

Romuald Jakub WekslerWaszkinel
Catholic University of Lublin

A Breakthrough in the Teachings of the Church on Jews and Judaism¹

"As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New covenant to Abraham's stock."

Nostra aetate, No. 4.

The message contained in the citation above - paragraph 4 of the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* proclaimed at the Vatican Council (*Nostra aetate*, No. 4, hereinafter referred to as "Nae, 4") — refers to memory. The memory of the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock, and to be more precise, *the discovery of the bond that links the Church of Jesus Christ with Judaism*², is of particular importance, a *breakthrough* for new teachings of the Church following the Second Vatican Council. It is precisely what the fourth paragraph of the said Declaration proclaimed by Pope Paul VI at the Second Vatican Council *remembers or rather recalls* that constitutes a clear *dividing line in the history of the Church*.

Commemorating the 20 anniversary of the proclamation of the said Declaration, John Paul II - making a reference to the contents of paragraph 4 — said: "*It has been contended repeatedly that the contents of this paragraph, short and quite simple, was the starting point of a new epoch that changed the*

¹ A excerpt from a larger text.

² In his address delivered in the Roman Tempio Maggiore in Rome on 13 April 1986, John Paul II - paraphrasing the first sentence of the Council Declaration - said: "(...) analysing in depth its own mystery, the Church of Jesus Christ is discovering the bond that ties it to Judaism (*Nostra aetate*, No. 4)."

relation of the Church to the Jewish people, opening an entirely new era in these relations³."

This new epoch in the history of the Church, a turning point, and even a new era in Christian (Catholic)-Jewish relations are not words that frequently appear in official papal addresses. They did appear this time, since they adequately describe what actually happened. Paragraph 4 of the Nostra aetate Declaration is the first - since Apostolic times (i.e. the Council of Jerusalem) - doctrinal and highly solemn expression that underlines the inseparable spiritual bond between the Church (those who believe in Jesus Christ) with the Jewish religion (followers of Judaism). It is said that the Second Vatican Council marks the beginning of a new evangelisation. What can this possibly mean? After all there is no new Gospel to speak of.

It was not long after the landmark event that took place during the first century of Christianity reported in Acts in Chapter 15 and called the Jerusalem Council when instead of *commemorating* the spiritual bond that ties followers of Christ with followers of Judaism, *the gap that separates the two began to become noticeable⁴.*

Let us consider the following statement made by John Paul II: *"The New Covenant has its roots in the Old. The time when the people of the Old Covenant will be able to see themselves as part of the New is, naturally, a question to be left to the Holy Spirit. We, as human beings, try only not to put obstacles in the way⁵.* At the first glance, the cited statement made by the Pope resembles an adage of St. Augustine: *Novum Testamentum in Vetere patet, et Vetus in Novo latet (The New testament is contained in the Old and the Old Testament opens up because of the New).* However, there is no need to explain in detail that this apparent similarity reveals striking differences. Instead of elaborating on the differences between the statements made by St. Augustine (4 c. AD) and John Paul II (20th c. AD), it is best to return to paragraph 4 of Nostra aetate. A cursory look at the text of the Declaration is sufficient to see that there is not a single reference to the teachings of the previous councils, popes, fathers and Doctors of the Church. Clearly, this can only indicate that during *the past 19 centuries of the teachings of the Church* — and surely in none of the twenty councils that took place from the Council of Nicaea (in 325) through the First Vatican Council

³ Quoted after G. Ignatowski, *Kościół wobec przejawów antysemityzmu*, [Churches and Symptoms of Anti-Semitism] (Łódź, 1999), pp. 57 - 58, italics in the original text. During the said visit to the Roman synagogue John Paul II said about the document: "This short and concise paragraph has become *a turning point* in the relations between the Catholic Church and Judaism as well as individual Jews" - Para. 4; italics are mine.

⁴ Cf.: "Żydzi - chrześcijanie. Tak blisko i tak daleko", [Jews - Christians. So Close and So Far Apart] in: R. J. Weksler-Waszkineł, *Zgłębiając tajemnicę Kościoła* [Analysing the in Depth Mystery of the Church], (Cracow, 2003), pp. 90 - 109.

⁵ John Paul II, *Przekroczyć próg nadziei* [Crossing the Threshold of Hope], (Lublin, 1994), p. 87.

(in 1869) - no signs of *the remembrance as referred to in the cited paragraph* were found⁶. The document issued by the Holy See concerning the implementation of the said Declaration, where references are made to Judaism and Jews, i.e. *Guideline Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* of 1 December 1974, seems to confirm such circumstances already at the beginning: "Although Christianity sprang from Judaism, taking from it certain essential elements of its faith and divine worship, the gap dividing them was deepened more and more, to such an extent that Christians and Jews hardly knew each other."

This one-sentence *resume* of the 20 centuries of the history of the Church can actually explain a great deal in the subject matter of this article. Shocking, as it will sound, there are grounds to call the literature of the 19 centuries of Christianity, i.e., roughly speaking, from Bishop Meliton of Sardes or Tertulian (2nd c.) through all Church Fathers and Doctors of the Church to Prof. F. Koneczny or Rev. S. Trzeciak (20 .a), to give our "local" examples, as "the literature of the growing gap" or, to describe it straightforwardly as the literature tainted with anti-Judaism (anti-Semitic literature)!⁷

Irrespective of the name given to this literature, the rich literary heritage of the 19 centuries of Christianity collected in libraries proves useless if one attempts to build "a bridge" or even "a footbridge" to enable one to discern *the spiritual link between Christianity and Judaism*. On the contrary, this is the literature that deepens the gap and makes it unbridgeable. It presents the Jewish world as an exterior and utterly alien reality, at worst, hostile to Christianity⁸. In the last analysis, it is "this literature of the ever deepening gap" that is also responsible for the fact that *Christians and Jews hardly know each other*.

This lack of knowledge is but one aspect of the matter. Originating, in the majority of cases, from erroneous interpretations of the Bible, most notably the New Testament, it is also responsible for the fact that the Christian Europe in the 20th c. failed to combat the anti-Jewish Nazi propaganda. Exceptions to that are

⁶ In a very popular Conciliar compendium compiled by Rahner and Vorgrimler, the following is said about the statement concerning Jews and Judaism: "The declaration, as it is dynamically worded today, is an absolute exception in the history of the Church, its councils and theology". Cited after: *Żydzi i chrześcijanie jedną mają przyszłość* [Common Past of Jews and Christians! translated by D. Motak, (Cracow, 2001), p. 42. See also: F. Becheau, *Historia soborów* [The History of Councils], translated by P. Rak, (Cracow, 1998).

⁷ See e.g. F. Koneczny, *Cywilizacja żydowska*, [Jewish Civilisation] (Komorów: Antyk. M. Dybowski, 1997).

⁸ M. Starowieyski writes: "The first three centuries of Christianity were marked with polemics against Judaism which, besides paganism, was considered the most serious threat looming over the spread of Christianity." *Caelestis urbs Hierusalem*, in: *Jerozolima w kulturze europejskiej* [Jerusalem in the European Culture] ed. P. Paszkiewicz and T. Zadrożny, (Warsaw, 1997), pp. 49-57.

few and far between including J. Maritain⁹, Rev. Ch. Journet¹⁰, E. Stein¹¹ and a handful of others.

Although the Decree of the Holy Office of 25 March 1928 condemned "in the strongest possible terms hatred /.../ that is commonly referred to as «anti-Semitism»" (quoted after G. Ignatowski, p. 81), Hitler's rise to power (in 1933) made the said decree practically useless. This is clearly evidenced in a letter written by Edith Stein to Pope Pius XI immediately after the rise of Hitler in which she points out that the German government "which calls itself «Christian»", actually propounds hatred towards Jews¹². Soon after the end of World War II, J. Maritain pointed out the need to condemn anti-Semitism by the Church. As French Ambassador to the Holy See, he wrote a letter to Pius XII via Archbishop J. B. Monitini (later Pope Paul VI) dated 12 July 1946 in which he pleaded - ineffectively - for the explicit condemnation of anti-Semitism¹³.

The situation in Poland was not any different. The letter of Cardinal A. Hlond, Primate of Poland, in autumn 1936 which condemned extreme anti-Semitism did not have any effect on the Polish Catholic press of the day, as many historians now assert¹⁴.

The fact remains that Christian Europe not only failed to undertake an all-out war against anti-Jewish propaganda of the Nazis but also followed suit. The author of a study on the Jewish themes as presented by the Catholic press in the thirties, A. Landau-Czajka, makes such comments about the Polish environment (p. 25): "Jews were perceived as *strangers and enemies* not only for not being Christian, but also as followers of Judaism - unknown and mysterious, and therefore dangerous. While this type of traditional anti-Semitism did not generate its own solutions to the Jewish problem, it did constitute a fruitful ground on which such solutions took roots." This opinion is evidenced in a report for June and mid July 1944 compiled by the community closely linked

⁹ See e.g.: M. Dubois, "Jacques Maritain et le mystère d'Israël", in: M. Dubois, *Rencontres avec le judaïsme en Israël*, (Jerusalem, 1983), pp. 127 - 146.

¹⁰ See e.g.: Ł. Kamykowski, *Izrael i Kościół według Charlesa Journeta* [Israel and the Church according to Charles Journet], (Cracow, 1993).

¹¹ See e.g.: J. M. Oesterricher, *Sept philosophes juifs devant le Christ*, (Paris, 1955), M. Dubois, "L'itinéraire philosophique et spirituel d'Edith Stein" in: op. cit., pp. 147 - 183; R. J. Weksler-Waszkinel, "Edyta Stein - patronka Europy" [Edith Stein - Europe's Patron Saint], inop. cit., pp. 199-216.

¹² See: "Nieznany list Edyty Stein do Piusa XI" [Unknown letter of Edith Stein to Pius XI], in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, No. 9(2799), 2 March 2003.

¹³ Cf.: B. Charmet, *Jacques Maritain et Pie XII. Quelques précisions d'ordre documentaire*, Sens, 2 - 2000, pp. 101-106.

¹⁴ See: A. Landau-Czajka, *W jednym stali domu...* [In one house they abode...] A solution to the Jewish Problem in Polish Journalism in the Years 1933-1939, (Warsaw, 1998); D. Libionka, «Kwestia żydowska» w prasie katolickiej w Polsce w latach trzydziestych XX wieku [The Jewish Problem" in the Catholic Press in Poland in 1930s] (a Ph.D. dissertation written in the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences - Warsaw 1998).

with the Church for the Polish government-in-exile in London. Here is an excerpt from the report:

As far as the Jewish problem is concerned, it is a peculiar sign of God's Providence that Germans, besides the atrocities committed in the past and now to our country, have made a good start by showing the way to free the Polish society from the Jewish plague which we should follow, of course, in a less brutal and cruel manner. Clearly, this is the work of Providence to make the occupying army contribute to solving this pressing problem. The Polish nation, too soft and lacking in consistency, would never be able to make decisive steps that the solution of this problem requires. It is obvious that this is a burning issue, for undoubtedly, Jews are doing irreparable harm to our religious and national life.¹⁵

This is a shocking account that prompts nothing but shameful silence and an appeal to God for forgiveness....

Indeed, the Nazis *who occupied Poland* and other countries, *did contribute to "solving" the Jewish problem once and for all*. Worse still, in their task of "purifying" Europe (making it Judenrein) they were not alone: "The wave of hatred towards Jews that swept through the entire Christian Europe claimed a heavy loss of life: about six million people including 1.5 million children.

However, it must also be pointed out at this juncture, that this unprecedented wave of hatred was an eye opener to many who did not bury their conscience. One cannot fail to notice that among those who during the years of the Nazi occupation "opened their eyes and hearts," Poles are most numerous represented. The largest number of those who received the Righteous Among Nations distinction conferred by Yad Vashem for saving Jews from imminent death during the war are Poles (and among them my parents - Piotr and Emilia Waszkinel). These people risked their own lives to save others, as Poland was the only country under the Nazi occupation with such severe sanctions against those who helped Jews. One should also bear in mind that the London-based Polish Government-in-Exile was the only government of all the countries that

¹⁵ Source: from the Archives of Ministry of the Interior, file 46. L.p. 8/Kośc., k. 1-10. Cf.: T. Szarota, *U progu Zagłady. Zajścia antyżydowskie i pogromy w okupowanej Europie*, [On the Threshold of the Holocaust. Anti-Jewish Demonstrations and Pogroms in Europe under German Occupation], (Warsaw, 2000). For the evaluation of the relation of the Church to Jews during the Second World War see: Alain Besançon, *Przekleństwo wieku. O komunizmie, narodowym socjalizmie i jedyności Zagłady* [Curse of the Century. About Communism, National Socialism and the Uniqueness of the Holocaust] translated by J. Guze, (Warsaw, 2000), p. 94 and subsequent pages.

fought against the Nazis who established a clandestine underground Council for Aid to Jews¹⁶.

Generally speaking, during World War II various people behaved like humans do: differently. In the light of war crimes committed by the Nazis, their sneers addressed to God from the Hebrew Bible¹⁷ were also sneers addressed to God, the Father of Jesus Christ (compare Rom:1, 1:3; Eph 1, 3)¹⁸. Hatred or contempt for the Jewish world was actually hatred - *or merely contempt* (!) - for Jesus of Nazareth, his Mother, his disciples, and, in the last instance, for *the first Church of Jesus Christ* when the day of Pentecost was fully come (cf: Acts 2:1-41), made up *exclusively* of Jews!¹⁹

In the light of the facts and events presented above, it should now be clear that any attempt to seek an answer to the question "*How should one talk about the Church after Auschwitz?*" in "*the literature of the erowine eao*" is bound to fail. The Second Vatican Council was well aware of that. While raising the question of relations of the Church to Jews and Judaism, it made a reference to the Bible - mainly to the New Testament²⁰.

Mainly, but not exclusively! The contents of the fourth paragraph of the Declaration *Nostra aetate* should be supplemented with one more explanation. Even without an in-depth analysis of the document, one can easily notice its connection with the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*)

¹⁶ Among 14 706 persons representing 35 countries who received the *Righteous Among Nations* medal, 4 954 are Poles - information as at January 1997. Cf.: *Those who helped. Polish rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust*, (Warsaw, 1997). For more information on the clandestine underground organisation - Council for Aid to Jews in Occupied Poland - see: «Zegota» Council for Aid to Jews, Warsaw 2002. For more information on aid provided in France, see: H. De Lubac, *Résistance chrétienne à l'antisémitisme*, Souvenirs 1940 - 1944, (Paris, 1988).

¹⁷ In his article entitled "the Valley of Shadows. Holocaust in the Context of Judaism", J. Sacks writes: "Josef Mengele, a doctor from Auschwitz, joked openly that he had replaced God as the one who makes the final judgement of "who will live and who will die". Franz Stangl, the commandant of Treblinka, forced Jews to spit on the Scrolls, and spat into their mouths so that they did not ran out of saliva. Jewish holidays and Sabbaths were marked by particular atrocities." translated by P. Spiewak, *Znak*, 507, August 1997, pp. 9 - 29; the citation above was published on pp. 11-12.

¹⁸ Cf.: J. Ratzinger, *Bóg Jezusa Chrystusa* [God of Jesus Christ], translated by J. Zychowicz, (Cracow, 1995).

¹⁹ Cardinal J. Ratzinger writes: "Auschwitz was the horrible expression of the outlook aimed to destroy Jews but also *expressed hatred of the Jewish heritage in Christianity and attempted to erase it completely*". See: J. Ratzinger, *Granice dialogu* [Limits of a Dialogue], translated by M. Mijalska (Cracow, 1999), p. 11; italics are mine.

By the way, the title of the work written by Cardinal J. Ratzinger in German is "*Die Vielfalt der Religionen und der Eine Bund*" and in French "*L'Unique Alliance de Dieu et le pluralisme des religions*". The cardinal would probably be surprised to find out that he is also the author of a book entitled "*Granice dialogu*". [Limits of a Dialogue].

²⁰ Out of the 10 references 7 refer to the Letters of St. Paul, five of which to the Letter to Romans.

promulgated a year earlier (21 November 1964). One of the footnotes of the Declaration *Nostra aetate* makes a reference to Chapter II of the said declaration entitled *On the People of God*²¹. A clearer clue referring the document to the Constitution adopted by Council is placed in the first sentence of paragraph 4 of the Declaration *Nostra aetate*. The sentence states what the present Vatican Council *remembers (and what other councils neglected)* indicating the very source of this memory. "As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church (*mysterium Ecclesiae perscrutans*), it remembers...." Let me repeat these words: The Second Vatican Council remembers.... while *searching into the mystery of the Church*. Before analysing the semantic contents of these words, the very syntactic aspect (or terminology used) is like a signpost which directs attention to the title of the first chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, i.e. *The Mystery of the Church (De mysterio Ecclesiae)*.

Clearly, there are easily "recognisable" syntactic "road signs" that allow one to assume that the first sentence of paragraph 4 of *Nostra aetate*, which seems to be the starting point of a new teaching of the Church about Jews and Judaism, is, in fact, a link that binds the discussed paragraph of *Nostra aetate* with the fundamental and *par excellence* doctrinal document of this Council²². There is every reason to believe that the whole message on Jews and Judaism as expressed by the Second Vatican Council and placed in paragraph 4 of *the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, is, in fact, an in-depth ecclesiology of the Council, an expression of *a new way of thinking of the Church about the Church itself and about Jews and Judaism*.

Certainly, the expression of this new way of thinking and teaching of the Church about the Church itself - and consequently a new way of thinking and teaching about Jews and Judaism - is found in all documents of the Second Vatican Council and the teachings of St. Peter's follower, the Bishop of Rome, the first teacher and witness of faith, documents of the Holy See commenting the teaching of the Council, and, finally, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* recommended by Pope John Paul II as «a sure norm» for teaching the faith revitalized with its very source!²³

²¹ See: *Nostra aetate* 4. Footnote 11. *Sobór Watykański II. Konstytucje Dekrety Deklaracje*, [Second Vatican Council - Constitutions, Decrees and Declarations] Polish-Latin edition, (Warsaw, 1968), p. 520.

²² Three more documents of a similar theological value were adopted by the Council. These include Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) and Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*). Cf.: Becheau, op. cit, pp. 228 - 229.

²³ See: John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum* on the Publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church Prepared following The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (11 October 1992). In the said document John Paul II says: "I declare it [i.e. the Catechism] to be a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion and a sure norm for teaching the faith."

Throughout the 20 centuries of the history of Christianity the reality of the Jewish world was by no means an abstract term. Local synods - e.g. in Toledo (in 653) or in Wroclaw (in 1267), and even Councils - e.g. the Fourth Lateran Council (in 1205) or in Florence (in 1442) defined the place of Jews in the Christian community, most notably their legal status. They offered the Christian community certain guidelines on how to "*protect oneself against the detrimental influence of Jews*". They also gave tips to Jews on what they should do to become members of the Christian world - i.e. to be baptised²⁴. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these documents belong, regrettably, to the murky sides of the history of all Christian churches. It might be because of their nature that the majority of Christians know nothing or very little about these documents. The fact remains, however, that throughout the last 19 centuries all Christian churches (not only the Roman Catholic Church) perceived the Jewish world as *external, strange and hostile* with respect to Christianity.

Following the changes inside the Church as a result of the Second Vatican Council and a new way of thinking about the Church itself, and, by extension, about Jews and Judaism, it was not only possible to arrange a visit of the Pope to a Roman Tempio Maggiore - *the first such visit (!) since St. Peter* - but also to hear words which made many Christians feel dizzy. Notorious for his disobedience Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre concluded after the visit that "*The Pope is no longer Catholic*". And what scandalised the archbishop who seemed more pious than the Pope himself? This is what Pope John Pauls II said to the Jews that gathered in the synagogue on that memorable day (13 April 1986) (n. 4): "*The Jewish religion is not an external reality to our religion. It is its internal part. Our attitude towards Jewish religion is different from our attitude towards other religions. You are our dear brothers or our older brothers.*"

The cited excerpt from the speech delivered by the first witness and teacher of faith, the Bishop of Rome, John Paul II, is probably the best

²⁴ See e.g.: Rev. G. Ignatowski, *Kościół i Synagoga* [The Church and the Synagogue], (Warsaw, 2000); Cf.: my article entitled "Henri Bergson: spotkanie judaizmu i katolicyzmu", [Henri Bergson: Where Judaism and Catholicism Meet] in: op. cit., pp. 158 — 176.

²⁵ I highly recommend the address of Rabbi M. Melchior delivered during the official visit of Pope John Paul II to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on 26 March 2000. See: *Visit to Israel of his Holiness Pope John II. Speeches and Addresses, March 2000*, Jerusalem 2000, pp. 26 - 28.

²⁶ Cf. e.g.: E. H. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews*, (New York, 1965); F. Lovsky, *l'antisémitisme chrétien*, (Paris, 1970); F. Lovsky, *La déchirure de l'absence*, (Paris, 1971); M. Simon, *Verus Israel*, (Paris, 1983); Brother Johanan, *Chrześcijański antysemityzm* [Christian Anti-Semitism], translated by M. Tarnowska, (Cracow, 2000); M. Remaud, *Chrétiens et Juifs entre le passé et l'avenir*, (Brussels, 2000).

²⁷ Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre was excommunicated in 1988. Cf.: *Żydzi i chrześcijanie jedną mają przyszłość...* [Jews and Christians Have One Common Future], (Cracow: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, 2001), pp. 36 and 116.

illustration of the breakthrough in the teachings of the Church about Jews and Judaism, a genuine milestone made possible by the Second Vatican Council.

Apparently, the latest Council did not compile a *new* Gospel. So what is this *new evangelisation*? It is the remembrance of this inseparable spiritual bond that *ties the people of the New Covenant or Christians to the followers of Judaism*. It follows that the post-Council breakthrough in the teaching of the Church about Jews and Judaism is by no means a significant change of the doctrine. If not, what is it then? It is definitely an explicit rejection of old mistakes that persisted for centuries. One can safely say that the Council diagnosed and defined this old, chronic and still very dangerous disease - anti-Judaism and all sorts of anti-Jewish derivatives. The task of the Church now is to see that the treatment undertaken is successful. The treatment is well underway.

Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkinel