

Dialogue between Catholics and Jews. Restarting with a concrete commitment against all forms of anti-Semitism

(13 January 2025)

Relations between Catholics and Jews, after the tragic terrorist act of 7 October 2023 and the escalation of the conflict in the Middle East, are becoming more difficult. The latest act, for the moment, in a series of declarations, which are threatening to undermine precious years in which there has been, in the intra-family¹ dialogue between Catholics and Jews, the slow passage from the teaching of contempt (J. Isaac) to that of insignificance (R. Etchegaray) and ignorance to finally arrive at mutual esteem and cooperation² is the letter from Rabbi Eliezer Simcha Weisz, member of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, addressed to Pope Francis and released on 9 January 2025³. 17 January is also the annual Day of Dialogue between Catholics and Jews, and the Italian bishops, together with the Rabbis of Italy, in their annual Message⁴ make no secret of the moments of suspicion, misunderstandings and prejudices that are being experienced, a period of objective cooling of relations, as also stated by the Italian Chief Rabbi Di Segni⁵.

In November 2023, a group of more than four hundred Rabbis and scholars engaged in dialogue between Jews and Christians had addressed an open letter to Pope Francis⁶ as an expression of confidence in the strong friendship with Catholics, invoking the comfort of the Catholic Church after the Hamas attack on Israel, specifying: «Comprendiamo che la Chiesa cerchi di mantenere, in base a considerazioni diplomatiche, una neutralità politica nella guerra in Medio Oriente nella quale molti poteri sono coinvolti». However, the letter concluded, «chiediamo che la Chiesa ora si distingua come un faro di morale e di chiarezza concettuale nel mare di disinformazione e distorsione della realtà, distinguendo tra le legittime critiche alle politiche di Israele e l'abominevole negazione del diritto a esistere degli ebrei e di Israele. E soprattutto chiediamo ai nostri fratelli cattolici di stendere una mano in solidarietà alle comunità ebraiche di tutto il mondo nello spirito di una genuina fratellanza con il popolo dell'Alleanza».

However, on the occasion of Francis' meetings with relatives of hostages kidnapped by Hamas⁷ and with relatives of Palestinians imprisoned in Israel⁸, the Council of the Assembly of Rabbis of Italy⁹ and the President of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities¹⁰ had criticised the speech and the way in which the papal meetings were managed, claiming that innocents and aggressors had been put on the same level. Little distensive effect had been produced by the clarifying statement of E.C.I. President Matteo Zuppi: «Il Papa è attento e guardate che questo non è mettere tutti sullo stesso piano, il 7 ottobre è stata una tragedia, punto e basta. È stata una tragedia. [...]. Poi c'è quello che sta succedendo a Gaza, perché il Papa chiede il cessate il fuoco? Perché c'è una sofferenza terribile, e guardando lontano mi sembra che spinga per un'altra soluzione

¹ DICASTERY FOR THE PROMOTION OF CHRISTIAN UNITY-COMMISSION FOR RELIGIOUS RELATIONS WITH JUDAISM, *Perché i Doni e la chiamata di Dio sono irrevocabili* (Rm 11,29). *Riflessioni su questioni teologiche attinenti alle relazioni cattolico-ebraiche, in occasione del 50° anniversario di Nostra aetate* (n. 4), 10 december 2015, in www.vatican.va, n. 20

² He reconstructs its path, PAOLO PALUMBO, *Inconciliabilità tra cattolicesimo e antisemitismo. Una prospettiva canonistica*, in *Quaderni di Diritto e politica ecclesiastica*, 2, 2024, p. 683 ss.

³ Available in www.moked.it.

⁴ Available in www.unedi.chiesacattolica.it.

⁵ Interview with Corriere della Sera, 20 November 2024.

⁶ A summary of the letter can be found at www.osservatoreromano.va.

⁷ Received, as communicated in the Bulletin of the Holy See Press Office, on 22.11.2023

⁸ Received, as communicated in the Bulletin of the Holy See Press Office, on 22.11.2023

⁹ Available in www.moked.it.

¹⁰ Available in www.moked.it.

perché si combatta davvero il terrorismo, togliendo tutto ciò che per certi versi paradossalmente lo può giustificare. [...] Questa è la posizione del Papa e non è che non capisce le motivazioni del governo israeliano»¹¹, but strives for the desire for peace to prevail over all. Shortly afterwards, however, the same group of scholars who had already addressed Francis, wrote¹² showing appreciation for the Church's effort in reaching out to Jews around the world and, in particular, to those in Israel: «Stiamo vivendo un momento storico che richiede perseveranza, speranza e coraggio. Il potere trasformativo di Nostra Aetate è per noi un'ispirazione, poiché dimostra che la fratellanza può essere recuperata anche nel conflitto più difficile».

Particular dismay in the world Jewish community was caused, however, by the expressions in the book *La speranza non delude mai*, written by Pope Francis together with Argentinean journalist Hernán Reyes Alcaide and published by Piemme, in which he states, with regard to the Israeli military operation, that we should «indagare con attenzione per determinare se s'inquadra nella definizione tecnica di genocidio formulata da giuristi e organismi internazionali»¹³. The Israeli Embassy to the Holy See immediately stated in a note: «Il 7 ottobre 2023 c'è stato un massacro genocida di cittadini israeliani e da allora Israele ha esercitato il proprio diritto di autodifesa contro i tentativi provenienti da sette diversi fronti di uccidere i suoi cittadini. Qualsiasi tentativo di chiamare questa autodifesa con qualsiasi altro nome significa isolare lo Stato ebraico»¹⁴; and even the Italian Rabbinical Assembly had labelled the Pontiff's statements 'very dangerous', specifying: «Le parole sono importanti e bisogna stare molto attenti a come usarle soprattutto se si svolge un ruolo di guida religiosa [...]. L'invocazione alla pace ci accomuna ma il modo peggiore di perseguire la pace è considerare le colpe in modo unilaterale e trasformare gli aggrediti in aggressori o addirittura in vendicatori sanguinari. Siamo sicuri che papa Francesco non avesse queste intenzioni, siamo sicuri che le sue parole derivino da una genuina preoccupazione per la guerra in atto. Riteniamo però che per perseguire la pace sia necessario adottare un'altra prospettiva, preoccupandosi di tutte le vittime»¹⁵. On the other hand, historian Anna Foa stated: «Il mondo ebraico non accetterà benevolmente le parole del Papa, il premier israeliano Netanyahu ripeterà che il suo Paese è solo, sentiremo evocare per l'ennesima volta l'antico antiggiudaismo cattolico che non passa [...] Ma il pontefice non ha affermato che a Gaza è in corso un genocidio, ha detto parliamone, affrontiamolo»¹⁶; and Judge Silvana Arbia, former prosecutor at the UN Tribunal for Rwanda and former Registrar of the International Criminal Court (ICC), also stated: «Ringrazio il Papa, sentitamente, per l'alto richiamo che ha rivolto alla comunità internazionale. Io sono d'accordo con lui. Ogni Stato su questa Terra ha l'obbligo, ripeto l'obbligo non solo di perseguire e punire il genocidio, ma anche di prevenire questo crimine internazionale gravissimo. Sono norme imperative inderogabili che la comunità internazionale ha adottato per garantire pace e sicurezza mondiale, ed evitare che orribili tragedie consumate durante la Seconda guerra mondiale potessero ripetersi. Purtroppo, assistiamo ad una crescente violazione di quelle regole, stiamo distruggendo l'intero sistema a difesa dei popoli, cioè di noi stessi. Disconoscere l'autorità Onu e le sue istituzioni comporta seri rischi che riguardano noi tutti»¹⁷.

Authoritative and discordant positions that make clear the difficulty and tension of the moment, further exacerbated in December 2024 when a crib from Bethlehem appeared in the Vatican in which the Baby Jesus rested in a cloth evocative of the Palestinian keffiyeh¹⁸.

¹¹ Available in www.vaticannews.va.

¹² Available in www.vaticannews.va.

¹³ Available in www.osservatoreromano.va.

¹⁴ Available in www.mosaico-ccm.it.

¹⁵ Available in www.mosaico-ccm.it.

¹⁶ Available in www.lastampa.it.

¹⁷ Available in www.lastampa.it.

¹⁸ Available in www.ilmessaggero.it.

Rabbi Eliezer Simcha Weisz's letter comes after the Pontiff's meeting with the Rector of the University of Religions and Denominations of Iran, Abolhassan Navab¹⁹. The words and actions of Pope Francis on Israel, says the Rabbi, are also due to the worldwide spread facilitated by digital, «non sono semplicemente deludenti, ma rappresentano un pericolo storico» for Jewish communities. The Pontiff's attitude is considered biased, as he has: «[...] ripetutamente tracciato una falsa equivalenza morale tra una nazione democratica che difende i propri cittadini e i terroristi che hanno perpetrato il più barbaro massacro di ebrei dopo la Shoah»²⁰.

And it is precisely in the Rabbi's statement that he believes Francis' action would lend «l'autorità papale al moderno antisemitismo»²¹ that the strongest concerns about the maintenance of relations between Catholics and Jews emerge.

This is a point and a subject on which there should be no grey areas.

With the conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, it was solemnly clarified that 'the Church, which abhors all persecutions against any man, mindful of the heritage she has in common with the Jews, and impelled not by political motives but by religious evangelical charity, deplores hatreds, persecutions and all manifestations of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews in every age and by anyone'²². Combating anti-Semitism is a commitment for all Catholics, and Pope Francis has stated since the beginning of his pontificate «È una contraddizione che un cristiano sia antisemita. [...] Un cristiano non può essere antisemita! L'antisemitismo sia bandito dal cuore e dalla vita di ogni uomo e di ogni donna!»²³.

The Italian bishops themselves, in 2024, supported and encouraged the translation into Italian of the French Bishops' Conference Document on Anti-Judaism, entitled "Decostruire l'antigiudaismo cristiano" (published by Castelvechi), among the last magisterial documents to clearly underline the irreconcilability between anti-Semitism and Catholicism. The volume, in line with the path of future memory pursued by ecclesial teaching over the last 60 years, courageously recognises that going to the roots of anti-Semitism means, in short, becoming aware that that subsoil has been too rich in Christian/Catholic humus for too long and that an affirmative answer must be given, consciously, an affirmative answer to the question that Joseph Ratzinger posed, wondering whether the prejudicial presentation of the Jews and the Jewish people in Christian/Catholic teaching had not fuelled the hostility that then fostered the ideology of those who wanted to suppress them²⁴. Catholicism is certainly not among those responsible for the Shoah, «sarebbe ingiusto e non veritiero addossare al cristianesimo questi crimini indicibili»²⁵, but Catholic thought, the attitude of many Catholics and a particular Church teaching²⁶ have provided is the past a 'favourable context for its spread'²⁷.

This is the past of Catholic-Jewish relations and this confusion must remain!

¹⁹ Available in www.ansa.it.

²⁰ Text available in www.moked.it.

²¹ Text available in www.moked.it.

²² VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL II, Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, No. 4

²³ FRANCIS, *Speech to the Delegation of the Jewish Community of Rome*, 11 october 2013, in www.vatican.va.

²⁴ JOSEPH RATZINGER, *Presentazione del documento «Noi ricordiamo: una riflessione sulla Shoah»*, 12 march 1998, in www.vatican.va.

²⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Meeting with representatives of the Jewish community in the apostolic Nunciature. on the occasion of the pastoral journey to Austria*, 24 june 1988, in www.vatican.va.

²⁶ As extensively reconstructed in PAOLO PALUMBO, *Inconciliabilità tra cattolicesimo e antisemitismo. Una prospettiva canonistica*, cit.

²⁷ WALTER KASPER, *Antisemitismo una piaga da guarire. Intervento in occasione della IV Giornata Europea della Cultura Ebraica*, 7 september 2003, available in web.

Every Catholic believer, by adhering to Christ, becomes a ‘descendant of Abraham’ (Gal 3:29) and is included in the people of Israel. Accordingly, «se possiede questa forte convinzione, egli non potrà più accettare che gli ebrei in quanto ebrei siano disprezzati o, peggio, maltrattati»²⁸, having to condemn, as a matter of principle, any and all forms of anti-Semitism, and especially religiously and racially motivated anti-Semitism, which is naturally and theologically irreconcilable with the Catholic religion. In the case of Catholic religiously motivated anti-Semitism, in fact, the Jewish roots of Catholicism make it profoundly contradictory that a believer could be anti-Semitic, insofar as he would outrage himself and his own creed by adopting opinions, attitudes or behaviour that are also profoundly contrary to the theological content of the Catholic religion, based on the intrinsicity of the Jewish religion to the Catholic religion. In the hypothesis of racial anti-Semitism, then, the constant teaching of the Catholic Church on the unity of the human race, which has its roots in the Old Testament in the common descent from Adam, makes any position aimed at affirming the superiority of one group of human beings over others equally irreconcilable with the Catholic religion.

It is sadly true that since 7 October 2023 episodes of anti-Semitism have drastically increased worldwide²⁹, and the Catholic Church, and all the Catholic faithful, must play their part in firmly opposing every anti-Semitic word, action or expression, also committing themselves to eradicating from Catholic circles the residual but always dangerous, manifestations of anti-Semitism and any incitement to hatred against Jews and Judaism, in themselves contrary to Christian principles - and, therefore, to be avoided - by fostering a culture of prevention and embodying the appeal of the French Bishops «a lottare energicamente contro ogni forma d’antisemitismo politico e religioso in se stessi e attorno a sé»³⁰. Taking a clear stand, denouncing and punishing are important acts and evidence of the common commitment of all social agents - including religions - against all forms of anti-Semitism. The importance of legislation to counter anti-Semitism and the awareness that the protection afforded may be more simboli than real should not obscure the consideration that the use of criminal sanction «non può essere considerato un compito cui l’ordinamento debba sottrarsi o debba rinunciare, nonostante l’oggettiva difficoltà di superare tutti i problemi legati alla descrizione in termini sufficientemente determinati e tassativi dello stesso fatto tipico»³¹.

It is a cardinal commitment that also engages canon law.

As I have already tried to demonstrate³², external anti-Semitic conduct of a religious or racial nature by a Catholic can be considered a crime under canon law, and the fundamental normative reference for the fight against anti-Semitism - whether Catholic or racial - in the ecclesial order can be found in Title I of Part Two of Book VI of the Code of Canon Law, specifically in canon 1368, so as to understand the ‘crime of anti-Semitism’ as a particular expression of insulting behaviour, incitement to hatred or contempt against religion carried out publicly through performances, speeches or stances, disseminated writings or through the instruments of social communication. In the light of the indissoluble bond between the Catholic Church and Judaism and of the contents of the teaching of the Catholic religion on relations with Judaism, considering any act of anti-Semitism committed by a Catholic believer, whether religiously or racially motivated, to be a serious «negazione delle proprie origini, una contraddizione assoluta»³³ with one’s religion, a cutting off of

²⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission*, 11 april 1997, in www.vatican.va.

²⁹ Cf. Annual Antisemitism Worldwide Report, published by Tel Aviv University and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL).

³⁰ PERMANENT COUNCIL OF THE FRENCH EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE, *Appeal «Lottare insieme contro l’antisemitismo e l’antigiudaismo»*, february 2021, available in web.

³¹ ANGELO LICASTRO, *Incitamento all’odio religioso e tutela della dignità della persona*, in *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale. Rivista telematica (www.statoechurchiese.it)*, n. 18, 2022, pp. 79-80.

³² Cf. PAOLO PALUMBO, *Inconciliabilità tra cattolicesimo e antisemitismo. Una prospettiva canonistica*, cit., pp. 693-696.

³³ FRANCIS, *Address to a Delegation of the American Jewish Committee*, 8 march 2019, at www.vatican.va.

the branch on which one is grafted, when such behaviour integrates the elements of the crime, ex can. 1321, and is carried out in the manner provided for in canon 1368, it must be prosecuted and punished as established by the norm, as the canonical crime of anti-Semitism. The pontifical magisterium has also consistently affirmed the sinful rationale of anti-Semitism, for which one must also answer in conscience before God. John Paul II called it a ‘sin against God and humanity’ (1990); Benedict XVI referred to it as ‘a sin against God’ (2009) and Francis elaborated on the category of the ‘sin of anti-Semitism’ (2013 and 2024).

On this concrete commitment, the dialogue between Catholics and Jews must be relaunched and broadened. As Card. C.M. Martini: «La posta in gioco non è semplicemente la maggiore o minore continuazione vitale di un dialogo, bensì l’acquisizione della coscienza, nei cristiani, dei loro legami con il gregge di Abramo e le conseguenze che ne deriveranno sul piano dottrinale, per la disciplina, la liturgia, la vita spirituale della Chiesa e addirittura per la sua missione nel mondo d’oggi»³⁴. Indeed, as the Italian Bishops write for the 2025 Annual Day of Jewish-Catholic Dialogue: «Su tale dialogo si gioca e si giocherà una partita tanto delicata quanto decisiva, anche per il futuro delle chiese cristiane»³⁵, to consolidate a common and ever clearer stance against discrimination, resisting the ‘pathology’³⁶ of religious extremism and thus returning to raising the ‘standards’³⁷ of respect, to definitively eradicate every still active religious form of anti-Semitism and every prejudice, which is never normal and inoffensive, and also thus contribute to the growth of peace, a need that challenges everyone «e impone di perseguire progetti concreti»³⁸.

Walking the path was made in the dialogue between Catholics and Jews, purifying themselves of the ‘original sin’ of the thousand-year conflict, and so «indifferenza e opposizione si sono mutate in collaborazione e benevolenza», from enemies and strangers became «amici e fratelli»³⁹. From this milestone, the path must be resumed, remembering that this path passes, as does the history of every man or woman, through Auschwitz, through that unique and incomparable event of the Shoah, an account with the conscience of humanity, as we particularly remember every 27 January.

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Keywords: Catholic-Jewish relations, anti-Semitism, Middle East war, canon law

³⁴ Available in www.fondazionecarlo mariamartini.it.

³⁵ Available in www.unedi.chiesacattolica.it.

³⁶ FRANCIS, *Greeting to the Delegation of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations*, 30 June 2022, in www.vatican.va.

³⁷ ANGELO LICASTRO, *Incitamento all’odio religioso e tutela della dignità della persona*, cit., p. 80.

³⁸ FRANCIS, *Spes non confundit, Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025*, 9 May 2024, in www.vatican.va, n. 8.

³⁹ FRANCIS, *Address to the Jewish community on the occasion of the Visit to the Synagogue of Rome*, 17 January 2016, www.vatican.va.