

Jews hail new papal saints who revolutionized ties with Catholics



Pope John Paul II places his hand on a crevice along the massive rocks of the Western Wall as he prays at Judaism's holiest site March 26.

The late Popes John XXIII and John Paul II, who will be made saints on Sunday, did so much to end two millennia of Catholic anti-Semitism that a Jewish human rights group calls them "heroes to the Jewish people".

Both pontiffs marked the world's largest church in such varied ways that most Roman Catholics would probably list their pioneering respect for Jews, whom John Paul called "our beloved elder brothers" in faith, behind their other achievements.

But for a minority faith that suffered centuries of persecution, life in the ghettos and then the horrors of the Holocaust, the turnaround they achieved in Catholic-Jewish relations could rank as another miracle to their credit.

John is especially remembered for calling the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), whose landmark document "Nostra Aetate" (In Our Times) repudiated the 2,000-year-old concept of collective Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus.

"Nostra Aetate ushered in amazing changes in Catholic-Jewish relations around the world, even if the degree to which it was internalized depended on whether Catholics and Jews lived side by side," said Rabbi David Rosen, International Director of Inter-religious Affairs of American Jewish Committee.

During his long reign from 1978 to 2005, John Paul became the first pope since ancient times to visit a synagogue. On a visit to Jerusalem's Western Wall, he left a note saying he was "deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer."

"It was a gesture that will never be forgotten," said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the group that hailed the two new saints as heroes.

LONG HISTORY OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Christianity began as an offshoot of Judaism that became the main religion across Europe. It treated the tiny minority that did not follow Jesus with persecution, exclusion and expulsion.

During the Second World War, the public silence of Pope Pius XII about the Holocaust led to allegations - still vivid today - that he turned a blind eye to the plight of the Jews. Defenders say Pius did all he could behind the scenes to help Jews.

At the same time, Archbishop Angelo Roncalli was using his wartime post as Vatican ambassador in Istanbul to run a network of nuns, diplomats and other people to issue forged visas and baptismal and immigration certificates to Jews from the Balkans to get them to Turkey and then to British-mandate Palestine.

Elected as Pope John in 1958, he struck the offensive phrase "perfidious Jews" from a Good Friday liturgical prayer recited on the day Christians commemorate the death of Jesus.

"During the Holocaust, then Archbishop Angelo Roncalli was instrumental in saving the lives of large numbers of Bulgarian, Hungarian and other Jews," said Menachem Rosensaft, professor of the law of genocide at Columbia and Cornell universities and the son of two Holocaust survivors.

SPIRITUAL AND HUMAN LEGACIES

Karol Wojtyla, who became John Paul II in 1978, grew up in Poland with Jewish friends and, as a young man, witnessed the Nazi round-up of Jews in his homeland.

He made a historic visit to Rome's synagogue in 1986, where he called Jews "our beloved elder brothers". He led the Vatican into forging diplomatic ties with Israel and mentioned Rome's former chief rabbi, Elio Toaff, in his will.

Pope Francis had good relations with Argentine Jews when he was Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio of Buenos Aires and even wrote a book with the city's chief rabbi, Abraham Skorka.

Rosensaft said Francis came into his papacy with a genuine affection for the Jewish faith and the Jewish people.

"He is now solidifying the spiritual and human legacies of his two predecessors by canonizing not just John XXIII and John Paul II but, perhaps even more importantly, the values they embodied," he said.

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