

# The Pope Francis Effect and Catholic-Jewish Relations

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COVER

POPE FRANCIS AT THE WESTERN WALL  
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In evaluating the trajectory of Catholic-Jewish Relations in the Pope Francis era, one picture is worth a thousand words. Pope Francis has identified Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion* as one of his favorite paintings.<sup>2</sup> In the aftermath of Kristallnacht in 1938, when hundreds of European synagogues were torched, foreshadowing greater evil yet to come, Chagall artistically interpreted the threat of Nazism within the continuum of anti-Semitism. A "Jewish Jesus" is on the cross, wearing a *tallit* (prayer shawl) loincloth and surrounded by scenes of persecuted and fleeing Jews. A synagogue and its Torah scrolls are engulfed in flames, torched by a Nazi brownshirt. Using conflicting imagery, Chagall delivers his warning: the Jews who were persecuted as Christ-killers are now crucified as Jesus the Jew once was.

Pope Francis did not hesitate to publicly herald a painting featuring a syncretistic "Jewish Jesus" that

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1. Rabbi Noam E. Marans is AJC's director of Interreligious and Intergroup Relations. A version of this paper was delivered on October 26, 2014 at the CCJR (Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations) 13th Annual Meeting in Mobile, Alabama. It was subsequently published in *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations, Vol 10, No 1 (2015)*. The research assistance of AJC colleague Dahlia Herzog in preparing this article is acknowledged with gratitude.

2. Antonio Spadaro, S.J., "A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis," *America*, Sept. 30, 2013 issue, <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview>, accessed March 4, 2015. *White Crucifixion* can be viewed at <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/59426>, accessed March 4, 2015.

certainly has the potential to offend, notwithstanding the facts of Jesus' historic Jewishness and the painter's Jewish identity. It speaks volumes about Francis' empathy with the Jewish people and lack of concern that his admiration for the painting might be controversial or misinterpreted. And the absence of negative reaction from the Jewish community to Francis' fondness for this painting demonstrates a Jewish comfort level with this pope that may be unique. Certainly, Francis' interest in the painting suggests the significant role that the trauma of the Holocaust plays in his theological and interreligious thinking.

Additionally, Jewish sensitivity to Christian images previously perceived as threatening may be diminishing. Pope Francis, instinctively or unconsciously, might sense that. In a poignant scene from Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev*, published in 1972, the young Hasidic artist's family cannot fathom his unorthodox act of painting crucifixions and nudes. Asher's mother says in exasperation, "Your painting. It's taken us to Jesus. And to the way they paint women." Asher responds, "Chagall is a Jew," but his mother cuts him off, "Religious Jews, Asher, Torah Jews. Such Jews don't draw and paint."<sup>3</sup> Asher's father is enraged, and asks his son if he knows "how much Jewish blood had been spilled because of that man?"<sup>4</sup>

And yet in the fall of 2013, the Jewish Museum in New York showcased a collection of Chagall paintings entitled *Chagall: Love, War, and Exile*, featuring several paintings of the "Jewish Jesus" genre. *White Crucifixion* from the Art

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3. Chaim Potok. *My Name Is Asher Lev* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), 171.

4. Ibid, 173.

Institute of Chicago collection was not shown in the exhibit, but was included in its publication.<sup>5</sup> The exhibit generated no protest from the Jewish community. On the contrary, it was welcomed with universal acclaim. Jewish culture has come a long way from Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev* to the Jewish Museum's *Chagall: Love, War, and Exile*. Pope Francis' artistic sensibilities are, perhaps, in sync with the Jewish people's own cultural comfort level.

Pope Francis' unselfconscious ease with his Jewish relationships can be traced to his Argentinian roots. In addition to being the first Jesuit, first Latino, and first Southern Hemisphere pope, Francis is also the first pope to have had the opportunity to implement *Nostra Aetate* within a local ongoing, fluid, and living Catholic-Jewish relationship. He rose up within an Argentinian church that had relations with Jews. He spoke out on issues of concern to the Jewish people and demonstrated solidarity with the families of the 85 victims murdered by terrorists at the AMIA Jewish center. He led the Argentinian church in Holocaust commemoration and education.

It is important in the understanding of Francis' biography that the Jewish community of Argentina is large and proud. Argentina has the seventh largest number of Jews in the world. Excluding Israeli and American cities which dominate Jewish demographics, Buenos Aires' Jewish population is one of the largest in the world.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Susan Tumarkin Goodman and Kenneth E. Silver, *Chagall: Love, War, and Exile* (New York: Jewish Museum, 2013), 105.

6. "Vital Statistics: Jewish Population of the World (1882 - Present)," citing Sergio DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population, 2012," in *The American Jewish Year Book*, (2012 [2014]), 212-283, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Judaism/jewpop.html>, accessed March 5, 2015.

Pope Francis enjoys well-documented positive relationships with Argentinian-Jewish leaders, particularly rabbis. He publicly celebrates his friendship with Rabbi Abraham Skorka. Their rabbi-priest conversations, part of a television series, were adapted into the one and only book, *On Heaven and Earth*, authored by Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the future pope, before his ascent to the papacy.<sup>7</sup>

There is no papal precedent for the frequency and intensity of Francis' engagement with the Jewish people through meetings, gestures, and formal and informal pronouncements and teachings. On the day of his election he initiated a warm exchange with the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Dr. Riccardo Di Segni. At his installation a few days later, the pope singled out for welcome the Jewish leaders in attendance with the phrase, "the representatives of the Jewish community and the other religious communities."<sup>8</sup>

In Francis' characteristic yet remarkable interaction with Eugenio Scalfari, the self-described non-believer and co-founder and former editor of *La Repubblica*, the pope wrote,

With the help of God, especially since the Second Vatican Council, we have rediscovered that the

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7. Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth: Pope Francis on Faith, Family and the Church in the 21st Century*, trans. Alejandro Bermudez and Howard Goodman, (New York: Image, 2013).

8. Pope Francis, *Mass, Imposition of the Pallium and Bestowal of the Fisherman's Ring for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome: Homily of Pope Francis* (March 19, 2013), 1, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130319\\_omelia-inizio-pontificato.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130319_omelia-inizio-pontificato.html), accessed March 5, 2015.

Jewish people remain for us the holy root from which Jesus was born.... As my mind turned to the terrible experience of the Shoah, I looked to God. What I can tell you, with Saint Paul, is that God has never neglected his faithfulness to the covenant with Israel, and that, through the awful trials of these last centuries, the Jews have preserved their faith in God. And for this, we, the Church and the whole human family, can never be sufficiently grateful to them.<sup>9</sup>

In a letter to *La Repubblica*, Chief Rabbi Di Segni, who is known to set cautious limits to interreligious dialogue, wrote, "This pontiff does not cease to surprise."<sup>10</sup> While acknowledging that Francis' sentiments are not new to the Catholic Church, Di Segni nonetheless exclaimed, "It is the force with which he expresses them and his capacity of communicating them that is astounding."<sup>11</sup> The profound truth in this observation is applicable as well to Pope Francis' wider ability to resuscitate the Church. Without minimizing the positive content of the pope's statements, it is often the way he says things more than the content of his utterances that has brought a new spirit to the Church.

Beginning with his first audience at the Vatican with

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9. Pope Francis, *Letter to a Non-Believer* (Sept 4, 2013), 4, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130911\\_eugenio-scalfari.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130911_eugenio-scalfari.html), accessed March 5, 2015.

10. As quoted in Lisa Palmieri-Billig, "Pope Francis and the Jews: the first six months," *Vatican Insider: La Stampa*, (Sept. 18, 2013), <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/inquiries-and-interviews/detail/articolo/jews-di-segni-david-rosen-vatican-ii-27954/>, accessed March 5, 2015.

11. *Ibid.*

representatives of the international Jewish community, when Pope Francis greeted an International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) delegation, he has repeatedly characterized Christian anti-Semitism as both sinful and absurd. In the official Vatican English translation of his June 24, 2013 address in Italian to the IJCIC delegation, an exclamation point accentuates the salient sentence: “Due to our common roots, a Christian cannot be anti-Semitic!”<sup>12</sup> Christian anti-Semitism is self-denial or self-hate, argues Pope Francis, because there is no Christianity without Judaism first. The pope recently reiterated this teaching during an interview with the Israeli newspaper, *Yediot Achronot*. He said, “Anti-Semitism is a sin...Our roots are in Judaism.”<sup>13</sup>

It was at the IJCIC meeting that we were introduced up close to the relative informality of Francis encounters. This is indicative of his style, and perhaps even more so in his Jewish meetings. Veterans of papal encounters were expecting an announcement or signal of the pope’s arrival, but Francis caught us off guard, entering an intimate room from the rear and taking his seat on an unelevated and understated chair. He is a warm, unassuming, and unscripted pope who has a remarkable ability to engage each individual fully even as his guests work their way through the long receiving lines.

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12. Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Members of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations* (June 24, 2013), 1, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130624\\_international-jewish-committee.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130624_international-jewish-committee.html), accessed March 5, 2015.

13. Henrique Cymerman, “It’s hard to build peace; but living without peace is an absolute nightmare,” *ynetnews*, (Nov. 28, 2014), <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4597267,00.html>, accessed March 5, 2015.

More dramatically, the now legendary September 2013 Jewish holiday experience at Francis’ Vatican was reported in depth by his good friend, Rabbi Skorka. Skorka visited with Pope Francis during Shemini Atzeret, Simchat Torah, and Shabbat, and described the scene:

I eat with him at breakfast, lunch and dinner every day. He cares for me, and controls everything regarding my food to make sure it is all kosher, and according to my religious tradition. These are festive days, and I have to say certain prayers at meals and, I expand the last prayer and translate it. He accompanies me together with the others at the table—his secretaries and a bishop—and they all say “Amen” at the end.<sup>14</sup>

Can we safely presume that this scene is unprecedented in papal history?

Although Francis’ gestures are important, it is the formal teaching of the Magisterium that will have the most lasting effect beyond his tenure. His first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), a 224-page document, briefly but powerfully addresses interreligious dialogue. In a section entitled “Relations with Judaism,” Francis writes,

Dialogue and friendship with the children of Israel are part of the life of Jesus’ disciples. The friendship

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14. Gerard O’Connell, “Pope Francis and Rabbi Skorka make history in the Vatican,” *Vatican Insider: La Stampa*, (Sept. 29, 2013), <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/the-vatican/detail/articolo/francesco-francisco-28206/>, accessed March 5, 2015.

which has grown between us makes us bitterly and sincerely regret the terrible persecutions which they have endured, and continue to endure, especially those that have involved Christians.<sup>15</sup>

Rabbi David Rosen, my AJC colleague and the leading Jewish dialogue partner with the three most recent popes, put *Evangelii Gaudium* in historic context. “His emphasis on the ongoing Divine Presence in the life of the Jewish People and on the importance of the ‘values of Judaism’ for Christians is particularly significant in further advancing the historic transformation in the Catholic Church’s approach towards the Jewish people,” said Rosen.<sup>16</sup>

Pope Francis wasted little time in affirming the centrality of Holocaust commemoration and the importance of the State of Israel to Jews, Catholics, and Catholic-Jewish relations. Following in the footsteps of his two predecessors but prioritizing it earlier in his papal travel schedule, Francis made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with a state visit to Israel. Notwithstanding some overstated controversy regarding an impromptu stop at the security wall in Bethlehem, Francis clearly conveyed his heartfelt appreciation for the Jewish story. Building upon the historic establishment of Holy See-Israel diplomatic relations with Israel in 1993, Francis articulated the “right

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15. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful of the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World*, 185 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html), accessed March 5, 2015.

16. “AJC Welcomes the Appeal by Pope Francis for Catholic-Jewish Friendship,” (Nov 26, 2013), <http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=7oJILSPwFfJSG&b=8480439&ct=13423079>, accessed March 5, 2015.

of the State of Israel to exist and to flourish in peace and security within internationally recognized borders.”<sup>17</sup> He recognized the right of the Palestinian people to a homeland and the Holy See’s support for a two-state solution. Francis followed the latter aspiration with an assemblage at the Vatican to pray for peace that was attended by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious leaders, together with Israel’s President Shimon Peres and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

At a moving encounter at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial and museum in Jerusalem, Francis “humbly bowed to kiss the hands of Holocaust survivors,”<sup>18</sup> and offered an elegiac homily concluding with, “Adam, ‘where are you?’ Here we are, Lord, shamed by what man, created in your own image and likeness, was capable of doing.”<sup>19</sup>

Francis was the first pontiff to visit and lay a wreath at the grave of Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism.<sup>20</sup> The drama of history was not lost upon

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17. Pope Francis, *Welcoming Ceremony: Address of Pope Francis*, (May 25, 2014), 2, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140525\\_terra-santa-cerimonia-benvenuto-tel-aviv.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140525_terra-santa-cerimonia-benvenuto-tel-aviv.html), accessed March 5, 2015.

18. Crispian Balmer and Philip Pullella, “As Mideast Trip Nears End, Pope Navigates Minefield of Symbols,” *Reuters*, (May 26, 2014), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/26/us-pope-holyland-idUSBREA4O00120140526>, accessed March 5, 2015.

19. Pope Francis, *Visit to the Yad Vashem Memorial: Address of Pope Francis*, (May 26, 2014), 2, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140526\\_terra-santa-memorale-yad-vashem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140526_terra-santa-memorale-yad-vashem.html), accessed March 5, 2015.

20. Jodi Rudoren, “Pope Lays Wreath at Tomb of Zionism’s Founder,” *The New York Times*, (May 26, 2014), <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/27/world/middleeast/pope-francis-jerusalem.html>, accessed March 5, 2015.

those who remembered Herzl's diary post describing his 1904 audience with Pope Pius X, when he entreated Catholicism's leader to support the Zionist effort to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. Herzl set down Pius X's response:

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.<sup>21</sup>

As a result of the unprecedented nature of Francis' positive history and interactions with the Jewish community past and present, the Francis effect has arguably had a more significant impact upon Catholic-Jewish relations than in other arenas. Therefore, in predicting the future of Catholic-Jewish relations during the Francis era it seems unlikely preexisting strains will evolve into full confrontations during his pontificate. A combination of his empathy for the Jewish people and a perception among Jews that he is a friend should mitigate any potential tensions. Whatever disagreements might arise between Catholics and Jews, it is clear in the post-*Nostra Aetate* era, even more so in the Francis era, that differences will be resolved, or at least discussed, among friends, and Pope Francis is certainly a friend.

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21. Raphael Patai, ed., *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl* (New York/London: Herzl Press/Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), 4: 1603.

Nonetheless, there are at least two challenges that may rear their heads during his tenure, and are worth watching. One is theological/liturgical, and the other is historical.

The former relates to the extraordinary rite (Tridentine) version of the Good Friday prayer "For the Jews" promulgated by Pope Benedict XVI in 2008. It includes the hope, "May the Lord our God illuminate their hearts so that they may recognize Jesus Christ as savior of all men," and "as the fullness of peoples enter into your Church, all of Israel may be saved."<sup>22</sup> This controversial prayer's intent was clarified by Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, as an eschatological hope and not a call to conversion, but the contretemps may linger.<sup>23</sup> The proselytization of Jews, even implicit, remains a sensitive topic for the Jewish people.

The latter challenge is likely to be more serious and difficult to resolve: the historical record of Pope Pius XII during the Holocaust years. This entails the opening of the relevant Vatican archives and the controversy over the beatification process for Pius XII. As Cardinal Bergoglio, Pope Francis called for the full opening of the archives so the truth may be known.<sup>24</sup> Pope Francis' recent comments about Pope Pius XII reveal his belief that perhaps the

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22. Pope Benedict XVI, "New Tridentine Rite Good Friday Prayer for Jews," (July 7, 2007) cited in *Dialogika*, <http://www.ccr.us/dialogika-resources/themes-in-todays-dialogue/pasttopics/good-friday-prayer/440-b1608feb5-1>, accessed March 5, 2015.

23. John Thavis, "Vatican Cardinal Defends Reformulation of Tridentine Prayer for Jews," *Catholic News Service*, (February 7, 2008), <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0800734.htm>, accessed March 5, 2015.

24. Bergoglio and Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth*, 183.

war-time pope's record has been misunderstood.<sup>25</sup> However this historical debate plays out, it will be a challenge for Catholic-Jewish relations.

But the promise of Francis' pontificate remains most alluring. There has long been concern that the advances in Catholic-Jewish relations taken for granted in Europe and even more so in the United States may be harder to achieve elsewhere, especially where there are few Jews. A pope whose background is so different from his predecessors and speaks Spanish as his mother tongue might have the ability to reach more broadly with the message of *Nostra Aetate* and expand this golden age of Catholic-Jewish relations.

When an AJC delegation met with Pope Francis at the Vatican in February 2014, we presented him with a copy of the Jewish Museum exhibit book inside an artistic and inscribed gift box. We showed him page 105 of the exquisite volume, where a print of *White Crucifixion* is included. Francis was moved by our recognition of his emotional connection to the painting and responded with a joyous smile.

With Pope Francis, Catholic-Jewish relations have entered a new stage, normalization. It is all very natural, without premeditation. It is therefore most appropriate that the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* will be commemorated and celebrated during Francis' pontificate, emblematic of the maturity of this cherished interreligious relationship between sibling faiths. ■

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25. "Pope Francis defends Pius XII's wartime record," *JTA: News Brief*, (June 13, 2014), <http://www.jta.org/2014/06/13/news-opinion/world/pope-francis-defends-pius-xiis-wartime-record>, accessed March 5, 2015.

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