

What dialogue looks like: Jewish-Christian relations

Leading up to the October anniversary of the historic document *Nostra Aetate*, the *Prairie Messenger* is featuring “capsule biographies,” which are also posted on the “Catholic-Jewish Relations” section of the *Scarboro Interfaith website* (http://www.scarboromissions.ca/JC_Relations/dialogue_partners.php). By October there will have been featured material on numerous individuals — Jews and Christians, men and women — who have played key roles in drafting the conciliar declaration, or who have led local, national or international efforts to put *Nostra Aetate*’s vision into practice, through various forms of dialogue, action and scholarship. This is the fourth in the series.

Judith Hershcopf Banki (1928 -)

Today there is only a small handful of people who can say that they had a first-hand involvement in the process that led to the publication of Vatican II’s declaration *Nostra Aetate* in 1965. Judith Banki is one of those rare individuals — someone who has had a front-row seat for the unfolding of modern Jewish-Catholic dialogue, during Vatican II itself, and as one of its leading voices in the five decades since.



Judith Hershcopf Banki

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1928, into a family that she describes as “middle class, politically liberal, Jewish and secular,” Banki studied liberal arts at the University of Wisconsin. “After graduation, I went to the new State of Israel in early 1949 for a two-week visit, stayed over nine months, and almost didn’t come back to the States . . . I was hooked! Israel made a Jew out of me, in terms of historical awareness, sensitivity and commitment . . . It awakened in me a strong sense of identity with the Jewish people — historically and culturally — and a decision to somehow ally myself with the fate and faith of that people. I started learning the language, history and religion of my people, and have been learning ever since.”

In 1955, Banki was interviewed for a position in the Anti-Defamation League’s newly established Department of Interreligious Co-operation. “When she inquired about the nature of the job, Rabbi (Arthur) Gilbert explained that it focused on building bridges of understanding to confront stereotypes and prejudices. Banki replied that though the job sounded wonderful, it was not for her. He pressed her, ‘Why not?’ ‘I have no experience in this field,’ she replied. Gilbert retorted, ‘My dear young lady, there *is* no field.’” (*Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, p. 1277).

Late in 1959, she joined the

staff of the American Jewish Committee’s department of inter-religious affairs and when, in 1961, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum became its director, the two of them began a close collaboration that would span more than 20 years. Rabbi Tanenbaum became the AJC’s designated point-person in matters related to Vatican II, and Banki was already working on an AJC memorandum that distilled down the conclusions of a recently completed study of how Jews were depicted in Catholic religious textbooks (one of several memoranda sent by the AJC to Cardinal Augustin Bea in Rome). Cardinal Bea had been tasked by Pope John XXIII with preparing a draft document on the Jews for the Council’s consideration, and the study written by Banki provided tangible examples of the kinds of misunderstandings and misrepresentations that so badly needed revision.

Many historians today agree that the AJC’s memorandum was one of the important catalysts making a strong case that such a document was urgently needed. During the Council, Banki wrote summaries of its deliberations that were published in the annual *American Jewish Year Book*.

In the years after Vatican II, Banki worked closely with Rabbi Tanenbaum (and, from 1968 onward, with his colleague and successor, Rabbi James Rudin), until Rabbi Tanenbaum’s untimely passing in 1992. In the wake of his death, his widow (Dr. Georgette Bennett), colleagues and friends established what would become the Tanenbaum Center for Inter-religious Understanding in New York, to share his humanitarian and religious vision, and to continue his work; as the centre’s website states, “Tanenbaum’s vision is a safe world in which religious differences are respected and daily life reflects the highest values of our shared religious and ethical traditions.”

Judy Banki has been a respected leader on the staff of the Tanenbaum Center since its establishment, and today serves as its Senior Adviser for Inter-religious Affairs. She has been instrumental in collecting, editing and publishing many of Rabbi Tanenbaum’s speeches and writings which were left unpublished at his death, most particularly in the 2002 volume *A Prophet for Our Time: An Anthology of the Writings of Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum* (Fordham University Press), which she co-edited with Dr. Eugene Fisher.

In her role as an interfaith scholar and educator, Banki has written numerous articles on Jewish-Christian relations, anti-Semitism and prejudice, including the portrayal of Jews and Judaism in Christian catechetical materials, assessments of Vatican II’s impact in the decades follow-

ing the Council, an analysis of the Oberammergau Passion Play, and responses to several major Vatican documents, including the 1985 Vatican “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism” and the 1993 statement on the Shoah, *We Remember*. In 1992 she authored a memorial tribute to Rabbi Tanenbaum for the periodical *SIDIC*, published by the Sisters of Zion in Rome.

Judith Banki has been repeatedly honoured for her longstanding commitment to interfaith dialogue, including an honorary doctorate from Seton Hall University in 2001, the Interfaith Gold Medallion from the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCI), the *Nostra Aetate* Award from the National Catholic Center on Holocaust Education at Seton Hill University, and the 2009 Shevet Achim Award from the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations (CCJR). In 1992, the National Workshop of Christian-Jewish Relations, in recognizing her contributions, said: “No one has done more to shape the nature and meaning of inter-religious relations as we have developed them, perhaps uniquely, in this country than Judith Banki.” Today, although in her mid-80s, she continues to be a much-respected and much-loved figure in Jewish-Christian dialogue, a source of wisdom, and a tireless advocate of interfaith understanding, who shows no signs of slowing down any time soon.

Pope St. John XXIII (1881-1963)

The man who would go on to become one of the most beloved Catholic leaders of modern times was born into a large peasant family on Nov. 25, 1881, in the village of Sotto Il Monte, in Bergamo, and was named Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli. After his seminary studies, he was ordained a priest in 1904, and was sent to pursue further studies in canon law, and he later served as a professor of church history at the

Turkey and Greece (1935-44), and France (1944-58). During the Second World War, he distinguished himself by his consistent, effective efforts to defend and save many of the victims of the Nazis, especially Jews who were threatened by death. Many historians say that, as a Vatican diplomat, he provided numerous immigration certificates (and, some say, false baptismal papers) which enabled thousands of Jews to escape to safety. In more than one case, his efforts succeeded in the liberation of Jews who had already been deported to concentration camps. Sometimes Roncalli’s efforts involved sympathetic Nazi officials, such as the German Ambassador to Turkey, Franz von Papen; Roncalli would later write that von Papen’s actions had allowed Roncalli to try to save the lives of 24,000 Jews.

In 1944, Isaac Herzog, the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, wrote to Roncalli:

“I want to express my deepest gratitude for the energetic steps that you have taken and will undertake to save our unfortunate people, innocent victims of unheard of horrors from a cruel power which totally ignores the principles of religion that are the basis of humanity. You follow in the tradition, so profoundly humanitarian, of the Holy See, and you follow the noble feelings of your own heart. The people of Israel will never forget the help brought to its unfortunate brothers and sisters by the Holy See and its highest representatives at this the saddest moment of our history” (Letter dated Feb. 28, 1944).

In December of 1944, shortly after the Allied liberation of France, Pope Pius XII named Archbishop Roncalli as its new nuncio. Eight years later, in November 1952, he was informed that he had been named a cardinal by the pope, and had been nominated as the new Patriarch of Venice, a role he assumed in 1953. After the death of Pius XII in October 1958, he took part in the conclave that elected

him pope on Oct. 28.

Many assumed that, as an old man, his papacy would be short and uneventful. However, his choice of papal name — John XXIII — was surprising to many, since the *previous* pope John had been a 15th-century antipope, and subsequent popes had shied away

from the name, as if it were tainted. However, it was perhaps an early indication of other surprises that his papacy might hold.

In January 1959, Pope John surprised the Catholic Church, and the



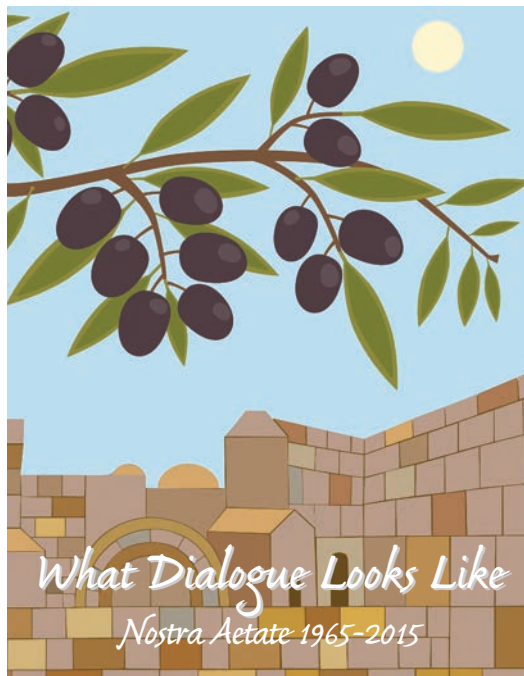
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BELOVED POPE — Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli became one of the most beloved Catholic leaders of modern times, Pope John XXIII.

world, with the announcement that he intended to call an ecumenical council of the world’s Catholic bishops, to begin in 1962. It was intended to foster a new dialogue between the church and the world, and to promote *aggiornamento* (“updating”) where necessary. One of the key areas where John XXIII sought to renew Catholicism was in its attitude toward Judaism. Early on in his papacy, he ordered the adjective “perfidious” (“faithless,” sometimes interpreted as “treacherous”) removed from the solemn Good Friday “Prayer for the Conversion of the Jews,” and, when a cardinal accidentally reinserted it during the 1960 Holy Week services at the Vatican, Pope John asked him to repeat it, in the corrected version.

In June 1960, Pope John received the French Jewish historian Jules Isaac in an audience at the Vatican and, in response to Isaac’s plea that the upcoming Council discuss a rethinking of Catholic attitudes toward Jews, he promised action, and commissioned Cardinal Augustin Bea to form a team of scholars who could begin to draft a document on Judaism for Vatican II. That document, after considerable debate and reworking, would eventually become *Nostra Aetate*, the Council’s landmark 1965 declaration on non-Christian religions.

Sadly, Pope John would not survive long enough to see the end of the Council; he died of cancer on June 3, 1963, and was widely mourned in the Jewish world. In September 2000, Pope John Paul II declared him Blessed, and he was canonized as a saint by Pope Francis in April 2014. Yad Vasem (the International Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem) is currently considering the possibility of naming John XXIII as one of the Righteous Among the Nations, for his wartime efforts to save Jews.



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local seminary. During the First World War, he served as a stretcher-bearer, a role that brought him face-to-face with the brutal reality of modern war and its victims.

In 1925, Angelo Roncalli began his career in church diplomacy; he would serve, in turn, as the papal nuncio to Bulgaria (1925-35),