

## Roman Catholics Confront the Shoah I

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### Introduction

The Roman Catholic pontiff, Pope John Paul II, made reconciliation with the Jewish people a central element of his papacy. Born in Poland, and witnessing the Nazi terror there beginning in 1939 ending with the killing factories of such places as Auschwitz, left its mark on the Pope. Pope John Paul II was also a bishop at the Second Vatican Council that produced the document *Nostra Aetate* or the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to the Non-Christian Religions that called for an end to religious bigotry and anti-Semitism.

**Indeed the Church reproves every form of persecution against whomsoever it may be directed. Remembering, then, her common heritage with the Jews and moved not by any political consideration, but solely by the religious motivation of Christian charity, she deplores all hatreds, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism leveled at any time or from any source against the Jews.**

### *Nostra Aetate* #4

Since the Second Vatican Council the Church has been moving to reconcile with the Jewish people by recognizing the Church's own complicity in creating the conditions for the Shoah and not being more forceful in collectively denouncing the Nazi program of terror directed against the Jewish people and others. In March of 1998 the Vatican document entitled, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* was published. This document is seen by many as an important step to a more forceful effort at reconciliation with the Jewish people and the Roman Catholic Church.

**In addressing this reflection to our brothers and sisters of the Catholic Church throughout the world, we ask all Christians to join us in meditating on the catastrophe which befell the Jewish people, and on the moral imperative to ensure that never again will selfishness and hatred grow to the point of sowing such suffering and death. Most especially, we ask our Jewish friends, "whose terrible fate has become a symbol of the aberrations of which man is capable when he turns against God," to hear us with open hearts.**

The Church has also approached this issue in the broader context of the moral evil of racism. The Church's position concerning racism is best captured by citations of the following documents:

**Racism is not merely one sin among many; it is a radical evil that divides the human family and denies the new creation of a redeemed world. To struggle against it demands an equally radical transformation, in our minds and hearts as well as the structure of society.**

U.S. Catholic Bishops, Brothers and Sisters to Us

**Every social group must take account of the needs and legitimate aspirations of the other groups, even of the general welfare of the human family.**

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World

**...forms of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language or religious, must be curbed and eradicated.**

Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society

### **The Tragic History of Anti-Semitism in the West**

The purpose of this section of the introduction is not to give an exhaustive or detailed account of the history of anti-Semitism in the West. Its purpose is to give a general outline that helps to explain how the Shoah in the twentieth century happened.

Raul Hilberg, one of the most authoritative scholars of the Shoah, has delineated three historical phases on how Christian Europe developed anti-Semitism—hatred of the Jewish people. These three phases of anti-Semitism consist of: conversion; expulsion; and annihilation. (1)

In the conversion phase, dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, to the Reformation period the Church placed emphasis on the conversion of the Jewish people. This was combined with an almost visceral hatred of the Jewish people and the accusation of deicide, that is, that the Jewish people bore the guilt of being Christ killers. Such an approach to the Jewish people found expression in an misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the intention of John's and the Synoptic gospels, the writings and preaching of some of the Patristic Fathers of the Church, and vitriolic writings and preaching of Martin Luther.

**If the Jewish rites are holy and venerable, our way of life must be false. But if our way is true, as indeed it is, theirs is fraudulent. I am not speaking of the Scriptures. Far from it! For they lead one to Christ. I am speaking of their present impiety and madness." (2)**

St. John Chrysostom

**Herewith you can readily see how they understand and obey the fifth commandment of God, namely, that they are thirsty bloodhounds and murderers of all Christendom, with full intent, now for more than fourteen hundred years, and indeed they were often burned to death upon the accusation that they had poisoned water and wells, stolen children, and torn and hacked them apart, in order to cool their temper secretly with Christian blood. (3)**

Martin Luther

The next phase of anti-Semitism was known as the expulsion phase. This was characterized by isolating the Jewish people from Christians in ghettos, or in outright expulsion from cities and countries—the most dramatic example is the expulsion from Spain in 1492. It was not unusual during this phase of anti-Semitism for Christians to burn the Jewish Talmud and to bar Jews

from public office. (4) This phase was typical of the period beginning in the Middle Ages and up to 1941 in Nazi Germany.

In 1941 the Nazi leadership in Germany decided that expulsion would not solve the Jewish problem. It was at this time that the Nazi leadership decided on a final solution to the Jewish problem that was made official policy at the Wannsee Conference in 1942. The official policy of the Nazi regime would be the goal of annihilation of the Jewish race. This became the third phase of anti-Semitism in Europe. This phase of anti-Semitism in Germany was labeled eliminationist anti-Semitism by Dr. Daniel Goldhagen in his work entitled, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. (5)

During the nineteenth century a dramatic shift took place in Europe's relations with the Jewish people. Rather than emphasizing the religious differences between the two groups as a source of persecution, racial differences were emphasized that viewed the Jewish people as subhumans and white Aryans as the master race.

The adaptation of the work of Charles Darwin to the racist ideas of Gobineau, Chamberlain, and the nihilistic philosophy of Nietzsche all found expression in the racial purity laws and policies of the Third Reich. These racial theories were combined with the traditional anti-Semitic ideas in Europe that saw the Jews as pests, vermin and a pestilence that contributed to the Nazi justification of scapegoating and seeking to annihilate the Jewish people. Even in 1895 German officials were adding to the foundation of anti-Semitic feeling that would contribute to the onslaught that would come fifty years later during the Nazi reign of terror.

**It is quite clear that there is many a Jew among us of whom one cannot say anything bad. If one designates the whole of Jewry as harmful, one does so in the knowledge that the racial qualities of this people are such that in the long run they cannot harmonize with the racial qualities of the Germanic peoples, and that every Jew who at this moment has not done anything bad may nevertheless under the proper conditions do precisely that, because his racial qualities drive him to it.**

Ahlwardt, member of the German Reichstag (6)

Such thinking found expression in a more systematic political program embodied in the Nazi philosophy, and later, in the Nazi laws and systematic killings that would enmesh this philosophy.

**Boys and girls, look back to a little more than ten years ago. A war—the World War—had whirled over the peoples of the earth and had left in the end a heap of ruins. Only one people remained victorious in this dreadful war, a people of whom Christ said its father is the devil. That people had ruined the German nation in body and soul.**

**Boys and girls, even if they say that the Jews were once the chosen people, do not believe it, but believe us when we say that the Jews are not a chosen people. Because it cannot be that a chosen people should act among the peoples as the Jews do today.**

**A chosen people does not go into the world to make others work for them, to suck blood. It does not go among the peoples to chase the peasants from the land. It does not go among the peoples to make your fathers poor and drive them to despair. A chosen people does not slay and torture animals to death. (7)**

Gauleiter Julius Streicher of the Nazi Party

These three phases of anti-Semitism can be summed up most succinctly by Raul Hilberg,

**The missionaries of Christianity had said in effect: you have no right to live among us as Jews. The secular rulers who followed had proclaimed: you have no right to live among us. The Nazis at least decreed: you have no right to live.**

*Notes*

Raul Hilberg. *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York, London, Holmes and Meier, 1985), p.7. This work is considered among the most authoritative concerning the Holocaust or Shoah.

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1996), p.50. This extraordinary and controversial work explores the reasons why ordinary Germans participated in the mass killings of the Holocaust.

Hilberg, p.14

Hilberg, p. 6

Goldhagen, p. 80

Hilberg, p. 15

(7) Hilberg, p. 17