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## Pope Francis and his really hostile critics

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Since his election, Pope Francis has made millions of friends and admirers. But he has acquired some critics, too. Then there are the extremely hostile, outspoken opponents who see him as a heretic or deceiver and speak with shrill and caustic voices. Not surprisingly, many of these come from the extremes of the religious traditions that Pope Francis talks a lot about -- Catholics and Jews.

Some far-right conservative Catholics are outraged that the pope has said on numerous occasions that the people of Israel continue to be God's chosen people, that God has not rejected his promises of the Old Covenant. "Heresy!" declare the editors of *Novus Ordo Watch*, an online review by those who insist Jews no longer have any claim on God's favor. Holy Scripture, they note, is "permeated with evidence that the Jews who rejected Jesus Christ are not God's chosen people, and even those Jews who accept him are not God's chosen people."

Now, you may reply, "Wait a minute. Isn't Francis saying more explicitly what the Second Vatican Council said, namely that God has not rejected the Jewish people?" Vatican II may have said that, the *Novus Ordo Watch* folks admit, but it's not true, they contend, because Vatican II was not a genuine council of the true Catholic church. And none of the council's other declarations are true either, and for that matter, none of the popes since Pius XII are true popes. These on-edge Catholics see themselves as holding to the ancient, unchangeable decrees of earlier councils and earlier popes, and they intend to do so until the heresy of "Modernism" is put down for good. There are, according to some estimates, tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, who hold this position. They are known as "sedevacantists" (Latin for "empty-seat proponents"); that is, they view the chair of Peter as vacant for the past 56 years while the church is being run by a host of illegitimate operatives.

The problem far-right Jews have with Francis is his frequent statement that the Jews are the elder brothers

of Christians. Articles in *The Jewish Press* express extreme alarm at such statements.

Cited in particular was Francis' statement on the 75th anniversary of Kristallnacht ("night of broken glass"), considered the beginning of the Holocaust. Said the pope, "We renew our closeness and solidarity to the Jewish people, our big brothers, and pray to God that the memory of the past and of the sins of the past helps us to be always vigilant against every form of hate and intolerance."

What the pope said was not a statement of friendship, said a *Jewish Press* article, but "a religious and ideological attack on Jews." It's perfectly clear in the Bible, the writer explained, that the elder brother is "always the castoff, always the evil one and always replaced by the younger brother." Esau and Jacob, David and his older brothers were cited among examples of God's preference for younger brothers.

"We're nobody's brother," the writer stated. "We're God's favorite children without any extra-familial affiliations. I accept the fact that the current pope is not a bloodthirsty enemy of our nation like so many of his predecessors, but when he, too, spits on us, it's not rain. Incidentally, we have more in common with Muslims than we do with Christians."

By stressing the elder brother connection, the writer suggested, Pope Francis is luring Jews into a kind of interfaith link that will eventually lead to the abolishing of the Torah and "the very idea of Jewish nationhood."

If Francis has any success in modifying the views or allaying the fears of these religious outliers, Catholic or Jewish, his place in history will be assured.

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