Opinion
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Pope John Paul II places a prayer in a crevice of the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest site, March 26, 2000. Speaking to ecumenical leaders on the historic trip that included visits to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories, the pontiff prayed that the Holy Land would be a homeland to all faiths and peoples. (CNS file photo/Arturo Mari)



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Yesterday, Oct. 28, was the 60th anniversary of the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. It was, at once, both the most necessary and the most far-reaching of all the conciliar documents.

*Nostra Aetate* was necessary because, after the Shoah, the Christian faith had to reckon with its complicity in the murder of 6 million Jews. Indeed, one of the reasons the council was necessary in the first place was the haunting fact of this counterwitness to the Gospels. How could believing Christians, who went to Mass and said their daily prayers, stand by or even collaborate in such a crime? Further, while intergenerational accountability is a tricky thing, the Shoah demanded of Christendom that it reckon also with its centuries of Jew hatred.

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"Until *Nostra Aetate* the church and Christianity in general held that the Jews killed Jesus; Judaism was 'degenerate' in the time of Jesus; and Jews were exiled from their ancestral homeland as punishment for Jesus' crucifixion," said Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, rabbinic scholar at the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago. "These contributed to nearly two millennia of anti-Jewish persecutions. Furthermore, Christianity asserted that it had superseded and replaced Judaism and the Jewish people. This teaching of contempt for Judaism and the Jewish people provided the necessary albeit insufficient condition that culminated in the destruction of European Jewry."

The adjective "insufficient" is important. Christians had conducted pogroms for centuries, but it was a pagan ideology, Nazism, armed with modern technology and the unique capacity for amorality that technological advances invite, that invented the "final solution."

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This was the historical backdrop for the council and for the drafting of *Nostra Aetate* specifically. The Catholic Church, in its most formal and authoritative teaching instrument, an ecumenical council presided over by the Roman pontiff, repudiated its own history of Jew hatred and reminded the Catholic world that our Savior was a Jew, his mother and his apostles were all Jews, and that the sacred Scripture of the Jews was our sacred Scripture too. That all this had been forgotten or twisted by hatred for centuries, is one of history's greatest invitations to cultural humility — and watchfulness.

*Nostra Aetate* was a starting point, not an end point. What followed was 60 years of dialogue that has made the text so far-reaching. Who can forget Pope John Paul II, a son of Poland, where the Germans built their extermination camps, walking unsteadily to the Western Wall in Jerusalem on March 26, 2000? He placed this prayer in the crevices of the foundation stones:

> God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your Name to the Nations: we are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant. Jerusalem, 26 March 2000. Joannnes Paulus II

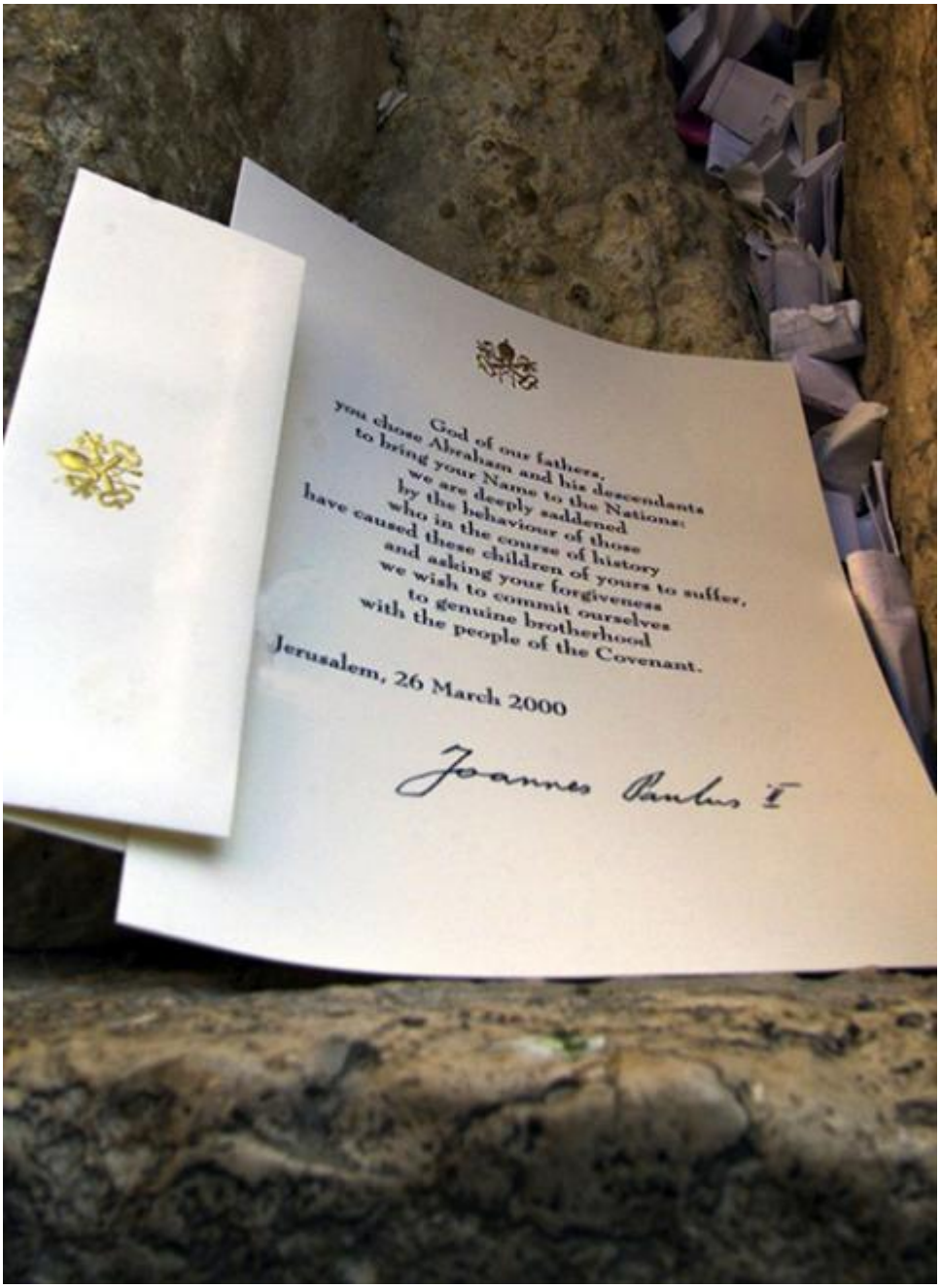
Or, Pope Benedict XVI, a son of Germany, going to Auschwitz, explaining why it was the Nazis, not the Jews, who attempted deicide:

> Those vicious criminals, by wiping out this people, wanted to kill the God who called Abraham, who spoke on Sinai and laid down principles to serve as a guide for mankind, principles that are eternally valid.  If this people, by its very existence, was a witness to the God who spoke to humanity and took us to himself, then that God finally had to die.



Pope Benedict XVI walks through the gate of the Auschwitz Nazi concentration camp in Oswiecim, Poland, in this May 28, 2006, file photo. (CNS photo/OSV News/Reuters/Pawel Kopczynski)

And, in 2014, Pope Francis paid tribute at the grave of Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, banishing from Catholic thought the long-held obscenity that the Jews were destined to the diaspora forever.




A prayer that begins ''God of our fathers ...'' was left in a crevice of Jerusalem's Western Wall by Pope John Paul II March 26, 2000. He was the first pontiff to pray at Judaism's most sacred site. (CNS photo/Reuters)

"It is very important to appreciate the brevity of *Nostra Aetate*'s words and sentences on Judaism and the Jewish people," says Poupko. "By this very act of brevity the Church summoned itself and its faithful to then develop and explore the meaning of *Nostra Aetate*. The Church kept its promise to the Jewish people." In addition to these papal pilgrimages, he cited a series of documents, starting with the

1974 Vatican document "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration '*Nostra Aetate*,' " which asked Catholics to understand the Jewish people as they understand themselves. In 2015, the Vatican issued "The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable" which affirmed that the church would not seek to actively convert Jews.

Poupko is not an outlier. Most rabbis I know recognize the significance of *Nostra Aetate* and its progeny. "I feel so very fortunate that, in my lifetime, the Church has come so far in expunging past misconceptions and in creating opportunities for support, dialogue and true brotherhood," Gary Jones*, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of United Jewish Federation of Stamford, New Canaan and Darien, Connecticut, wrote to me in an email marking the anniversary. "The Church's actions have made the world a much better place and should serve as a template for reconciliation efforts everywhere."

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Catholics and Jews who have been committed to the work of interreligious dialogue are aware of the strains placed on their work by the conflict between Israel and Hamas. In March, I reviewed *Stress Test: The Israel-Hamas War and Christian-Jewish Relations* which catalogued some of those tensions. It has been difficult to see so many well-meaning Catholics reflexively blame Israel and the Jews for the war, as if we were living in another time, before *Nostra Aetate*, when blaming Jews was always an easy way to ignore complexity.

Let us hope that the ceasefire will hold and that the surge in antisemitism will diminish, but we are called to more than hope. On this 60th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the church should recommit itself to its relationship with our "elder brothers" as John Paul II called the Jewish people when he visited the great synagogue in Rome. We Catholics still have much to learn from them. And we still have much for which to atone.

**This article has been updated to correct the attribution of a quote.*