

Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations

A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations

Published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

The “Johannine Prayer” that Never Really Was

Murray K. Watson

St. Peter’s Seminary

Volume 6 (2011)

<http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr>

If one had consciously set out to create a prayer that would sum up in its words the repentance of post-*Shoah* Christianity—an invocation that would communicate the contrition of Jesus' followers for centuries of anti-Semitic words and actions—one could hardly have expressed that intention so eloquently or with such evident, broken-hearted passion as in the following lines:

We recognize today
That many centuries of blindness
Have veiled our eyes,
So that we no longer see the beauty of your Chosen
People
And no longer recognize the features
Of our firstborn brother.
We know now that the mark of Cain is on our forehead.
Over the course of centuries our brother Abel
Has lain in blood we have spilled
Because we forgot your love.
Forgive us for the curse
Which we unjustly placed on the name of the Jews.
Forgive us
For crucifying you a second time,
For we knew not what we were doing ...¹

In modern Jewish-Catholic dialogue, very few prayers (with the possible exception of the prayer “For the Conversion of the Jews” from the Tridentine Good Friday liturgy) have been so widely reprinted and discussed. Perhaps no address to the Divine has been so influential in capturing the spirit of interfaith commitment and theological re-thinking that led to Vatican II's landmark 1965 declaration *Nostra Aetate*. The prayer is

¹ “Pope John XXIII, Prayer of Penance written shortly before his death on June 3, 1963,” as reprinted in Zev Garber, “Do Not Hurt Them,” ed. Henry J. Cargas, *Holocaust Scholars Write to the Vatican* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 51-52.

attributed to the final weeks of a beloved and ground-breaking Pope, John XXIII, seeking to atone liturgically for the innumerable sins of Catholics against their Jewish sisters and brothers. As the Pope lay dying, it was claimed, he had scribbled the draft of a “Prayer of Repentance” which he intended to have recited in all the Catholic churches of the world—an intention that was, unfortunately, thwarted by his death not long afterward. The poignancy of the words captured the imagination of many who respected and loved Pope John, and who saw in the account an accurate expression of the Pope's love for the Jewish people, and his desire to begin redressing the wrongs of which they had been victims for much of Christian history.

The full extent of the influence of this particular prayer is today difficult to measure accurately. For more than forty years, it has circulated in several forms and been reprinted in both erudite and popular publications, in many different languages. Indeed, it continues to be quoted authoritatively, even very recently²:

[FRENCH :] Nous sommes aujourd'hui conscients qu'au cours de beaucoup, beaucoup, de siècles, nos yeux étaient si aveugles que nous n'étions plus capables de voir la beauté de ton peuple élu, ni de reconnaître dans leur visage les traits de nos frères privilégiés. Nous

² As a merely indicative sample of the dozens of English books which attribute this prayer to John XXIII: Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, *Why the Jews?: The Reason for Antisemitism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 109; Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1991), 471; Benjamin Blech, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Jewish History and Culture*. 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Alpha, 2004), 146; Robert A. Michael, *A Concise History of American Antisemitism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 207; Taylor Marshall, *The Crucified Rabbi: Judaism and the Origins of Catholic Christianity* (Dallas: Saint John Press, 2009), 14; Shalom Goldman, *Zeal for Zion: Christians, Jews, and the Idea of the Promised Land* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 196, etc.

comprendons que le signe de Caïn soit inscrit sur notre front. Au cours des siècles notre frère Abel était couché ensanglanté et en pleurs par notre faute, parce que nous avons oublié ton amour. Pardonne-nous la malédiction que nous avons injustement attribuée à leur nom de Juif. Pardonne-nous de t'avoir crucifié une deuxième fois, en eux, en ta chair, parce que nous ne savions pas ce que nous faisons.³

[ITALIAN:] Siamo oggi consapevoli che per molti e molti secoli i nostri occhi erano tanti ciechi da renderci incapaci di vedere ancora la bellezza del tuo popolo eletto...⁴ Noi comprendiamo che il marchio di Caino è scritto sulla nostra fronte. Nel corso dei secoli nostro fratello Abele giacque insanguinato e in lacrime per colpa nostra, perché avevamo dimenticato il Tuo amore. Perdonaci per le maledizioni che abbiamo ingiustamente attribuito al loro nome di ebrei. Perdonaci per averti una seconda volta crocifisso in essi, nella loro carne...⁵

[SPANISH:] Reconocemos ahora que muchos, muchos siglos de ceguera han tapado nuestros ojos de manera que ya no vemos la hermosura de tu pueblo elegido, ni

³ Jean-William Dereymez, *Le refuge et le piège : les juifs dans les Alpes, 1938-1945* (Paris: Harmattan, 2008), 220, fn. 77; Hélène Bart-Lukas and Olivier Boruchowitch, *Et l'homme créa l'enfer: Témoignage sur l'antisémitisme en Pologne* (Brussels: Éditions Luc Pire, 2002), 122; Nathan Weinstock and Micheline Weinstock, *Pourquoi le Carmel d'Auschwitz?* (Brussels: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1990), 100.

⁴ Giovanni Caprile, *Il Concilio Vaticano II: Cronache del Concilio Vaticano II*. Vol. 5 (Rome: La Civiltà cattolica, 1969), 294; Sergio Quinzio, *La speranza nell'Apocalisse* (Milan: Edizioni Paoline, 2002), 162. See also Orazio La Rocca, "Giovanni XXIII: Prego per gli ebrei". *La Repubblica* (December 20, 2008), 47; online at: <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2008/12/20/giovanni-xiii-prego-per-gli-ebrei.html>

⁵ Giuseppe Centore, *Lettura poetica dell'ebraismo*. Vol. 1: Il canto di Gabila (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1994), 29.

reconocemos en su rostro los rasgos de nuestro hermano mayor. Reconocemos que llevamos sobre nuestra frente la marca de Caïn. Durante siglos Abel ha estado abatido y en lágrimas porque nosotros habíamos olvidado tu amor. Perdónanos que en su carne te crucificásemos por segunda vez; pues no sabíamos lo que hacíamos.⁶

[GERMAN:] Wir erkennen heute, dass viele Jahrhunderte der Blindheit unsere Augen verhüllt haben, so dass wir die Schönheit Deines auserwählten Volkes nicht mehr sehen und in seinem Gesicht nicht mehr die Züge unseres erstgeborenen Bruders wiedererkennen. Wir erkennen, dass ein Kainsmal auf unserer Stirn steht. Im Laufe der Jahrhunderte hat unser Bruder Abel in dem Blute gelegen, das wir vergossen, und er hat Tränen geweint, die wir verursacht haben, weil wir Deine Liebe vergaßen. Vergib uns den Fluch, den wir zu unrecht an den Namen der Juden hefteten. Vergib uns, dass wir Dich in ihrem Fleische zum zweitenmal ans Kreuz schlugen. Denn wir wussten nicht, was wir taten.⁷

[PORTUGUESE:] A marca de Caim está gravada na nossa testa. Ao longo dos séculos, nosso irmão Abel jazeu no sangue que lhe arrancamos e derramou lágrimas que lhe causamos por havermos esquecido

⁶ Ana Martos, *Pablo de Tarso: Apóstol o hereje? La inquietante verdad sobre la identidad del auténtico fundador del cristianismo* (Madrid: Nowtilus, 2007), 142; see also: Mario Satz, *El judaísmo: 4,000 años de cultura*. Biblioteca de divulgación temática 18 (Barcelona: Montesinos, 1982), 121.

⁷ From: "Bischof Müller: Holocaustleugner raus aus dem Klerikerstand"; online at: <http://www.regensburg-digital.de/bischof-muller-holocaustleugner-raus-aus-dem-klerikerstand/06022009/>; see also: <http://www.hagalil.com/nizza/johannes-23.htm>; "Johannes XXIII - il Papa buono - der gute Papst"; online at: http://www.christ-im-dialog.de/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=892

Vosso amor. Perdoai-nos, Senhor, pela maldição que falsamente atribuímos ao seu nome de judeus.⁸

Indeed, the Italian actor Guido Roncalli (no relation to Pope John) offered an interpretive reading of this particular prayer for the public on December 21, 2008 at the Roman monastery of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, as part of a concert called “Roncalli Reads Roncalli,” which included recitations from a selection of Pope John’s writings. Well past the year 2000, the “Prayer of Repentance” was being cited as one of the most forward-thinking examples of the late Pope’s magisterium concerning Catholic relations with Jews. Its impact and inspirational quality are impossible to deny.

The unfortunate fact, however, which has become more and more clear with the passing years, is that this beautiful and stirring prayer is *not*, in fact, from the pen (or even the mind) of John XXIII, as many authors have maintained (and continue to assert). It is, sadly, a forgery, a literary invention, and recent research seems quite certain as to its original source.

This prayer first appeared in January 1965, as part of an eleven page article by “F.E. Cartus” in *Commentary* magazine. The article, entitled “Vatican II & the Jews,” was a detailed insider account of much of the politicking that was taking place behind the scenes at Vatican II during the lengthy process of debate and revision of the Council’s intended “Declaration on the Jews.” This document (which would become, in its final form, *Nostra Aetate*) was one of the most theologically and politically controversial documents on the Council floor, opposed by powerful conservative blocs of bishops, and by Middle Eastern religious and political leaders, who saw in it either an un-Scriptural “exculpation” of the Jews, or a subtle ecclesiastical legitimization of the still-young Jewish state of Israel. In

⁸ James A. Haight, *Perseguições Religiosas* (Rio de Janeiro: Ediouro Publicações, 2003), 154.

explaining Pope John’s personal desire for a new Catholic approach to Judaism, Cartus wrote: “John’s own conception of the essentials of such a document may be gauged by **the act of reparation which he composed three months before his death in 1963 and which he originally intended to have read aloud in all Roman Catholic churches of the world on a fixed date:** [text as cited above]...It is against this superb Christian statement, with its acknowledgment of past injustices, its recognition of false accusations, and its affirmation of the intrinsic value of Judaism, that the various drafts of the document on the Jews must be measured.”⁹ The note identifying the author, however, raised eyebrows (and questions) from the beginning: “F.E. Cartus is the pseudonym of a Roman Catholic observer who has watched developments at the Ecumenical Council closely” (19).

On December 21, 2008, the Italian historian-journalist Andrea Tornielli addressed the ongoing questions surrounding the famous “Johannine prayer” in an article in the Italian newspaper *Il Giornale*.¹⁰ In it, Tornielli said:

An entire page of yesterday’s *La Repubblica* revealed an exceptional “unpublished fragment” of John XXIII, a “prayer for the Jews” that “the good Pope”—at that point on the verge of death—was said to have written, acknowledging the faults of Christians who (so the text read) bore on their foreheads “the mark of Cain.”

Speaking of Guido Roncalli’s previously-announced public performance of the prayer that evening in Rome, Tornielli wrote:

⁹ Cartus, “Vatican II & the Jews,” 21.

¹⁰ “La falsa preghiera del Papa buono,” *Il Giornale* (December 21, 2008); online at: http://www.ilgiornale.it/cultura/la_falsa_preghiera_papa_buono/21-12-2008/articolo-id=316012-page=0-comments=1 (My translation from the original Italian text).

What a shame, however, that the “prayer” is a falsehood, repeatedly denounced and, what is more, [it has all been] well known for many, many years. [It is] an apocryphal work, of which no original hand-written copy exists, and the details of whose origins are uncertain. It was first brought to the attention of the public by the ex-Jesuit Malachi Martin (writing under a pseudonym) in 1965, and has been declared to be totally inauthentic by all of John XXIII’s collaborators, starting with his secretary, Bishop Loris Capovilla, who has been the attentive and faithful custodian of the papers of the Pope from Bergamo...It is [allegedly] an important and unsettling text, which inexplicably “was forgotten about for 45 years.”...In reality, there was a reason—and a well-founded reason—why it was forgotten. “It is a fake; John XXIII had nothing to do with that prayer,” Bishop Capovilla explained to *Il Giornale*, “and when it was first brought to people’s attention, it was promptly denounced.” The whole story was reconstructed...by Jesuit Father Giovanni Caprile in *La Civiltà cattolica* (June 18, 1983), on the basis of papers preserved in the archives of Bergamo’s “John XXIII Foundation.” There we discover that the first to publish this apocryphal work (with no indication as to its source, and no one to vouch for its authenticity) was the journal of the American Jewish Committee, in an article signed by a certain “Cartus”—a pseudonym of the ex-Jesuit Malachi Martin. For decades, this latter figure has been the focus of the main suspicions concerning the fabrication of the [apocryphal prayer]. Capovilla, who had already denounced the text at the time, is even more emphatic today: “It is pure invention, and it is a shame that people could ever have considered authentic a prayer which does not correspond to the spirit or the style of Pope John, who would never have allowed it to be said that Christians

bear ‘the mark of Cain’¹¹ on their foreheads. Roncalli’s texts have been intensively studied and published, and there is no trace of this prayer in the Pontiff’s papers. None of those who quote it have ever been able to produce evidence of its authenticity—an authenticity which is negated by the text itself.”¹²

¹¹ A Biblically sensitive reader will, of course, recall that, in the original reference (Gen 4:15), the “mark of Cain” is not so much a mark of *condemnation* or *punishment* as a mark of *divine protection from harm* that could be inflicted by others: “And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him”. It is interesting to note that other authors use this imagery of the “mark of Cain” to speak about the guilt of those involved in perpetrating the *Shoah*, and the stigma it has left on subsequent generations: “Along with the tropes of original sin, inherited guilt, and scapegoating, second-generation perpetrator narratives take up a further allusion to biblical guilt and marking, that of the mark of Cain...Cain is thus doubly marked—as both perpetrator and as the protected charge of the Lord. The mark of Cain has customarily been seen ‘as a brand or stigma meant to identify, humiliate and punish the criminal Cain’ (Mellinkoff, 1), a physical marking that...is meant to distinguish him visually from the rest of mankind. Thus the notion of Cain’s mark is one in which the perpetrator is unable to escape recognition for his crime; he must live its legacy constantly, for he signifies it with his very body. At the same time, however, by virtue of this very mark, he is able to evade punishment for his misdeed. He lives in a suspended state, for his crime is neither overlooked nor absolved; nor is he able to do penance, be forgiven, and carry on with his life. Stigmatized in this way, the criminal thus signifies a guilt that cannot be resolved and a criminal past that is perpetually present, neither entirely forgotten nor forgiven.” (Erin H. McGlothlin, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* [Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006], 26).

For more on this topic, see: Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981).

¹² The 1983 Caprile article highlights both *internal* and *external* criteria which, together, argue conclusively against the authenticity of the text. Among the internal criteria are a number of expressions which are clearly untypical of John XXIII’s style and vocabulary (“blindness has closed our eyes,” “the curse when we unjustly pronounced,” etc.) (567). The external criteria focus on the total absence of any form of this prayer in the Pope’s writings, which have been extensively catalogued and examined by scholars in the decades since his death. Apparently, Pope John was in the habit of having any of his private prayers “vetted” by the office of the Apostolic Penitentiary before per-

Twenty years before Torielli, however, Msgr. John Oesterreicher, one of the pioneers of Jewish-Catholic reconciliation, had himself forcefully rejected the “Cartus” article:

The most alarming examples of “disclosures” which, for want of better information, are accepted by many as authentic reports, are *The Pilgrim* by M. Serafian, and an article on the history of the Declaration on the Jews, entitled “Vatican II and the Jews” (*Commentary*, January, 1965) by the same author. **He is an ex-Jesuit, Malachi Martin, this time using another pseudonym, F.E. Cartus.** The article contains a prayer ascribed to Pope John that has had wide currency, though everyone who knew the Pope’s mind and style is convinced that it was fabricated. Moreover, Mr. Martin has in all these years refused to offer any proof of the prayer’s authenticity, a photocopy of the original, for instance. Nor did he ever reveal how he came into the possession of the alleged prayer of Pope John [which Cartus claimed was found among the Pope’s personal papers only after his death] ...The prayer reads as a careful composition. The Pope’s style, however, was unassuming, conversational rather than literary. No one I know had ever heard Pope John speak in a similar vein. I, myself, had had a long audience in which he told me how he viewed his role in the history of Catholic-Jewish relations...In not a single instance did he utter words that bore the slightest resemblance to the alleged prayer.

Why am I so adamant in rejecting the prayer? First, I would not want to base the new Christian-Jewish encounter, indeed, any relationship, on a lie. Second, I consider the prayer harmful to Jews. In my opinion,

phrases like “the beauty of Your Chosen People” and of “the features of our privileged brethren” are intended to beguile, not to honor Jews. They bespeak flattery rather than love. It treats Jews as immature, needing assurance and approval, when they should be given the justice and esteem that are their due. It is not mean-spirited to distrust a former Jesuit and priest, at odds with his Church, when he publishes an alleged Vatican secret in an influential Jewish journal!

By having the Pope say: “We bear the mark of Cain on our brows” (incidentally, the mark of Cain is not a brand of guilt, but a sign of protection), “our brother Abel has lain in the blood we have shed,” and “Forgive us for crucifying You a second time,” the prayer locks Christian-Jewish relations into a paternalistic frame rather than reshaping them in a new spirit. By using such language, the tendency of the prayer seems to be the opposite of the Conciliar Declaration. While the Declaration rejects the collective guilt of the Jews, the prayer lays a universal guilt on Christians, even those of today, for the wrongs and sufferings inflicted on Jews by one or another Christian generation of the past. Here, truth and fairness have given way to sensationalism.

There are other unanswered questions. If Pope John really considered the prayer a kind of testament, a message to the whole Church, why did he not see to its publication during his lifetime? Further, if Mr. Martin held the prayer to be of vital importance, as he says he did, why did he wait a year and a half to publish it? One need not wait for an answer; the questions themselves divulge that “we have been had.”¹³

mitting their publication; the files of the Penitentiary have no record of any such text received from the Pope (568).

¹³ John M. Oesterreicher, *The New Encounter Between Christians and Jews* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1986), 155-56.

For a text that is almost certainly a counterfeit, the “Johannine prayer” has truly taken on a life of its own. Following upon its publication in *Commentary* in January 1965, it was then taken up and quoted by Bishop John S. Quinn (who had been one of the Council *periti*) in a speech in Chicago, which was reported by *La documentation catholique*:

“Les milieux du Vatican ont confirmé le 7 septembre l’existence et l’authenticité d’une prière composée par Jean XXIII quelques jours seulement avant sa mort et dans laquelle le Pape demande pardon à Dieu pour toutes les souffrances que l’Église catholique a fait subir aux juifs. L’existence de cette prière qui, selon les intentions de son auteur, aurait dû être récitée dans toutes les églises, avait été annoncée récemment au cours d’une conférence à Chicago par Mgr John S. Quinn, qui fut un des experts du Concile.”¹⁴

Only a month later, however, *La documentation catholique* was forced to publish an embarrassing retraction, admitting that the original source of their report had been a Dutch newspaper, *De Tijd*, whose March 18, 1965 edition had

¹⁴ *Documentation catholique* (October 2, 1966, col. 1728). Translation: “Vatican sources confirmed on September 7 the existence and authenticity of a prayer composed by John XXIII only a few days before his death, in which the Pope begs forgiveness of God for all the sufferings that the Catholic Church has made the Jews endure. The existence of this prayer, which was intended by its author to be recited in every church, had recently been announced during a lecture in Chicago by Bishop John S. Quinn, who was one of the Council experts.”

The 1983 Caprile article in *La Civiltà Cattolica* suggests that Quinn was aware of a link between Martin and the text, but that it was precisely because Quinn (as a *peritus* himself) knew of Martin’s “insider” status at the Secretariat for Christian Unity that he was willing to give credence to the claimed attribution, assuming Martin had received it through Vatican channels: “Fu la persuasione che il Martin avesse ricevuto il documento dal Segretariato, che spinse mons. Quinn ad accreditarlo a sua volta.” (566)

carried an article—itsself based on the *Commentary* article of two months earlier:

Le fait même de publier la chose sous un pseudonyme aurait dû mettre en garde. Mgr Quinn, qui est de Chicago, fit sienne cette prière (en toute bonne foi, on peut le croire) et en parla à une réunion interconfessionnelle. Aucun bureau du Vatican ne peut avoir confirmé l’authenticité de cette prière, qui n’existe ni à la Pénitencerie apostolique, ni dans les écrits, tant imprimés qu’inédits, du Pape Jean XXIII. Mgr Loris Capovilla, qui est le dépositaire de ces derniers, dément sans hésiter l’authenticité de cette prière. L’examen attentif du texte fait d’ailleurs apparaître qu’elle est étrangère au style et au vocabulaire du regretté Pontife.¹⁵

A November 11, 1966 article in the *Rhode Island Herald* (page 9) further confirms this judgement:

Msgr. Loris Capovilla, the late Pope’s secretary, was vehement in denying that the pontiff had composed [this] prayer...The Vatican never acknowledged the existence of the prayer. It appeared in Italy for the first time recently when it was printed by “This Italy,” a small Catholic magazine published in Venice. Shortly thereafter it was published by Ansa, the Italian news agency, and comments from Vatican sources quickly followed...

¹⁵ Translation: “The very fact of publishing this [prayer] under a pseudonym should have put us on our guard. Bishop Quinn, who is from Chicago, adopted this prayer (in all good faith, we believe), and spoke about it at an interdenominational meeting. No Vatican office could have confirmed the authenticity of this prayer, which exists neither at the Apostolic Penitentiary, nor in the writings of Pope John XXIII, whether printed or unpublished. Bishop Loris Capovilla, who is the guardian of those papers, rejected the authenticity of this prayer without hesitation. A careful examination of the text highlights, furthermore, that it is foreign to the late Pontiff’s style and vocabulary.” (*Documentation catholique* [November 6, 1966], cols. 1908-9).

Msgr. Capovilla, issued a firm denial. "This prayer doesn't exist either in the archives or in the late Pope's private papers," he said, and some "international elements" in the text provide evidence that the prayer was not written by John. "In order to pay a compliment to the Jews it wasn't necessary to insult all Christians by stating they carry 'Cain's mark.'"¹⁶

Malachi Martin's role in this entire affair is fascinating. An Irish-born Jesuit scholar, and former professor of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, Martin worked on the staff of Cardinal Augustin Bea, whose secretariat was responsible for preparing the drafts of a conciliar document on Judaism. Martin was thus in a privileged position to have contacts inside the Vatican, and apparently enjoyed playing the game of "informer" regarding the Church's inner affairs, for both journalists and Jewish leaders. With regard to Jewish-Catholic matters, Martin was a friend and colleague of both Rabbi Abraham Heschel, and of Zachariah Shuster, who was an AJC staffer in France, reporting on European Jewish matters. Personally sympathetic to Jewish concerns about the direction of Vatican II vis-à-vis Judaism, Martin apparently chose to provide information to the AJC, keep them abreast of key discussions and directions in Catholic circles during the Council, and enable them to lobby more effectively:

Less overtly, Shuster found other ways to obtain restricted information, and even copies of secret documents. He developed a clandestine source of information, a "mole" within Cardinal Bea's Secretariat. This secret agent was an Irish Jesuit, Malachi Martin, a voluble, larger-than-life figure variously referred to as "Forest," "Pushkin," and Heschel's "young friend" in

¹⁶ My thanks to Father James Massa and his staff at the USCCB's Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs for their kindness in providing a copy of this article from their files.

Shuster's confidential reports and transcripts of transatlantic phone conversations. Martin, a highly educated Old Testament scholar at the Pontifical Institute in Rome, was sympathetic to the Jewish position. He held degrees in ancient Semitic languages and biblical archeology from the University of Louvain and had studied at Oxford and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Martin also knew modern Hebrew, Arabic, and several European tongues.

With a mixture of motives, lofty and ignoble, Martin became close to Heschel and Shuster. He enjoyed their company immensely, especially when they vied with each other in telling jokes in Yiddish. Heschel felt close to Martin as well, confiding details of his childhood in Poland, the privations of his student years in Berlin, and his immigration to the United States. Martin primarily advised the AJC on theological issues, but he also provided logistical intelligence and copies of restricted documents.¹⁷

Similarly, a 1966 article by Joseph Roody in *Look* magazine finally unveiled the identity of the "mystery man":

The American Jewish Committee's intellectual monthly, *Commentary*, had offered a most bleak report on the Council and the Jews by the pseudonymous F.E. Cartus. In a footnote, the author referred the reader to a confirming account in *The Pilgrim*, a 281-page book by the pseudonymous Michael Serafian... The cassock had come off the double agent who could never turn down work. Pushkin, it turned out, was Michael Serafian in book length, F.E. Cartus for the magazines, and a

¹⁷ Edward K. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America, 1940–1972* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 243.

translator in the Secretariat for Christian Unity, while keeping up a warm friendship with the AJC. At the time, Pushkin-Serafian-Cartus was living in the Biblical Institute, where he had been known well since his ordination in 1954...For the journalists, the young priest's inside tips and tactical leaks checked out so well that he could not resist gilding them every now and then with a flourish of creative writing.¹⁸

Much of the documentation supporting the Martin—Cartus identification has been collected and presented online, on the traditionalist (and brutally anti-Jewish) blog of Maurice Pinay.¹⁹

The evidence, then, seems relatively conclusive: the much-touted “Prayer of Repentance” has its genesis, not in the mind of John XXIII (who was, however, genuinely committed to repairing anti-Jewish tendencies in Catholicism), but in the somewhat dubious backroom finagling of a Catholic scholar-priest who may have believed that “planting” this text would lead Catholics to a deeper reflection on the dark side of their interactions with Jews.

If his intention was to spark conversation and thought on that topic, then Martin's subterfuge must be judged something of a success. More than forty years after its initial appearance, this prayer continues to be cited and recited in many contexts, notwithstanding the doubts that have clung to it since its publication: “While the prayer is apocryphal (no trace

¹⁸ Joseph Roddy, “How the Jews Changed Catholic Thinking,” in *Look* magazine (Vol. 3, No. 2; January 25, 1966); text online at: <http://www.fisheaters.com/jewsvaticanii.html>

¹⁹ <http://mauricepinay.blogspot.com/2007/06/malachi-martin-american-jewish.html>

of it has been found in John's papers), widespread acceptance of its attribution reflects John's known regret and concern.”²⁰

If this line of investigation effectively debunks the so-called “Johannine prayer,” have we really lost something of significance? Certainly, the papal authority claimed for this text gave it a veneer of theological acceptability that, at least initially, ensured its relevance and widespread circulation. In the mid-1960s, to hear a Pope speak in such terms was (or would have been) dramatic, novel and thought-provoking. But forty-five years later, the slow maturing of Jewish-Catholic relations means that such literary or theological “crutches” are no longer necessary—especially when they are demonstrably forgeries.

More significant (because more real) is the well-known “prayer of repentance” prayed as part of the historic “Liturgy of Repentance” which John Paul II presided over in St. Peter's Basilica on Sunday, March 12, 2000. That prayer was originally composed in the context of the Great Jubilee celebrations, and was meant to embody the spirit of contrition for second-millennium sins called for by the Pope in his 1994 apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (As the Third Millennium Approaches).²¹ Two weeks later, it would be that same prayer

²⁰ Irving (Yitzchak) Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity After the Holocaust,” in: Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman and Gershon Greenberg, eds., *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 505.

²¹ “This then is one of the tasks of Christians as we make our way to the Year 2000. The approaching end of the second millennium demands of everyone an *examination of conscience*...On the threshold of the new Millennium Christians need to place themselves humbly before the Lord and examine themselves on *the responsibility which they too have for the evils of our day*...These sins of the past unfortunately still burden us and remain ever present temptations. It is necessary to make amends for them, and earnestly to beseech Christ's forgiveness.” (§§34, 36, 34; italics in original)

that the Pope placed between the stones of the Western Wall, as part of his Jubilee pilgrimage to Israel.

While both of those prayers are today well-known and widely reprinted, a much less familiar (though arguably equally significant) papal prayer for the Jewish people is one composed in Polish by Pope John Paul in late 1999, apparently at the request of Jewish and Catholic leaders in the Pope's native Poland. Reprinted by *Our Sunday Visitor* on page 4 of its January 10, 1999 edition, the English translation of the text reads:

God of Abraham, the prophets, Jesus Christ, in You everything is embraced, toward You everything moves, You are the end of all things. Hear the prayers we extend for the Jewish nation which—thanks to its forefathers—is still very dear to you.

Instill within it a constant, ever livelier desire to deepen your truth and love. Help it, as it yearns for peace and justice, that it may reveal to the world the might of Your blessing.

Succor it, that it may obtain respect and love from the side of those who do not yet understand the greatness of suffering it has borne, and those who, in solidarity and a sense of mutual care, experience together the pain of wounds inflicted upon it.

Remember the new generations of youth and children that they may, unchangeably faithful to You, uphold what remains the particular mystery of their vocation.

Strengthen all generations, that, thanks to their testimony, humanity will understand that Your salvific intention extends over all humankind, and that You, God, are for all nations the beginning and the final end. Amen.

According to the *Sunday Visitor* article, Polish religious leaders “[saw] it as a way to spur dialogue and help dispel lingering anti-Semitism in the country. A million copies of the prayer were printed by a Jewish publisher in Poland in late December.”²² Inasmuch as the “Johannine” prayer is inauthentic, this *genuine* prayer marks a real milestone in references to Jews in Catholic piety and clearly lays the foundation for the year 2000 declaration of repentance.

Today, we have no need of doctored documents to express the very real contrition of Catholicism (and other Christian churches) for the sins of their past. The twin sins of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism have been largely repudiated by official Church structures and spokespersons,²³ although the

²² Frank J. Coppa, who reproduces the text of this prayer on pages 310 and 311 of his book *The Papacy, the Jews and the Holocaust* (Catholic University of America Press, 2006), further states that this prayer is now recited annually in Poland, as part of that country's yearly Day of Reflection on the Jews and Judaism.

²³ “The late Cardinal [John] O'Connor, the former head of the Catholic Archdiocese of New York, was a student of history and was familiar with man's inhumanity to man. The Cardinal must also have had some knowledge of Jewish customs, since he wrote letters a few days before Yom Kippur in September 1999 to a number of prominent Jews in New York. In these letters the Cardinal asked for forgiveness and apologized to the Jewish people for the pain inflicted upon them by Christians throughout history.” (Seymour Fiedler, *The Orphans Among Us: The History of Anti-Semitism* [Bloomington, IN: 1st Books, 2004], xi).

“Meeting with an international delegation from Jewish organizations in the Vatican, Pope John Paul II endorsed a statement yesterday drawn up three months ago acknowledging that some aspects of Catholic teaching and practice had fostered anti-Semitism and outlining plans for combating its re-emergence in Eastern Europe...The Prague statement branded anti-Semitism ‘a sin against God and humanity,’ and said that the church should repent for the anti-Semitism that had found a place in Catholic thought and behavior.” (Peter Steinfeld, “Pope Endorses Statement on Anti-Semitism,” *New York Times*. December 7, 1990, A10).

dark legacy of hatred of Jews continues to lurk in some quarters, and occasionally re-surfaces in ugly and painful ways. The Vatican and its official bodies, the World Council of Churches, various national episcopal conferences and groups of Christian leaders have forcefully reiterated the responsibility of Christians for the past, and their commitment to a very different future. Taken together, their statements, resolutions and actions provide a much more credible, reliable and enduring foundation than the single prayer so often attributed to Pope John.

The words may not have been those of Papa Roncalli, but there is no questioning the authenticity of John XXIII's personal sorrow for the tremendous suffering of the Jewish people, and his commitment to transforming the Jewish-Christian relationship, liturgically, theologically and structurally. It was John who, after his brief 1960 meeting with Jules Isaac, resolved to address "the Jewish question" at Vatican II and, although he never lived to see the Council's final fruits, nevertheless certainly set a new trajectory for Catholicism which (despite occasional backsteps) continues to unfold today in many life-giving ways. In a certain sense, to impute to Pope John praise for something he did *not* do risks diluting the praise he has rightfully received for so much that he *did* do during his brief but revolutionary papacy.²⁴ As his close collaborator Cardinal Augustin Bea wrote after the Pope's death:

"...the Church has not failed to deplore the failings of her sons and daughters, begging forgiveness for all that could in any way have contributed to the scourge of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism. May these wounds be healed forever!" (Pope Benedict XVI, Address at the Great Synagogue of Rome, January 17, 2010; English translation at: <http://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/main/showNews/id/8810>)

²⁴ See, for example, the enumeration of significant Johannine actions relative to Judaism and Jewish-Catholic relations, in Pinchas Lapide's *The Last Three Popes and the Jews*, 306-44.

It is—and will remain—to John XXIII's great credit that he sensitized himself to this centuries-old problem, and grasped its overall importance. He was the one who, by an entirely personal decision, removed from the Good Friday liturgy the expression *pro perfidis Judæis*, which had been the source of so many misunderstandings. Taking an even further step, he personally entrusted [to Bea and his colleagues] the task of preparing a suitable schema for the Council. When, in one of the most decisive moments in this matter, I had delivered to him an overview of such a document, I received—only a few days later—a precious sheet of paper, written entirely by his own hand—which said: "[I have] read with great attentiveness this report of Cardinal Bea's, and I fully appreciate [literally "share"] its seriousness, and the responsibility for an intervention on our part." It is therefore, first of all, to John XIII that we should be grateful, and to the greatest degree, if this schema has been able to be presented to the Council.²⁵

And Malachi Martin? The man at the center of the mystery died in July 1999²⁶, apparently without ever admitting (at least publicly) to his role in the whole affair. His later writings were, as the *New York Times* characterized them, "enlivened by an atmosphere reminiscent of John Le Carré," and the one-time Biblical scholar lived the remainder of his life surrounded by swirling claims of international intrigue, conspiracy theories and ecclesiastical corruption. Perhaps Martin, as a Vatican insider, was gratified by the circulation and influence of his pseudo-Johannine prayer. Perhaps he was pleased to hear Pope John Paul II speak words strikingly similar to those Martin

²⁵ In *Civiltà Cattolica* 1964, Vol. II, 219-220, as quoted on page 569 of the article by Caprile (my translation from the Italian original).

²⁶ "Malachi Martin is Dead at 78; Author of Books on the Church," in *New York Times*. July 30, 1999, A17.

himself had once penned. We may never know if it was something of an innocent game for then-Father Martin, or a more cynical ploy to sway official churchdom, and perhaps influence the Council's deliberations. If, in the end, those "centuries of Christian blindness" have largely yielded to a new age of openness and clearer vision, there is no question that much of the credit belongs to the beloved Pope from Bergamo. And if "Pope's John's prayer" has made any contribution to that transformation, if it achieved any genuine and lasting good, then perhaps we can smile indulgently to think that—just for once—the "voice" of that Italian pontiff spoke with a Kerry brogue.