

Moving toward Mutuality: Five Decades on the Catholic-Jewish “Journey of Friendship”

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1. The Birth of a New but Unprecedented Relationship

I fear I must start with a grotesque understatement: After the Second World War, the need for a better relationship between Christians and Jews was hideously apparent. In the Catholic Church, the crisis of conscience sparked by the Nazi genocide of European Jews prompted the Second Vatican Council in 1965 to issue the declaration on the Relationship of the Catholic Church to other religion, called *Nostra Aetate*. Reversing centuries of teaching to the contrary, *Nostra Aetate* declared: “this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.”¹ The Institute I now co-direct was founded in 1967 in direct response to this conciliar call for “fraternal dialogues.”

However, in those decades immediately after the Second World War, it was not at all clear that it was even possible for Jews and Christians to engage in respectful conversation. A thousand years of intergroup contempt, combined with the recent Shoah, made the likelihood of dialogue seem very remote. As one Jewish observer said, “All we want of Christians is that they keep their hands off us and our children!”² Influential voices in both communities expressed alarm at the prospect of open dialogue, saying it would surely endanger the religious identities of each tradition.

The new Jewish and Christian relationship that came to birth from these uncertain beginnings might be compared to a newborn human being. Just as major milestones in early child development are learning how to talk and walk, a primary task for the pioneering post-World War II interfaith dialogists was to learn how to speak to one another. Although human babies are genetically “hard-wired” toward language acquisition, pioneering dialogists were challenged by centuries of hostility, suspicion, stereotyping, fear, and oppositional thinking. How were Jews and Christians ever really to communicate with one another?

At the risk of pushing the metaphor too far: if, generally speaking, Christians and Jews have been interacting for about two thousand years, then the few decades since the Shoah amount to about only one-fortieth of that entire history. If the human lifespan in the Western world is rounded off to about 80 years of age, then the new relationship between Christians and Jews is even today still only equivalently at the point of toddlerhood!

2. Lessons Learned in the Nascent Dialogue

Yet an unprecedented dialogical relationship between Catholics and Jews has grown in the seventy-plus years since the end of the Second World War.

¹ Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* (1965), §4.

² Eliezer Berkovits, “Judaism in the Post-Christian Era” in F. E. Talmage, ed., *Disputation and Dialogue: Readings in the Jewish-Christian Encounter* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1975), 293.

What have we learned in our toddling toward being able to talk interreligiously?

First, we learned that we needed time and commitment to begin to build trust. Past behavior had taught Jews that Christians' "only interest is to cause all the Jews to abandon their pure and holy faith so that they will accept Christianity,"³ in the 1967 words of an American Jewish leader. Were kindly overtures to Jews only temporary aberrations, maybe prompted by Holocaust-guilt, before Christians returned to their proselytizing habits? Christians needed to demonstrate their sincerity over time.

Second, we learned that Jews and Christians bring different agendas to the dialogue. They come with different interests, concerns, historical knowledge, and (mis)conceptions about each other. Christians tend to want to talk "religion"—often asking, "why don't Jews believe in Jesus?"—while Jews are more inclined to discuss social justice issues. Jews, understandably, tend to wonder if Christian invitations to dialogue are only a temporary cessation of the conversionary campaigns of the past, while Christians, usually unfamiliar with the history of Christian oppression of Jews, can be shocked and guilt-ridden when learning of it for the first time. Christians may find it difficult to understand the depth of Jewish fears for the survival of the State of Israel or fright over antisemitic incidents, while Jews tend to avoid expressing their general mystification over Christian claims that something called "salvation" is the result of the execution of a single Jew among the thousands of Jews crucified under Roman imperial rule.

Third, we learned that authentic dialogue requires that the other tradition be encountered on its own terms. In Catholic circles this was expressed in the 1974 document to implement *Nostra Aetate*: "Christians must therefore strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism; they must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience."⁴ This might seem like a self-evident matter of simple courtesy. However, in my experience it is very difficult for Christians to really hear Jews. Perhaps this is because of the presence of the "Old Testament" in the canon of the Christian Bible: we Christians think we are already familiar with Judaism because of these scriptures. Too many Christians are unaware that Judaism has evolved and developed its rich spiritual heritage over the centuries, just as Christianity has.

Hearing the Jewish or Christian other on his or her own terms forces everyone to question their presuppositions and their existing caricatures of the other. This principle has a further manifestation in the religious conversations specifically between Jews and Christians: we often use the same theologically weighty words with very different meanings in mind. Perhaps this is most apparent with the term "messiah." Even though the Hebrew and Greek words *mashiah* and *christos* both mean "anointed one," Jews and Christians today mean something quite different by them. We need to come to a common understanding of such terms when conversing across religious lines.

Fourth, Christians had to learn that by its very nature interreligious dialogue requires the conscious renunciation of any desire to convert the other. But this lesson had to be learned through painful trial-and-error. Let me quickly relate two relevant episodes in the Catholic community as illustrations, one from the United States and one from Europe.

³ Moshe Feinstein, quoted in David Ellenson, "A Jewish Legal Authority Addresses Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Two Responsa of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein," *American Jewish Archives Journal* 52 (2000): 122.

⁴ Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, No. 4" (1974), Preamble.

In the summer of 2009, staff members of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops released a statement that controversially asserted: “Though Christian participation in interreligious dialogue would not normally include an explicit invitation to baptism and entrance into the Church, the Christian dialogue partner is always giving witness to the following of Christ, to which all are implicitly invited.”⁵

The prospect that dialogue could be the setting for an explicit invitation to baptism immediately shocked Jews and Catholics alike. In an extraordinary expression of unanimity, all the major American Jewish organizations and movements wrote to the bishops: “[O]nce Jewish-Christian dialogue has been formally characterized as an invitation, whether explicit or implicit, to apostatize, then Jewish participation becomes untenable.”⁶ The vibrant Catholic-Jewish dialogue in the United States could cease over this issue. Soon the leaders of the bishops’ conference took the unheard-of step of retracting the problematic sentences about implicit and explicit invitations, stating that: “Jewish-Catholic dialogue, one of the blessed fruits of the Second Vatican Council, has never been and will never be used by the Catholic Church as a means of proselytism—nor is it intended as a disguised invitation to baptism.”⁷

In the same period, in February 2008, Pope Benedict XVI, trying to extend an olive branch to schismatic Catholic groups, issued an alternate version of the Good Friday intercession for Jews for use by the small minority of Catholics who worship according to the pre-Vatican II Tridentine Rite. The new form of this prayer was published under the title “*Pro conversione Iudaeorum*” and asked God to illuminate the hearts of Jews, “so that they may recognize Jesus Christ as savior of all men [sic].”⁸ This new prayer generated considerable criticism, as exemplified by a statement issued by the ongoing discussion group between Jews and Christians of the Central Committee of German Catholics, entitled: “No to Mission to the Jews — Yes to Dialogue Between Jews and Christians.”⁹

This framing of the controversy as a binary choice between conversion or dialogue was cleverly visualized in an Italian newspaper cartoon on the eve of Pope Benedict’s visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome in January 2010. The cartoon shows the pope crossing over the Tiber River from the Vatican to the synagogue on a tightrope. He holds a balancing rod on either end of which are the Italian words “*dialogo*” and “*conversione*.”



If the cartoon humorously depicts supposed papal indecision about which path to take in relating to Jews, he later showed no uncertainty on the topic of a Christian conversionary “mission” to

⁵ <http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/themes-in-todays-dialogue/conversion/559-usccb-09june18>

⁶ <http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/themes-in-todays-dialogue/conversion/574-njil09aug18>

⁷ <http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/themes-in-todays-dialogue/conversion/583-usccbdialogue09oct2>

⁸ <http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-benedict-xvi/425-b1608feb5>

⁹ <http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/themes-in-todays-dialogue/conversion/527-zdk09mar9>. The controversy over the Good Friday prayer was further roiled when in January 2009 Pope Benedict lifted the excommunications of four bishops of a schismatic group, unaware that one of them denied the full extent of the Holocaust. The furor this generated prompted the pope to publish an apologetic explanatory letter to the world’s Catholic bishops on March 10th: <http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-benedict-xvi/502-b16-09mar10-1>

Jews. In a 2011 book, he affirmatively quoted Austrian abbess Hildegard of Brem as follows: “In the light of Romans 11:25, *the Church must not concern herself with the conversion of the Jews*, since she must wait for the time fixed for this by God, ‘until the full number of the Gentiles come in’ (Rom 11:25) ...”¹⁰

In these two episodes, we see Christians being unsure if their commitment to a dialogical relationship with Jews required them to renounce traditional conversionary efforts. The controversy that ensued in both cases led to deeper Christian awareness and to more explicit statements that the sacred space of interreligious dialogue precludes such motives. It became vividly clear that any use of dialogue to convey an “invitation to join the Church strikes at the very heart of the dialogical enterprise and undermines the most basic understanding that makes that enterprise possible.”¹¹ Pope Francis in a recent video with Rabbi Abraham Skorka makes this point quite clearly when describing their dialogues:

[T]here was a basis of total trust, and because we knew in our conversations—and I want to highlight that—*neither of us negotiated our own identity*. If we had, we would not have been able to talk. It would have been a sham. ... And the friendship grew, *always maintaining our respective identities*. ... It's very important because my religious life became richer with his explanations, so much richer. ... And I began to further understand the [scriptural] revelation, and he further understood the Christian stance. It developed from our own identities and that's really nice. ... And *neither of us attempted to convert the other*.¹²

Fifth, Christians are learning that Jewish covenantal life never ended, and it is saving. Since first explicitly articulated by Saint John Paul II in 1980, the realization that Jewish covenanting with God “was never revoked by God,”¹³ Catholic theology has gradually deepened its appreciation that a relationship so intimate as to be called a “covenant” must mediate grace to the Jewish community. As Cardinal Walter Kasper expressed it in 2001: “the Church believes that Judaism, i.e. the faithful response of the Jewish people to God's irrevocable covenant, is salvific for them, because God is faithful to his promises.”¹⁴

The realization that Jews enjoy a saving, covenantal life with God is not without attendant, unresolved theological questions, but it probably relates to a perception occasionally reported by participants in Christian-Jewish dialogue. I am referring to the experience of discerning holiness, the elusive presence of the Holy One, in the lives, rituals, texts, or traditions of the religious other. Cardinal Kasper has expressed this awareness in Catholic theological terms by describing Judaism “as a sacrament of every otherness that as such the Church must learn to discern, recognize and celebrate.”¹⁵ His use of the rich theological term “sacrament” is

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two, Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 44-45. Italics added.

¹¹ Letter of David Berger with Fabian Schoenfeld to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, July 8, 2009: <http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/themes-in-todays-dialogue/conversion/573-berger09june29>

¹² Italics added. This video was produced by the Elijah Interfaith Institute as part of its “Make Friends” series. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4Xu3i3ki9Q>

¹³ Address to the Jewish community in Mainz, West Germany, November 17, 1980.

¹⁴ Commission of the Holy See 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),” December 10, 2015, §36.

¹⁵ “Address on the 37th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*,” October 28, 2002. <http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/650-wk02oct28>

significant. I have glimpsed holiness, for example, when moved by the profundity of rabbinic debate on some subject or when seeing a friend don *tefillin* (phylacteries) for prayer. And this holiness is mediated precisely through the “otherness” of Judaism—in the distinctiveness of the covenantal relationship Jews have with the One who saves.

Sixth, we are learning that our new relationship can weather disputes and that trust is possible. I have already mentioned some of the controversies of the past decades. There are others as well, including the behavior of Christians, especially their leaders, during the Second World War; the Auschwitz convent debate; the canonization of Edith Stein; the legacy of passion plays, notably in the film *The Passion of the Christ*; and heated exchanges over the seemingly interminable Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As many have noted, in most cases personal contacts and the new structures of institutional interaction have been able to withstand such storms. We haven’t walked away from each other.

Moreover, Jewish caution about Christian sincerity has started to give way to a level of trust among Jews involved with the dialogue. In 2015, for instance, leaders of the French Jewish community wrote that: “In a move whose sincerity has been proven, the Church has made a decisive turning point of theological significance. ... [We Jews should] welcome Christianity as the religion of our brothers and sisters in synergy with Judaism.”¹⁶ In that same year, an international group of Orthodox rabbis stated that since many Christians have: “acknowledged the eternal Covenant between G-d and Israel, we Jews can acknowledge the ongoing constructive validity of Christianity as our partner in world redemption, without any fear that this will be exploited for missionary purposes. ... Neither of us can achieve G-d’s mission in this world alone.”¹⁷ Most recently, the official institutional bodies of Orthodox Jews in Europe, the United States, and Israel, while not touching on the covenantal status of Christianity as the other statements did, nevertheless declared: “Over time, it has become clear that the transformations in the Church’s attitudes and teachings are not only sincere but also increasingly profound, and that we are entering an era of growing tolerance, mutual respect, and solidarity between members of our respective faiths.”¹⁸ All these Jewish statements call for Jews and Christians “to find additional ways that will enable us, together, to improve the world: to go in God’s ways, feed the hungry and dress the naked, give joy to widows and orphans, provide refuge to the persecuted and the oppressed, and thus merit His [sic] blessings.”¹⁹

These, I think, are at least some of the key lessons learned in the infancy and early childhood of the new relationship between Jews and Christians. Some of them were more pertinent to Christians than to Jews, an imbalance that was inevitable given the history of Christian dominance and oppression of Jews. Some of these lessons have yet to be learned in many segments of the both the Christian and Jewish worlds. This is unsurprising since long-entrenched habits of thought take time to unlearn. Still, speaking in general terms, we have clearly come a great distance from the words spoken by Pope Pius X

¹⁶ French Jewish Leaders, “Declaration for the Upcoming Jubilee of Brotherhood,” November 23, 2015: <http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/1356-declaration-for-the-upcoming-jubilee-of-brotherhood>

¹⁷ “To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians,” December 3, 2015: <http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/1359-orthodox-2015dec4>

¹⁸ The Conference of European Rabbis, the Rabbinical Council of America, and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, “Between Jerusalem and Rome: Reflections on 50 Years of *Nostra Aetate*”: <http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/1421-cer-cri-rca-2017>

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

to Theodor Herzl in 1904: “The Jewish religion was the foundation of our own; but it was superseded by the teachings of Christ, and we cannot concede it any further validity.”²⁰

I suggest that one way to describe the new relationship from a Catholic perspective is to see Jews and Christians as co-covenanting companions. Covenant should be understood as a dynamic sharing in life. Speaking of Jews and Christians as “co-covenanting” with God conveys both commonality and distinction. We each walk with God in our distinctive ways, but since we are covenanting with the same Holy One, our experiences of God must have many resonances. The word “companion,” literally “one who breaks bread with another,” is also significant here. It suggests that Christians and Jews can assist each other in living out their respective covenantal obligations before God. I believe these concepts summarize much of what we have learned in our early years of beginning to speak respectfully to each other and to learn how to walk together before God.

3. Catholics and Jews as Study Partners

The vision of Jews and Christians as studying and learning together inspired Saint Joseph’s University in 2015 to commission an original sculpture to mark the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*. Reimagining the medieval images of *Synagoga* and *Ecclesia*, the statue by Philadelphia artist Joshua Koffman shows *Synagoga* and Church as women of equal dignity, both wearing crowns to symbolize their covenantal lives with God, and holding open their respective sacred texts, the Torah and the Christian Bible for each other to study together.

When Pope Francis visited Philadelphia in September 2015, he visited the Saint Joseph’s University campus to bless the sculpture. He was greeted by his friend Rabbi Skorka, who had been the keynote speaker at its dedication. Pointing to the two figures enjoying their conversation together, Rabbi Skorka said to his friend: “They are you and I – Pope and Rabbi learning from each other.”

I believe that the new artwork expresses something about the future: as the new Christian-Jewish relationship deepens we are beginning to chart the unexplored paths of mutuality. What do I mean by mutuality? Besides the vivid example of the long friendship between Pope Francis and Rabbi Skorka, there are many other examples.

Rev. Hanspeter Heinz, past chair of the dialogue group “Jews and Christians” of the *Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken*, has written movingly about his twenty-year friendship with the late Rabbi Michael Signer: “The joy we shared as friends was no less important than our [educational] projects together. ... Indeed, our free time together and our correspondence brought us much more than relaxation. ... During our long walks ... we regularly lost our way because we were so absorbed in our discussions.”²¹ Their informal camaraderie developed the trust in each other necessary for deep dialogue. Their experience of leaving the everyday world behind when in the midst of profound religious conversation recalls the rabbinic practice of *chavruta* study—grappling with sacred texts in

²⁰ Raphael Patai, *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York/London: Herzl Press, Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), 1603.

²¹ Hanspeter Heinz, “‘Your Privilege: You Have Jewish Friends’: Michael Signer’s Hermeneutics of Friendship,” Philip A. Cunningham, Joseph Sievers, Mary C. Boys, Hans Hermann Henrix, and Jesper Svartvik, eds., *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2011), 4,

close relationship with a study partner. It is a way of learning I am privileged to share with my colleague and close friend at Saint Joseph's University, Adam Gregerman.

Similarly, Catholic theologian Mary C. Boys has written of her long collaboration with Jewish educator Sara Lee: "Over the years, Sara and I have discussed many demanding and delicate questions—but the conversations themselves have not been difficult. To the contrary, our friendship allows us to probe in sensitive areas."²²

These relationships are what I mean by "mutuality." Theologically, it is a deepening love for the distinct way of walking with God of the Jewish or Christian other who is no longer an outsider, but who has become a friend.

Fifty years along what Pope Francis has called "our journey of friendship," we have learned that we can explore and study profound questions together with a closeness and trust that was unimaginable not so long ago. Catholics and Jews today are now able to discuss topics in an environment of mutual respect that previous generations could not have imagined would ever be possible. Let me suggest a few current subjects (out of many possible ones) that we are for the first time able to study together.

1. How can God be both concerned and even involved in human history while also being beyond space and time and the created universe? Both traditions have developed distinctive approaches, such as the mystical Kabbalistic *sephirot* or divine emanations or Christian Trinitarian theology. Can we learn from each other's approaches to our shared, paradoxical belief in God's immanence and transcendence?
2. If God is involved in human history, how are we to judge whether or which contemporary events are religiously meaningful? There are some who see the hand of God at work everywhere, while others dismiss the thought that God plays any role in human lives today. How do Jews and Christians go about attributing or denying theological significance to such occurrences as natural disasters, the outbreak of new and virulent diseases, the Shoah, or the 1948 foundation of the State of Israel? Are there ways we can help each other to "read the signs of the times," as one Vatican II document put it?
3. Although both traditions believe that they have benefited from God's redeeming acts in history, we both also know that the world's redemption is incomplete and look toward a future messianic End of Days. Christians have tended to stress what has already happened, while Jews tend to highlight the unredeemed aspects of the human condition. What can we say to each other about our respective emphases? What can we learn from each other's hopes and expectations for our ultimate destinies?

No doubt as we explore such topics there will inevitably be tensions and maybe irresolvable disputes. But I believe as we journey together, we are learning that it is our new relationship *itself* that is assuming a primary value. It is becoming the very space within which both Jews and Christians can theologize, where they can seek to deepen their understanding of their relationship with the Holy One.

²² Mary C. Boys, "Learning in the Presence of the Other: My Friendship with Sara Lee," James L. Fredericks and Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, eds., *Interreligious Friendship after Nostra Aetate* (New York/London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 18.

Allow me, please, to conclude with what to me is a very moving quotation from the book that Pope Francis wrote with Rabbi Skorka. As a result of their decades of interreligious collaboration and conversation, Francis had this to say about the nature of their dialogues. I think it points the way ahead for the new relationship between Christians and Jews.

Dialogue is born from a respectful attitude toward the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It supposes that we can make room in our heart for their point of view, their opinion and their proposals. The challenge consists in walking the path of respect and affection ... I consider Rabbi Skorka a brother and a friend ... walking in the presence of God. ... To dialogue, one must know how to lower the defenses, to open the doors of one's home and to offer warmth.²³

²³ Bergoglio, Jorge Mario and Abraham Skorka. *On Heaven and Earth: Pope Francis on Faith, Family, and the Church in the Twenty-First Century*. Alejandro Bermudez and Howard Goodman, trans. (New York: Image Books, 2013), xiv.