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## **Despite progress, work remains for next Pope on Israel-Vatican ties**

By Sean Savage/JNS.org

The sudden resignation announcement of Pope Benedict XVI left the world stunned. For Israel, the end of Benedict's tenure as Pope concludes nearly two decades of remarkable progress of relations between the Vatican and Israel. But Benedict's resignation also raises uncertainty over the future, regarding the next Pope's policies and issues over the Church's relationship with Zionism and support for the Palestinians.

Despite centuries of mutual mistrust and severe anti-Semitism, early Zionist leaders understood the political importance of the Catholic Church in the Middle East. In 1904, Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, met with Pope Pius X and sought his support for their endeavor. Herzl, however, did not receive the support he was looking for.

"We cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem, but we could never sanction it. The Jews have not recognized our Lord; therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people. If you come to Palestine and settle your people there, we will have churches and priests ready to baptize all of you," Pope Pius X told Herzl, according to the *Jewish Virtual Library*.

After the establishment of Israel in 1948, the Vatican's position on Israel changed very little. The concept of Zionism was little understood within the Church and was contrary to traditional Catholic doctrine, which held that the Jews were destined to wander the Earth for their involvement in the death of Jesus. Diplomatically, the main concerns of the Church related to sovereignty over Catholic holy sites in Israel, including the status of Jerusalem, which had been divided between Israel and Jordan following the 1948 War of Independence. The Church favored an international solution to the Jerusalem issue.

Approval of the reforms known as Vatican II in 1965, however, brought profound changes to the relationship between Catholics and Jews. Most important was the declaration of *Nostra Aetate*, which changed the Church's position on deicide, no longer blaming Jews for the death of Jesus. But despite the theological shift, the Vatican still did not change its position on Israel.

"A strong concern at that time for Vatican officials was the safety of Middle Eastern Christians and their holy sites in the region amid the Arab-Israeli Wars," Dr. Ruth Langer, professor of Jewish studies at Boston College and associate director of the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, told *JNS.org*.

This concern led to relations with Israel being completely left out of the discussion during Vatican II.

Still, the relationship began to improve on both the Jewish-Christian and Israel-Vatican fronts under the leadership of Pope John Paul II.

Born Karol Wojtyla in Wadowice, Poland in 1920, John Paul II was profoundly shaped by his experience of witnessing the Holocaust first-hand as a young man. As Pope, he repeatedly

condemned anti-Semitism, commemorated the Holocaust and established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1993, according to the *Jewish Virtual Library*.

John Paul II's efforts culminated with a trip to Israel in 2000, where he publicly apologized for centuries of Catholic persecution of Jews and placed a note in the Western Wall asking for God's forgiveness.

Nevertheless, important theological and diplomatic issues between Israel-Vatican remained, including issues such as Palestinian statehood.

"The establishment of Israel-Vatican relations in 1993 was heavily tied to the Oslo Accords and the expectation of a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian issue," Langer told *JNS.org*.

Benedict XVI largely continued his predecessor's outreach to both the Jewish community and the state of Israel. He also became the first pontiff to declare a sweeping exoneration of the Jewish people for the death of Jesus Christ. In his book *Jesus of Nazareth-Part II*, Benedict forcefully explained both biblically and theologically why there is no basis in Scripture for blaming Jews for Jesus's crucifixion and death, the *Associated Press* reported.

Benedict XVI's tenure also included a celebrated 2009 trip to Israel where, like John Paul II, he visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum and the Western Wall.

"During his period (as Pope) there were the best relations ever between the church and the chief rabbinate, and we hope that this trend will continue," Ashekenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel Yona Metzger conveyed through his spokesman after Benedict XVI's resignation announcement, *Reuters* reported.

"I think he deserves a lot of credit for advancing inter-religious links the world over between Judaism, Christianity and Islam," Metzger said.

More recently, Israel and the Vatican finalized a historic agreement that formalized relations between the two nations. It included agreements on the status of the Catholic Church in Israel, sovereignty over Catholic sites, taxation and expropriation. Most significantly, the agreement also included an official seat for the Pope in the room where Jesus's Last Supper is believed to have been held, resolving a large point of contention between Israel and the Vatican.

"I think we will look back on Pope Benedict XVI's pontificate as very significant in consolidating the amazing achievements in Catholic-Jewish relations," Rabbi David Rosen, the director of the American Jewish Committee's Department of Interreligious Affairs, told *Vatican Radio*.

Yet, despite all the progress between Israel and the Vatican, some remain skeptical of the Vatican's Israel policies, especially in light of its support for Palestinian statehood at the UN last November.

"The Vatican policy under the last two Popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, has been very simple: theological dialogue with the Jews and political sovereignty for the Palestinian Arabs. Both popes visited Auschwitz and the synagogues, they both left a paper in the Wailing Wall, all important events, but they have also been pioneers in the Palestinian project, which is essentially

a Trojan horse to dismantle the Jewish State,” Giulio Meotti, a Italian journalist and author of *The New Shoah*, told *JNS.org*.

While she was more optimistic than Meotti about Israel-Vatican relations, Langer explained to *JNS.org* why the Vatican is concerned with Palestinian issues.

“There is a strong tendency within Christian theology to be concerned with the underdog and with people who are suffering. Currently, there is a perception within the Church that Israel is a mighty country and that the Palestinians are suffering,” she said.

“There are also a number of Palestinians who are Catholic as well,” Dr. Langer added.

As of 2009, there were an estimated 44,000 Israeli-Arabs who are Catholic and 17,000 Palestinian Catholics remaining in the West Bank, according to *Reuters*. While those numbers are relatively small, a large number of Palestinian Catholics have been disproportionately represented within the Palestinian national movement and have played a significant role in shaping the Church’s attitude towards Israel. One of their most important spokesmen is the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Twal.

Twal generated controversy during last year’s Christmas celebrations when he declared, “Christmas is also a celebration of ... the birth of the state of Palestine,” *Israel National News* reported. Twal’s remarks came amid the November 2012 UN General Assembly resolution upgrading the Palestinians’ status.

The next Pope will be faced with a decision on whether or not to continue the theological and diplomatic progress his two predecessors made with Israel and the Middle East. Work remains on developing a deeper understanding of Zionism in the Catholic Church. While the Church has come a long way from its first encounter with Zionism in 1904, including the repudiation of its teaching on deicide, reconciling Zionism within Church doctrine remains an outstanding issue for the next Pope.

“There still is not an easy way for Catholics to understand the reason why the Jewish people are connected to the land of Israel [Zionism]. This is a topic of dialogue right now between Jewish and Catholic leaders, but it is still preliminary,” Langer told *JNS.org*.