

TENEBRAE

Holy Week after the Holocaust

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CHAPTER 1

The Convent and the Cross

In 1984, a group of Catholic nuns of the Carmelite order established a convent just outside of what was once the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. Five years later, a large¹ cross was erected on the convent grounds in memory of Polish Catholics who had been murdered at the site in 1941. These actions, neither one of which was accompanied by much fanfare, eventually became so controversial that they caused an international uproar.

I wish to begin this book with an exploration of the convent and the cross, because the arguments and anger that swirled around them touched on several of the painful and ongoing issues that trouble Jewish-Catholic relations. Certainly I do not expect to resolve these issues in one chapter or even in one book. My aim is rather to help explain the controversies' several origins and to show how a careful and honest consideration of them might point the way towards a new understanding of Catholicism. Literature professor Harry James Cargas, who did much to foster interreligious dialogue, once defined himself as a "post-Auschwitz Christian."² This book hopes to be a post-Auschwitz interpretation of some of the central feasts of the Catholic faith, especially Holy Week. There is no better place to begin such a project than with Auschwitz and with its convent and its cross.

THE CONVENT

When the Carmelite nuns established a convent just outside the perimeter of Auschwitz, they did not foresee the furor that would ensue. Their intent seemed simple enough: to pray for all of those who had lived and died in the camp. Who could possibly object to such a plan?

2 **The Convent and the Cross**

Plenty of people, as it turned out.

First, the building that the nuns had chosen for their convent, though it was located outside the gates of Auschwitz itself, was nonetheless considered by many to be a part of the camp. Its location appears on maps distributed by the Auschwitz museum, and it lies within the bounds of what had been designated in 1979 as a cultural heritage site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).³ Its renovation and use by the Carmelites was thus legally questionable, as well as troubling to those who felt that the camp should not be altered in any way lest its historical significance be lost.

Along these same lines, not just the building's location but also the way it had been used by the Nazis gave some pause. The structure had been erected before World War I and had been originally designed as a theater for the entertainment of army troops stationed nearby. During the Second World War, however, it was taken over by the Nazis to store canisters of Zyklon B, the pesticide used in the gas chambers.⁴ Those chambers, of course, have become symbols of and shorthand for the Holocaust itself. Renovating the site where the gas was stored seemed to some a trivializing of, or, worse, an attempt to cover over, the Nazis' systematic, technologically advanced mass murder.

The building itself is a large brick structure clearly visible from the doorway of Block 11, Auschwitz's notorious Death Block. It was in Block 11 that prisoners awaiting execution at the nearby Wall of Death were held. It was in Block 11 that unspeakable tortures were carried out. And it was in Block 11 that one of the first experiments using Zyklon B as a means of mass murder was carried out. On September 3, 1941, approximately six hundred Soviet prisoners and more than two hundred other people were gassed to death in that building's basement.⁵ To some, placing a convent so close to a site that had witnessed such horror was an outrage.

A few of the objections to the convent's establishment were, perhaps, based on misunderstanding or misinformation. For example, at one point a controversy arose over how money had been raised to renovate the convent building. In 1985, a Belgian Catholic charity named Aide à l'Eglise en Détresse had initiated a fund-raising campaign to help the Carmelites begin their foundation at Auschwitz. The organization had issued a newsletter appealing for donations that included this statement:

After the Pope's visit [in 1985], we wish to present him as a gift from our benefactors in the Benelux countries [i.e. Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg] the sum of money necessary to found the convent, which will become a spiritual fortress and a guarantee of the conversion of strayed brothers from our countries as well as proof of our desire to erase the outrages so often done to the Vicar of Christ.⁶

Some Jews assumed (with considerable justification, given the Church's long history of anti-Jewish teaching) that they were the "strayed brothers" to whom the letter referred. The statement about "outrages done to the Vicar of Christ" was thought to be a veiled reference to the frequently repeated charge that Pope Pius XII had done little to save Jews during the Holocaust.

It is possible that the language about strayed brethren did not refer to Jews at all, but rather to those who had given Pope John Paul II a less-than-warm welcome when he had visited Holland. Many Dutch Catholics had protested the pope's visit there, and many had openly disagreed with papal teachings on abortion, homosexual practice, and the status of women in the Church. It was perhaps in reparation for these challenges to the pope's authority that the agency had initiated its fund-raising efforts.⁷ It is also possible that the language was directed at Poles who had drifted from the Church under the influence of Communism.⁸ However, given the context of the Church's historical attitudes towards Jews, it is not surprising that the letter became a source of anger and contention.

Another controversy arose when the nuns stated that they intended to pray for the victims of Auschwitz. The Mother Superior of the convent explained, "Let the Jews understand that the prayers of the Carmelite nuns are also offered for the souls of those victims who were also of the Jewish persuasion."⁹ Some interpreted their mission as a campaign to convert posthumously the souls of Jews who had been murdered at the site.

The history of Catholic teachings regarding the conversion of Jews is enormously complex, and each pronouncement, whether dogmatic or theological, deserves close examination in its own right. It would not be inaccurate, however, to say that for most of its history, the Catholic Church has thought of itself as having inherited Israel's covenant with God and thus as having in

4 **The Convent and the Cross**

some sense superseded Judaism. Catholics have traditionally sought to convert Jews and thus to bring them to salvation through faith in Jesus.

Recently, however, significant changes have occurred within the Church and consequently in the way the Church thinks of itself in relation to the world. These changes came to fruition in the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, most notably in the document known as *Nostra Aetate*, or the “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.” Admittedly, this declaration affirms a supersessionist position, stating that “Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation,” and expressing regret that only a few Jews accepted the Gospel. The document refers to the Church as “the new people of God,” and it “awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and ‘serve him with one accord.’” Nevertheless, *Nostra Aetate* affirms the validity of the original covenant between God and Israel and, citing the apostle Paul, asserts that “the Jews still remain most dear to God because of their fathers, for He does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues.”¹⁰

Even more recently, in 2002 a committee of American Catholic bishops released a document stating that Catholics should recognize the salvific nature of the Jewish covenant, and that the Church’s task of evangelization “no longer includes the wish to absorb the Jewish faith into Christianity and so end the distinctive witness of Jews to God in human history.” The Church now recognizes, said the document, that the witness of Jews to the Kingdom of God “must not be curtailed by seeking the conversion of the Jewish people to Christianity.”¹¹

Likewise, numerous contemporary Catholic theologians affirm the will of God to bring all people, regardless of religion, into heavenly life. For example, in the twentieth century, the renowned German theologian Karl Rahner pointed to the universality of God’s salvific will by invoking the all-encompassing grace of God. He observed,

However little we can say with certitude about the final lot of an individual inside or outside the officially constituted Christian religion, we have every reason to think optimistically—i.e. truly hopefully and confidently in a Christian

sense—of God who has certainly the last word and who has revealed to us that he has spoken his powerful word of reconciliation and forgiveness into the world . . . In Christ God not only gives the *possibility* of salvation, which in that case would still have to be effected by man himself, but the actual salvation itself, however much this includes also the right decision of human freedom which is itself a gift from God.¹²

For Rahner, as for much contemporary Catholic theology, God became incarnate in history for the salvation of all, and only an outright rejection of divine love (which is not at all the same thing as a rejection of baptism) could annul the gift of salvation. While not all Catholics would agree with him, and while his ideas cannot be considered dogmatic, many contemporary theologians take for granted the notions that God wills the salvation of all people regardless of religion and that baptism cannot be considered the only criterion for entrance into life in heaven.

Thus it is somewhat misleading to say, as Daniel Jonah Goldhagen does in his book *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair*, that “The Church’s official doctrine, faithful to Christian Scripture and now in existence for almost two millennia, is unbending and unequivocal: Jews cannot attain salvation through Judaism.”¹³ Goldhagen is correct to point out in hard-hitting fashion how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (which, it should be noted, does not carry the weight of an infallible pronouncement) perpetuates the idea that salvation comes only to those who profess faith in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, he dismisses voices such as Rahner’s as “hair-splitting formulations clergy and theologians think up in order to try to soften the Church’s positions regarding the Jews.”¹⁴ Those hair-splitting formulations can sometimes make all the difference in the world. They are in fact responsible for the admittedly glacial changes that have come to the Church in the past half-century and that Goldhagen otherwise applauds as at least minor steps in the right direction.

In any case, Catholic efforts to convert Jews have never been aimed at the dead. There is no tradition at all in Catholicism of posthumous conversion. Canon law actually forbids baptism (and thus initiation into the Christian faith) of those who have

already died. The Catholic practice of praying for the dead stems rather from two sources: first, a belief that God's judgment on those who have died might be influenced by the prayers of the living, and second, that even those whom God has chosen for salvation must undergo a period of trial that might be lessened by prayerful intercession.

Since ancient times, Christians have prayed that their beloved dead might receive the mercy of God and thus be admitted into everlasting life, and the practice continues today. At a contemporary Catholic funeral, for example, the following prayer might be said: "Merciful Lord, turn toward us and listen to our prayers: open the gates of paradise to your servant and help us who remain to comfort one another with assurances of faith, until we all meet in Christ and are with you and with our sister for ever."¹⁵ The purpose of the prayers is to intercede on behalf of the dead, but also to seek comfort and healing for the living.

The second reason why Catholics pray for the dead stems from a belief that even those whom God has destined for salvation might need to undergo a period of preparation before being admitted. In medieval times, this interval between death and eternal life was given the name of purgatory, and any number of colorful descriptions of it were developed, most notably, of course, by the poet Dante. Teachings about purgatory were bound up with the practice of granting indulgences, whereby the living believed they could reduce the agonies of the dead by saying prayers, going on pilgrimages, or, of course, donating money to the Church. In the wake of the Protestant Reformation, the sale of indulgences was banned by the Church. However, the practice of granting them for prayer and good works continues. There is a basic and enduring sense in Catholic tradition that the dead must be cleansed and refined before gaining access to heaven. Likewise, there is a basic and enduring belief that the prayers of the living might help speed along the purgatorial trials of the deceased. Thus, it is quite common for Catholics to pray that the souls of their beloved might come more quickly into paradise.

Thus when the Carmelite nuns expressed their intention to pray for the dead, posthumous conversion was not what they had in mind. Given the contentious atmosphere in which the convent was built, however, their statement aroused both suspicion and anger.

If some of the furor over the convent had roots in misinformation, miscommunication, or misunderstanding, other controversies were based on serious, authentic, and fundamental differences in world view. One of these stemmed from the Carmelite sisters' original desire to name the convent in memory of a deceased nun named Edith Stein.¹⁶ Stein, born into a Jewish family in 1891, had converted to Catholicism as an adult and at the age of forty-two had entered the Carmelite order. As hostilities against Jews rose in Germany, Stein had fled to Holland and joined the community of Carmelite nuns in Echt. It turned out that Holland was no safer than Germany had been, though. In 1942, Dutch bishops issued a letter of protest against Nazi policies, and the Nazis retaliated by rounding up Dutch Jews who had converted to Catholicism. Stein was arrested at her convent, deported, and murdered at Auschwitz. In 1998, Pope John Paul II canonized her as a martyr for the Catholic faith.

Explaining why Stein was to be honored among the Church's saints, the pope proclaimed, "From now on, as we celebrate the memory of this new saint from year to year, we must also remember the Shoah, that cruel plan to exterminate a people—a plan to which millions of our Jewish brothers and sisters fell victim."¹⁷ In his eyes, Stein was a symbol for all innocent victims of persecution: "*May such criminal deeds never be repeated* against any ethnic group, against any race, in any corner of this world!"¹⁸ In the eyes of many Jews, however, canonizing Stein was an affront to those who had gone to their deaths holding fast to their Jewish faith. Two leaders of the Anti-Defamation League wrote, "We as Jews feel that we have lost Edith Stein twice. The first time was at her conversion to Catholicism. The second time is with her canonization, by which some groups appropriate her as a Christian martyr even though her death relates to the Jewish focus of the Holocaust."¹⁹

Much of the anger that Jews felt towards Stein's canonization stemmed from the fact that Stein herself had written a testimonial in which she had offered her life and death "for the expiation of the unbelief of the Jewish people and so that the Lord may be welcomed by his own people and his kingdom come in majesty."²⁰ Naming the convent after a converted Jew who had prayed for the conversion of all Jews appeared to some as an

unbearable insult. When the Carmelites at Auschwitz were informed of this, they agreed to change the name.

Another issue concerned the specifically contemplative nature of the Carmelite order. The Carmelites trace their origins back to the twelfth century, to a group of hermits living on Mount Carmel in what is now Israel. Spiritually, however, they consider the prophet Elijah to be their inspiration. According to the biblical story, Elijah was told by God to go out to the top of a mountain to wait for the Lord to pass by. Elijah did as he was told, and as he waited a great wind split the mountain, “but the Lord was not in the wind.” Then an earthquake shook the ground, and a fire raged, but God was not present in either of those terrors. After the fire came “a soft murmuring sound,” and according to the biblical account, “When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his mantle about his face,” because in the quiet he recognized the presence of God (I Kings 19:9–13).

The Carmelites have undergone numerous changes since the twelfth century, most notably the split that resulted in two different orders, the Discalced Carmelites and the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance. What both groups hold in common, though, is a sense that God can be found in silence and in the quiet of a contemplative heart. The Carmelite nuns living at Auschwitz surely shared this conviction.

Since the Holocaust, however, “silence” has become a freighted term. On the one hand, in the work of some post-Holocaust writers, silence is seen as the only appropriate response to the horrors of the *Shoah*. Elie Wiesel, for example, observes that the Holocaust has become “a fashionable subject: good to impress or shock.” He continues, “One reaches the point of longing for the days when only a few people dared speak of it; now everybody does. Too much. And too lightly.”²¹

On the other hand, silence is equated with complicity. It raises the ghosts of all those who saw evil and did nothing about it, whether through fear or apathy or tacit approval. David Patterson makes this point forcefully when he writes, “From the standpoint of the victims, the silence of the cloister’s walls is the silence of indifference, the silence that profanes the Name [of the divine] and robs the world of its face.” This is not to suggest, he says, that the Carmelites are to be equated with Nazis: “But it is to suggest that their view of the world and of the ideal life could

play into the hands of the Nazis. For it could play into the hands of an indifference toward the condition of this world—and toward the plight of Jews in this world—as one turns away from this world to prepare to enter the next.”²²

This brings us to another objection to the presence of a Carmelite convent at the death camp, an objection that has to do with differences between Christian and Jewish notions of prayer. In many strands of Christian tradition, especially Christian mystical tradition, prayer is understood as a form of communication between the individual soul and the divine. For example, the sixteenth-century Carmelite mystic Teresa of Avila spoke of prayer as “taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us.”²³ Likewise, her fellow Carmelite John of the Cross described the ideal prayer as “the Divine union of the soul with God.”²⁴ The emphasis in these Catholic mystical texts is on the interior personal journey that individuals make towards God.

Of course, Catholics do gather together to pray and to worship in communion with one another. The liturgy of the Mass is precisely a collective prayer offered by the faithful gathered in the name of Jesus. And yet, there is in the history of Catholicism, particularly Catholic mysticism, something of a bias towards the individual: towards his or her relationship with God and towards the salvation of his or her soul. Until recently, this could be seen even in the Mass, as up until the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, it was not unusual for each member of a congregation to spend the hour of the liturgy engaged in more or less private worship. Moreover, Mass could be celebrated by an individual priest alone with no congregation present at all.

This “vertical” understanding of prayer is very different from that found in much of Jewish tradition. David Patterson explains that “Jews do not retreat to the cloister to pray; rather, they pray in a *minyan*, standing as a community before the Holy One.”²⁵ This is, of course, something of a generalization, since according to Jewish tradition some prayers may be recited even if a quorum of ten is not present. Moreover, Judaism recognizes the importance of an individual’s relationship with and response to the divine. Still, just as in Christian tradition there is a tendency to think of prayer as the action of an individual, so in Judaism prayer is more often thought of as a communal activity.

This distinction leads to diverging conceptions of the relation between prayer and action. Writes Patterson, “The Christian encounters God as love; the Jew responds to God as the *commandment* to love and therefore to *act* in a certain manner.”²⁶ Again, Patterson’s remark is a generalization. After all, according to the New Testament, Jesus taught that those who love God must also love their neighbors. And yet if Patterson’s statement is a generalization, it is nonetheless a useful one.

Consider, for example, this passage from the Spanish Carmelite mystic John of the Cross: “The Christian, then, if he will direct his rejoicing to God with regard to moral good, must realize that the value of his good works, fasts, alms, penances, etc., is based, not upon the number or the quality of them, but upon the love of God which inspires him to do them.”²⁷

In John’s view, loving God comes first, and good deeds on behalf of the neighbor not only come second, but have value only insofar as they are rooted in a desire for union with God. Though John believes that it is the duty of a Christian to perform works of charity, these works are subordinate to considerations of the soul and its ascent towards God. Indeed, charitable works are worthless if not done with an eye towards that union. John identifies two reasons why a person might rejoice in good deeds: “for that which they are in themselves, or for the good which they imply and bring with them as a means and instrument.”²⁸ The Christian, he says, “must rejoice principally and solely in the possession and employment of this moral good after the second manner—namely, in that by doing these works for the love of God he will gain eternal life.”²⁹ Loving good works only for their own sake is the product of an earthly mentality. It is to act as the heathen act and is to risk the flames of hell.

John illustrates this point with his interpretation of Jesus’s parable of the ten virgins, in which five bridesmaids bring extra oil for their lamps when they go out to meet the bridegroom, and five do not. When the bridegroom arrives, the foolish virgins ask the wise ones for help in lighting their lamps. The wise refuse to comply, and as a result the foolish bridesmaids are refused entrance to the wedding banquet (Matt. 25:1–13). John interprets the parable by commenting that the ten virgins “had all kept their virginity and done good works; and yet, because the joy of five of them was not of the second kind (that is, because

they had not directed their joy to God), but was rather after the first and vain kind, for they rejoiced in the possession of their good works, they were cast out from Heaven with no acknowledgement or reward from the Bridegroom.”³⁰ John concludes, “The Christian, then, must rejoice, not in the performing of good works and the following of good customs, but in doing them for the love of God alone, without respect to aught else soever.”³¹ Good works done for the sake of doing good profit nothing. The only truly acceptable reason to do good, from John’s point of view, is to give pleasure to God.

John’s fellow Carmelite Teresa of Avila had a similar understanding of the relation between spiritual ascent and good deeds, though she put far more emphasis on performing charitable works than John did. In her mystical treatise *The Interior Castle*, Teresa stressed the importance of caring for others: “This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works. This is the true sign of a thing, or favor, being from God, as I have already told you. It benefits me little to be alone making acts of devotion to our Lord, proposing and promising to do wonders in His service, if I then go away and when the occasion offers itself do everything the opposite.” Immediately, however, Teresa retracted her own statement: “I was wrong in saying it profits little, for everything having to do with God profits a great deal.”³² She went on to explain that acts of charity derive their importance not from their inherent value but from the spirit in which they are performed: “The Lord doesn’t look so much at the greatness of our works as at the love with which they are done.”³³

This tendency within Christian mysticism to value love for and union with God over performing acts of charity has occasionally led practitioners to claim that good works are utterly irrelevant to religious life and that the only thing that matters is the individual’s relation with the divine. In the early fourteenth century, for example, a Christian mystic named Marguerite Porete described six stages through which a soul passes before it reaches its final destination in heaven. The third of these stages, a stage which must be surpassed if the soul wishes to progress, is reached “when the Soul considers herself in the affection of the love of the work of perfection, by which her spirit is sharpened through a boiling desire of love in multiplying in herself such works.”

This stage, according to the mystic, is actually dangerous, because while in it the soul may be tempted to love the works themselves rather than God: “For no death would be martyrdom to her except abstaining from the work she loves, which is the delight of her pleasure and the life of her will which is nourished by this.” In order to overcome this temptation, the soul must detach herself from the pleasure of doing good: “And thus she relinquishes such works from which she has such delight, and she puts the will to death which had life from this.”³⁴ The soul does this in order that she may see that “there is nothing except God Himself Who is, from whom all things are.”³⁵ Good works must be sacrificed if God is to be found.

Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake as a heretic.³⁶ Heresy, though, is often simply orthodoxy *in extremis*. A tradition’s heresies reveal much about its inner workings—the tensions and unresolvable oppositions that give it life. The heretical ideas of Marguerite Porete show a basic tendency within Christian mystical thought to diminish the value of good works in favor of the union of the soul with God.

On the other hand, consider a work of fiction, first published in 1946, entitled *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*. Written as if it were the diary of one of the last fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the book gives voice to the agonies of faith and doubt that arose during the Holocaust and in its aftermath. It begins by telling readers, “In one of the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto, preserved in a little bottle and concealed amongst heaps of charred stone and human bones, the following testament was found, written in the last hours of the ghetto by a Jew named Yosl Rakover.” It then offers the text of the fictional diary, dated “Warsaw, 28 April 1943.”³⁷

The diary describes what happened that day in the ghetto: the raging artillery fire and the flames that swept through the streets. Its real purpose, though, is to offer testimony both to God and about God. As he looks back at his own life and at the whole of Jewish history, the diary’s fictional author, Yosl Rakover, reflects, “I am happy to belong to the unhappiest of all peoples in the world, whose Torah embodies the highest law and the most beautiful morality.” Yosl believes in God, he says: “For if You are not my God—whose God are You? The God of the murderers?” And yet, there is something even higher than God to which he professes his fidelity: “I believe in the God of

Israel, even when He has done everything to make me cease to believe in Him. I believe in His laws even when I cannot justify His deeds . . . I love Him. But I love His Torah more. Even if I were disappointed in Him, I would still cherish His Torah.”³⁸

Reflecting on Yosel’s extraordinary profession of faith, twentieth-century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas remarks that for Judaism, God is made manifest in the Word of God that is the Torah. Unlike in Christianity, he says, in Judaism “the connection between God and man is not a sentimental communion within the love of a God made flesh [*l’amour d’un Dieu incarné*], but a relation of minds [*entre esprits*] mediated by instruction, through the Torah.”³⁹ Christian tradition, particularly its mystical tradition, tends to prize the silence of contemplation that fosters spiritual ascent and union of the soul with God. Jewish tradition, on the other hand, tends to prize the righteousness found in fidelity to the Torah. It is not surprising that when Jews were informed of cloistered Carmelite nuns praying at Auschwitz, some suspected that such prayers would do little to bring about palpable change in Christians’ treatment of or attitudes towards them.

It is also not surprising that most Christians could not foresee the furor that the convent would cause. Polish Archbishop Henryk Muszynski, for example, confessed, “I would never have expected that the Jews would react in such a way. We thought that first of all, it’s the same God. I expected that believing Jews would have more or less the same feelings. I was very much surprised that the Jews had something against the nuns who were engaged in silent prayer in this place.” Tellingly, he concluded, “We didn’t know each other, we didn’t have any contact with each other.”⁴⁰

In 1993, the convent was closed, and the nuns left the town of Oswiecim.⁴¹ They left behind them the painful memories and angry words of both Catholics and Jews. They left behind something else as well: the large cross that had been raised at the site in 1989. That cross continues to be a source of controversy and debate.

THE CROSS

In the eyes of many Jews, the presence of both the convent and the cross at Auschwitz seemed to diminish the Jewish focus of the Holocaust. Roughly one hundred forty thousand non-

Jewish Poles were imprisoned at the infamous concentration camp, and more than half of those died there.⁴² By contrast, nearly one million Jews died at Auschwitz, most of them murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the killing center a mile or two from the main camp. Jews accounted for about eighty-seven percent of the total number of Auschwitz's victims.⁴³

Nonetheless, after the defeat of Hitler's army, many Poles felt that their suffering under Nazi occupation had been forgotten by the rest of the world. They wished to establish a memorial to their fallen heroes in the form of the cross, and they felt that the presence of the convent would sanctify the ground where so many had been murdered.

However, the fact that the memorial was not simply a plaque or a sculpture, but was rather a Christian cross, caused significant consternation. At various times in history, Christians have justified persecution of Jews by charging them with crucifying Jesus. In the fourth century, Saint John Chrysostom wrote regarding Jews, "You did slay Christ, you did lift violent hands against the Master, you did spill his precious blood. This is why you have no chance for atonement, excuse, or defense."⁴⁴ Innumerable Christian commentators have echoed his sentiments. Given this history, placing a cross within sight of the place where a million Jews were murdered was read by some as a gesture of Christian triumphalism.

On the other hand, Catholic teachings about Judaism have changed significantly in recent years. In the 1960s, the Church officially proclaimed that Jews were not to be held responsible for the death of Jesus. Moreover, throughout his reign, Pope John Paul II issued statements expressing regret for Christian involvement in the Holocaust, most notably the 1998 pronouncement, "We Remember: A Reflection on the *Shoah*." Continuing to hold the Church responsible for past errors was, in the eyes of some, a failure to recognize that much Catholic teaching had changed.

The controversies surrounding the cross and the convent were not limited to academic debate. In 1989, an American rabbi named Avraham Weiss led six students over the convent's fence during a protest demonstration. They were beaten by

Polish workers on the site and removed from the grounds.⁴⁵ Years later, in the summer of 1998, a Polish Catholic layman named Kazimierz Switon urged his followers to place hundreds of small crosses around the convent grounds.⁴⁶ The following spring, when authorities attempted to remove the crosses, Switon installed explosive devices to protect them. The small crosses and the explosives were removed under police supervision, but debate continued.⁴⁷

The Catholics who built the memorial outside of Auschwitz to honor Polish martyrs did not choose just any cross for the site. Rather, they chose the one that had been used for the Mass celebrated by Pope John Paul II during his visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1979. The cross was large—large enough to have been seen by the crowds who had gathered for that solemn occasion years earlier. When it was erected in the gravel pit outside of Auschwitz, its upper reaches could be seen from inside the camp by anyone standing across from Block 11.

It was not the only cross erected. As has been noted, several hundred smaller ones were placed at the site by Kazimierz Switon and his followers. Still others were planted along with small Stars of David by a group of Boy Scouts who, with apparently good intentions, wished to memorialize Auschwitz's dead. These were all removed. The large cross, however, still stands.

In one way, it is surprising that such a furor erupted over the cross at Auschwitz. After all, a cross stands at the entrance to the memorial at Chelmno, but that one has generated little controversy. What accounts for the difference?

The answer seems to lie in the symbolic value that has accrued to Auschwitz over the past sixty years. Ironically, the camp plays such a powerful role in the memory of the Holocaust precisely because so many of its prisoners actually survived. At Chelmno at least one hundred fifty-two thousand people were gassed; three Jews survived. At Belzec at least four hundred thousand were gassed; two survived. At Treblinka at least eight hundred thousand were gassed; fewer than forty survived.⁴⁸ By contrast, an estimated 1.1 million Jews were deported to Auschwitz, and one hundred and forty

thousand of them survived.⁴⁹ Their testimonies constitute a large portion of the documentation available about the Holocaust, and their memories have contributed greatly to the collective memory of the *Shoah*. It is only natural then that the name of Auschwitz has come to be synonymous with the Nazi plan to exterminate the Jews. Thus when Catholics erected a cross at the concentration camp, the action appeared to some as an attempt to erase the specifically Jewish nature of the Holocaust. (One can only imagine what the reaction might have been had the cross been erected at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the extermination site where, beginning in 1942, most of the Jewish victims were actually murdered.)⁵⁰

What does the cross—not just the cross at Auschwitz, but “The Cross,” any cross, if one can speak of a symbol devoid of its context—*mean*? Henryk Muszynski says that the cross is “a mark of power and victory over weakness, sin, hatred, and all those things that are the negation of full love and true Christianity.”⁵¹ On the other hand, Jewish scholar and camp survivor Elie Wiesel observes, “The cross was a symbol of compassion and love and mercy for the Christian. It was a symbol of persecution for the Jew.”⁵² Jacob Neusner puts the point more strongly: “The cross stands to humiliate, to express hatred, to serve God by acts of hatred and contempt.”⁵³

One doesn't have to look too deeply into Catholic history to find numerous examples of the cross being used as a source of contempt for Jews. Catholics have frequently pointed to the crucifixion of Jesus and charged Jews with deicide. At times, that charge has turned deadly; in 1096 the Jews of Mainz were slaughtered at the hands of Christians who wore crosses on their vestments and who accused the Jews of killing God by charging that “You are the children of those who killed our object of veneration, hanging him on a tree; and he himself had said: ‘There will yet come a day when my children will come and avenge my blood.’”⁵⁴ Moreover, the symbol of the cross accompanied the crusaders as they made their bloody way towards the Holy Land.

Even in the twentieth century, Christians who would never have thought of harming Jews themselves were able to justify

the Holocaust as God's punishment by pointing to Jesus's crucifixion. One Polish Christian who hid many of his Jewish neighbors from the Nazis during the war nonetheless went to a nearby town to watch a group of Jews being led to their deaths. When asked by some of those under his protection why he wanted to witness such a thing, he explained that because Jews had handed Jesus over to his death two thousand years ago, he would now watch Jews being taken to slaughter.⁵⁵ The sentiment seems to have been widespread. Describing a pogrom that took place in 1941 in the Polish village of Radzilow, Menachem Finkelsztajn testified that the mobs were spurred on by propaganda "stating that it was time to settle scores with those who had crucified Jesus Christ . . . the Jews."⁵⁶ Helena Szereszewska, a Jew who spent part of the war hiding in a convent, recalled, "Every Sunday I listened to the priest's sermon. He often referred to the events which had so recently and so tragically taken place. He talked about the annihilation of the Jews. 'Everything that has happened to the Jews is atonement for the terrible sins they committed. It was God's punishment. The Germans are only the instruments of God's punishment.'"⁵⁷ Even as late as 1948, a meeting of the German Evangelical Church described the Holocaust as divine punishment and called on Jews to stop their rejection and ongoing crucifixion of Jesus Christ.⁵⁸

Against this history, it must be pointed out that Jesus was executed under Roman authority for the crime of insurrection against the Roman empire. He was not killed by Jews, nor was he killed for the crime of blasphemy. The statement issued by the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church did not go far enough when it proclaimed that Jesus's death "cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today."⁵⁹ What it should have added was that Jesus was crucified by the Romans, just as thousands of other Jews had been crucified before him, including two thousand of the followers of Judas son of Hezekiah in the year 4 BCE, not far from Jesus's home in Nazareth.

Can the cross continue to serve Christians as a symbol of their faith, or has it become too freighted by centuries of antisemitism

for it to stand as anything other than an incitement to hatred and violence? Even the best intentions are sometimes thwarted by unavoidable confrontations with history. In an essay urging that the controversial cross be removed from Auschwitz, Polish Jesuit priest Stanislaw Musial notes that one need not be a psychologist to understand why Jews would be disturbed by the symbol: “It is enough to be kindhearted.”⁶⁰ He points out that for a century and a half after the death of Jesus, Christians did not use crosses in their services, and he calls for contemporary Christians to renounce their need for monuments. Those who wish to venerate a cross at Auschwitz, he says, already have a place where they can do so: the death cell of a Polish priest named Maximilian Kolbe.

The story of Saint Maximilian Kolbe (canonized as a martyr by Pope John Paul II in 1981) is as follows: Kolbe was taken prisoner by the Nazis in 1941 and was sent to the Auschwitz camp. In reprisal for an escape, the guards chose ten men at random and sentenced them to death by starvation. One of those ten, a Polish army sergeant, begged for mercy, pleading that he had a wife and children. Hearing the man’s cries, Kolbe stepped forward and offered himself in the man’s place. His offer was accepted, and Kolbe was sentenced to slow starvation along with his fellow victims, until he was finally injected with poison two weeks later. Regarding this sacrifice, Musial asks,

Do we Christians, and with us—I dare humbly say—people of good will, need a different monument at the Oswiecim [Auschwitz] camp? Those who have need of material religious symbols will find plenty of them in Father Kolbe’s cell (block X, [sic]⁶¹ the so-called death block). Father Kolbe’s cell points the way for all of us. It tells us to build a world without death cells, without hatred, in the spirit of love and dialogue, in the spirit of humility, in the face of the prodigious task of interpretation of the world . . . in the face of suffering that oppresses mankind, and of the oft rampant evil.⁶²

There is no need for a cross at Auschwitz, argues Musial, other than the one commemorating the selfless act of Maximilian Kolbe.

And yet Saint Maximilian's life was not so simple. To be sure, no one doubts his courage in offering his life for another prisoner. Moreover, before his arrest, he and his monastery cared for thousands of refugees, including fifteen hundred Jews. On the other hand, though, that same monastery published a daily newspaper that routinely contained vicious attacks against Jews. The newspaper defended the Nuremberg laws passed in Germany that, among other things, restricted marriage between Jews and non-Jews. It contended that the laws were a justifiable bulwark against Jewish domination of Germany. Likewise, it supported Italy's enactment of such laws, calling the legislation an "act of self-defense by Italians against Jews."⁶³ The newspaper urged Poles not to buy goods from Jewish merchants or manufacturers, and it published statements to the effect that Poland had been "too hospitable" to Jews for too long.⁶⁴

Was Kolbe himself an antisemite? Assessments differ. What is undeniable, though, is that even the veneration of this martyr, even the honoring of this priest who sacrificed himself for a man he did not know, is bound up with centuries of Christian teachings of contempt for Jews. Praying at the cell of Maximilian Kolbe is tied to a chain of historical events and associations that are impossible to ignore and devastating to consider.

The pivotal question, then, is what the cross can say to the world after Auschwitz. I do not know the answer. This book, in truth, is intended as an experiment. It is an experiment in rethinking both the symbol of the cross and the cycle of liturgies that, year in and year out, give it context and meaning. I hope to find a new way of thinking about the cross, one that situates it in a long line of prayers and tears for a time when every bruised reed will be made whole, every life will be redeemed, and justice will be established on the earth.

What works against such an interpretation is Christianity's propensity for seeing the cross as merely a bit of high drama

in a story that has already ended, and ended happily at that. In the Christian calendar, the weeping of Good Friday gives way to Easter Sunday's proclamation that what the world longs for has already in fact been accomplished. Not here on earth, to be sure: it has not been accomplished in time as we reckon it, but it is truly and finally finished. Everything that has followed since that day on that hillside near Jerusalem, in this view, is just the restlessness an audience feels after the final curtain has fallen but before the ushers open the exit doors.

What I am hoping to find is a new way of thinking about the Catholic liturgical cycle to see if there is not some other way of reading it, some other way of living it. I would like to make sense of Good Friday, as well as of the feasts that lead up to it and that follow in its wake, in such a way that neither the horror of the cross nor the horrors that have followed, one after another, century after century, are lost. My thesis is that these feasts are best understood as, in the words of Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, festivals of holy pain. They are festivals that mark the human longing for God, even as they direct our attention to the spaces where the causes of God, the causes of justice and healing and dignity, might be served.