As I've said a number of times already, Pope Francis seems to have a good heart, but theologically he is a train wreck; a man of the new orientation (with his own mixture of traditional aspects kneaded in, as has been the case with all post-Conciliar popes). There's even more to this story, based on Cardinal Bergoglio's own words, that I will write about in a future issue of CFN. *Oremus*. – J. Vennari

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A repair process that began with John Paul II just might be completed by the new pope.

by Francis X. Rocca*, Vatican City

(Wall Street Journal) – Nearly half a century ago, the Second Vatican Council corrected the Roman Catholic Church's historical attitude toward Jews with the document *"Nostra Aetate"*, which exonerated the Jewish people of any collective guilt for the killing of Jesus and affirmed that God's covenant with them had never been abrogated.

The document remains a source of controversy among Catholics, particularly over the question of whether they should ever seek to convert Jews, or merely, as *"Nostra Aetate"* says, await "that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord with a single voice". Yet the 1965 document unquestionably opened a period of unprecedented dialogue and dramatic overtures by Catholic leaders—a movement that promises to continue, and even rise to another level, under Pope Francis.

While Jews have an obvious interest in communication and harmony with the world's largest church, the interest for Catholics is more complex. Dialogue allows the church to repudiate the anti-Semitism encouraged or tolerated by its leaders and members over the centuries, and to acknowledge what *"Nostra Aetate"* called its "sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles". A Catholicism that regards the people of its divine founder with anything other than love and honor is a religion profoundly at odds with itself.

Pope John Paul II, who grew up with friends from Poland's large prewar Jewish community, became in 1986 the first pope of modern times to visit a synagogue — in the very Roman Ghetto where his predecessors had kept Jews confined until the late 19th century. The pope visited Jerusalem in 2000 and prayed at the Western Wall, expressing sadness for past injuries to Jews. John Paul also opened full diplomatic relations between Israel and the Holy See.

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Pope Benedict XVI followed John Paul's lead, also visiting the Rome synagogue and Israel, and he reiterated and elaborated on Vatican II's denial that the Jewish people were culpable for Jesus' death. Benedict also modified John Paul's famous description of Jews as Christians' "elder brothers", in favor of what he deemed a more unambiguously reverent term, "fathers in the faith." When Benedict's decision in 2009 to readmit to the Catholic Church an excommunicated traditionalist bishop who turned out to be a public Holocaust denier stirred an international furor, the pope pointedly thanked "our Jewish friends" for their support.

Benedict's words and gestures, coming from a German who had served (unwillingly) in the Hitler Youth and then his country's military during World War II, had a special historical resonance. They also indicated that friendship with the Jews was a principle of church teaching rather than merely the inclination of a given pontiff.

Nevertheless, given the rising urgency of pursuing a dialogue with Islam, it was hardly obvious that Benedict's successor in Rome would promote the church's relationship with Judaism with the same focus and zeal, especially if the new pope came from outside Europe.

As it turned out, the College of Cardinals could not have elected a man with a clearer commitment to Catholic-Jewish relations than Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio. [*note – it is safe to say this is one of the reasons the Cardinals chose him. The last person they want is someone who takes the true Catholic approach to Judaism – jv*]

As archbishop of Buenos Aires, he had celebrated Rosh Hashanah and Hannukah in local synagogues, voiced solidarity with Jewish victims of terrorism, and co-written a book with a prominent rabbi. Touching on one of the most sensitive points in the relationship between Catholics and Jews, Bergoglio had called for the Vatican to open its archives from the pontificate of Pius XII, who reigned from 1939 to 1958, to address lingering questions about whether the wartime pope had done or said enough to oppose the Nazi genocide.

It is relevant in this connection that the new pope comes from Buenos Aires, the city with the largest Jewish community in the Southern Hemisphere. No pope since the church's early centuries has come from a society as culturally diverse as modern Argentina, which Francis has celebrated for its blend of ethnicities and religions.

This background helps explain the strikingly matter-of-fact and unselfconscious character of his book-length conversation with Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Buenos Aires, published in Spanish three years ago and recently brought out in English under the title *"On Heaven and Earth"*. Only a few pages of the discussion between the then-cardinal and the rabbi touch on the historical tensions between Catholics and Jews or how they might be resolved —

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questions that have traditionally loomed large in Catholic-Jewish exchanges.

Instead, the book presents two religious leaders reflecting together as friends on topics as varied as feminism, globalization and same-sex marriage. The two men compare notes on the approaches of their respective traditions, often agreeing yet not hesitating to note differences. In the (future) pope's own words: "With Skorka I never had to compromise my Catholic identity, just as he never did with his Jewish identity, and this was not only because of the respect we have for each other, but also because that is how we understand interreligious dialogue."

Half a century after Vatican II, following John Paul's pioneering opening to Judaism and its confirmation under Benedict, Pope Francis's pontificate now offers the prospect of an achievement no less historic for Catholic-Jewish relations: normalcy.

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Note: Bergoglio's approach (as is the new Conciliar orientation's approach) is a far cry from the words of Pope Pius VII, who in his Encyclical Letter *Post tam diuturnas*, denounced the new concept of religious liberty: "By the fact that the indiscriminate freedom of all forms of worship is proclaimed, truth is confused with error, and the Holy and Immaculate Spouse of Christ is placed on the same level as heretical sects and even as Jewish perfidy [faithlessness]" – John Vennari

PS: In case you had not heard, Pope Francis plans to visit Assisi on October 4. It will be interesting to see whether or not the trip includes a 'Spirit of Assisi' type gathering during the visit. Based on his track record in Argentina, some sort of 'Spirit of Assisi' event is certainly not out of the question. In Argentina he encouraged members of false religions to pray in his cathedral during interrreligious gatherings. Again, *oremus*!

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