

*A Brief Overview of:*

***WE REMEMBER:  
A REFLECTION ON THE SHOAH***

Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ)  
Vatican Curia | 16 March 1998

### **Context**

*We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* was issued 16 March 1998, fifty-three years after World War II, thirty-three years after Vatican II's ground-breaking Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, and two years prior to the Great Jubilee of 2000.

This document was the Catholic Church's attempt to reflect upon the terrible events of the Holocaust in order to "help to heal the wounds of past misunderstandings and injustices".<sup>1</sup> Memory is significant here. By remembering and healing the past, a better future can be charted. By the time this Vatican document was published a number of local episcopal conferences and other Christian leadership bodies had already issued statements of contrition and re-commitment following the end of the war.

The document's proximity to the Great Jubilee is significant in view of Pope John Paul II's programmatic vision that the faithful should "purify their hearts, through repentance of past errors and infidelities"<sup>2</sup> as preparation for entering the new millennium reconciled with God and neighbour. The subject matter of *We Remember* reflects a strong concern of this Pope and it may help a reader to be aware of his papal statements on issues relating to the Holocaust.

### **Readability and Significance**

*We Remember* consists of five main sections. In less than four thousand words it takes the reader on a brief journey through a painful history. The language is accessible for a general audience.

Whilst the document 'broke ground' for its the time, it was controversial. Among both Christians and Jews there were those who considered it inadequate, arguing that it did not go far enough in naming Christian culpability; that it seemed to lay blame at the feet of nameless 'sons and daughters' of the Church in place of the Church itself shouldering responsibility, especially in view of the long history of Christian anti-Judaism that had a conditioning effect on European populations and that unwittingly aided the Nazi propaganda machine. The wartime record of Pope Pius XII was also a source of contention, exacerbated by scholars' lack of full access (until recently) to the Vatican archives in this regard. [A [Jewish response](#) to the document can be read here.]

In response to criticism, Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy, who oversaw the publication of *We Remember*, reportedly made the point that the document should be viewed as an initial step in breaking ground on a highly sensitive issue, that its audience first had to be made aware of the subject before further lessons could be digested.

*We Remember* is best read in the context of the Second Vatican Council and as part of a developing corpus of documentation emerging from the Catholic-Jewish dialogue up to the present day. It should

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II's Introductory Letter, 12 March 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

be studied in the light of emerging Christian scholarship on the Holocaust where deep moral questions arise for the way Christians approach theological enquiry in a post-Auschwitz era.

### **Content: A selection of key points**

#### **I. The tragedy of the Shoah and the duty of remembrance**

Section I states the fact of the crime of the Shoah: the murders and brutalities inflicted on an innocent people, simply because they were Jewish.

In saying that “no one can remain indifferent” to the Shoah, *We Remember* singles out the Church “by reason of her very close bonds of spiritual kinship with the Jewish people and her remembrance of the injustices of the past”. The first part of this sentence recalls *Nostra Aetate*, 4, as well as repeated papal statements affirming close spiritual ties between Jews and Christians – by now this point is firmly entrenched in Catholic teaching. The phrase “injustices of the past” refers to the long and tragic history of Christian antagonism towards the Jewish people, albeit expressed in an understated way.

Says *We Remember*, memory of the past is integral to moving forward, for “there is no future without memory” (John Paul II, 11 June 1995). “History itself is *memoria futuri*.”

Christians are asked to reflect on “the catastrophe” of the Shoah, and on the moral imperative that it never happen again. A plea is made to Jewish friends “to hear us with open hearts”.

#### **II. What we must remember**

This brief section has three key foci:

- It must be remembered that Jews were massacred in an unspeakable way “for the sole reason that they were Jews”.
- There is a need to study the question of “why” the Shoah occurred. Important here is “moral and religious memory”, calling for Christian engagement.
- “The fact that the Shoah took place in Europe, that is, in countries of long-standing Christian civilization, raises the question of the relation between the Nazi persecution and the attitudes down the centuries of Christians towards Jews.”

#### **III. Relations between Jews and Christians**

Section III begins by tracing the emergence of anti-Judaism in Christian history, in its growing severity, including distorted “interpretations of the New Testament [which] have been totally and definitively rejected by the Second Vatican Council”.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a more virulent form of antisemitism (more sociological and political than religious) was developing in European society. Fuelled by toxic forms of nationalist and pseudo-scientific theories about race, antisemitism grew to new levels under National Socialism in Germany.

The last third of section III is devoted to defending the wartime record of the German Church, the German Bishops, as well as Pope Pius XI and Pius XII, regarding their public opposition to Nazi racism.

#### **IV. Nazi anti-Semitism and the Shoah**

This section draws a clear distinction between the State-sponsored final solution of Nazi Germany and the anti-Jewish failings of Christian history. “The Shoah was the work of a thoroughly modern

neo-pagan regime. Its anti-Semitism had its roots outside of Christianity and, in pursuing its aims, it did not hesitate to oppose the Church and persecute her members also.”

However, Christians played a role and the document broaches this painful subject with a question: “Did anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians make them less sensitive, or even indifferent, to the persecution launched against the Jews by National Socialism when it reached power?” The document refrains from answering this question directly, but rather details some of the complexities of the war period. “Any response to this question must take into account that we are dealing with the history of people’s attitudes and ways of thinking, subject to multiple influences.”

The final third of Section IV admits that alongside those courageous men and women who resisted Nazism, “the spiritual resistance and concrete action of other Christians was not that which might have been expected from Christ’s followers” and reiterates the Church’s repudiation of antisemitism, quoting *Nostra Aetate*, as well as Pope John Paul II.

We deeply regret the errors and failures of those sons and daughters of the Church. We make our own what is said in the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, which unequivocally affirms: “The Church ... mindful of her common patrimony with the Jews, and motivated by the Gospel’s spiritual love and by no political considerations, deplores the hatred, persecutions and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any source.” [*We Remember*, IV]

The Armenian genocide and other atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are also acknowledged and deplored.

#### **V. Looking together to a common future**

A final section looks to the future of Jewish-Christian reconciliation in accord with the vision set forth at Vatican II. This vision affirms the Jewishness of Jesus and the Jewish roots of the Church, and calls for love and respect for “our elder brothers” (a significant expression used by Pope John XXIII).

*We Remember* expresses the Church’s deep respect and compassion for what the Jewish people have undergone and her “deep sorrow for the failures of her sons and daughters in every age”. Thus, the document is deemed an act of *teshuva* (‘repentance’), for Christians are linked to one another in their sins as in their merits. The choice of this Hebrew term in a Catholic document is striking.

A closing ‘call to action’ entails not mere words but “a binding commitment” to ensure that “the spoiled seeds of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism must never again be allowed to take root in any human heart”; and to heed the memory of the dead as well as the testimony of living witnesses.

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The points above are a guide to the 1998 CRRJ *We Remember*, however nothing replaces a reading of the document itself. [Access it here](#) at the *Dialogika* online library (maintained by the Council of Centres on Jewish-Christian Relations and the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations of Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia).

Quotations from 1998 *We Remember* have been accessed at the [Dialogika](#) website.

[Jewish response to We Remember](#)