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POPE JOHN PAUL II'S TEACHING AND GESTURES: THE INFLUENCE ON POLISH-JEWISH RECONCILIATION

ABSTRACT

In the article, the author presents the influence of the theological teaching and symbolic gestures of Pope John Paul II on the Polish-Jewish reconciliation. Considering the main papal acts related to the Jewish community and Judaism, such as visiting the Great Synagogue of Rome, the apostolic visit to Israel (especially his visit to the Yad Vashem Institute and praying near the Western Wall), the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel, visiting the former Nazi concentration camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau, and his act of repentance on 12 March 2000. She presents the possible influence of the Roman Catholic Church on the change of Polish attitudes towards Jews. She also explains how the personal testimony of the Holocaust affected the Pope's actions and opinions, and presents his teaching as innovative, post-Shoah theological doctrine, which changed the Holy See's policy as well. The author presents John Paul II not only as an influential religious leader, significant theologian, and ethicist, but also as a politician and moral authority for Poles, who set the example for

STRESZCZENIE

W swym artykule Autorka prezentuje znaczenie teologicznej nauki i gestów symbolicznych Papieża Jana Pawła II dla pojednania polsko-żydowskiego. Ukazując najważniejsze papieskie akty związane ze wspólnotą żydowską i judaizmem, takie jak wizytę w Większej Synagodze w Rzymie, pielgrzymkę do Izraela (zwłaszcza spotkanie w Instytucie Yad Vashem i modlitwę przy Ścianie Płaczu), ustanowienie między Izraelem a Watykanem stosunków dyplomatycznych, odwiedzenie byłego, nazistowskiego obozu koncentracyjnego Auschwitz-Birkenau czy jego Akt Skruchy 12 marca 2000 roku, przedstawia on możliwy wpływ kościoła katolickiego na zmianę postawy Polaków wobec Żydów. Wyjaśnia także, jak osobiste świadectwo Holokaustu wpłynęło na papieskie działania i opinię i ukazuje jego nauczanie jako nowatorską, teologiczną doktrynę po Szoah, która odmieniła politykę Stolicy Apostolskiej. Autorka ukazuje Jana Pawła II nie tylko jako wpływowego przywódcę religijnego, znaczącego teologa i etyka, lecz również jako polityka i moralny autorytet Polaków, który dał przykład przyjaznego nastawienia do Żydów i Izraela,

possessing a friendly attitude in relations with Jews and Israel, and recognized them as *elder brothers* in faith, and condemning all acts of anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism, which even today is accepted and justified by some of Poles.

Key words

Pope John Paul II (1978–2005); Karol Wojtyła (1920–2005); Polish-Jewish Reconciliation; the Holocaust; anti-Semitism

nazywając ich *starszymi braćmi* w wierze i potępiając wszelkie akty antysemityzmu i anty-judaizmu, nawet dziś wciąż akceptowane lub usprawiedliwane przez niektórych Polaków.

Słowa kluczowe

Jan Paweł II (1978–2005); Karol Wojtyła (1920–2005); pojednanie polsko-żydowskie; Holokaust, antysemityzm

Small wooden houses were close to each other, because it was cheaper to build next to neighbor's wall. Houses cuddled up to, shored up and leaned themselves, like disabled and ill beings, which are too weak, feel cold, and are afraid to stay alone There lived the Poor: shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, tinsmiths, coopers, bricklayers, furriers, bakers, and all kinds of coachmen and porters – all of them diligent people, working all day to earn a bread or few coins, that enabled to feed their children – A. Granch.

Poles doubtlessly admired Pope John Paul II. Poland was proud that that one of her sons had become the Pope. To this day, Poles remain proud, as evidenced by the fact that they continue to construct monuments in his honor, as well as name schools or other public facilities after him. However, it is surprising that the majority of Poles are not familiar with their *beloved* Pope's teachings. As professor Michał Czajkowski said, "John Paul II is loved in Poland, but he had never been heard."

The admiration of the Pope, unfortunately, among theologians and people linked with the Roman Catholic Church prevented any constructive critique of the Pope's opinions or attitudes for fear of a backlash. "Anyone who wanted highlight that some of John Paul II's gestures may have had negative consequences was ostracized by the Church. Now, more than seven years after the Pope's death, we can observe an increase in severe criticism of his vision of theology and politics. "There are some negative assessments and opinions about his acting. But, they do not consider his positive influence on the international politics". It is not uncommon that these evaluations of the Pope's legacy are from persons who are not related to theology, history of religion, or the Catholic Church. Often,

these are statements” of so-called “every-issue experts,” which in a thoughtful discussion become silent, because they are not knowledgeable about the Pope’s acts, speeches, or gestures.

One of the issues with which Poles are unfamiliar is John Paul II’s commitment to the development of warm relations between Poles and Jews, as well as between Poland and the State of Israel. The Pope, repeatedly visited Poland and always met with members of the Jewish community in Poland. He expressed the importance of Jews in Polish society and history and reminded Poland that Jews were still present in Poland. It was through these symbolic gestures that John Paul II tried to influence the attitude of Poles towards their Jewish compatriots. But, the Pope’s influence on the Polish relations with Jews was not a direct one; his actions indirectly affected the Polish mentality and slowly modified the Polish ways of thinking and behaving, however, there are still exists some anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish attitudes in Poland.

The Pope’s teaching related to the Roman Catholic Church’s relationships with Judaism and Jews¹ was based on the post-Vatican II directive, elaborated in the *Noestrea Aetate* Declaration. The tragic Jewish experience of the Holocaust (the Shoah) could not influence the new Catholic teaching. The Holocaust was an impulse to settle matters with the Church’s own co-responsibility in the genocide of millions of Jewish individuals. The important issue was to overcome stereotypes present in the theology: the rejection of Jewish people by God; the replacement of the Israelites by the new chosen people – Christians; Jewish direct responsibility for Jesus Christ’s death; and a tendency to suspect, albeit inconsistent with the historical facts, Jews with ritual manslaughter² or a profanation of the Host (Sacramental bread). The Council’s Fathers referred to these issues and tackled with stereotypes about Jews and anti-Judaism teaching of the Church irretrievably. It is beyond doubt that the Second Vatican Council was a watershed moment in Christian-Jewish relations.

Karol Wojtyła, as an active participant of the Vatican II, as well as the holder of the office of the Bishop of Rome continued to be true o its outcome. Both his teaching and his gestures were filled with openness on the development of

¹ About theological aspects of the Christianity-Judaism relation see: S. Rambo, *Judaism and Christianity* [in:] *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, I.A. McFarland, D.A.S. Fergusson, K. Kilby, I.R. Torrance (eds.), Cambridge–New York 2011, pp. 253–255.

² The noteworthy is professor Michał Czajkowski’s speech on this issue, delivered 5th April 2006 in Rome, during the International Conference “When the Pope went to the Synagogue – the Conference to commemorate the 20th Anniversary of the Pope’s visit in the Synagogue in Rome”.

positive relations with Israel. Speaking about Jews, he always used phrases and expressions full of friendship, comprehension, and kindness. Continuously, he recalled common roots of two religions, stating, “[...] we are able to commonly declare our faith in the One God, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Living, the Almighty, the Merciful.”³

As a result of the commonalities, he recognized that Christians were the younger brothers in the belief (on 13 April 1986 while visiting the Synagogue in Rome, John Paul II called Jews the *elder brothers in the belief*⁴). When he was interviewed by Tad Szulc in 1994, he clearly emphasized, that Christians’ attitude should (and may) be just an attitude of the younger brother.⁵ The elder brother is the authority, adviser, and teacher; it is not permissible to disregard or hold him in contempt.⁶

Another important issue, which influenced the attitude change towards Jews, was John Paul II’s emphasis the Jewish identity of Christ, which was shocking, especially for elder Catholic believer.⁷ The Roman Catholic Church during the Second Vatican Council objected to the mendacious theory that Christ was a universal (not Jewish) individual, which resulted in an assumption that Christ was Jewish⁸ – was born as Jew, was a member of the Jewish religious community,

³ John Paul II, *The Speech to Religious Leaders at the Ecumenical Meeting in Lisbon (14th May 1982) during the 1st Apostolic Visit in Portugal*, Quoted after: *Żydzi i judaizm w dokumentach Kościoła i nauczaniu Jana Pawła II (1965–1989)* [Jews and Judaism in the Documents of the Church and the Teachings of John Paul II (1965–1989)], W. Chrostowski, R. Rubinkiewicz (eds.), Warszawa 1990, p. 71.

⁴ And it was not once, when John Paul II used this phrase. Eight months later (31st December 1986 during his sermon in del Gesu Church in Rome he thanked the God for a blessing, which was visiting “our elder brothers”. During his 3rd apostolic visit in France, in his speech directed to leaders of the Jewish community reminded that Jews and Christians discovering their common values may recognize themselves as brothers. In Mexico (1990) he strengthen the message replacing the verb “may” with “must”.

⁵ “Parade Magazine”, 3rd April 1994. Ted Szulc’s interview with the Pope John Paul II.

⁶ John Paul II, *The Speech Delivered to Members of Papal Biblical Commission*, 11th April 1997.

⁷ Stefan Świeżawski often stated, that Poland will become truly Catholic, when all Poles will recognize that the Mother of God, presented on the well-known icon in Częstochowa Cloister (pol. *Matka Boska Częstochowska*) was originally Jewish woman. See. S. Świeżawski, *Alfabet duchowy* [Spiritual Alphabet], Kraków 2004, p. 80.

⁸ See: *Komisja Stolicy Apostolskiej ds. Stosunków Religijnych z Judaizmem* [The Apostolic See Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism] [in:] *Żydzi i judaizm...*, op.cit., p. 66.

and is still today is Jew. Christ spoke like other Jews, prayed with the same prayers, which his parents had taught him, attended synagogue, read the First Testament, ate with the Pharisees, shared some of their opinions, wore *cicit*, went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, celebrated all Jewish feasts, and was loyal to his Jewish roots. It was the message of the entirety of the term of Pope John Paul II, who adopted the words contained in a declaration by German bishops about the Church's attitude towards Judaism: "whoever meets Jesus Christ, meets Judaism."⁹

In his speech to the members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (11 April 1997), he stated that "to deprive Christ of his relationship with the Old Testament is therefore to detach him from his roots and to empty his mystery of all meaning. Indeed, to be meaningful, the Incarnation had to be rooted in centuries of preparation. Christ would otherwise have been like a meteor that falls to the earth and is devoid of any connection with human history."¹⁰ Emphasizing the Jewish identity of the Messiah prevented the Church from accepting any forms of hate or violence against Jews and their religion. The majority of Poles still identify themselves as Catholics, must not be guided by stereotypes about Jewish people, because, referring to the message of their own religion, they are obligated to adopt a friendly and positive attitude towards all believers of Judaism, as well as to accept them as Jews, something that is quite problematic for Christian missionaries. The question of the conversion of pagans, right up to modern history, was an obsession of the Church. A Jew could not be recognized as a Christian's equal, even if he/she had been baptized. On 30 April 1987, John Paul II stated that Jews are not pagans.¹¹ The Pope repeatedly emphasized a common messianic hope, common covenant, common feasts, and common prayers.¹² His theological teaching directly influenced the Church, and then indirectly Polish society.

⁹ John Paul II, *The Speech to Representatives of the Jewish Community during 1st Apostolic Visit in Western Germany, Mainz (17th November 1980)*, Quoted after: *Żydzi i judaizm...*, op.cit., p. 65.

¹⁰ Idem, *The Speech Delivered to Members of Papal Biblical Commission*, 11th April 1997, Quoted after: *Żydzi i judaizm...*, op.cit., p. 245.

¹¹ See: John Paul II, *The Speech to Representatives of the Jewish Community during 1st Apostolic Visit in Western Germany, Mainz (17th November 1980)*.

¹² An example may be the Christian community in Ethiopia, which still celebrates Shabbat and never took part in any antisemitic act or conflict with the Jewish community.

His condemnation of both anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism¹³ is what most affected Polish-Jewish relations. He included into his speeches his own considerations about the history of Polish Jews and the Jewish community in Poland. He also emphasized his own recollections before, during, and after the Shoah; during which he had lived in Poland and had bore witness.

For ages, all Christian churches presented the Jewish people as an infidel, godless nation of traitors and murderers; Jews were characterized as advocates or children of the devil, or even as demons themselves.¹⁴ But, the most important charge against Jews was the accusation that they had caused the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. On 28 September 1988, in his catechesis, the Pope clearly stated that all of humankind was guilty of Christ's death and that nobody present at the crucifixion of Christ could be considered guilty, because, as Jacek Salij underlined, Christ's death was voluntary.¹⁵

John Paul II discarded anti-Judaism in the Church's teaching and recognized anti-Semitism as a sin. In the name of all Roman Catholics, he asked forgiveness of Jews for all harm and ill treatment. He also expressed his sorrow that even acts of discrimination against Jews continued after the Holocaust. To prove his genuine sorrow, on 12 March 2000, on the Day of Forgiveness, the Church (inspired by the Pope) prayed and confessed itself to be guilty towards the people of Covenant – the Nation of Israel.¹⁶ The Pope condemned anti-Semitism and he

¹³ Anti-Semitism is recognized as hostility against Jewish people, while anti-Judaism refers to hostility against the Jewish religion (Judaism).

¹⁴ See: L. Wawrzyńska-Furman, *Judaizm a ekumenizm w świetle nauczania Jana Pawła II* [Judaism and Ecumenism in the Light of the Teachings of John Paul II], Toruń 2009, pp. 123–124.

¹⁵ J. Salij, *Czy Żydzi ukrzyżowali Pana Jezusa?* [Are the Jews Crucified Jesus?], "Więź. Wydanie specjalne" [Bond. Special Issue] 1998, p. 53. He wrote: "[...] he voluntarily agreed that aimed at him ill will of the humankind reached its road. [...] On his own free will he agreed to be the Sacrifice for all our sins. [...] First of all, the crucifixion of Christ was a result of inconceivable and, simply, God's mad love to humankind".

¹⁶ All calls: (1) general confession of sins; (2) confessions of sins against truth; (3) confession of sins against ecumenism; (4) confession of sins against the Israel; (5) confession of sins against love, peace, rights of nations, presence of different cultures and religions; (6) confession of sins against women; and (7) confession of sins against human rights. The confession of sins against the Israel included: "Remembering the Israel's suffering during all the History, we pray for Christian's ability to confess their sins, which were committed by a lot of them against the people of Covenant and Blessings, so they will clear their hearts. The God of Our Fathers, you had chosen Abraham and his children, to offer Your Name to other nations: we are deeply sorry for conduct of these, who during

did not attempt to find any excuse for it. He compared it to racism and stated that both cannot be forgiven or justified. He reminded the world that anti-Semitism is a betrayal of Christianity, a failure of Christian faith, hope, and love, a *coup de grace* against Christ's sacrifice.

Poland occupied an important position in Pope John Paul II's teachings. For a long time, right up to the World War II, it was the motherland of millions of Jewish families. Jews were so deeply rooted in Poland, that it is hard to find any Polish novel written before the Shoah that does not include any Jewish character in the plot. Jews witnessed the building of the Polish nation, the development of the country, and the re-establishment of the state; facts that made the Pope so sorrowful when he considered that Adolf Hitler and the Nazis had changed this land into a large Jewish graveyard. The Pope, as a Pole, never forgot about Polish Jews. Significantly, he requested the commemoration and remembrance all those that has died. When he participated in meetings with those who survived, he listened to their stories. He was never ashamed of his friendship with his Jewish colleagues and never avoided the most difficult Polish issue of the remembrance: the testimony of Jewish tragedy in the 20th century.¹⁷

It is clear from Pope John Paul II's speeches that he was emotionally involved in remembering Polish Jews, and Poland as a one motherland of Jews and Christians. The Pope, speaking about the Jewish community, presented them like someone who was close, well known, and important. He enjoyed meeting with Polish Jews; he stated this plainly in his speech during the General Audience, just after his 4th apostolic visit in Poland. Considering or recalling Polish Jews, the Pope never referred to a particular event (besides the Holocaust) of the common Polish-Jewish history and he never judged them. He left judgment to historians, because he understood that he was just a philosopher, ethicist, and theologian; John Paul II only expressed that he takes the side of the aggrieved and injured, and sees their pain and suffering.

Jews in Poland were recognized as strangers. But, despite a host of suspicions and persecutions (Polish Jews were accused of ritual manslaughter, profanation

the History caused suffering of Your Children, and asking You for the Forgiveness, we express our will to establish a bond of real brotherhood with the people of Covenant". *Żydzi i judaizm...*, op.cit., p. 283.

¹⁷ "Amongst all nations of Europe, Our Nation had taken a singular part in this Hecatomb. On our land the Commandment «Thou shalt not kill» was violated by millions of crimes and offenses". John Paul II, *Sermon during the High Mass in Radom on 4th June 1991 during 4th Apostolic Visit in Poland*, Quoted after: *Żydzi i judaizm...*, op.cit., p. 183.

of the Host, poisoning wells, larcenies, or trading the Church's property) against them, they felt a lot safer than in other European countries, where Jews were being methodically expelled from towns, as well as suffering trials without grounds, torture, religious persecution, and assaults. "Cases of Jewish oppression in Poland pale when compared with those tragedies, which were ordinary in Western Europe," wrote Historian Jerzy Tomaszewski.¹⁸ The Jewish community living in Poland in the 20th Century recognized this land as their own motherland.¹⁹ Here, the unique Jewish language – *Yiddish* – was created. It was here that Kabbalism, which had arrived from Germany, Palestine, and Spain, was developed (students with their Rabbi studied the Bible and the Talmud, and believed that thanks to certain a number of words and characters it is possible to experience the unspeakable Name of God and create an animated anthropomorphic being – Golem).

Even if Poland was a better place for Jews to live when compared to other countries in Europe, the pass to a normal life was adopting Christianity. As a result, many Polish Jews abandoned Judaism and became Christians. Assimilated Jews, who were mostly well educated or bourgeoisie, faced extensive difficulties. For instance, conservative Jews treated them as traitors while Poles harbored mistrust of Christianized Jews. Alongside the development of Polish National movement, they were recognized as persons that could not be considered as real Poles and were viewed as a "poison" to Polish culture.²⁰

In spite of the negative attitude towards Jews, the majority of Polish Jews remained in Poland. John Paul II sought reconciliation in spite of the evil that occurred here and to remember about the good, because a lot of it was also present. He chose to not forget about millions, who formed this land hand by hand with Polish Christians,²¹ to remember that their sacrifice and death sanctified Polish lands; "Murderers did it on our land – maybe, because they wanted to disgrace it. But none can disgrace the land with the blood of innocent.

¹⁸ J. Tomaszewski, *Polacy – Żydzi: 1000 lat wspólnej historii* [Poles – Jews: 1000 Years of Common History], "Collectanea Theologica" 1996, No. 2, p. 11.

¹⁹ There is a Jewish legend about two Jews, escaping from Germany, whom God sent a message on paper, on which it was written *Po-lin*, "here, you could rest."

²⁰ J. Żyndul, *Asymilacja* [Assimilation] [in:] *Pamięć. Historia Żydów Polskich przed, w czasie, i po Zagładzie* [Memory. History of Polish Jews before, during, and after the Holocaust], F. Tych (ed.), Warszawa 2004, p. 50–51.

²¹ See: John Paul II, *Sermon during the High Mass in Radom on 4th June 1991 during 4th Apostolic Visit in Poland* [in:] *Żydzi i judaizm...*, op.cit., p. 185.

Thanks to this sacrifice the land becomes a relic.²² Nazis committed the cruelest acts against Jews in Poland. Poles were mostly passive, sometimes supporting the German authorities, but very often opposed the Nazi genocide policy (a third of trees in the Yad Vashem Institute are in the name of the Polish Righteous). This last group of Poles exhibited it is possible to without fear and save lives of Jewish compatriots even in the face of unimaginable evil.

In his teaching, the Pope many times referred to the Holocaust. When he knelt down in Nazi extermination camps, he was seeking for reasons for this enormous harassment. He knew that the Shoah was the climax of anti-Semitism, but he never stated that Christians and that their long-standing teaching of contempt for Jews, the distorted message of the Church, was responsible for it. It was only Christians and in the presence of Christians that the cruelest crimes were committed. The world has never seen the excommunication of Hitler, Himmler, or Eichmann, even though in the past, every second (of the duelist) could have been excommunicated.

The most recognized symbol of the Shoah is the Polish city of Auschwitz (pol. Oświęcim). The Pope visited the former camp and prayed for all of the murdered Jews of Europe. He reminded Poles to remember the history of this place so as to ensure that history would not repeat itself, because the Holocaust is the part of shared history of the Jewish and Polish peoples. John Paul II – then as a young Karol Wojtyła – witnessed the hecatomb during the World War II.

The papal teaching about Jews and Judaism was supported by his significant gestures. The Pope did a lot to establish dialogue with Judaism and to change the mentality of Catholic believers, including Polish ones. During his apostolic visits, he often met with local Jewish communities in Poland to remind people that Jews are still present in the society. In total, he participated in more than sixty of these meetings. As I already mentioned, John Paul II often and willingly met with Jewish representatives. The last time was in January 2005, when he spoke to a group of 160 Rabbis. During this meeting, Gary L. Krupp, the chairman of the Pave the Way Foundation, recognized the most meaningful events of John Paul II's pontificate as: (1) visiting the synagogue in Rome; (2) the apostolic visit to Palestine; (3) praying near the remains of the Western Wall; and (4) visiting the Yad Vashem Institute. Moreover, he thanked the Pope for his condemnation

²² Idem, *Catechesis on 26th September 1990*. Quoted after: *Żydzi i judaizm...*, op.cit., p. 169.

of anti-Semitism and recognizing it as a sin against God and humankind, as well as for his meaningful visit to Auschwitz and his loyal defense of Jewish people.²³

He met with representatives of nearly every single community of Jews around the world: in Poland (7 June 1979; 17 June 1983; 14 June 1987; 9 June 1991), in France (1 June 1980; 7 October 1986; 9 October 1988), in Brazil (3 July 1980; 15 October 1991), in Germany (17 November 1980; 1 May 1987, and after unification on 23 June 1996), in Portugal (14 May 1982), in the United Kingdom (31 May 1982), in Scotland (1 June 1982), in Spain (3 November 1982), in Switzerland (13 June 1984), in Italy (13 April 1986), in Australia (26 November 1986), in Argentina (9 April 1987), in the United States (11 September 1987), in Austria (24 June 1988), in Mexico (9 May 1990; 23 January 1999), in Hungary (18 August 1991), in Bosnia and Herzegovina (13 April 1997), in Israel (21–26 March 2000), and in Azerbaijan (22 May 2002). He also spoke to Jewish representatives and hosted them in his “home,” the Vatican City, or at his residence, Castel Gandolfo, on at least thirty occasions.

A significant papal gesture, which influenced the change in the Christian attitude towards Jews, was the Pope’s visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome on 13 April 1986. It was the very first papal visit to any synagogue since apostolic times.²⁴ It was also a gesture of courage, because, during those days, both Jews²⁵ and Catholics²⁶ opposed the idea of a papal visit to the synagogue. In his speech delivered at the Synagogue of Rome, the Pope referred to a few issues: (1) the history of Jewish community in Rome; (2) the tragic experience of the Shoah; (3) the unique spiritual bond that links Jews and Christians; (4) the possibility of cooperation for humankind and morality; and (5) the role of Palestine – the Holy Land – for both communities. He emphasized one issue that is a difficult

²³ G.L. Krupp, *Opening Speech during the Meeting with Representatives of the “Pave the Way” Foundation on 18th January 2005*, Quoted after: *Żydzi i judaizm...*, op.cit., p. 345–355.

²⁴ Some sources state that in the medieval period some Bishops of Rome met representatives of the Jewish community, performed acts of respect (e.g. go horseback riding with a rabbi), or received the Hebraic Bible. See: J. Poniewierski, *Pontyfikat 1978–2005* [The Pontificate 1978–2005], Kraków 2005, pp. 119–120. During nine centuries of the common history any Pope did not visit any Jewish temple. Only once Pope John XXIII asked to stop his car, and blessed passing by Jews, being after a service.

²⁵ A. Boniecki, *Papież w synagodze rzymskiej* [Pope at Rome Synagogue], “Tygodnik Powszechny” 1986, No. 17, pp. 1–2.

²⁶ An example could be the Fellowship of the Saint Pius X, which call the Pope to restrain meeting with “killers of the God” [sic!].

subject in Christian-Jewish dialogue – the individuality of Jesus Christ, the Son of Jewish people. Once more, he condemned all forms of anti-Semitism, contempt, and persecution of Jews; however, he did not mention the role of Pope Pius XIII's silence in the Holocaust.²⁷ And, then he spoke significant words, recognizing Jews as the *elder brothers* of all Christians.

Another important gesture was the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel. It was not until 1994 that official relations between Israel and the Holy See were established even though Israel's independence had been proclaimed in 1948.²⁸ The establishment of relations with Israel ended a tense era in the history of Christian-Jewish contacts; the Holy See and the Roman Catholic Church recognized the unique and universal character of the Holy Land and assured Israel of Holy See's respect for all other religions and their believers²⁹. The papal act influenced the improvement of diplomatic, political, economic, and trade relations between Israel and Catholic states.³⁰ The Holy See was obligated to cooperate in actions against all forms of anti-Semitic behavior, and once again condemned persecutions of the Jewish community. John Paul II became the first Pope ever to direct his words at the State of Israel.

It is also significant to consider the celebrations of 2000 year, which caused a change in the character of the relations between the Christian world and the State of Israel. The Roman Catholic Church has been preparing itself for these events for a long time. These acts could not overlook references to Judaism, to the history of Jewish-Christian coexistence, and to the Jewish state. Two of the most significant acts were (1) the Act of Repentance on 12 March and (2) the papal apostolic visit to Israel. On the first Sunday of Lent, along with seven Holy See dignitaries, John Paul II prayed in front of a menorah and asked God for forgiveness of all sins against the Jewish people. This act of repentance started

²⁷ See: D.M. Gordis, *Jan Paweł II i Żydzi* [Pope John Paul II and the Jews] [in:] *Jan Paweł II i dialog międzyreligijny* [Pope John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue], B.L. Sherwin, H. Kaismow (eds.), Kraków 2001, p. 145.

²⁸ The Agreement on establishing diplomatic relations between Israel and the Holy See was signed on 30 December 1993. This date is also used as the beginning caesura of these relations.

²⁹ J. Poniewierski, *Pontyfikat...*, op.cit., p. 251.

³⁰ B.L. Sherwin, *We współpracy z Bogiem: Wiara, duchowość i etyka społeczna Żydów* [In Cooperation with God: Faith, Spirituality and Social Ethics of the Jews], Kraków 2005, p. 84.

a new era in the Christian-Jewish dialogue, and summarized post-Holocaust papal theology.

The papal visit to the Holy Land was also not unprecedented as John Paul II was not the first Pope, who visited Israel as the Head of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1964, Paul VI had visited the Holy Land, but disappointed the Jewish community by not referring Israel; as a matter of fact, he did not use the words “Jew” or “Israel.” John Paul II’s visit was quite different. It was noticed in every Israeli milieu and John Paul II was presented as *a friend, who does not feign*.

All observers of the visit stated that the most significant moments of the visit were John Paul II’s visit to Yad Vashem and his prayer near the Western Wall. The Yad Vashem visit was subject to speculation and some of commentators even claimed that the Pope’s pilgrimage would collapse at this point. In this atmosphere of tension, it was impossible to conceal the real motivations behind the Pope’s actions. Despite the opinions of a few, it proved that John Paul II was not playing any game and that his friendly attitude towards the Jewish people was authentic and reliable.

The Pope began his speech with a prayer (the 31st Psalm). Then, he stated, “I have come to Yad Vashem to pay homage to the millions of Jewish people who, stripped of everything, especially of human dignity, were murdered in the Holocaust... No one can forget or ignore what happened. No one can diminish its scale.”³¹ The most shocking gesture was when the Pope, an old man, who hardly could move, approached seven survivors. In this act, John Paul II paid homage to all Jews, without any exceptions. For the majority of Jewish people, these were the most significant acts and the most significant words, which need not be elaborated upon.³²

On 26 March 2000, on the last day of the apostolic visit in Israel, John Paul II completed a purely Jewish religious custom. With 86 steps he came to the most sacred place of Judaism – the Western Wall – to ask God for forgiveness of all sins against Jews. At the wall, he placed a piece of paper (*fituch*) with his prayer into one of the wall’s crevices, as it is done by millions of Jews every year. It was

³¹ John Paul II, *The Speech in the Yad Vashem Institute on 23rd March 2000*, Quoted after: *Żydzi i judaizm...*, op.cit., p. 288.

³² George Weigel describes a conversation, during which a well-educated Israeli soldier said: “It was the personification of the Wisdom, the Humanity, and the Honesty. Nothing was missing. Nothing more should be said. G. Weigel, *Świadek nadziei: biografia papieża Jana Pawła II* [Witness of Hope: Biography of Pope John Paul II], Kraków 2003, p. 1109.

an unusual situation; no one expected a gesture like it.³³ It is still a significant iconographic representation of our times – “The old man Pope, with a leaf approaches the Jewish Kotel (Western Wall).”³⁴ This gesture became stronger than any papal speech.

The entirety of the Pope's teaching about Jews and their religion, supported by numerous gestures, meetings with the Jewish community, visiting Israel, establishing diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel, visiting the Great Synagogue of Rome, and asking for forgiveness for all of the sins committed against Jews, has without a doubt influenced the Catholic attitude towards Israel. In Poland, the young generation is virtually untainted by anti-Semitism. Furthermore, we can notice an interest in Jewish culture, language, history, the land, and religion; every year, the Days of Jewish Culture festival draw thousands of Poles. Additionally, the exchange programs of high school students from Poland and Israel are well developed – thousands of Israeli students visit Poland every year.³⁵ This cooperation does not compare to any other established by the State of Israel.

Every January, for one day (in some cities is extended to two weeks), all Catholic churches celebrate the Day of Judaism. In Warsaw, the Jewish Book Day; Festival “Warsaw of Singer;” the review of Jewish cinema; celebrations related to the Warsaw Ghetto, especially the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising; and the Prayful March are organized annually. Krakow, Łódź, Wrocław, and other Polish cities or towns (or even villages) have their own feasts and cultural events related to Jewish heritage. Every year, the former concentration camp in Auschwitz is visited by (mostly young) Poles to commemorate the innocent victims of the Holocaust and, on Holocaust Memorial Day, the March of the Living, which also draws Polish youth, is held at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The Jewish minority in Poland does not have representation in the Polish Parliament.³⁶ But, still literature, both belles-letters and professional, related

³³ S. Gądecki, *Wkład pielgrzymki Jana Pawła II do Ziemi Świętej* [The Contribution of John Paul II's Pilgrimage to the Holy Land], “Collectanea Theologica” 2001, No. 2, p. 18.

³⁴ S. Musiał, W. Bereś, K. Brunetko, *Duchowny niepokorny: rozmowy z księdzem Stanisławem Musiałem* [Defiant Cleric: Talks with a Priest Stanisław Musiał], Warszawa 2006, s. 214.

³⁵ On the Israeli Embassy in Poland's website, there is information that, based on the bilateral agreement, every year thousands of young Jews visit Poland and, in the trip schedule, they have meetings with Polish youth. Until 2000, thanks to this program, 15,000 Poles and Jews had the possibility to meet each other.

³⁶ Only German one has.

to Polish-Jewish issues is developing; there are Jewish theaters; numerous foundations; and there are schools where Jewish children are able to study Hebrew with children representing other confessions and nationalities (more and more Poles have started studying Yiddish or subscribe Jewish periodicals).³⁷ Additionally, the Mordechai Anielewicz Center was established at the Warsaw University, there is a Chair of Jewish Studies at Jagiellonian University, and the Jewish Historical Institute is located in Warsaw. In few next years, the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews in Warsaw, which is planned as one of three most important historical museums in Poland, will be opened. Also, there are hundreds of local, small, or unknown initiatives, which are significant they are avoiding publicity in order to get at the heat of present Polish-Jewish relations.

The Polish-Jewish contacts in fields of culture and science seem to be proper. Many important works or research projects considering Jewish culture, history, religion, and new and innovative textbooks for history teachers were published or established. All Poles, especially the young, have opportunities to take part in various trainings, conferences, projects, workshops, and festivals (e.g. the Dialogue of Four Cultures in Łódź or the Season of Three Cultures in Włodawa).

Summing up, I have no doubts about that we can attribute the change in the way of thinking about Jews and some related initiatives to Pope John Paul II. He, thanks to his approach to the issue of Christian-Jewish relations, influenced the Church's teaching; and, as a result, changed the way of thinking of many Poles, who are unaware of the significance of Polish-Jewish relations and reconciliation.

³⁷ E.g. bimonthly "Dos Jidishe Wort – Słowo Żydowskie" or monthly "Midrasz".