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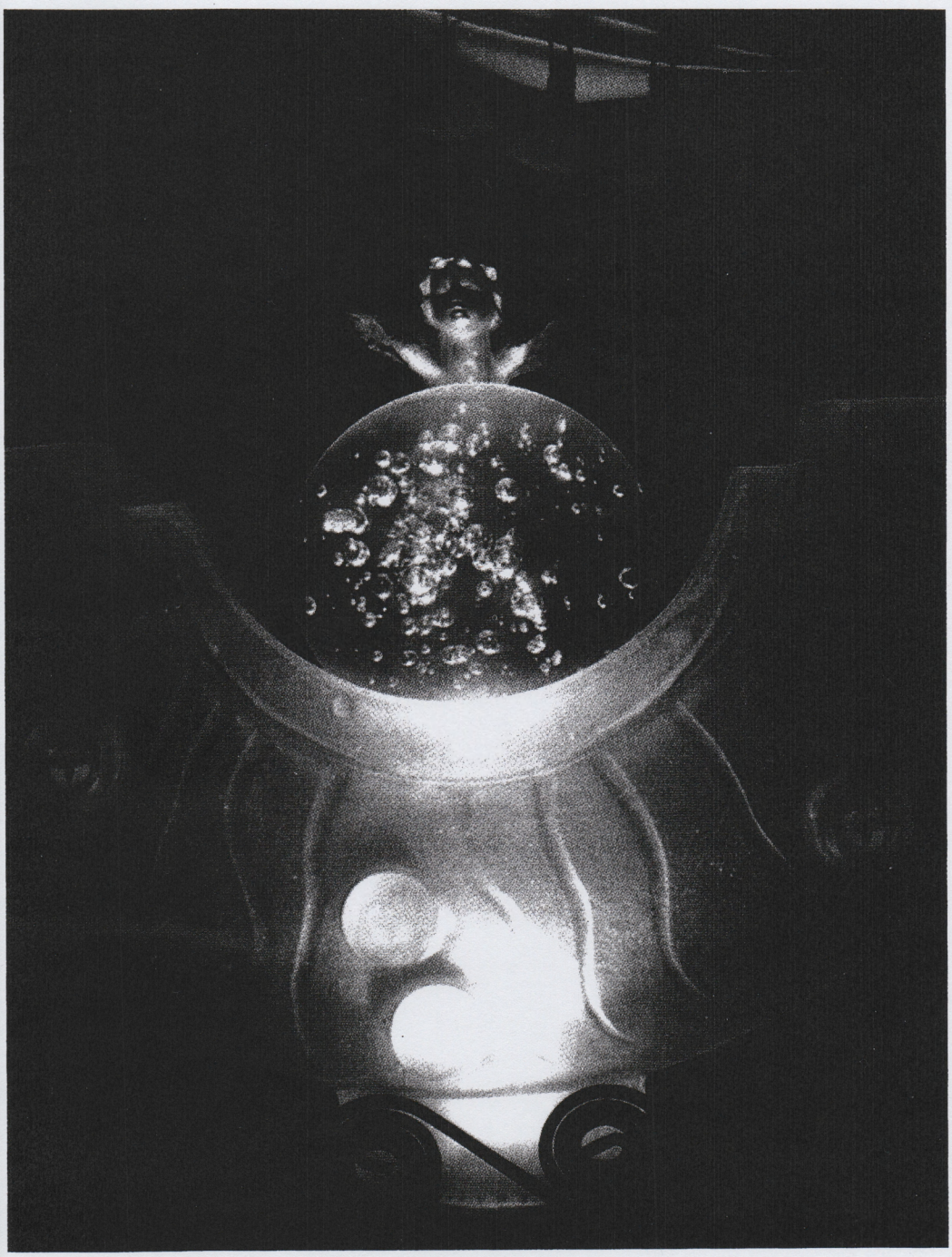

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A. James Rudin

Reflections on the Vatican's *Reflection on the Shoah*

The summer of 1987 was a particularly difficult moment in Roman Catholic-Jewish relations throughout the world. In June of that year Pope John Paul II had a widely publicized and highly controversial meeting at the Vatican with Austrian President Kurt Waldheim. At the time the former Secretary-General of the United Nations was charged with participating in deadly crimes against innocent civilians, especially Jews, when he served as a German army officer in the Balkans during World War II.

In addition, the controversy surrounding the presence of a Carmelite convent at the Auschwitz death camp in Poland was at its most intense in 1987. The building chosen by the nuns a few years earlier was an original camp building used by the Germans during the Holocaust to store the lethal Zyklon B poison gas.

Many Jewish and Catholic leaders vigorously argued that the convent needed to be moved to a new location that was not part of the Auschwitz killing site. The issue of the convent was an international *cause célèbre* that required the intervention of Vatican officials and, ultimately, the pope himself before the crisis could be satisfactorily resolved. The nuns now reside in a new convent that was built in the early 1990s, six hundred meters from the death camp.

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Finally, during the summer of 1987, the pope was preparing for a lengthy visit to United States that included a long-planned September meeting in Miami with American Jewish leadership. The strong negative reaction to the Waldheim audience and the acrid Auschwitz convent crisis placed the Miami assembly in some jeopardy.

An emergency meeting between the pope and international Jewish leaders at Castel Gandolfo, the papal summer residence, was arranged by the Vatican to ease the tensions. When the meeting concluded on September 1, 1987, the Holy See announced that a formal document on the relation of the Catholic Church to the Shoah (the Hebrew word for Holocaust) would be developed and published soon. Pope John Paul II affirmed the importance of the proposed document. As a direct result of the fruitful Castel Gandolfo conversations, a successful Miami meeting took place a few days later.

Nearly eleven years passed, however, before the Vatican published the long-awaited document on March 16, 1998, as *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah.* During that period, both Christians and Jews eagerly anticipated the text, which was to be the church's formal attempt to confront directly the terrible years of 1933–45, when the persecution and then the mass murder of Jews was the policy of Germany's Nazi government.

When *We Remember* finally appeared, however, it raised more questions than it answered and created more problems than it solved. It remains a highly controversial document, drawing praise and criticism from both Christians and Jews.

The twelve-page statement is divided into five sections: "The Tragedy of the Shoah and the Duty of Remembrance," "What We Must Remember," "Relations Between Jews and Christians," "Nazi Anti-Semitism and the Shoah," and "Looking Together to a Common Future." A short but important letter from the pope to Edward Cardinal Cassidy introduces the document. Cardinal Cassidy is the president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, and his Commission is the primary author of *We Remember.* The papal letter, although brief, embodies John Paul's personal endorsement of the document.

The letter clearly reveals the Polish-born Pontiff's acute personal sorrow in describing "...the sufferings of the Jewish people during the Second World War. The crime which has become known as the Shoah remains an indelible stain on the history of the century that is coming to a close." His words are an emphatic refutation of those who deny the reality of the Holocaust as well as those who minimize its horrors. His

letter represents one of the positive features of the document. A century from now when all the survivors of the Holocaust are dead, these words of the pope from Poland, who was born in 1920 and witnessed first-hand the German occupation of his country in 1939, will remain, as will his declaration, in another context, that "this is the century of the Shoah."*

In his letter to Cardinal Cassidy, the pope calls for "a future in which the unspeakable iniquity of the Shoah will never again be possible." The pope's words are more powerful than the overly cautious committee-approved document that follows. Unlike the pope's words, *We Remember* is obviously the work of many authors and lacks a single compelling voice of conscience and contrition.

This call for remembrance is an integral part of the pope's teachings. His special emphasis on remembering the Shoah has been a hallmark of his pontificate. Since he became pope in 1978, John Paul II has consistently stressed the importance of building mutual respect and understanding between Catholics and Jews. His focus on the Shoah was reflected most notably in his 1991 address to Jewish leaders in Budapest. He also reiterated this theme at the 1994 Vatican concert that commemorated the Shoah. At the conclusion of his remarks at the concert, the pope publicly identified with the victims of Nazi German terror when he declared: "Do not forget us!"

The first two sections of *We Remember* reflect the tone and substance of the pope's letter, and together they spell out the document's *raison d'etre.* The first part describes the unique bond the church has with the Jewish people. "... [It] is unlike the one she shares with any other religion. However, it is not only a question of recalling the past. The common future of Jews and Christians demand that we remember, for 'there is no future without memory.' History itself is *memoria futuri.*"

This opening section also calls for "all Christians" to recognize how the "image of the Creator" in human beings "has been offended and disfigured" by the horrors of this century. For Catholics, the "unspeak-

*I strongly believe that after 1945 the word "Holocaust" must always be spelled with a capital "H" and without any plural ending. Unfortunately, today the term "Holocaust" is being misused and abused when it is employed to describe every terrible event that takes place. Such continued abuse of the word may soon lead to the loss of its distinctive meaning. For that reason, I commend the Vatican authors of *We Remember* for using the Hebrew term "Shoah," which can only refer to the destruction of six million Jews between 1933 and 1945.

able tragedy [of the Shoah] can never be forgotten." It is necessary, the document asserts, to recall its terror. "Women and men, old and young, children and infants [were murdered].... It is a major fact of the history of this century.... All this was done to them for the sole reason that they were Jews." This call for appropriate remembrance of the Shoah is one of the strong features of the whole document.

Although only three paragraphs in length, the opening section correctly notes that the Shoah "raises many questions." Although "much scholarly study still remains to be done... such an event cannot be fully measured by the ordinary criteria of historical research alone. It calls for a 'moral and religious memory' and, particularly among Christians, a very serious reflection on what gave rise to it [the Shoah]."

The Vatican statement, candidly acknowledging that "the Shoah took place in Europe... in countries of long standing Christian civilization," asks what influences "the attitudes down the centuries of Christians towards the Jews" might have had on Nazi German persecutions. Was the Holocaust "made easier by anti-Jewish prejudices embedded in Christian minds and hearts?" Did the centuries of Christian teaching of contempt towards Jews and Judaism make Catholics "less sensitive or even indifferent" to the Shoah? These opening sections pose many of the relevant questions, such as these, that are addressed in subsequent parts of the document.

Unfortunately, the remaining sections of *We Remember* are much more problematic and troubling. The authors set the proper tone and ask the correct questions at the outset, but they then provide ambivalent, ambiguous, and in some cases unsatisfactory answers. For that reason, after over a decade of anticipation, the statement is a profound disappointment to many Catholics and Jews.

The Rev. John T. Pawlikowski, Professor of Social Ethics at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, has written that *We Remember* "... is marked by some perspectives which are incomplete and sometimes even misleading." The Rev. Richard P. McBrien, Crowley-O'Brien-Walter Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, has declared: "... I believe the weight of the evidence is on the side of the Vatican statement's critics.... [B]y the standards of 1998, the Vatican commission that issued the statement did not go far enough."

The document's various internal contradictions and problems are sharply revealed in its central sections, which deal with historic relations between Jews and Christians and Nazi anti-Semitism and the

Shoah. For example, while confessing that the "...history of relations between Jews and Christians is a tormented one," the document also states that the Jewish people "in their devotion to the Law, on occasion violently opposed the preachers of the Gospel and the first Christians." This observation is unfortunate and unnecessary for several reasons. It conjures up the old negative canard that has been at heart of much of Christian teaching about Jews and Judaism: The Jews of Jesus' time were wedded to static vindictive religious "Law" filled with zealotry and restrictions. In contrast, the "preachers of the Gospels," many of whom were themselves Jews, were filled with overflowing love and spiritual liberation from the Law's severe yoke.

By using the words "violently opposed," the Vatican text transmits the not-so-subtle message of a moral equivalency between historic, often deadly, Christian persecution and denigration of Jews and Judaism and the anti-Christian attitudes and behavior of some Jews. It is an equation that has no historic basis. Indeed, it was frequently the church, especially after the First Crusade in 1096, that was the primary source of religious violence. Pagans, Jews, and all other non-Christians were often the targets of officially sanctioned "violent" assaults carried out by Christians.

This harsh and false dichotomy has fostered anti-Jewish attitudes and behavior among many Christians for centuries. In fact, it is precisely this kind of negative teaching that the Roman Catholic Church since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 has been aggressively combating. It is unfortunate that this most important statement on Catholic-Jewish relations since the Council contains the discredited negative references to the Jewish "Law" and "violent" Jewish opposition to "preachers of the Gospel."

In the same section, the Vatican describes the rise of National Socialism (Nazism) in post–World War I Germany. This "extremist form of nationalism" promulgated a "pseudoscientific basis for a distinction between so-called Nordic-Aryan races and supposedly inferior races," especially the Jews. *We Remember* asserts that the "Church in Germany replied by condemning racism," listing some of the Catholic leaders, including both Pope Pius XI and Pope Pius XII, who spoke out in the 1930s against Nazi racial ideology.

However, the declaration of the German Catholic bishops issued in January 1995 clearly recognizes that such Catholic responses to Nazism in the 1930s were inadequate: "Today the fact is weighing heavily on our mind that individual initiatives [such as those noted in *We*

Remember] to help persecuted Jews and that even the pogroms [Kristallnacht] of November 1938 were not followed by public and expressed protests;... [We have as Catholic bishops] the heavy burden of history. ...[T]he 'Church which we proclaim as holy and which we all know as a mystery, is also a sinful church and in need of conversion.'" (This statement comes from the declaration issued by the German and Austrian bishops conferences in 1988 on the fiftieth anniversary of the November 1938 pogroms.)

The forthright statements of the German and Austrian bishops have a much more historically balanced view of the official Catholic responses to Nazi anti-Semitism than does the Vatican document. In addition, there seems to be a tension between the bishops' statements and *We Remember* regarding the behavior of the church as a church and its individual members.

Father McBrien cites the Second Vatican Council's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" (Article Eight): "The Church, however, clasping sinners to its bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal." For McBrien, "there is no theological or doctrinal impediment to attributing sin to the Church as such in this whole terrible matter of the Shoah and of the Church's complicity in it."

McBrien is challenging one of the central themes of *We Remember:* the clear distinction between the church and the behavior of its members. In May 1998, Cardinal Cassidy delivered an important address on the Vatican document in Washington, D.C., at the Annual Meeting of the American Jewish Committee. In that address the cardinal said: "This distinction — the church and the members of the church — runs throughout the Vatican document and is not readily understood by those who are not members of the Catholic Church. Let me state firstly that when we make this distinction, the term 'members of the church' does not refer to a particular category of church members, but can include according to the circumstances popes, cardinals, bishops, priests and the laity."

During the same address, Cardinal Cassidy declared: "For Catholics the church is not just the members that belong to it. It is looked upon as the bride of Christ, the heavenly Jerusalem, holy and sinless." This distinction between the "sinless" church and "members of the church" who may act in sinful ways, and even commit genocide, is, of course an internal Catholic matter. But this distinction is confusing, especially when the German and Austrian bishops speak of a "sinful Church and

overwhelming majority of European Christians were indifferent to the anti-Jewish actions of the Nazis and their collaborators.

Another troubling aspect of *We Remember* is its ardent defense of the wartime activities of Pope Pius XII. Not surprisingly, this section has drawn sharp criticism. This bitterly contentious issue involves not only Jewish critics of the wartime pope, it stirs deep passions among Catholics as well. I personally regret that this defense of Pius XII is included because it further compromises an already weakened statement. My own sense is that a defense of Pius would be better presented in a separate Vatican document once all the relevant archival documents relating to the World War II pope have been analyzed by appropriate Catholic and Jewish historians of the period. Because of the importance of Pope Pius XII during the Shoah, it is vital that scholars have full access the pertinent records. Only in that way can this difficult question be satisfactorily addressed.

On September 17, 1998, John Cardinal O'Connor, the Roman Catholic archbishop of New York, spoke in Worcester, Massachusetts, at the dedication of Clark University's doctoral program in Holocaust Studies, the first in the United States. He said that he was "personally persuaded that the silence of Pius XII [during World War II]... enabled him and others to save the greatest number of lives." However, the cardinal also declared: "I would like to see [the Vatican Archives] opened.... It would be much better for the world, much better for the Church, if the Archives were opened tomorrow...." The cardinal told the newspaper *Catholic New York:* "The Pope [John Paul II] would open everything, but not everyone in Rome is as open-minded."

Key documents located in Rome and in other parts of Europe that would provide definitive information about Pius XII remain inaccessible even to qualified scholars. Until and unless the full record is made available by Catholic authorities, all we have is an incomplete and inadequate picture. It is highly problematic when Pius XII's defenders and detractors base their judgments on limited knowledge of the primary source material. Personal testimonies (however sincere) and incomplete data do not allow for a strong defense of anyone in history, least of all the controversial spiritual leader of the Roman Catholic Church during World War II. To cite one example of the difficulty presented by the lack of access to all of the primary documents, the Vatican document asserts that "...Jewish communities and leaders expressed their thanks for all that had been done for them, including what Pope Pius XII did personally or through his representatives to save hundreds of thousands

of Jewish lives." To buttress this claim, it lists the post World War II testimonies of four prominent Jews, including the late Golda Meir, a prime minister of Israel. But there is no attribution nor any historical evidence presented to support the claim that such a large number of Jews were saved by Pius XII's efforts. Most scholars of the Shoah believe, in fact, that no one person or institution saved "hundreds of thousands" of people. Without full substantiation of this figure, the assertion lacks credibility.

In the closing paragraph of this troubling section, the document lists other horrors of this century, including the "massacre of the Armenians, ... the Ukraine in the 1930s, the genocide of the Gypsies, ... racist ideas in America, Africa, and the Balkans, ... the millions of victims ... in the Soviet Union, in China, Cambodia and elsewhere." This clutter of other tragic twentieth-century events weakens the intended power of the document. Instead of focusing solely on the Shoah, a kind of menu is presented that weakens the uniqueness of suffering in all of the examples cited. It seems to me each horrific event needs to be addressed on its own, not added to a genocidal stew of twentieth-century atrocities. This approach appears to suggest that the Shoah, an "indelible stain on the history" of this century, cannot be dealt with by and for itself. By cataloging other such fearful events of our time, *We Remember* runs the risk of minimizing them all.

The final sentence of this section is enigmatic and problematic. "Nor can we forget the drama of the Middle East, the elements of which are well known." Which elements? Which drama? Known to whom? Is this a form of compensation and recognition for the Palestinians who are currently engaged in a difficult peace process with Israel, the Jewish state that regained its independence only three years after the Shoah? Since *We Remember* is filled with empathy and solidarity with the Jewish people, did the Vatican authors feel it necessary to "balance" their extraordinary concern for Jews with a veiled acknowledgment of the Palestinians? Is this baffling sentence a back-hand slap at the policies of Israel? I sense that this entire paragraph, with its omnibus litany of horrors and its cryptic reference to the Arab-Israeli conflict, was tacked on to the original text by Vatican officials who were not among its original drafters.

The brief closing section urges Catholics and Jews to work together on issues of mutual concern, reaffirming Pope John Paul II's 1986 statement, made in Rome's Grand Synagogue, that Jews are "our elder brothers in faith." As a result of the Shoah, Catholics must also work

to build a "new relationship" with the Jewish people, based on "deep respect and great compassion." The document expresses the church's "deep sorrow for the failures of her sons and daughters in every age. This is an act of repentance (teshuva), since... we are linked to the sins as well as the merits of all her [the Church's] children."

Unfortunately, this otherwise laudable section retains traces of an inaccurate moral equivalency. In the new century, "there will be no more anti-Judaism among Christians or anti-Christian sentiment among Jews, but rather a shared mutual respect...." Surely, there is no comparison between Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism and anti-Christian feelings among Jews. The roles of victimizer and victim are not analogous; those roles as they have been played out throughout history demand careful clarification and not a facile balancing sentence.

I am deeply disappointed that the document is significantly weaker in tone and substance than the statements on the Shoah issued by the German bishops in 1995 and the French bishops in 1997. Those two documents, along with statements made by the bishops of the United States, Italy, and Poland, are landmark declarations in the long and painful Christian effort to come to terms in a spiritual and theological way with the evil of the Shoah. Some Vatican officials have publicly explained the obvious discrepancy between the vigorous national bishops' statements and the weaker Vatican statement by noting that *We Remember* is intended for the universal Church, even in those areas of the world with little or no Jewish population. They further state that it is precisely the bishops of Europe, the site of the Shoah, who are best qualified to address the terror of the 1930s and 1940s in all its aspects. In addition, the American bishops represent the nation that, along with its wartime allies, played a decisive role in defeating Nazi Germany.

Other Catholic leaders argue, however, that for millions of Catholics, especially in Asia and Africa, this document may be their only source of reliable information about Jews, Judaism, and the Shoah. Precisely because its audience is global, it should have been made as strong and unproblematic as possible.

We Remember is rich with *remembrance* of tragic history. It is abundant with calls for *repentance;* it is eloquent in its *resolve* to improve future Catholic-Jewish relations. But the fourth "r" of *responsibility* is inadequately and incompletely addressed. I find it revealing that this key word is found only once in the entire statement, not surprisingly in the pope's letter of contrition addressed to Cardinal Cassidy. "...The Church...encourages her sons and daughters...to place themselves

humbly before the Lord and examine themselves on the responsibilit which they too have for the evils of our time."

Because of the various limitations and problems of the Vatican doc ument, it is extremely important that it not be the only resource on th Shoah for the world's Catholics. Appropriate new teaching material historical research, and liturgical forms are urgently needed to augmer and strengthen *We Remember,* which, taken by itself, is an inadequat teaching tool.

Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore, a former president of th National Conference of Catholic bishops and a leader in the Catholi Jewish encounter, and Dr. Eugene Fisher, the NCCB's Director Catholic-Jewish Relations, recognized this need when on the day *We R member* was published, they said: "...[W]e must commit our resource our historians, sociologists, theologians, and other scholars, as the do ument mandates, to study together with their Jewish counterparts a the evidence with a view to the healing of memories, a reconciliatic of history."

Will *We Remember,* which was so eagerly anticipated, stimulate tl intensive Catholic study of "all the evidence" and the contemplation the Shoah that is urgently required? Or will this well-intentioned b compromised and ambivalent document mark the formal conclusion the church's exploration into the Shoah? Only time will tell.