



‘Religions and Ideologies,  
Polish Perspectives and beyond.’

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**Christian-Jewish Dialogue in Poland today  
– Coming out of the shadows of WWII and Communist dictatorship**

**A Catholic perspective**

The world is not, and never has been, a monolith. It is characterized by pluralism: religious, civilization, culture. Hence, not only in Poland but in the entire history of a human being and humanity, there is a great need for and an understanding of the significance of dialogue, including interreligious dialogue.

Its biblical prototype remains incessantly the dialogue of the Creator with man. On the plane of the New Testament, Jesus Christ conducts an informative dialogue with the apostles, disciples, with the Samaritan at Jacob’s well (J 4,1-42). All these dialogues were conducted – as one may say – on the plane of one and the same Jewish religion, although the Holy Scripture does not lack informative examples of relations with other religions.

As far as the present state of interreligious dialogue in Poland is concerned, which strives to model itself on the Gospel, I would propose to single out four stages in it. The period of Vatican Council II. The impact of *Nostra Aetate*. The teachings of Paul VI. The teachings of Benedict XVI.

## 1. VATICAN COUNCIL II

The actual breakthrough in the way of thinking about the role and importance of interreligious dialogue in the Church was Vatican Council II.<sup>1</sup> He who wishes to grasp the turn that was taken in this area in the teachings and practice of the Catholic Church must get acquainted with the “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions “ – *Nostra Aetate*. What is important for deliberations about Christian – Jewish dialogue is not only the fragment regarding Jews (*Nostra Aetate*, 4), but also the very introduction itself, so often omitted in commentaries. It is there that the fundamental and basic thought for all subsequent deliberations and practical conclusions are emphasized: the unity of mankind.

“In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship.

One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. (1) One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extended to all men,(2) until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light.”<sup>2</sup>

Without emphasizing this first truth, all subsequent practical solutions are not fully understood and clear.

## 2. POSITIVE RESULTS OF *NOSTRA AETATE* IN POLAND

The turn brought about by the declaration *Nostra Aetate* echoed positively across Poland. Amongst the difficulties at the end of the communist era, the Catholic Church in Poland began to slowly realize the deepened theological base of the Christian – Jewish dialogue.

Firstly, our faith is rooted not only in the New Testament but also in the entire Old Testament. “Thus the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the Prophets.” Later it was formulated more pointedly, “Without the Old Testament, the New Testament would be an incomprehensible book, a plant deprived of its roots and destined to dry up and wither.”<sup>3</sup> If the Christians were to reject the Old Testament, it would lead to the rejection of Christianity itself. This vision of unity between two parts of the Bible, which lies at the basis of the faith of the entire Church, is taught today in every Polish priest seminary.

This truth also encompasses the difficult subject of the cross. Jesus, by His cross, reconciles Jews and Gentiles and makes them one. We learnt in Poland from Cardinal Ratzinger's lecture in Jerusalem that this work of reconciliation was the fruit of the deepest conflict between the obedience of Jesus and the obedience of many Jews. “On the one hand, Jesus opened the Law, wished to open it and do so not as a liberal, not

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<sup>1</sup> *Le dialogue interreligieux dans l'insegnement officiel de l'Eglise catholique (1963-1997). Conseil Pontifical pour le dialogue interreligieux.* par F. Gioia, Éditions de Solesmes.

<sup>2</sup> *Nostra Aetate*, 1

<sup>3</sup> Papieska Komisja Biblijna, *Naród żydowski i jego Święte Pisma w Biblii chrześcijańskiej*, 84 [The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 84]

through diminished faithfulness, but in the strictest obedience towards the Law[...] On the other hand, Israel must have recognized in it something more world - shaking than only a contravention of one commandment or another, it was a violation of the basic obedience, the very nature of the revelation and faith of Israel, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God" [...] Thus, the cross cannot be perceived as an accident or a sin of Israel that can be escaped as it left a stain on Israel for centuries and distinguished it from pagans for whom it became salvation. In accordance with the New Testament, two results of the cross do not exist: damnation and salvation, but there is only one result which is salvation and reconciliation."

Hence, in the teaching of Polish theological departments there does not exist two Covenants but one, renewed Covenant. It was to this one and only Covenant, made with the Patriarchs, that we received access, thanks to Christ who destroyed the "wall of division", hostility dividing humanity, Jews from pagans. Christ himself became for Christians the fulfillment, goal and end of this Covenant (Ga 3,24). This state makes us feel today a deepened spiritual bond between Jews and Christians.

There has been a change in the atmosphere of present – day interreligious meetings in Poland in comparison with those in pre-Vatican II era. There is a better understanding that dialogue has become one of the key cultural notions of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Since *Nostra Aetate* was published, it has been used in teaching and documents, as well as in practice, with attention to its deeper, theological sense. Not bringing it down to an ordinary exchange of views but understanding it as a common search for truth, in a spirit of love and respect for every human being, their culture and spiritual tradition.

It does not mean that since *Nostra Aetate* the Catholic - Jewish dialogue in Poland is trouble-free. It was the Jewish side itself who pointed out the fact that very few Jews take time to define their attitude towards Christians (a good example in the US is, among others, the *Dabru Emet* declaration). Another well known difficulty in this dialogue is the fact that the Catholic side presents a rather homogenous stand, whereas the Jewish organizations – as is the case with the very nature of Judaism – bring in a great heterogeneity of views.

We do not shy away today from dealing with historical issues; however, we would like to stay away from treating the past in such a way that would paralyze the possibility of creating a new future – both for Jews and Catholics.

As far as further perspectives of the Jewish – Christian dialogue in Poland are concerned, one should strive to include a larger number of the faithful in the dialogue, in the education of future generations about the questions of the dialogue, into the strengthening and broadening of the existing institutions, to a wider presence of the dialogue and related issues in the mass media. It is also necessary to spread in Poland – common for the Jewish and Catholic communities – values such as: pro-life activities or supporting marriage and family. New areas of activity appear in the field of bioethics, respecting the inalienable dignity of a human being and his true freedom. On top of that, there are such issues as: religious freedom, social responsibility, etc.

### 3. TEACHINGS OF PAUL VI

The second stage of the teachings of the Church about interreligious dialogue, were the teachings of Paul VI about the need for dialogue, especially those teachings in *Ecclesiam suam*:

It courageously supported all people of good will, "Speaking generally of the dialogue which the Church of today must take up with a great renewal of fervor, we would say that

it must be readily conducted with all men of good will both inside and outside the Church.”<sup>4</sup>

It also presented the wide horizons of interest of the dialogue: “It speaks to them of truth, justice, freedom, progress, concord, civilization and peace.”<sup>5</sup> This Pope was convinced that it was necessary to do so as the Church had been entrusted with the task of fostering unity, love and peace among men.

The Pope was also convinced that one has to show respect for the spiritual and moral values of the various non – Christian religions. “We desire to join with them in promoting and defending common ideals in the spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood, education, culture, social welfare, and civic order. Dialogue is possible in all these great projects, which are our concern as much as theirs and we will not fail to offer opportunities for discussion in the event of such an offer being favorably received in genuine, mutual respect.”<sup>6</sup>

Without doubt, Paul VI wished that apart from a limited sphere of purely speculative and rational exchange – there come into existence a true dialogue between Judaism and Christianity. Its goal was not only better understanding of Jews and Catholics, but better understanding of the Almighty God and confirmation of the fact that the Catholic Church rejects anti-Semitism in any form.

The teachings of the Pope about the fact that the dialogue between Catholics and Jews assumes respect for the Jewish faith on the part of Catholics, but the same Catholics should also be faithful to all vital elements of their own faith, were received with understanding in Poland.

#### 4. TEACHINGS OF JOHN PAUL II

John Paul II was fully aware of the importance of this issue. “Dialogue among religions,” he claimed, “has a preeminent part, for it leads to love and mutual respect, and takes away, or at least diminishes, prejudices among the followers of various religions and promotes unity and friendship among peoples.”<sup>7</sup> And in *Redemptoris missio* in Chapter V we heard: “Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church: they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and of the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all.”

a. 1986 saw the famous visit of the Holy Father to the synagogue in Rome. This visit received numerous comments. The same year, relating to the visit of the Pope to Poland, the Polish Episcopal Conference founded the Subcommittee for Dialogue with Judaism (2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 1986), which in turn in autumn 1987 became a Commission.

The first fruit of its activities, apart from the meeting with the Pope, was a Theological Colloquium “Jews and Christians in Dialogue”, organized in Krakow between 24<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> April, 1988. After this conference, many sessions dedicated to various aspects of this subject were organized in Warsaw (“The Church, Jews and Judaism”). A scientific seminar dedicated to Polish priests professors turned out to be a very useful undertaking. It was organized in Spertus College of Judaica in Chicago between 29<sup>th</sup> June and 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1989. The Commission organized many conferences, symposia, meetings with Jewish groups or

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<sup>4</sup> *Ecclesiam suam*, 93

<sup>5</sup> *Ecclesiam suam*, 94

<sup>6</sup> *Ecclesiam suam*, 108

<sup>7</sup> *Christifideles laici*, 35

with individual Jewish scientists who came to Poland. The activities of the Commission were commented on in respectable newspapers with a wide readership, in radio stations and on TV. Thanks to the work of the Commission, the subject matter of Catholic – Jewish dialogue was noticed and public opinion became aware of it. Such newspapers and magazines as *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Znak* and *Więź* were leading magazines in the promotion of the theological dialogue.

In the meantime, in the town of Oświęcim (better known under its German name, Auschwitz - translator's note), a city with great merits in the area of dialogue, there came into existence the "Centre for Information, Meetings, Dialogue, and Prayer", presently managed by Father Director Jan Nowak and Father Manfred Deselaers, PhD. Greatly appreciated were also "Tygodnie Oświęcimskie" ("Oświęcim Weeks"), organized by KIK (Catholic Intelligentsia Club) from Kraków.

On 3rd October, 1994, *Instytut Dialogu Katolicko-Judaistycznego (Institute for Catholic – Judaic Dialogue)* was established at the then Catholic Theology Academy in Warsaw. This institution started publishing a semiannual entitled *Maqom*.

In Warsaw, the Polish Council of Christians and Jews came into being. An honorary title "Person of Human Reconciliation" was established.

b. The Pope from Poland, whose country of origin made some suspect him of an inclination towards anti – Semitism, brought into the Church a particular sensitivity to the Jewish issue. John Paul II contributed to an extraordinary move, bringing the two religions closer together, nothing can compare with this in the history of the Church to date. During the Second World War the Pope witnessed the tragedy of the Shoah, and then, as the first Pope, he visited the Auschwitz concentration camp. Since apostolic times he was the first Pope to visit a synagogue. The first to pray together with the rabbis for peace. The first to pray at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, the first to recognize the State of Israel. All this greatly facilitated the development of the atmosphere for dialogue in Poland. Thanks to him, the contents of *Nostra Aetate* became common possessions of humanity. For all Jews, from religious to anti-religious, this is a reason to be grateful to John Paul II<sup>8</sup>.

Appreciating the value of the breakthrough brought by *Nostra Aetate*, the Committee for the Dialogue with Judaism of the Polish Episcopal Conference, published in 2005 the first complete collection of texts in Poland of the Holy Father John Paul II, entitled *Żydzi i judaizm w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II 1978-2005 (Jews and Judaism in the teachings of John Paul II 1978 – 2005)*. This work contains approximately 100 statements of the Pope and forms a beautiful testimony of changes he brought about in this matter. It is also a valuable aid for Polish students and academics.

This publication of the statements of the Pope is the fruit of thought of one, great and exceptional pontificate. The pontificate of a man who introduced changes which all the pontificates together before him had been unable to make. To the best of my knowledge, in the entire world there is only one broader – because it also encompasses national and diocesan documents – work regarding this subject. It is a work in two volumes: *Die Kirchen und das Judentum. Dokumente von 1945 bis 1985*, published by R. Rendtorff and H. H. Henrix, and *Die Kirchen und das Judentum. Dokumente von 1986 bis 2000*. It contains a wider (each volume of over 1,000 pages) panorama of statements by popes, the Holy See and particular Churches in Germany. However, it does not encompass the last five years of John Paul II's pontificate.

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<sup>8</sup> Compare: S. Krajewski, *Kościół i świat po Janie Pawle II. Ciężar historii, nadzieja braterstwa*

c. Inspired by the thought of the Pope, the Committee for Dialogue with Judaism of the Polish Episcopal Conference has published a number of documents which try to explain the issue of Jewish – Christian dialogue:

- Pastoral letter of the Polish Episcopate on the 25th anniversary of the announcement of the conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (read in all churches on 20th January, 1991);
- A statement on the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising;
- A statement on the 50th anniversary of the death camp Auschwitz – Birkenau liberation (27th January, 1995);
- A statement of the Committee for Dialogue with Judaism of the Polish Episcopal Conference on the 50th anniversary of the tragic events in Kielce;
- Letter of the Council for Interreligious Dialogue of the Polish Episcopal Conference on the Great Jubilee of the year 2000. Dialogue – a task for the new century (approved by the Polish Episcopal Conference – 25th August, 2000).

The last of the aforementioned documents reminded us that “dialogue is not any free-form attitude but an evangelical duty of all Christ’s disciples” and “a mother tongue of mankind.”

In our present-day Polish reality, in the field of dialogue there are many positive examples of goodwill, prayer and engagement, but there are also reasons for anxiety and worry, calling for examination of conscience and conversion. During this pontificate many works on dialogue with Judaism were published in Poland (M. Mikołajczyk, *Bibliografia dialogu chrześcijańsko-żydowskiego w Polsce [Bibliography of Christian – Jewish Dialogue in Poland]*.) A document by the Pontifical Biblical Commission entitled *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in The Christian Bible* was translated into Polish.

In sermons and religious instruction there is still too little responsible shaping of conscience in this field, based on authentic Conciliar and Pontifical teaching, both so clear and unambiguous. It is not possible to reconcile a religious respect for the People with whom our God and Lord made a Covenant that had never been called off, with a disdainful, unfriendly, or outright hostile attitude towards every Jewish thing in the past and present. In the life of this People – in any case, internally diversified and far from free from internal tensions and dramas – there are things worthy of admiration, truly bearing testimony to the lasting bond of the Holy Covenant. There are also human deeds and achievements, interesting and worthy of respect, as a manifestation of a separate, centuries – old culture and morality.

It also happens that we cannot agree with some things in the actions, political or moral decisions of people or groups remaining within a broadly understood Jewish community. One has to learn to distinguish between those two issues. Such a distinction requires a study of the history and present – day situation of Jews, understanding Judaism and everyday life in the State of Israel, as well as among the Jewish Diaspora. In particular, we need to remember the burden that still hovers above this People: the horror of the Holocaust from the years of WW II.

d. In 1998 in Poland we started a particularly valuable initiative – an annual Day of Judaism in the Catholic Church in Poland. That day, celebrated each 17<sup>th</sup> January, on the eve of the Ecumenical Week, has become an opportunity to arouse a positive interest and deeper knowledge of the Jewish religion, tradition and culture which to a large extent had developed over the centuries next to us on Polish soil. It is an opportunity for a deeper reflection on the religious bond connecting Christians and Jews. An opportunity to ponder

over the tragedy of Auschwitz – Birkenau, Majdanek, Treblinka and other towns of Jewish genocide carried out by the Germans on Polish territory. An opportunity to look after abandoned Jewish cemeteries, so numerous spread across our Homeland. An opportunity to draw conclusions from the enormity of suffering of previous generations which allow us to shape the awareness of Catholics in Poland and our relations with others in such a way that everyone can feel safe and respected among us while being faithful to their religious identity. An opportunity to counteract, so long it is up to us, re-birth among us of fears, resentment and hatred which can lead to similar crimes. The present chairman of the Committee for Dialogue with Judaism, Bishop Cisz, supports this important work and the continuation of this undertaking meets no objections.

## 5. BENEDICT XVI

Initially, in the eyes of some Jews, it seemed that the pontificate of Benedict XVI leads to the shattering of 50 years of history of Catholic – Jewish dialogue. The chief rabbi of Venice, Elia Enrico Richetti accused the Pope that his stand makes the dialogue pointless as supposedly it was based on the feeling of superiority of Christianity over Judaism.

Christians and Jews can do much so that future generations live in harmony and respect the dignity of man, emphasized Benedict XVI when he met with representatives of Simon Wiesenthal Centre from the US on 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2005. “After a long, painful history, the relations between our communities are finally heading off in a new, more positive direction. We need to continue our journey on this road of mutual respect and dialogue, inspired by our shared spiritual legacy. We should strive for an ever more effective cooperation.”

In an article on dialogue among religions, entitled *La verità si dimostra mettendola in pratica*, Archbishop Angelo Amato expresses a conviction that “the lecture of Benedict XVI in Regensburg can be considered the beginning of a new attitude that overcomes the strict formulae of diplomatic dialogue which does not take into consideration the impact of the virtual dialogue, is separated from reality, in order to enter the «dialogue of truth and life» that touches the very existence of the interlocutors, in the globality and complexity of their plan of realization as a human being.”

Archbishop Amato reminded us that there are two levels of dialogue among religions: the dialogue of love “which aims to build a reconciled and peaceful human civilization” and the dialogue of truth “whose aim is to recognize the truth of particular religious beliefs.” The Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the time added that the latter dialogue is difficult, and its aim “is not a universal religion with the smallest common denominator” but “it makes the interlocutors define the fundamental features of their religious beliefs.” “We should bear in mind that all great religions, and not just Christianity, make claims to truth and universalism. This is why the dialogue of truth is vital for the objective assessment of the true state of affairs.”

In the opinion of the Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the time, “it is high time to overcome the theories of uncompromising attitude, connectivity and relativism” and move in two directions: “First of all, avoid vague interreligious dialogue which does not take into consideration the specific identity of each interlocutor. A dialogue among religions, similar to the ecumenical dialogue, requires a bilateral confrontation in which the interlocutors can be taken into consideration in their very originality and this way show their ‘truth’. Secondly, it is necessary for the interreligious dialogue of truth to emphasize the core contents of religious beliefs, that is their vision of God (if they refer to it), man and the universe. The dialogue of truth must be a concrete confrontation of religious, ethical, educational, political and cultural

beliefs, in a nutshell - the very core of the interlocutor's religious identity." This, however, requires "a good complex knowledge of one's own faith and equally complete information about the beliefs of others," because in the dialogue of truth "there is no room for improvisation without risking banality or even betrayal of one's own beliefs and those of the others."

The archbishop admitted that "in the culture of post-modernism, in which the opinion is of greater importance and the truth seems to be an unreachable mirage, the dialogue of truth may seem to be a challenge of going against the current."

In his speech in the synagogue in Cologne, the Pope enumerated once again the aims of the dialogue: "our gaze should not only be directed to the past, but should also look forward to the tasks that await us today and tomorrow. Our rich common heritage and our fraternal and more trusting relations call upon us to join in giving an ever more harmonious witness and to work together on the practical level for the defence and promotion of human rights and the sacredness of human life, for family values, for social justice and for peace in the world. The Decalogue (cf. Ex 20; Dt 5) is for us a shared legacy and commitment. The Ten Commandments are not a burden, but a signpost showing the path leading to a successful life. This is particularly the case for the young people whom I am meeting in these days and who are so dear to me. My wish is that they may be able to recognize in the Decalogue our common foundation, a lamp for their steps, a light for their path (cf. Ps 119: 105). Adults have the responsibility of handing down to young people the torch of hope that God has given to Jews and to Christians, so that "never again" will the forces of evil come to power, and that future generations, with God's help, may be able to build a more just and peaceful world, in which all people have equal rights and are equally at home."

Taking into consideration everything that the Pope had done in the past years for relations with Judaism, one can say with conviction that for him dialogue with Judaism is and shall remain dear to him, it is an imperative of the heart. In Poland, we understand this direction of the dialogue in a similar way.

## CONCLUSION

Dialogue plays a fundamental role in the relations among human beings. We took this opportunity to remind ourselves that "dialogue is not a free-form attitude but an evangelical duty of all Christ's disciples " and a "mother tongue of mankind." The prototype of every dialogue is a conversation among free, sovereign persons who have an inalienable dignity. It is not about erasing differences but about an internal change, a conversion in a meeting with your neighbour. Dialogue presumes faithfulness to one's own identity as well as respect for the otherness of the other person. It is the hardship of the common search for the truth.

The ultimate aim of interreligious dialogue is the common conversion of Christians and followers of other religious traditions to the same God who calls the former and the latter, posing a challenge for one through the other.

Christ's Gospel is an ever relevant Good News about the fact that everyone is created by God and called to make one huge human family; all those for whom His Son Jesus Christ suffered death on the cross; all those whose hearts hear the mysterious voice of His Spirit – are invited to build a wise and magnanimous bond of brotherly understanding, dialogue and love.