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## After Ups and Downs, Historic Step by The Pope

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Special To The Jewish Week

Six years into the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI, no one would argue that the Church's relations with the Jewish people during his tenure have been characterized by ups and downs, positives and negatives, seeming to suggest an unevenness in his approach so far toward Catholic-Jewish relations.

But one historic gesture earlier this month registered as a complete positive for the Church's relations with Jews — the publication of Pope Benedict's new book, "Jesus of Nazareth, Volume II."

In his book, the pope clearly declared there is no basis in the New Testament for the claim that the Jewish people were responsible for the death of Jesus.

This is truly a historic moment, building on the legacy of the Second Vatican Council and the work of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, in reconciling the Church and the Jewish people.

Pope Benedict's declaration in his book that Christianity should not pursue conversion of Jews was equally momentous. He wrote that the fate of the Jewish people is in the hands of God, who will provide salvation at some time in the future, a time that cannot be known to man. Until then, the Church should bring its message to the Gentiles, and "not concern herself with the conversion of the Jews."

After nearly 2,000 years of the persecution and murder of millions of Jews by Christians holding Jews responsible for killing their God, and also seeking to convert Jews under threat of death, Pope Benedict's teachings could not be more important for the Jewish people, and for the continuing evolution of Catholic-Jewish relations.

It is technically true that Pope Benedict's refutation of the deicide charge is not totally new. Since the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the Catholic Church, in officially condemning anti-Semitism, rejected any interpretation of the New Testament that held all Jews, then or now, responsible for the death of Jesus.

But Pope Benedict's clear statements that the Jewish people are not responsible for the death of Jesus, in a book meant for the masses, is a profound development that must not be overlooked. Here is a sitting pope and a world-class theologian making the irrefutable case to "exonerate the Jews" — as headline writers around the world proclaimed — based on strong biblical and theological grounds.

Benedict's teachings on these matters mean an entirely positive new interpretation of the New Testament vis-à-vis the Jewish people. He is attempting to fulfill what he told us shortly after he was elected in 2005, when I was invited to a meeting with him in Rome. At that time, he reassured us of his desire to follow in the footsteps of Pope John Paul II, who brought the historic reconciliation between Jews and Christians to new heights.

Since then, Pope Benedict XVI has issued historic positive statements about Judaism and Israel and demonstrated to the world his commitment to building up Catholic-Jewish dialogue by visiting several synagogues, including the Park East Synagogue in New York City.

His visit to the State of Israel solidified the Vatican's formal relationship with the Jewish state, and the Church's commitment to its security and survival. In Israel, the pope honored the memory of the "six million Jewish victims of the Shoah," and said that "every effort must be made to fight anti-Semitism wherever it is found."

And during his trip to the Great Synagogue in Rome last year, Pope Benedict made an important theological step. He referred to Jews as "people of the Covenant of Moses," clearly demonstrating the Roman Catholic Church's belief that God's Covenant with the Jewish People made with Moses at Mt. Sinai is eternal and irrevocable.

While there have been moments of tension — early controversies over the Church's rehabilitation of a Holocaust denying bishop and the reinstatement of a Latin Mass containing a prayer for the conversion of Jews — there's no doubt that the pope has set his papacy on the right path in its efforts to symbolically and theologically repair centuries of injustice and persecution against the Jewish people.

And there are still issues we will be watching that could further define the pope's legacy in Catholic-Jewish relations.

The Church has indicated that it may move forward soon with steps toward the beatification of Pope Pius XII. The question remains as to whether the Church will open the relevant Vatican archives on the Second World War before moving forward with sainthood, a step we believe is essential toward better understanding the wartime pope's actions during the Holocaust.

We are awaiting a final report from the Vatican concerning a recent Bishops Synod on the Middle East to see whether Israel will be unfairly blamed for the plight facing Christian minorities in the Holy Land.

And we will be watching to see if the teachings about Jews in Pope Benedict's new book will have lasting impact with Catholics around the world — particularly the fast growing communities in South America, Africa and Asia most of whom have never met a Jew. This will require leadership from the Vatican that would enable the message of the book to filter down into the pews.

Only time will tell how all of this plays out. Yet, the statements in his latest book certainly are a high point in Christian-Jewish relations and build the momentum for solidifying the Church's record in its relations with the Jews.

Abraham H. Foxman is national director of the Anti-Defamation League and the author, most recently, of "Jews and Money: The Story of a Stereotype" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).