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Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka embraces Pope Francis as they leave after praying at Jerusalem's Western Wall Jerusalem in 2014. On the right is Omar Abboud, a Muslim leader from Argentina. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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At his general audience on Aug. 11, 2021, Pope Francis delivered a talk titled "Catechesis on the Letter to the Galatians: 4. The Mosaic Law" Among other things, the pope said, "The Law does not give life. It does not offer the fulfillment of the promise because it is not capable of being able to fulfill it."

He went on to say, "All those who have faith in Jesus Christ are called to live in the Holy Spirit, who liberates from the Law, and at the same time, brings it to fulfillment according to the commandment of love."

The Law, better known to the Jewish People as the Mitzvot — the Commandments of the Torah — is the very essence of Judaism. We are the Chosen People because we are the Commanded People. God endowed us with the greatest of compliments. In commanding us, it was God's assessment that we — the Jewish People, the children of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel and Leah — have the intellectual and emotional assets, the moral and ethical fortitude to fulfill the Mitzvot.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that the pope received letters from some Jewish communal organizations expressing much concern about this statement. In a communication from the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the author wrote, "In his homily the Pope presents the Christian faith as not just superseding the Torah, but asserts that the latter no longer gives life, implying that Jewish religious practice in the present era is rendered obsolete. This is, in effect, part and parcel of the teaching of contempt towards Jews and Judaism that we thought had been fully repudiated by the Church."

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Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Vatican official responsible for relations with Judaism and the Jewish people, responded to that letter affirming what is well known: that Judaism and the Jewish People do enjoy the greatest respect and affection of Pope Francis; that his remarks about the Mitzvot were not directed to the Jewish people; and that for Christians, the Mitzvot are a journey to Christ.

Koch further affirmed that "in the Holy Father's address the Torah is not devalued." He also wrote that this does not mean "the Torah is diminished or no longer

recognized as the way of salvation for Jews," and that the pope was referring only to the historical context of St. Paul's letter, not to contemporary Judaism.

This is not the first time that a presentation by Pope Francis has caused some concern in the Jewish community and for that matter in the Roman Catholic Church itself. On Oct. 19, 2017, in his morning meditation in the Chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae, titled "Pharisees of Today," Pope Francis admonished pastors who would exclude some Catholics from participation in certain sacraments, noting that "this is happening today because the Pharisees, doctors of the law, are not things of days gone by: even today there are many of them."

His statement raises that age-old stereotype of the Pharisees (Perushim), who are in fact the sacred spiritual parents of Judaism and the Jewish people to this day, as hypocrites who fail to understand the spirit of the Law. The Jewish response was predictable. Such statements about the Pharisees are deeply painful to us. These characterizations have over the centuries fostered Jew-hatred.

Now, what was the church's response to these concerns raised by the Jewish community and by many Catholic friends? A conference was convened not too long thereafter, at the Vatican, under the sponsorship of the pope, on the Pharisees! This is how true friends act.

Where else in the Christian world does one get a full-fledged, thoroughly open, scholarly conference held in order to explore an issue of Jewish concern? This goes to the heart of the contemporary Catholic-Jewish relationship, which is the determining framework for presenting such Jewish concerns.

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Frankly, I am not so much concerned with this or that episodic statement made by Pope Francis. Surely we are at times concerned. We must be. However, our concerns, our fears and our pain must of ethical necessity be expressed in the overall context of the friendship of this pope and of the church.

Let it be clearly stated, the Jewish people enjoy no better friend in Christendom today than the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has fulfilled its promises made to us in Nostra Aetate and in the subsequent notes to Nostra Aetate, which called for the Catholic faithful to understand Judaism and the Jewish people as Judaism and the Jewish People understand themselves.

Thus, the Roman Catholic Church has witnessed to us something that no Protestant church ever has. The Roman Catholic Church has affirmed the covenantal efficacy of our reading of Scripture from our tradition and through the lens of the rabbis, the Talmud and the Midrash. The church stated that our reading of Scripture is spiritually and ethically valid, life-giving and legitimate. It understands us as an indivisible amalgam of God, land, language, Torah, Mitzvot and familial peoplehood. The church's statements to us in "The Gifts and The Calling of God are Irrevocable" and "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible" contain affirmations and statements of affection and respect that are not to be found anywhere in official documents of the major Protestant churches. These affirmations are probably the most significant change in Christian theology in 2,000 years.

To be sure, the Roman Catholic Church is near legendary for the care, scholarship and diligence with which it presents its teachings and instructions both to the Catholic faithful and the world at large. At the same time, it is also true that significant numbers of Catholics and Jews do not read theological documents. It is in the lived life of the church that the ideas of such documents are made real for all to witness. This can be called performative theology. Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI were masters of performance theology on the world stage. These understandings of performance theology have been tested with Catholic theologians, and a prelate or two.

In his March 2000 pilgrimage to Israel, John Paul II went to Jerusalem, the heart of Israel, for which all Jewish eyes had yearned for centuries. He went to the Wall — the Kotel — and there in the place of our greatest longing, gave witness to the world. The same is true for Pope Francis. Here are two examples that demonstrate Pope Francis' friendship, affection and respect for Judaism and the Jewish people.

On Sept. 11, 2013, Pope Francis replied in writing to a series of questions put to him in a letter from Eugenio Scalfari, founder of the Italian newspaper La Repubblica. Here is an excerpt:

> You [Dr. Scalfari] also ask me, in conclusion of your first article, what we should say to our Jewish brothers about the promise made to them by God: has it all come to nothing? Believe me, this is a question that challenges us radically as Christians, because, with the help of God, especially since Vatican Council II, we have rediscovered that the Jewish people are still for us the holy root from which Jesus germinated. In the friendship I cultivated in the course of all these years with Jewish brothers in Argentina, often in prayer I also questioned God, especially when my mind went to the memory of the terrible experience of the Shoa. What I can say to you, with the Apostle Paul, is that God's fidelity to the close covenant with Israel never failed and that, through the terrible trials of these centuries, the Jews have kept their faith in God. And for this, we shall never be sufficiently grateful to them as Church, but also as humanity [emphasis mine]. They, then, precisely by persevering in the faith of the God of the Covenant, called all, also us Christians, to the fact that we are always waiting, as pilgrims, for the Lord's return and, therefore, that we must always be open to Him and never take refuge in what we have already attained.

In his remarkable letter, the pope goes way beyond the formal theological changes in the church's thinking about Judaism and the Jewish people. Unsurprisingly for him but surprisingly in light of history, he affirms the enduring efficacy of God's covenant with Israel. Not only does he express abiding friendship for the Jewish people, but he also refers to his decades-long friendship with Jewish people in Argentina.

What is surprising, indeed breathtaking, is that he expresses the church's indebtedness, and the indebtedness of all humanity, for Israel's centuries-long witness to the One God, in the midst of unspeakable suffering and torment. Endless Jewish wandering and homelessness, which served as proof to Augustine of the punishment imposed on the Jews for rejecting Christ, is now turned on its head. Israel's devotion to the Covenant, its steadfast and stubborn devotion to and observance of the Mitzvot over two millennia is unparalleled witness to the One God for the church and for humanity. This witness is so significant that Pope Francis writes that the church and humanity "will never be sufficiently grateful."

The centuries-old Christian teaching of contempt for Judaism and the Jewish people was a necessary but nonetheless an insufficient condition for the destruction of

European Jewry. In the wake of the Shoa, it was clear that Christianity and its churches would have to change. Frankly, one would have to be blind beyond all imagination not to know that. In that sense, comparatively speaking, changes in Christian theological thinking about Judaism, the faith of the Jewish people, were morally unavoidable. Yet much more was needed.

Christianity is a religion. Judaism is not just a religion. It is much more. We the Jewish people are a family that became a faith and remained a family. In the words of a Catholic theologian, for Judaism the sequence is, "I belong, I do, I believe"; for Christianity, the sequence is, "I believe, I do, I belong." Thus, one is born a Jew, but one becomes a Christian.

This respect and appreciation for our national self-understanding was demonstrated when Pope John Paul II went to Jerusalem in March 2000, thus witnessing by performance that the church has no theological objection to the Jewish return to sovereignty in the ancient homeland.

This was also dramatically expressed when Pope Francis laid a wreath at the grave of Theodor Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, in May 2014. In 1904 Theodor Herzl went to Rome, seeking the pope's support for Zionism. Pius X responded with the following statement:

> We cannot give approval to this movement. We cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem — but we could never sanction it. The soil of Jerusalem, if it was not always sacred, has been sanctified by the life of Jesus Christ. As the head of the Church I cannot tell you anything different. The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people.

In paying honor to Theodor Herzl at his last resting place on Mt. Herzl in Jerusalem, in an act of performance theology, Francis negated his predecessor's words. Pope Francis is our friend.

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