John Paul and the Jews: 'A blessing to one another'

by Jason Byassee in the March 20, 2007 issue

During John Paul II's pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 2000, the frail pontiff visited the Western Wall, the remnant of the ancient Jewish Temple. With quivering hands he placed in a crevice of the wall a piece of paper on which he had written a prayer. His visit to Judaism's holiest place was one of several acts on a trip that signaled a new era in the church's relationship with the people John Paul called "elder brothers" in the faith.

The note with the pope's prayer is displayed—next to the white skullcap he wore that day and the cane with which he steadied himself—at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, part of the exhibit "A Blessing to One Another: Pope John Paul II & the Jewish People." The exhibit ends in New York on March 16, but will be on display at Loyola University in Chicago from April 14 to August 11. It will also travel to Philadelphia; Clearwater, Florida; Los Angeles; and possibly Poland. It will eventually find a permanent home in Israel.

A new era of Jewish-Catholic relations was hardly the work of one pope. John XXIII in 1959 struck from the Good Friday liturgy the phrase "perfidious Jews." The 1965 Vatican II encyclical *Nostra Aetate*, issued during Paul VI's pontificate, retracted the teaching that Jews were guilty of deicide. Also under Paul VI, the traditional 16th-century prayer "Let us pray for the faithless Jews, that our God and Lord may remove the veil from their hearts" was replaced with "Let us pray for the Jewish people, the first to hear the word of God, that they may continue to grow in love of his name and faithfulness to his covenant."

John Paul's words at the Wall contained no hint of a prayer for Jewish conversion, but instead carried a note of penitence: "God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your Name to the Nations: we are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer and asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine

brotherhood with the people of the Covenant."

John Paul II was the first pope ever to visit a synagogue when he took the short trip across the Tiber to visit Rome's Jewish community in 1986. His embrace of Rome's chief rabbi was an iconic moment in his papacy. He established official diplomatic relations with Israel in 1993 and also implemented Vatican II's changes in catechesis about Jews. Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Vatican's chief ecumenical officer, has aptly summarized the significance of John Paul's personal contribution to the church's relationship with Israel this way: "To have a fine conciliar statement is one thing, to make it known and have it received in the body of the worldwide church, and even more to implement it at the grassroots level, is another."

The "Blessing" exhibit was born in Cincinnati under the guidance of Yaffa Eliach, a Holocaust survivor and pioneer in Holocaust studies. A guest professor at Xavier University's Brueggeman Center for Dialogue, Eliach wanted Karol Wojtyla's lifelong relationship with Jews to be more widely appreciated. Rabbi Abie Ingber of the Hillel Jewish Student Center in Cincinnati and Xavier professors William Madges and James Buchanan created the exhibit with support from Hillel, Eliach's Shtetl Foundation and Cincinnati's Jewish Foundation.

Unlike any pope since the church and synagogue went their separate ways, Wojtyla grew up among Jews and had Jewish friends. He witnessed Jewish suffering firsthand during the Nazi occupation of Poland, a time when he was forced to labor in a chemical factory. Papal biographer George Weigel, writing of the pope's 1986 visit to the Rome synagogue, observed: "John Paul carried with him his boyhood friendships with Jews, his father's lessons of tolerance, his old pastor's teaching that anti-Semitism was forbidden by the gospel" (*Witness to Hope*).

The immediate inspiration for the exhibit was Wojtyla's lifelong friendship with Jerzy Kluger and other Jews in his hometown of Wadowice, a quarter of whose 8,000 residents were Jews. Wojtyla and his father, who rented their apartment from a Jewish family, had occasion to visit the synagogue in Wadowice before the Nazis destroyed it. The exhibit features a streaming video in which Kluger tells of looking for Wojtyla—known in his youth by the nickname Lolek—inside a church. A woman in the church demanded of Kluger, "What are you doing here?" When he heard about this encounter, Lolek objected: "Why? Aren't we all God's children?" This part of the exhibit offers more mundane and fewer hagiographical details. John Paul II lore often records that Lolek played goalie on the soccer field, often for the Jewish team

against his fellow Catholics. The reason? Jerzy Kluger explains: Lolek didn’t like to run.

Kluger survived the Nazi liquidation of the Jewish community because he was captured by the Soviets instead of the Nazis. His mother, sister and grandparents all died in Auschwitz. In 1989, when a ceremony was held to mark the site of the Wadowice synagogue, Kluger read a letter from the pope. Later he served as John Paul’s informal liaison to Israeli and Italian diplomats in advance of the “fundamental agreement” that established diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Israel. The “Blessing” exhibit includes a list of the names of the Jews of Wadowice along with the prayer “May the memory of all our righteous martyrs be for a blessing, Wadowice, 1935-1945.” Of the 6 million Poles who died in the war, half were Jews.

Seeking to give visitors a sense of Wojtyla’s early life, “Blessing” includes his report cards and the recollections of his friends, including a description of Wojtyla’s visit to Wadowice’s synagogue by the boy who was seated next to him that day. Photos show Wojtyla at the chemical plant and a view of Wadowice’s church from his bedroom. Visitors can read about his participation in an underground theater company, which sought to keep Polish culture alive under the Nazis, and learn of his enrollment in a clandestine Roman Catholic seminary. They can walk through a replica of the gate of the famous Krakow ghetto. A can of Zyklon-B and a pile of children’s shoes tell their own chilling tale.

John Paul’s years as a priest in Poland are also represented. In a video, former New York mayor Ed Koch recounts the story of Stanley Berger, who as Schachne Hiller was hidden from the Nazis by a Roman Catholic foster mother. When the woman presented Hiller to Wojtyla for baptism, Wojtyla refused. “No, he must not be baptized,” he said, and encouraged the woman to connect the boy with Jewish relatives in the U.S.

As a priest, bishop and archbishop in the Polish church under Soviet domination, Wojtyla did not forget the Jews. In 1968, amid a wave of anti-Semitism, he publicly visited Remuh synagogue, identifying himself with the oppressed in a way that hinted at how he would use his position as pope. The fact that Wojtyla visited synagogues in Remuh and Wadowice was uncovered by researchers for “Blessing” and had not been previously publicized.

A section of the exhibit is devoted to John Paul's papacy, especially his trip to Israel, where he visited the Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem and relit the flame of eternal remembrance. His prayer at the Wall is commemorated with a video, photographs and a floor-to-ceiling replica of the Wall, complete with grass emanating from the ancient stones. Prayers placed in the crevices of this wall will be taken to the actual Wall. Rabbi Ingber said of the prayers left at the Wall, "None of them are ever thrown away," because of the Jewish prohibition against destroying the written name of God. "These, then, are also holy texts." The exhibit concludes with a bronze cast of the late pope's hands. The day I was there, many visitors stopped to touch the hands and pray.

Weigel describes a progression in John Paul's thinking about the church's relationship with Judaism. His early remarks echo *Nostra Aetate's* renunciation of collective guilt and speak of the need to work with Jews for tolerance and world betterment. At the Roman synagogue in 1986 he said that Judaism "is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain sense is 'intrinsic' to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers."

The telling description "elder brothers" comes from Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz and was often cited by one of Wojtyla's secondary school teachers. In 1993, at a commemoration of the Warsaw ghetto uprising against the Nazis, John Paul made the speech from which "Blessing" took its title: "As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing to the world. . . . It is therefore necessary for us, Christians and Jews, to be first a blessing to one another."

For John Paul, Jewish-Christian relations were not just a matter of good will or even interreligious dialogue—important as such dialogue is. They meant for him the reopening of a theological conversation—cut short by Christian arrogance and brutality—about such shared mysteries as the oneness of God, election and the final shape of redemption.

The exhibit reveals a key dimension of Wojtyla's early life and of his landmark papacy. It has also been a popular success, especially with Catholic school groups. The Jewish Heritage Museum provides a workshop for the archdiocese about commonalities between Judaism and Christianity, and a number of Catholic

schoolteachers have been trained to be docents for the exhibit.

The exhibit might have delved into some of the more controversial aspects of John Paul's relationship with the Jews. His beatification of Edith Stein, the philosopher and Jewish convert, drew fire from Jews, as did his elevation of another convert from Judaism, Jean-Marie Lustiger, to be cardinal of Paris. His meeting with Austrian president and former Nazi officer Kurt Waldheim, his resistance to offering more explicit repentance for the church's complicity in the Holocaust, and the running dispute over the presence of a Carmelite convent at Auschwitz might merit mention as well. Rabbi Ingber said the museum docents are equipped to deal with questions on such topics, but they are almost never raised. Of course, the point of the New York museum in presenting the exhibit is to celebrate John Paul's achievements, not to raise controversy. But mature relationships can face up to points of disagreement—as John Paul and Kluger handled their own disagreement when the pope decided to meet with Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat.

Rabbi Ingber, a child of Holocaust survivors, shares John Paul's desire for Catholics and Jews to speak not only as dialogue partners but as theological partners who gaze on a common mystery: "Maybe God's plan for healing the world after the Holocaust was John Paul II."

The rabbi is aware of the audacity of that claim. "Who has the right to say what? I do not have the right to forgive what happened to my parents' families in the Holocaust. . . . But I am completely willing to say that the uniqueness of Karol Wojtyla becoming pope, especially coming from the land of the Holocaust, could be one of those rare miracles."