

The Scandal of the Jewish Pope

One of the first official acts of the newly installed Pope Francis was to reach out to the Jewish community of Rome—as his predecessor Pope Benedict had done—and he is being greeted warmly by many Jewish leaders worldwide. For most of the last 1,500 years, though, Catholic-Jewish relations have not been so warm. In fact, there was a time when the **Catholic Church** was rocked with a scandal: It was alleged that the Pope himself was Jewish.

But that was almost 1,000 years ago, and the first order of business is to note how well-received **Pope Francis** has been by Jews around the world.

The Religion News Service reported on March 14 that “Jews worldwide see an ally in Pope Francis,” pointing “in particular to his sympathetic and strong reaction to the 1994 bombing of a Jewish center in his native Argentina—the deadliest bombing in the country’s history.”

Riccardo Di Segni, the chief rabbi of Rome, said, “As far as I have heard and read in the few minutes since he was elected pope, he has shown deep signs of respect and friendship towards the **Jews**. It’s a good starting point.”

According to Rabbi David Rosen, international director of interreligious affairs at the American Jewish Committee, as Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis “has had a warm relationship with the Jewish community of Argentina, and enjoyed close friendships with many prominent rabbis.”

And David Novak, a professor of Jewish studies and philosophy at the University of Toronto, expressed his hopes that Francis would improve “on his predecessor’s prioritization of Jewish-

Catholic relations," pointing back to the papacy of John Paul II as the highest point achieved in these relations. It was John Paul who recognized the state of Israel in 1997 and was the first pope "to visit Auschwitz, to bless Israel and to apologize for Christian acts against Jews."

"If the Catholics don't canonize him," Novak said, "the Jews should."

Sentiments like this, of course, were not always the norm for the Catholic Church and the synagogue (to put it mildly), as Matt, a listener to my radio show, reminded me last week via email. With evident passion, he told me that, "You Jews are Christ-killers on the road to eternal condemnation," referring to me as a "blasphemer and murder[er] of the Lord God Jesus Christ." (This is because I am both Jewish and a follower of Jesus, but in Matt's mind, the former must cancel out the latter.)

He also noted that, "There is Absolutely No Salvation Outside of the Catholic Church you killer of God Lord Jesus Christ." To back up his vitriol, he supplied a series of apparently anti-Semitic quotes from previous popes, including Pope Clement VIII, Pope Innocent IV, Pope Gregory IX and Pope Saint Pius V.

I honored his hard work and thoughtfulness (sarcasm intended) by reading excerpts of his letter on the air, which, I imagine, gave him further assurance of my alleged perfidy. Perhaps I should have offered to send him a free copy of my book *Our Hands Are Stained with Blood*, written in 1992 but continuously in print since then, outlining the horrible history of "Christian" anti-Semitism. (But wait. I have a sneaking suspicion that he might not be looking for dialogue. And it turns out the website he links to in his email warns against Pope Francis too!)

Putting Matt's email aside, there really have been many tragic

episodes in Catholic-Jewish history, some of them deadly (think of the Crusades and the Inquisitions; Catholics, of course, do not have a monopoly on persecuting Jews in Jesus' name, just to be fair). But there is one episode that might be the most telling of them all.

In the 1130s, there were two rival popes, Anacletus II and Innocent II, and it seems that the most serious charge brought against Anacletus was that he was Jewish. How could this be? A Jewish pope? The *Jewish Encyclopedia* noted that Bernard of Clairvaux, a zealous supporter of Innocent, "poured forth his indignation in a vehement epistle to Lothaire, to the effect that 'to the shame of Christ a man of Jewish origin was come to occupy the chair of St. Peter.'"

What? Did Bernard forget that Peter himself was a Jew, as were Paul and all the other apostles? (This is not the place to debate whether Peter was the first pope; for the record, I reject that he was.) Did Bernard forget that Christ himself was a Jew ("Christ" is simply the Greek way of saying "Messiah"), and that his mother's name was actually Miriam, not Mary?

Catholics around the world are embracing the fact that, for the first time, a Jesuit has been installed as pope, something far less dramatic than having a Jewish pope. But from a Catholic perspective, that has already happened, not once, but twice, first with Peter and then with Anacletus II.

I wonder how the Jewish world would react if the next pope turned out to be a Jew as well? For that matter, I wonder how the Catholic world would react. Talk about a story worthy of the news!

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