

## **We Remember: *A Complex Narrative***

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The 1998 Vatican Document on the Shoah was a decade in the making. First promised by Pope John Paul II in an address to the Jewish community of Miami during a pastoral visit to the city in 1987, it finally made its appearance in March 1998. Initially there was hope that the promised document would have the status of a papal encyclical. Regrettably this did not happen. Rather it was issued under the auspices of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, whose President at the time was Australian Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy. But the document did include a strongly worded supportive introduction by John Paul II. Taken together, the papal Forward and the actual text establish a measure of moral failure on the part of Catholics during the Nazi era. Otherwise there would be no need for the repentance to which it summons the church worldwide.

Some greeted *We Remember* with considerable enthusiasm while others in the Catholic and Jewish communities expressed disappointment that it was not as forceful as the statements issued by various episcopal conferences, notably one from the French Bishops. The response from the Vatican at the time was that the document had global orientation that was intended to address Catholic communities in South America, Asia, and Africa where the connection to the Shoah is not as direct as in Europe and North America. There is some validity to this argument but, in my judgment, there could have been some direct reference to the various European statements in *We Remember*.

Some of the most trenchant critiques came from Catholics. The respected Catholic magazine *Commonweal*, for instance, expressed strong concern about the document in an editorial in March 1998. The central criticism of the document was that it failed to move the discussion of the Shoah beyond what had already been articulated in ecclesial statements in prior national Catholic reflections. *Nostra Aetate* had already asserted that Jews bore no responsibility for the death of Jesus and that Jews remain in an ongoing covenantal relationship with God.

My own assessment of *We Remember* is rather mixed in terms of positives and negatives. I do see it as a document that establishes the Shoah as a permanently vital issue for Catholic self-reflection on a global level. But at the same time I believe it falls short from a scholarly point of view in critical areas. It brings the theological and ethical issues raised by the Shoah to the heart of Catholic self-reflection far more directly than any previous Vatican statement—and it does so with

papal endorsement. Because of this document, Catholics throughout the world, not only those in countries immediately impacted by World War II, must take seriously the challenge of the Shoah to Catholic theology and ethics. Finally, although not as pivotal a contribution to the theological challenge, the document makes it intellectually impossible for Catholics to accept the arguments of Holocaust deniers.

*We Remember* also clearly implicates Catholics at all levels of the church—even at the very highest levels, as Cardinal Edward Cassidy stressed in several speeches soon after the document’s release—in the sin of antisemitism. While the distinction made in the document between the “pure” mystical and sacramental church, the Body of Christ, and the wayward “sons and daughters” of the church may be rooted in a theological perspective no longer acceptable to leading theologians who regard such a perspective as not fully congruent with the ecclesial vision laid out at Vatican II, *We Remember* does at least argue that leading Catholics were guilty of serious moral failure during the Nazi era in their attitude towards Jews and Judaism.

Though *We Remember* is certainly one of the most important documents on Catholic-Jewish relations issued by the Vatican since *Nostra Aetate*, it is unfortunately marked by some perspectives that are incomplete and sometimes even misleading. I will focus on four such areas.

At the outset let me set some context for these misleading assertions in the text of the document. Soon after the release of *We Remember* I found myself together with Cardinal Edward Cassidy at the International Council of Christians and Jews annual conference in Germany. On a bus trip during the conference to the nearby Czech Republic I was able to engage the Cardinal in an in-depth conversation about the creation of the text. He was blunt in telling me that the four issues that I am about to discuss were imposed upon the text by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Cardinal Cassidy said he was faced with an ultimatum. Either he would alter the text or the CDF would not permit the publication of the document. After considerable soul-searching the Cardinal said he decided to incorporate the controversial revisions because he believed it was important to bring the Holocaust to a central place in Catholic self-identity despite the presence of these controversial statements. It is important to understand that these claims were not in the text as proposed by Cardinal Cassidy but changes demanded by Cardinal Ratzinger at the CDF.

The first of the controversial assertions in *We Remember* concerns the distinction between the sinful actions of wayward “sons and daughters” of the church and the church itself as a theological and spiritual reality. *We Remember* insists that the church itself cannot be guilty of sinfulness. During the Shoah it was only some members of the church who sinned by following inauthentic Catholic preachers. The late Cardinal Francis George of Chicago during a public discussion of *We Remember* related a conversation he had about the document with Pope John Paul II. In that conversation, Cardinal George insisted, the Pope strongly endorsed the view that the church itself did not sin during the Holocaust era. Sinfulness was confined to wayward members of the church. While this Catholic perspective on the capability of the church to sin has roots in the classical Catholic tradition, it needs

further discussion today. Surely we must come to see a much closer connection between the theological vision of the church and its institutional expression. And the so-called “wayward sons and daughters” who failed their moral responsibility during the Shoah had frequently taken their anti-Jewish views from the preaching and teaching of Catholic leaders.

The second problematic area in *We Remember* that I would highlight is its contention that there existed no links between Christian anti-Judaism (hatred of Jewish religion) and Christian antisemitism (the desire to make Jews marginal and miserable in social settings) and the Hitlerian form of antisemitism. There is some truth to that distinction. Classical Christian antisemitism, following the teachings of St. Augustine, argued for the preservation of Jews as a “witness people” who expose the spiritual and social consequences of rejecting Christ. Nazi antisemitism had the goal of eliminating Jews from the face of the earth through genocide. The Shoah represented a definite advance in the depth of antisemitism. But there was also a direct connection that *We Remember* fails to expose. While many people were likely unaware or unconvinced of Nazi genocidal ideology about Jews and Judaism, they were significantly impacted during the Nazi era by what they had been taught as an inherent part of their Christian faith. Anti-Judaism had become so embedded in Catholic theology, catechesis, and artistic expression. So to fundamentally separate the two forms of antisemitism is a gross error. Catholics abetted the Nazi extermination of the Jews directly or by remaining on the sidelines as sympathetic bystanders.

The third problematic dimension of *We Remember* is closely related to the second. As a result of the history of antisemitism in Christian proclamation over the centuries most Catholic did little to aid the Jews, so when *We Remember* asserts that most Catholics helped Jews during the Nazi onslaught it is misleading its membership. While there were some heroic examples of Polish assistance to Jewish victims, evident in those Polish citizens included in the Avenue of the Righteous at the National Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem’s Yad Vashem, they in fact represented a tiny fraction of the Catholic population of Europe. So *We Remember* is totally misleading when it claims majority Catholic assistance for the Jews. The contrary was actually the situation. This claim of exemplary Catholic assistance for the persecuted Jewish community deserves the extensive criticism it has received from both Christian and Jewish scholars. It is a clear falsification of the actual situation.

The final point I would raise about *We Remember* has to do with its portrayal of the papacy of Pius XII. In the aforementioned conversation I had with Cardinal Cassidy he shared with me that he wanted to leave the question of Pius XII out of the document. He believed it required a far more nuanced and in-depth consideration than *We Remember* would allow. Also the evaluation of Pius XII was still in early stages of study with considerably different perspectives emerging. And key materials in the Vatican Archives were not yet available for research. Nonetheless the Cardinal said he was forced by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to include it as a requirement for the Congregation’s approval of the document’s

public release. It was clear according to Cardinal Cassidy that the CDF was insisting on some defense of Pope Pius XII's papacy. So, as with the other requirements presented to him by the CDF, he reluctantly decided to go along with the Congregation's request. He judged it was vitally important that the Holocaust be placed on the Catholic table for theological and moral education as well as repentance. In light of the papal promise of a Vatican statement on the Shoah, its burial rather than its release would likely have caused further tensions. To satisfy some of the concerns of the CDF he included mention of the positive perspectives on Pius XII and his papacy issued right after World War II and at the time of his death. Certainly these statements need to be included in any comprehensive evaluation of Pius XII. But the political context of some of these statements must also be examined, something that is not undertaken in the text of *We Remember*. In my view, any presentation of Pius XII in such an official document must include an assessment that has scholarly and ethical authenticity for the sake of the Catholic Church's integrity. The 1998 text does not adequately meet that bar.

If *We Remember* is to remain the foundation for discussion about the Holocaust within global Catholicism, it must be revised in a way that corrects the first three distortions I have raised in these comments. And if the papacy of Pius XII is to remain in the text then words need to be added which make clear that his legacy is far from a settled question. There must be a clear affirmation of the importance and value of the scholarly research now being undertaken as a result of the opening of the various pertinent Vatican archives. Catholic leadership needs to make it clear that it remains open to a serious evaluation of his policies regarding the extermination of the Jews and the plight of the Polish people under the Nazis.

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