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John Paul II's visit to a synagogue in Rome on 13 April 1986 served to touch off dialog between the Catholic Church and Jewish communities. In 2000, John Paul II traveled to Israel – here at the Wailing Wall

The Pope in a Synagogue

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The history of the relations between the Catholic Church and Jews arouses much emotion and stirs historical memory

Two years ago, a scholarly conference was held in Rome to mark the 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's visit to a Rome synagogue, entitled "When the Pope Went to Synagogue," with the aim of taking stock of Catholic-Jewish relations. The session was jointly organized by the Scientific Center in Rome of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Jewish Community of Rome, the Rome mu-

nicipal authorities, the Polish Embassy to the Vatican, and Sapienza University of Rome; it was attended by Polish and Italian historians, philosophers, theologians, philologists, and writers. These two days of debate were a mere drop in the ocean in terms of satisfying the need for discussion of the problems that have arisen in Christianity's 2000-year existence, the difficult and frequently even hostile relations, inscribed in our common memory, that have played out between representatives of these two great and so closely linked religions.

Two perspectives

The invited speakers' papers explored just a small part of this complex issue, yet presented it openly and boldly, based on sources and historical facts. It is not surprising that there was no lack of heated discussion – the debate

underway in Poland about Jan T. Gross's book *Fear* indeed confirms the need for such meetings.

The speakers discussed the Pope's synagogue visit on 13 April 1986 and its watershed significance for Christian-Jewish relations. Two papers proved to be especially important: those by Cardinal Kasper and by Rabbi Di Segni, positing differing evaluations of the contemporary status of relations between the Catholic Church and Jews. For the cardinal, who began by pointing out the Holocaust crime and how important the memory of that tragedy is, what is most important is recognition of Christianity's roots in Judaism and the desire for such awareness to dominate these mutual relations. The rabbi, in turn, while appreciating all of the Church's achievements on behalf of dialog, pointed out concrete examples of how much remains to be done, chiefly on Christianity's part. It was Christians who persecuted Jews in the past, after all, not vice versa – something the rabbi did not say, but which was excellently emphasized by most of the papers delivered.

Church and secular anti-Semitism

The session began with a paper by Jan Grosfeld entitled "Jewish roots of Christianity." Starting by highlighting the historical paradox of hostility between Christians and Jews, the author discussed aspects of the two religions' kinship and concluded that the full realization of these Jewish roots is a condition for unity among Christians. Silvano Facioni, in a paper entitled "Who do you take me for? The negative identification of the other," analyzed Peter's response to the above question of Christ. Anna Foa outlined the history of relations in "The Church and Jews in Italy," stretching from with symptomatic rules requiring Jews to wear marked clothing back in the Middle Ages, to Paul IV's creation of a ghetto in Rome, to the subsequent intertwined periods of repression and tolerance, to racist laws under Fascism, to the postwar period characterized by an improvement in mutual relations following the Second Vatican Council and the *Nostra Aetate*.

Rev. Michał Czajkowski discussed alleged "Ritual murders: the image of the Jew as enemy," outlining the history of this absurd allegation leveled against Jews by Christians in Europe starting back in the 12th century (or in the 14th in Poland), all the way until the mid-20th century. He addressed the case of Sandomierz, where Jews were not only accused of ritual murders in 1698 and 1710, but they were also immortalized in paintings still visible in the cathedral and St. Paul's Church. The author resolutely condemned this "exhibition," which wrongs Jews and, in his view, disgraces Poles.

The paper by Jerzy Tomaszewski on the "Roman Catholic Church in Poland Towards Jews, 1918–1939," was also one of those contributions which either met with esteem or criticism. The author, a historian and director of the Anielewicz Center in Warsaw, warned at the outset

that he would not be discussing religious aspects, only presenting a critique of a gathered sources: "a historian (like any intellectual) has an obligation to take a critical view of his native history in the hope that he can contribute to shaping a better future." Tomaszewski assembled a grim picture of church and secular anti-Semitism on the basis of prewar Catholic press publications (*Rycerz Niepokalanej*, *Mały Dziennik*, *Przegląd Powszechny*), books of similar effect, and analysis of Primate Cardinal A. Hlond's pastoral letter in 1936.

Responsibility for the past

Laura Quercioli Mincer's paper on "Responsibility for the past: Jarosław M. Rymkiewicz's *Umschlagplatz* and the Jew as friend of the Pope" was one of the contributions which addressed the wartime Jewish extermination. The author described Rymkiewicz's search for meaning in the challenge posed to Poles by history and their moral responsibility; Rymkiewicz concludes his moral deliberations with a profound sense of guilt for having survived.

That attitude was exceptional just after the war, as was shown by Paulina Bochenska's paper entitled "The Catholic Church's attitude towards Jews, 1945–1948." The author does not so much discuss the facts of known murders of Jews by Poles, as she utilizes citations from pastoral letters and the response of the Polish episcopate

The dialog between Jews and Christians initiated by John Paul II demands further action on the part of the Catholic Church, including recognition of its guilt with respect to the Jewish community

to the questions of world Jews to reveal what stance was taken by most of the bishops and by Primate Hlond. This is described as one of silent indifference, predominantly averse to the Jews. But that was not always the case, as is evidenced by the attitude of Częstochowa's Bishop Teodor Kubina, who openly condemned the Kielce pogrom.

Two Italian papers, "13 April: what has changed" by Giacomo Saban and "I Papa 'n Sinagoga..." by Aldo Zargani, referred to the Pope's visit to a synagogue. The former author evaluated it from the Jewish standpoint, the latter described his associations of the visit with his own recollections as a Jewish child rescued in 1943 at the Catholic monastery of Turin.

The topic outlined in the conference's title was interestingly summed up by Stanisław Krajewski's paper "Contemporary Poland and the Jews," not only highlighting the significance and currency of the anti-Semitism problem, but at the same time underscoring that many serious publications are now appearing in Poland which stem from an interest in Jewish culture and the fate of Polish Jews in the past, especially among young people. ■