

Mount Zion Award 2025

60 Years of Nostra aetate - Laudatio for Dr. Karma Ben-Johanan

Prof. Dr. Christian M. Rutishauser SJ

Dear Dr. Karma Ben-Johanan,

Dear Alkrenawi family

Dear distinguished guests

It is also a great pleasure for me to welcome you to the Mount Zion Award ceremony 2025. Following the massacre of Israeli civilians by Hamas on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing war in Gaza, the Israeli hostages who were still alive have been liberated. The remains of the murdered hostages are being returned. It is a relief. Nevertheless, grief, pain, and open wounds remain. Many Palestinian civilians have also enormously suffered as a result of the war. Human blood cries out to heaven. But it is to be hoped that diplomacy works now and a process at the political level will follow in the forthcoming weeks. In civil society too, a long road is ahead of us to slowly rebuild trust and enable coexistence. This time must be more than just a respite between violence and war.

The Mount Zion Award 2025 comes into this political and social situation. It was founded by Rev. Dr. Wilhelm Salberg, born 100 years ago in 1925 in North-Rhine-Westfalia. Coming from a Jewish-Christian family himself—his father was of Jewish origin, his mother Catholic—, the Second Vatican Council with the declaration *Nostra aetate* became a turning point in his life. At the age of 45, he began Jewish studies at the University of Köln. He had realized that Christianity is constitutively linked to Judaism. Whenever Christians suppress or even deny this connection, it becomes anti-Jewish. Salberg felt that the Church's conversion and the renewal of theology in relation to Judaism were progressing too slowly after Vatican II. Above all, he lamented that the intellectual catastrophe of the Shoah had received far too little attention. In the founding document for the Mount Zion Award, he wrote: "Auschwitz – that was not so much the physical catastrophe of Judaism as the theological catastrophe of Christianity" – I read this sentence once and never forgot it."

But when he established the foundation in 1986, he was not only concerned with coming to terms with the past. He was far-sighted and recognized that new challenges did emerge, particularly in Israel, and that anti-Semitism had not been overcome either. It was his conviction, that it is precisely here in this country that work must continue to promote understanding and interfaith dialogue. He saw that Islam must be included. The foundation charter continues: "I have therefore decided to underpin the goals that have always been important to me in my life with a foundation that will outlive me. It should serve to accelerate the path of Jews and Christians toward each other and also the tentative beginnings of understanding toward Islam and from Islam [...]. All three consider Mount Zion in Jerusalem, with its traditions of David's tomb and the Upper Room where

the disciples gathered, to be holy. Zion is a symbol of the Spirit of God in human history, showing us new paths to the future that we shy away from." People are guided along paths, they are faced with challenges, God expects a lot from them, especially here in Israel. It is therefore the intention of Rev. Dr. Salberg's foundation that people in Israel/Palestine should be honored who face the ways of God and also the challenges that life and the social, religious, and political situation bring with them. This year, the Mount Zion Award 2025 fulfills its founding purpose more than ever.

Rev. Dr. Salberg was motivated to establish his foundation in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and the declaration *Nostra aetate*. The Council first intended a decree on Judaism, but it developed into a declaration of the Church on all religions, including Islam. As a result, *Nostra aetate* was adopted on October 28. That is why the award ceremony always takes place on the Sunday closest to October 28. This year, the Church is also celebrating the anniversary of *Nostra aetate*. It has been exactly 60 years since its proclamation in 1965. A major conference on this topic will begin tomorrow at the Gregorian University in Rome. On Tuesday, October 28, Pope Leo XIV will give a special audience. The Dicasteries for interreligious dialogue and for Christian unity – the latter include Jewish-Christian relations – , will publish a document. Our awardee Dr. Ben-Johanan and me too, we will be traveling to Rome for these days. Today's award ceremony is also dedicated to commemorating 60 years of *Nostra aetate*.

Since then, much has happened in Jewish-Catholic dialogue, even if the relationship has not always been easy. I recall in particular the 1993 Basic Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel. This was followed in 1997 by the important Vatican document “We Remember: Reflections on the Shoah,” in which the Church confronts its culpable past and asks what involvement it had with National Socialism. To this day, the role of Pope Pius XII in particular is still being debated. It so happened that a major international conference on this subject took place in Rome in the days following October 7, 2023. Ten years ago, the Vatican published a document entitled “For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable (Rom 11:29).” This document reflects on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity from a theological perspective and states that the Church renounces “institutional mission among Jews.” Theologically, this is a landmark statement for the Vatican, as the Church nevertheless maintains its universal claim to truth. You can imagine the internal Catholic controversy this document caused. It is no less than the best machloket among the rabbis themselves. The document has led to Jewish Orthodoxy entering into dialogue with the Vatican. “Between Jerusalem and Rome,” a declaration also signed by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, followed in 2017.

This official dialogue marked by declaration have their effect in the long run and are important for teaching. More relevant for social life have been the visits by the popes to the synagogue in Rome, and above all the visit by Pope John Paul II and also by Pope Benedict here in Israel. They changed the wider public mind. But since October 7, 2023, dialog has become difficult: *Nostra aetate* deliberately excluded the question of the religious meaning of the land of Israel. Otherwise, the document would not have been adopted by the Council’s fathers. The separation of political issues from religious once

made the Basic Agreement between the Vatican and the Holy See possible. Zionism is perceived in historic and secular terms. But for ten years, catholic theologians are in in-depth discussions on the significance of the land of Israel. Nevertheless, on the Vatican level, the massacre of October 7th and the Gaza war led to a dialogue crisis.

The issues are: What is the value of Jewish-Catholic dialogue facing terrorism? How should Pope Francis have responded to the conflict? What solidarity will be shown with the hostages and with the Israelis, who are traumatized and in shock? Where does the Roman Catholic Church stand in view of the conflict between Palestinians and Israel? The Church is engaged in Jewish-Christian dialog and at the same time, it has its own church in Israel, in the occupied territories, in Gaza. The Catholic Church represents the now tiny minority of Christians among the Palestinians, who's majority seeks their support in Islam. And that's not even mentioning the sharp rise in anti-Semitism in Europe, North America, and the Christian countries of the southern hemisphere. How is the Church responding to this renewed outbreak of anti-Semitism?

This is precisely where we come in with the Mount Zion Award. On November 12, 2023, our awardee Dr. Karma Ben-Johanan addressed an open letter to Pope Francis, published in the magazine "America" in the United States. It has since been signed by more than 400 renowned Jewish intellectuals and rabbis. In it, she describes the profound shock to Jewish trust and reminds Pope Francis that the Second Vatican Council emphasizes the common spiritual heritage of Jews and Christians. It is about the bond of friendship that has developed since then and now has to prove itself. The letter is not politically or diplomatically motivated, as the crisis transcends social dimensions, Dr. Ben-Johanan writes. She continues in her letter: spiritual solidarity must be demonstrated in a clear condemnation of anti-Semitism, an explicit recognition of the State of Israel, and a strong commitment to justice so that evil does not prevail.

With this initiative, it was clear that Dr. Ben-Johanan would not be intimidated by the most adverse circumstances. For years, she had engaged in Jewish/Roman Catholic dialogue on a theological and academic level. She also studied and researched at the Gregorian University in Rome. Her book "Jacob's Younger Brother" is a brilliant examination of the achievements of dialogue under Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. In the second part of the book, she introduces the Western world to how dialogue is progressing here in Israel. She shows that in national-religious circles in Israel, a Jewish-theological self-confidence has grown that is critical of the Church, challenges dialogue and even questions it. It was a courageous intellectual contribution that Dr. Ben-Johanan placed this criticism from Israel in relation to the dialog in Europe and in the US.

Yesterday evening, she gave her lecture here, which she titled: "Dialogue while the Canons Roar?" She has added a question mark to the title. Under what conditions is dialogue possible? Is dialogue merely an idealistic conversation and exchange that is only possible within the framework of a liberal and open democracy only? How does dialogue function under different social conditions? And what does dialogue mean in a situation such as those that have arisen here in Israel with the massacre carried out by Hamas on October 7, 2023: Is dialogue possible in the face of terror and in war time? Isn't

dialogue – dia logos – through the word – the very opposite of violence and armed conflict? Dr. Karma Ben-Johanan is being honored with the Mount Zion Award because she engages in interfaith dialogue under the most difficult social and political circumstances. Interfaith dialogue cannot be separated from political and social controversy especially here in Israel, even though it must be distinguished from them. There is a strong interference. Religion speaks to all aspects of human and societal life. In a situation where politicians, warring parties, and terrorists use religious vocabulary and repeatedly speak and act in the name of religion and in the name of God—praised be His name—it is important that religious representatives, as well as scholars and theologians, speak out. On the one hand, to criticize the political instrumentalization and abuse of religion. On the other hand, to open up an alternative space for dialogue, debate and encounter that is based on genuine religious and human concerns. Dr. Ben-Johanan does this on both an academic and a religious-political level.

It should now be clear that it is an honor for the Mount Zion Foundation to award Dr. Karma Ben-Johanan on the 60th anniversary of Nostra aetate. The Foundation is committed to interfaith dialogue and understanding here in Israel. At the same time, the Mount Zion Foundation also wants to honor concrete, courageous social action challenging the atrocities of October 7th. That is why not only Dr. Ben-Johanan is being honored, but also the Alkrenawi family. We will hear more about them, in the speeches which follow. I thank you for your attention.