of many was not what humanity expected of Christ’s disciples.”¹⁰

Pope John Paul II continued to spread his message of reconciliation for all religious people when he spoke on March 23, at the residence of the President of Israel, Ezer Weizman, stating:

History, as the ancients held, is the *Magistra vitae*, a teacher of how to live. This is why we must be determined to heal the wounds of the past, so that they may never be opened again. We must work for a new era of reconciliation and peace between Jews and Christians. My visit is a pledge that the Catholic Church will do everything possible to ensure that this is not just a dream but a reality.

He stressed the need for peace and justice in the Middle East:

We know that real peace in the Middle East will come only as a result of mutual understanding and respect between all the peoples of the region: Jews, Christians and Muslims. In this perspective, my pilgrimage is a journey of hope; the hope that the 21st century will lead to a new solidarity among the peoples of the world, in the conviction that development, justice and peace will not be attained unless they are attained for all.¹¹

The Visit to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem

An emotional high point of Pope John Paul II’s visit to Israel was his tour of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, on March 23.

Israel's Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, welcomed him with the following words:

Your Holiness,

In the name of the Jewish people, in the name of the State of Israel and all of its citizens — Christians, Muslims, and Jews — I welcome you, in friendship, in brotherhood and in peace, here in Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, the eternal city of faith.

Your Holiness, we meet in this sanctuary of memory for the Jewish people and for all humanity.

“Yad Vashem” — literally, “a place and a name” for the six million of our brothers and sisters, for one and a half million children, victims of the barbarian evil of Nazism. You have done more than anyone else to bring about the historic change in the attitude of the Church towards the Jewish people, initiated by the good Pope John XXIII, and to dress the gaping wounds that festered over many bitter centuries. And I think I can say, Your Holiness, that your coming here today, to the Tent of Remembrance of Yad Vashem, is a climax of this historic journey of healing. Here, right now, time itself has come to a standstill. This very moment holds within it two thousand years of history. And the weight is almost too much to bear. Shortly before setting out on your pilgrimage here, you raised the flag of fraternity to full staff, setting into Church liturgy a request for forgiveness, for wrongs committed by members of your faith against others, especially against the Jewish people.

We appreciate this noble act most profoundly.

Naturally, it is impossible to overcome all the pains of the past overnight. Your Holiness has frequently commented on problems regarding past relations between Christians and Jews. It is our wish to continue productive dialogue on this issue, to work together to eliminate the scourge of racism and anti-Semitism.

Prime Minister Barak shared with Pope John Paul II and the Catholic delegation the meaning of Israel after the Holocaust:

The establishment of the State of Israel against all odds, and the ingathering of the exiles, not only has restored to the Jewish people its honor and mastery over its faith; it is the definite, permanent answer to Auschwitz. We have returned home, and since then no Jew will ever remain helpless or be stripped of the last shred of human dignity. Here, at the cradle of our civilization, we have rebuilt our home, so that it may thrive in peace and security. Defending our State has claimed a heavy toll.

We are now resolved to find paths to historical reconciliation. We are in the midst of an enormous effort to secure comprehensive peace with our Palestinian neighbors, with Syria and Lebanon, and with the entire Arab world.

Prime Minister Barak thanked John Paul II, saying:

Your Holiness, we have noted with precision your words about the unique bond of the Jewish people to Jerusalem, that, and I quote you, “Jews love Jerusalem with a passion... from the days of David who chose it as a capital, and from the days of Solomon who built a Temple there; therefore, they return to it in their prayers every day, and point to it as a symbol of their nation.”

I would like to redirect our absolute commitment to protect all rights and properties of the Catholic Church, as well as those of the other Christian and Muslim institutions; to continue to ensure full freedom of worship to members of all faiths equally; and to keep united Jerusalem open and free, as never before, to all who love her. I know that you pray, as we do, for the unity and peace of Jerusalem:

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem... peace be within thy walls and prosperity within thy palaces, for my brethren and companions sake, I will now say, “Peace be within thee.”

Your Holiness, you have come on a mission of brotherhood, of remembrance and of peace. And we say to you: “Blessed are you in Israel.”¹²

Surrounded by Holocaust survivors, some from Krakow where he had served as Cardinal, the Pope responded to the Prime Minister:

In this place of memories, the mind and heart and soul feel an extreme need for silence. Silence in which to remember. Silence in which to try to make some sense of the memories which come flooding back. Silence because there are no words strong enough to deplore the terrible tragedy of the Shoah. My own personal memories are of all that happened when the Nazis occupied Poland during the War. I remember my Jewish friends and neighbors, some of whom perished, while others survived.

I have come to Yad Vashem to pay homage to the millions of Jewish people who, stripped of everything, especially of their human dignity, were murdered in the Holocaust. More than half a century has passed, but the memories remain.

Here, as at Auschwitz and many other places in Europe, we are overcome by the echo of the heartrending laments of so many. Men, women and children cry out to us from the depths of the horror that they knew. How can we fail to heed their cry? No one can forget or ignore what happened. No one can diminish its scale.

These words were especially appropriate since there existed a group claiming to be a legitimate historical school that maintained that Auschwitz and the gas chambers had not existed, but were part of a Jewish conspiracy. The Pope's speech was a reminder to all racists and anti-Semites that the Holocaust is the utmost example of horror that ever occurred in the Western world, calling our attention to the tremendous human possibilities of evil. John Paul II continued:

We wish to remember. But we wish to remember for a purpose, namely to ensure that never again will evil prevail, as it did for the millions of innocent victims of Nazism.

How could man have such utter contempt for man? Because he had reached the point of contempt for God. Only a Godless ideology could plan and carry out the extermination of a whole people.¹³

This was not the first time that Pope John Paul II had denounced the horror of the Holocaust. In Poland, under the communists and while he was the Bishop of Krakow, he visited Auschwitz and recalled the martyrdom of the Jewish people in that concentration camp. The communists were eager to show that the main victims at Auschwitz had been Polish and European workers. There was practically no mention of the murder of more than three million Jews. John Paul II made a point of reminding everybody that Auschwitz was a place of Jewish death.

After the fall of Communism, at the first meeting of Bishops from East and West in Rome on June 5–7, 1990, John Paul II devoted part of his speech to the meaning of the Holocaust in European history. He touched upon historical matters, but also on a theological question that still is central in present Jewish reflection. That is, the presence or silence of God in the concentration camps.

The Pope told the assembled Bishops:

The war itself with its immense cruelty, a cruelty that reached its most brutal expression in the organized extermination of the Jews, as well as of the Gypsies and of other categories of people, revealed to the European the other side of a civilization that he was inclined to consider superior to all others. Certainly, the war also brought out people's readiness to show solidarity and make heroic sacrifices for a just cause. But these admirable aspects of the war experience seemed to be overwhelmed by the immensity of evil and destruction, not only on the material plane but also in the moral order. Perhaps in no other war in history has man been so thoroughly trampled upon in his dignity and fundamental rights. An echo of the humiliation and even desperation caused by such an experience could be heard in the question often repeated after the war: How can we go on living after Auschwitz? Sometimes another question presented itself: Is it still possible to speak about God after Auschwitz?

On November 26, 1986, during a visit to Australia, John Paul II addressed the Jewish community saying:

This is still the century of the *Shoah*, the inhuman and ruthless attempt to exterminate European Jewry, and I know that Australia has given asylum and a new home to thousands of refugees and survivors of that ghastly series of events. To them in particular I say . . . it is the teaching of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that the Jews are beloved of God, who has called them with an irrevocable calling. No valid theological justification could ever be found for acts of discrimination or persecution against Jews. In fact, such acts must be held to be sinful.

On November 8, 1987, in a Letter to Archbishop John L. May, President, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, John Paul II pointed out:

. . . With our hearts filled with this unyielding hope, we Christians approach with immense respect the terrifying experience of the extermination, the *Shoah*, suffered by the Jews during World War II, and we seek to grasp its most authentic, specific and universal meaning. Before the vivid memory of the extermination, it is not permissible for anyone to pass by with indifference.

Reflection upon the *Shoah* shows us to what terrible consequences the lack of faith in God and a contempt for man created in His image can lead. It also impels us to promote the necessary historical and religious studies on this event which concerns the whole of humanity today.

. . . There is no doubt that the suffering endured by the Jews is also for the Catholic Church a motive of sincere sorrow, especially when one thinks of the indifference and sometimes resentment which, in particular historical circumstances, have divided Jews and Christians. Indeed this evokes in us still firmer resolutions to cooperate for justice and true peace.

On June 24, 1988, in his speech to the Jewish Community of Vienna, Pope John Paul II stressed the need for Jews and Christians to remember the Holocaust:

You (Jews) and we (Christians) are still weighed down by memories of the *Shoah*, the murder of millions of Jews in camps of destruction . . . An adequate consideration of the suffering and martyrdom of the Jewish people is impossible without relating it in its deepest dimension to the experience of faith that has characterized Jewish history, from the faith of Abraham to the Exodus to the covenant on Mount Sinai. It is a constant progression in faith and obedience in response to the loving call of God. As I said last year before representatives of the Jewish community in Warsaw, from these cruel sufferings may arise even deeper hope, a warning call to

all of humanity that may serve to save us all. Remembering *Shoah* means hoping that it will never happen again, and working to ensure that it does not. Faced with this immeasurable suffering we cannot remain cold. But faith teaches us that God never forsakes those who suffer persecution but reveals himself to them and enlightens through them all peoples on the road to salvation. Our (Christian) faith does not prevent us from feeling solidarity with the deep wounds that have been inflicted on the Jewish people by prescription, especially in this century, by contemporary anti-Semitism. On the contrary, it makes this solidarity a bounden duty . . . Cooperation and joint studies should be undertaken at all levels in order to inquire into the significance of the *Shoah*. We have to trace, and wherever possible, eliminate, the causes of anti-Semitism.

John Paul II often mentioned the Holocaust in his General Audiences, as for example, on April 28, 1999, when he stated:

Remembrance of tragic events can lead to new brotherhood. Not only the shared history of Christians and Jews, but especially their dialogue must look to the future (cf. CCC, n. 840), becoming as it were a “*memoria futuri*” (“We Remember: A Reflection on the ‘Shoah,’” *L’Osservatore Romano*, English edition, March 18, 1998, p. 6). The memory of these sorrowful and tragic events of the past can open the way to a renewed sense of brotherhood, the fruit of God’s grace, and to working so that the seeds infected with anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism will never again take root in human hearts.

Israel, a people who build their faith on the promise God made to Abraham: “You shall be the father of a multitude of nations” (Genesis 14:4; Romans 4:17), shows Jerusalem to the world as the symbolic place of the eschatological pilgrimage of peoples united in their praise of the Most High. I hope that at the dawn of the third millennium sincere dialogue between Christians and Jews will help create a new civilization founded on the one, holy and merciful God, and fostering a humanity reconciled in love.

The Testimony of Survivors

A Holocaust survivor remembers Pope John Paul II’s presence at Yad Vashem in moving words. The Jewish-Polish novelist and poet Halina Birenbaum explains what survivors felt in Israel and in the world when they saw Pope John Paul II in Jerusalem and especially at Yad Vashem:

For several weeks our mass media in Israel announced the Pope’s visit. This exceptional event was commented on from every viewpoint, from simple expectations to absurd guesses. Discussions and arguments held sway incessantly: the principles

of the Catholic faith, the meaning for Christians of the Holy Places in our ancestral land, where Jeshua (Jesus), the founder of the Christian religion, was born. Abruptly, the realities of our daily life — our political and religious strife, our accumulated problems, our incessant struggles, our bloody encounters — take on another dimension. The words “the Pope” dominate all ordinary daily events. The Pope in Jerusalem, in Israel! He comes to us!

For Halina Birenbaum, this visit by the head of the Catholic Church, a fellow Pole, has a special meaning;

The Pope who pays us this honorable visit is a son of the country where I was born, I and my grandparents, my parents, my brothers. His mother tongue is also my own. Each one of his words, each of his gestures, has particular meaning for me. His visit is extremely important for my whole country, in light of our past, our present and our future! The desire of several centuries for a good understanding between Jews and Christians — will that hope finally be realized?

My glance is fixed on his silhouette. I observe attentively all the reactions to his well-thought-out, meaningful words. I listen joyfully to the commentaries and appreciations of the Chief Rabbi and others, especially important personalities in Israel. Almost all of them admit that the present Pope is the greatest friend of Jews of all time. He expresses himself in the way and in the place where he should and even goes beyond. A Pope like this one is a first in history; no one else has ever done so much for good relations between the Jewish people and Christianity, to reestablish justice for Jewish people as Pope John Paul II has done.

Birenbaum, memories of Auschwitz still searing her soul, opens her heart to all, Christians and Jews:

The Pope at *Yad Vashem*! Immobile, I look fixedly at his silhouette in profound contemplation. Slowly he makes his way into *Ohel Izkov*, cloaked by a frightening darkness and sadness. An eternal flame lights up miserly but clearly the names of the terrible places of mass extermination of the Jewish people, of my parents, of my whole family: Treblinka, Majdanek, Oswiecim [Auschwitz], Cheimno, Sobibor, Ravensbruck, Dachau...

The Pope's face expresses the depth of his sorrow as he places a wreath. He bends silently over these terrible names, wipes his face with his hands with unspeakable sadness. He has tears in his eyes. I can see clearly his face, his eyes. In a miraculous way, I am there right next to him, at his side. Because, in reality, I carry within myself the nightmarish vision of those names and of the word *Shoah*! My childhood was in the Ghetto of Warsaw and of Auschwitz. The gas chamber at

Majdanek, where I spent a whole night waiting for my death, relates to my gratitude for the supreme values of life, even in the depths of hell. Through a miracle, they didn't have enough gas that night, so the next morning the doors opened so that the job could be finished at Auschwitz. Nevertheless, I was undoubtedly destined to survive, then to live long enough to see the creation of the Jewish state, and to see this visit of the Pope, my greatest compatriot. Over the course of two thousand years, it is a visit unique in its expression and meaning.

... As a Jewish child unable to do the work of a slave in the concentration camp, I should have died, condemned to instant death. In a little poem, I recently wrote the history of my family reflected in the places engraved on the black stone in the soil of *Ohel Izkov*... "*If I had died at Majdanek, I would be with the ashes of my mother! If I had died at Treblinka, I would be with the ashes of my father! If it was at Auschwitz, with the ashes of my brother and sister-in-law! If I had died there /death/ would not have been terrible for me.*" Many miracles have contributed to keep me from being ashes there, with my relatives, my parents, my neighbors, my childhood peers from the Warsaw Ghetto, those with whom I dreamed of the end of the war, of the end of the occupation, of freedom from the claws of this terrible evil, to be a person not forbidden to live. Free! And today, the words and the tears of the Pope, full of imposing historic weight at *Yad Vashem*! What satisfaction after years of suffering and ineffable tragedies.

For Birenbaum, the Pope's tears bring healing:

Tears flow also on my cheeks. As if the tears in the Pope's eyes were mine, and mine, those years past, never shed, were his. Tears of sorrow, of lived torments, of the loss of my relatives, mixed with gratitude for this profound understanding and compassion of the Pope. Gratitude, too, because he spoke forcefully here to God and exclusively to my nation and to persons like myself. At *Yad Vashem* he spoke to his faithful and to all the peoples of the world; he spoke of the prejudice Christians used against us over the centuries.

At this time I want to share the outpouring of my affection with my friends from Poland. I know that at this same instant they are following this historic visit of the Pope. Their thoughts certainly are of me and they also must be tearful as they remember *Yad Vashem*. How can I communicate my thoughts and feelings to them? Is it at all possible?

Pope John Paul II at the Wall

John Paul II's visit to the Western Wall was a unique moment. Millions of people around the world watched it on television. Rabbi Michael Melchior, a Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister

responsible for Diaspora and Social Affairs, welcomed him. Expressing the emotion of the entire community, he said:

Thousands of years of history are looking down on us from atop the Sacred Mount and from amidst the stones of this remnant of our Holy Temple and they see you here.

We welcome your coming here as the realization of a commitment of the Catholic Church to end the era of hatred, humiliation, and persecution of the Jewish people. In the name of the government of Israel and the Jewish people, we stand here today to call out in the loudest and clearest of voices:

“No longer.” For today begins a new era in which we will all lift our eyes to the heavens and commit ourselves to search every ancient path and to pave bold, new highways that will bring peace to all religions and to all believers — Jews, Christians, Muslims alike. A new era in which faith in God will be the symbol of peace and brotherhood among nations, justice, and concern for the suffering of every one of His creatures.

In response to your call to advance the cause of religious peace, I’m honored to announce my intention to begin work immediately towards the establishment of an interreligious forum to which will be invited representatives of the three great monotheistic faiths in order to promote peace among religions in the Sacred Land, in this region, and all over the world.

Pope John Paul II remained silent, touched the Western Wall, prayed for a while, and placed a note in a crevice of the Wall bearing the following message:

God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring Your Name to the nations... We are deeply saddened by the behavior 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.¹⁴

Except for one phrase, this was the same prayer for forgiveness Pope John Paul II had offered during a Mass in Rome on the first Sunday of Lent in the Jubilee year. During the Mass, the Australian Cardinal Edward Cassidy, who was then president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, said:

Let us pray that, in recording the sufferings endured by the people of Israel throughout history, Christians will acknowledge the sins committed by not a few of their number against the people of the Covenant and their blessings, and in this way will purify their hearts.

A moment of silent prayer followed and Pope John Paul II responded:

God of our Fathers, You chose Abraham and his descendants to bring Your name to the nations: we are deeply saddened by the behavior 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. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

This was a Catholic prayer in which the Pope invoked in the name of Jesus. When he transcribed this prayer into a message to be placed in the Jewish holy site, he left it out. When it was first offered at the Mass in Rome, this prayer had engendered some negative reaction from the Jewish community. The German Catholic theologian, Professor Hans Hermann Henrix, Director of the Initiative for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations, Diocese of Aachen, Germany, comments on this, pointing out:

The liturgy with the request for pardon the First Sunday of Lent (2000) in St. Peter's has not completely met Jewish anticipation for an unambiguous acknowledgment of guilt. For this purpose the liturgy and its context were, no doubt, too far removed from the Jewish people. Pope John Paul II himself had to "draw near" in order to overcome the existing hurdle. This came about during the days of his visit in the Holy Land from March 20 to 26. The pilgrimage was — if one looks beyond the staging and folklore — a great symbol.

The prayer, the content of which is identical with the fourth prayer for forgiveness of March 12 and which is kept with the Pope's signature in the Holocaust Memorial, can now be effective in a new way. It has been freed from a more limited focus on the Church's recognition of guilt in the context of the *Shoah*. Thereby it becomes possible, for example, to hear in the statement the Pope calling Jewish men and women "sons and daughters" of God, after the Church had denigrated them for centuries as sons of the devil. Further, the recognition of the Jewish mission to bring the name of God to the nations will bear the same importance as their portrayal of "people of the Covenant." These formulations breathe the same spirit as the Good Friday intercession for the Jews which enables Catholic congregations to pray year after year that "they may continue to grow in the love of God's name and in faithfulness to His Covenant."

The Rome prayer of reckoning and forgiveness was transformed by John Paul II into a heartfelt gesture of healing. It was, as Henrix illustrates, part of the Pope's prayerful pilgrimage, his own "station" of the cross:

In particular, the two "stations" of the Pope's visit — at *Yad Vashem* and at the Western Wall — have begun a healing process in the Catholic-Jewish relationship. The Jewish pain due to "the tumor in the memory" (Emmanuel Levinas) was to

some extent alleviated. Once again Pope John Paul II was successful in symbolically conveying a basic message. Few words are needed to interpret the symbol of the bent figure in white at the Western Wall, the *ha Kotel ha Ma'aravi*, the silent prayer and the prayer for forgiveness left in the crevice. It reaches the Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora. They understand that symbol and gesture are more open and all-embracing than theological expressions and Church doctrine. They are moved in spite of the fact that Pope John Paul II did not enter into an open discussion of his understanding of the Church, which makes a clear distinction between the Church as such (i.e., as Christ's undefiled bride) and the "sons and daughters" of the Church and their failure and sins.¹⁵

The Papal visit to the Western Wall, and the message he left there, profoundly moved the people of Israel. In *L'Osservatore Romano*, March 22, 2000, Rabbi Michael Melchior wrote:

Pope John Paul II approached the Western Wall holding a written prayer which acknowledges the unbroken covenant between the Jewish people and God. Furthermore, he beseeches God's forgiveness for the pain inflicted by the Christian Community on the people elected by God. It was an extraordinary moment. The Pope touched the Western Wall. From a location directly behind the Pope, I sensed that something unforeseen was about to happen. As I accompanied the Pope to the podium my perception was that the Pontiff was as if magnetized by the power of the Western Wall. When he touched the Wall I sensed that the Wall was indeed moving in the Pontiff's direction and was coming to touch him.

For Melchior, this was a seminal moment in Jewish-Christian relations:

It was as if a door, closed for so many centuries, was starting to open to reconciliation and peace among Christians and Jews. The mass media immortalized this historic event for more than a half million viewers worldwide. I thought about the many times other doors have been opened, over the course of centuries, by Jewish people facing great dangers. A few minutes earlier, when I had spoken to the Pope on behalf of the Israeli Government, I reminded the Pope that "thousands of centuries of history are looking down . . . from the highest mountain." I really felt that it was the right time to invoke our memories regarding the suffering of the Jewish people.

I wanted to reinforce the point that past persecutions can and should be the prelude to a new type of accord between a people and their religion. I said: "We cannot pervert religious value to justify war." We cannot invoke God's name to harm those who are created in His image. Today a new era is beginning, in which we are to follow the ancient paths and start building new roads that lead to peace among all religions. God's faith will be the symbol of peace and fraternity among all nations, the symbol of justice and care for all of God's suffering creation.

In the article, Melchior calls for the leaders of all religions to work together for peace:

I know that not many people agree with my convictions that religion may be a vehicle to promote peace among nations engaged in endless war. Some of us are saddened because intolerance toward religion is unjustified. Therefore, we need the participation of religious leaders in the Middle East peace process: a great majority of both parties are religious. The war has religious tones. Interreligious dialogue and reconciliation may create an understanding which will lead to real peace.

By the Western Wall I suggested that the Pope promote interreligious dialogue at the upper levels of the three monotheistic religions in order that peace will prevail in the Holy Land and the rest of the world. I am hoping that during Passover, when Jewish people open their hearts to the prophet Elijah, we will remember that peace is possible after centuries of exile and persecution. I hope that this remembrance will lead to courage rather than sadness in order to open our doors to a new era — an era in which our desires for peace and our religious aspirations are united into one flame of light and inspiration.

The Legacy of Pope John Paul II's Visit to Israel and the Middle East

The Pope's visit to Israel opened new dimensions in the Catholic-Jewish relationship, profoundly altering the way Catholics and Jews perceive each other. Professor Henrix thinks, as many do, that the visit engendered new religious and political responsibilities:

After the Papal journey to Israel there are responsibilities which the Church itself has to assume and fulfill. The first is a need for the Church to take up and make its own the Papal interest in and esteem for the Jewish people. With regard to the Church's relationship with the Jews and Judaism, Pope John Paul II is a "forerunner" and an example for the ecclesial community and all its members. The restoration of this very burdened relationship needs healing and the new beginnings on all levels must be in accord with this Papal action.

And he adds:

Besides shedding further light on the activities of Pius XII during the years of National Socialism, Christian theology has to continue ecclesiological reflection and discussion. Is it necessary to distinguish between sin *in* the Church and sin *of* the Church in a manner which suggests that sin *of* the Church does not exist, as the International Theological Commission seems to imply? Or is sin a power which affects the Church's mission as community and/or complex reality, in which

human and divine elements coexist (LG 8), itself affected, limited and damaged, so that one has to also speak of a sinful Church, thereby connoting an asymmetry in which the holiness and sinfulness of the Church is held in balance by God?

According to Henrix, Christians hope the Catholic-Jewish dialogue will provide new opportunities for mutual understanding and acceptance. He notes that Christian expectations of the Jewish people is an issue Pope John Paul II addressed twice during his time in Israel. On March 21, during the welcoming ceremonies at the airport in Tel Aviv, the Pope declared:

With a new-found openness towards one another, Christians and Jews together must make courageous efforts to remove all forms of prejudice. We must strive always and everywhere to present the true face of Jews and Judaism, as likewise of Christians and Christianity, and this at every level of attitude, teaching and communication.

And in his March 23 address at *Yad Vashem*, the Pope appealed:

Let us build a new future in which there will be no more anti-Jewish feeling among Christians or anti-Christian feeling among Jews, but rather the mutual respect required of those who adore the one Creator and Lord, and look to Abraham as our common father in the faith.

Henrix is aware that the dialogue relationship requires changes on both sides:

This is a call to both Christians and Jews. On the part of Christianity there exists a form of “debt from the past” in relation to the Jewish people. And the Jewish people have to cope with the very understandable “hermeneutic of suspicion” towards the Church and Christianity. Future proceedings and events in the Church may also raise questions and cause irritation to Jews. Some of these irritations have already announced themselves via media reports concerning the movement to beatify Pius IX and Pius XII. If these beatifications come to pass, Pope John Paul II will have been personally involved. This will not, however, turn this friend of the Jewish people into its enemy. Though, of course, the art of prudent Church interpretation will need to provide assurance that the intent of these processes are part of the Church’s self-determination.¹⁶

Whatever difficulties and disagreements arise between Catholics and Jews in their dialogue, the Pope’s visit to Israel has given Jews incontrovertible evidence of Catholic good will. Jewish voices in Israel and all over the world commented on this groundbreaking event. Rabbi David Rosen, then-Director of the Israel Office of the Anti-Defamation League and part of the Israeli delegation that worked out the Holy See-Israel diplomatic exchange, wrote in *L’Osservatore Romano* on March 22:

The historic pilgrimage of Pope John Paul II in the Holy Land involved numerous people and numerous relationships: the local Catholic Church, a variety of Christian communities, the relationship between the Jewish and Christian communities, the relationship between Christians and Muslims, the dialogue among three different religions, the rapport of the Holy See with the diverse entities of national politics, the transmission of a message of peace, a message of reconciliation among all faiths and people of the region.

The Papal visit in Jewish-Israeli society has had a positive impact in every possible way. To appreciate this we must remember that the Israelis do not live in a Christian world. They do not even know who the Christians are. For instance, when they travel internationally, they meet Jews rather than Christians. The Christian faith is not part of their everyday life. Therefore Israelis retain a negative idea based on the past. Having no familiarity with Christians, they have ignored the Vatican II Ecumenical Council and the *Nostra Aetate* document as well as the enormous progress between Jews and Catholics over the past 35 years. After the establishing of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Holy See in 1994 the majority of documents regarding Jews and Judaism were translated into Hebrew to be read by Israelis. This helped them to view with open eyes the Papal visit which profoundly recognized the heritage of Israeli Jews, their history and their people.

Rabbi Rosen pointed out the importance of Pope John Paul II's efforts to foster interfaith relations in Israel and the Middle East:

The major difficulty faced by interreligious dialogue in the Middle East is the fact that religious leadership among Jews and Muslims has political connotations. However, there is some interreligious dialogue in Jerusalem and elsewhere in Israel but only because it is promoted by Christians and Jews from the Western world or by scholars who have studied there.

There is evidence of a slow but sure growth of awareness of this new rapport of peace. The visit of Pope John Paul II has been a tremendous incentive for those of us who work in the interreligious field. Above all, it has demonstrated the need to overcome the animosities in this society through the virtue of love. It is time to give precedence to the ideals of our faith to sanctify God's name throughout the world.

A Final Reflection on Pope John Paul II's Pilgrimage

The experience of pilgrimage is pivotal to the spirituality of Christianity and Judaism. In the Torah, Jews are called upon to go to Jerusalem on three specific festivals: Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot

(Exodus 23:17, 34:23; Deuteronomy 16:16; II Chronicles 8:13). Christian pilgrimage to Israel became a ritual from the 4th century on; their destinations were Jerusalem, Galilee, and Bethlehem.

Pope John Paul II's pilgrimage echoed the experience of centuries of Catholic journeys to visit holy places in the Middle East, fulfilling both personal and Church spiritual commitments. For years, he had yearned to be in Israel and pray in Jerusalem. His words and actions projected a sense of spiritual sacredness and a message of friendship calling for mutual respect and religious acceptance.

The Pope was a pilgrim of peace, bringing healing to the hearts of many. Israel's Chief Rabbi, Israel Meir Lau, expressed the feelings of the many Catholics, Jews, and Muslims who were profoundly moved by the Pope's visit to the Middle East, when he told the Pontiff:

...You are the real bridge and hope for understanding, for friendship, and hopefully for brotherhood.¹⁷

NOTES

- ¹ *An Invitation to Joy: Selections from the Writings and Speeches of His Holiness John Paul II*, with commentary by Greg Burke, New York, Callaway Editions & Leonardo Periodici, 1999, p. 115.
- ² John Paul II in Jordan: The Visit to the Holy Land Begins, Washington, D.C., Origins, March 30, 2000, vol. 29, no. 41, p. 662 - 663, 2000.
- ³ Idem, p. 663 – 665.
- ⁴ Idem, p. 667.
- ⁵ Idem, p. 669.
- ⁶ *Visit to Israel of His Holiness Pope John Paul II*, Jerusalem, Israel Information Center, 2000 pp 5-7.
- ⁷ Idem pp 8-9.
- ⁸ Idem pp 10-11.
- ⁹ Idem p. 12.
- ¹⁰ *Radici Del'Antigiudaismo in Ambiente Cristiano*, Colloquio Intra-Ecclesiale, Atti Del Simposio Teologico – Storico Città Del Vaticano, 30 Ottobre – Novembre 1997, Roma, Editrice Vaticana, 1997.
- ¹¹ *Visit to Israel of His Holiness Pope John Paul II*, Jerusalem, Israel Information Center, 2000 p 15.
- ¹² Idem pp. 16-18.
- ¹³ Idem p. 19.
- ¹⁴ Idem pp. 26-29.
- ¹⁵ Hans Hermann Henrix, “The Papal Visit to Israel: A Great Symbol.” *SIDIC*, vol. xxxiv, no. 4, 2002.
- ¹⁶ Idem.
- ¹⁷ *Visit to Israel of His Holiness Pope John Paul II*, Jerusalem, Israel Information Center, 2000 p 23.

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