

The Conversion of the Chief Rabbi of Rome

On February 13, 1945, the world's leading news agencies broke the news that Professor Israel Zolli, chief rabbi of Rome, renowned biblical scholar, had been received into the Catholic Church.

He was born in 1881, in Brody, in the region of Poland that was then under Austrian rule. For 35 years, before assuming the chief rabbinate in Rome, he had held the same position in Trieste. After his baptism he considered himself not a converted but a completed Jew, since the Catholic Church was the fulfillment of the promise of Judaism. In his words, **the Old Testament is God's coded telegram to mankind, and the one cipher, the one code to reading its contents, is Jesus Christ, who is both true God and true Man.** As an eyewitness to the Holocaust, Zolli insisted that it was precisely the annihilation of Christian principles by Fascist ideology that contributed to that catastrophe. After the war he would write: **"I am convinced that when this war is over the only way of checking the forces of destruction and achieving the reconstruction of Europe will be by accepting the principles of the Catholic faith, that is, the idea of God and universal brotherhood embodied in Christ — not a brotherhood based on race and *übermensch*, for there is *neither Jew nor Greek...neither slave nor free...neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Ga. 3: 28).**

Eugenio Zolli's Polish name was Izrael



Rabbi Eugenio Zoli

Zoller. Derived from a well-known family of rabbinical scholars, his mother always dreamed that one of her five children would become a rabbi. Israel was her youngest son. He studied at a rabbinical school and also read philosophy at university, first in Vienna, then in Florence. In 1920, he was appointed chief rabbi of Trieste. In order to qualify for Italian citizenship in 1933, he was obliged by the fascist authorities to change his surname to Zolli. Soon after, he assumed the chair of the Department of Hebrew Language and Literature at the University of Padua. A few years later, anti-Semitic purges forced him to resign his post.

In 1940 he became chief rabbi of Rome. Throughout the dramatic years of the war, he played a crucial role as leader of the Jewish community in Rome, which included both antifascists and those who collaborated with the authorities. With the occupation of Rome by the German forces in early September of 1943, the Jewish community found itself in a critical situation. On September 27, the SS commander of the Roman garrison,

Lieutenant-Colonel Herbert Kappler, ordered the Jewish leaders to come up with 50 kilograms of gold in 24 hours. If they failed to deliver, he would begin the deportation of all men of Jewish origin. The community managed to collect 35 kilograms. Another 15 had to be found. Only a few hours remained. In this dramatic situation Rabbi Zolli turned to Pope Pius XII for help. The Holy Father immediately assured him of his assistance. However, as it turned out, the Catholics of Rome had already collected the 15 remaining kilograms of gold and delivered it to the Jewish community. On 29 September 1943, Commander Nogara, a

delegate of the special administration of the Holy See, sent the following memorandum to the Secretary of State, Cardinal Maglione: **"Yesterday Prof. Zolli came at 2 p.m. to tell me that they had received the required 15 kilograms of gold from the Catholic community, and that for the time being there was no need for them to resort to our help."** (*Actes et Documents du Saint Siègre relatifs a la seconde guerre mondiale*. Vol. 9, Città del Vaticano 1975, 494.)

Even though they received their 50 kilograms of gold, the Nazis arrested over 2000 Jewish men, women and children in the early hours October 16. The rest of the Jewish community went into hiding. Rabbi Zolli, his wife and daughter managed to find refuge in the home of a Catholic family, and remained there until the liberation of Rome by the Allies. Zolli subsequently resumed his duties as chief rabbi. In July 1944, he presided over a solemn prayer service in the Roman Synagogue. The event was broadcast by radio, allowing him to publicly thank Pope Pius XII and the President of the

United States for the assistance they had rendered the Jews in Rome during the time of the Nazi persecutions. On 25 July 1945, during a private audience with Pius XII, Rabbi Zolli and the president of the Jewish community thanked the Holy Father for his extraordinary, personal involvement in the fate of the Jews. They also asked him to convey their thanks to the Catholic population of Rome. At great personal sacrifice and risk to their lives, these people — both lay and religious — had provided assistance to thousands of Jews by accepting them

“Neither Jew nor Greek...neither slave nor free... neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Ga. 3:28).

into their cloisters, convents, rectories and private homes.

Zolli’s Baptism

Rabbi Zolli made his final decision to be received into the Catholic Church in July of 1944. The gift of faith came to him after many years of spiritual growth and sincere seeking after the truth. In August of 1944, Zolli asked the Jesuit professor

Paulo Cezza at the Gregorian University to prepare him, quietly and discreetly, for the Sacrament of Baptism.

But first he had to resign his post as chief rabbi of Rome. Jesus made it clear to him that his time of service at the Synagogue was drawing to a close. In September of 1944, on the Feast of Reconciliation, he presided over the solemn prayer service in the Synagogue for the last time. During the service Christ appeared to Zolli in a vision. He was dressed in a white robe and radiated an ineffable sense of peace. In his heart Zolli heard him say, “*You are here for the last time.*” That evening at home, his wife told him: “Today when you stood before the Ark of the Torah, I imagined I saw the white figure of Jesus placing his hand

over your head as though he were blessing you.” Zolli recalls: “I was stunned, but still felt at peace. I pretended not to understand her, but she repeated what she had said word for word. Then I heard our daughter Miriam calling me from her room: ‘D-a-d-d-y!’ I went to her and asked her what she wanted. She said, ‘You were talking about Jesus Christ, weren’t you? You know, I had a dream today in which I saw the tall figure of Jesus robed in white; I don’t recall what happened afterwards.’ A few days later I resigned my post in the



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Jewish community.”

Zolli’s decision came as a great shock to his community. Seeing his determination, the president accepted his resignation with great sorrow. He offered him the post of director of the rabbinical college. Zolli refused to accept it. In his letter of reply, the president expressed great surprise and sorrow. Professor Zolli was the most suitable candidate for the post. Wishing to avoid negative reactions, Zolli did not reveal his main reason for declining the offer. Thus, having freed himself of all extraneous responsibilities, he, along with his wife Emma and daughter Miriam, prepared to receive the Sacrament of Baptism. The event took place on February 13, 1945, in a private chapel adjoining the sacristy of S. Maria

degli Angeli Church in Rome. Only 15 of his most trusted friends attended the celebration. No journalists were invited. Israel Zolli took the name Eugenio (in honor of Pius XII, whose Christian name was Eugenio Pacelli) and his wife took the name Maria. That night a news reporter telephoned him from the United States, asking him if he had been received into the Catholic Church. Zolli could not deny it. The following day, all the main wire services in America and Europe broke the news that the chief rabbi of Rome had become a Catholic. Zolli lived close to the Synagogue. As soon as the news of his conversion to Catholicism became known, he began receiving threatening and abusive phone calls. The Hebrew monthly appeared with its cover bordered in black. Zolli was immediately forced to move out of his apartment. His wife and daughter found refuge in a cloister, and Professor Zolli took up temporary residence at the Gregorian University. Pius XII invited the Zollis for a private audience at the Vatican. Deeply moved, they expressed their joy and gratitude to the Holy Father. They also expressed their love and forgiveness of their fellow Jews, who could not understand their decision to become Catholics. **“Now that I am baptized,”** observed Emma, **“I am unable to hate anyone. I love everyone.”**

During his stay at the Gregorian University, Zolli received numerous visits from friends and enemies. Influential American Jews dropped in to persuade him to return to the bosom of Judaism, offering him whatever sum of money he wished. With great serenity, he refused every offer. A number of prominent Protestants also came to his door. Recognizing him as a scholar with a deep knowledge of the Scriptures, they asked him to prepare a refutation of the doctrine of Papal Primacy on biblical grounds. Zolli’s response was a book entitled *Petrus*, in which he used Holy Scripture to prove the case for Peter’s primacy and the succession of Popes. *“Since protesting is not testifying, I do not intend to trouble anyone by asking the question: Why did they wait 1500 years to protest? For fifteen centuries the*

Catholic Church was recognized as the true Church of God by the entire Christian world. No one in all honesty can dismiss those 1500 years out of hand and claim that the Catholic Church is not the Church of Christ. I can accept only that Church which was proclaimed to all creatures by my ancestors, the twelve apostles, who, like me, came out of the Synagogue."

The Path to Conversion

Already as a small boy in Poland, Zolli had many Catholic friends. *"We, Hebrew children, loved our Christian friends,"* he wrote, *"and they loved us. We knew nothing about racial differences. We knew our religions differed. That is why when it came to religion class we went to different rooms. Once the lesson was over we were together again..."*

While visiting the home of his friend Stas, he would stare with wonder at the crucifix on the wall. It was then that he first began asking questions about the person of Jesus. This prompted him to read the Gospels. With the passage of years, his knowledge of the New Testament grew deeper. In large measure, Zolli attributed his conversion to his shattering discovery that the prophecy of Yahweh's Suffering Servant contained in the four songs of the prophet Isaiah (42:1-7; 49:1-5; 50:4-9; 52:13; 53:12) was fulfilled in the suffering and crucified Jesus. He came to this conclusion after many years of studying the texts of the Old and New Testament. In this, expert scholarly exegesis and his perfect knowledge of Hebrew and Biblical Greek aided him. His scholarly studies culminated in the conviction that Yahweh's Suffering Servant could be no other but Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and rose from the dead for our justification. "In this way," he wrote, "after many years of study, meditation and living the Judaism of the Old Testament, I eventually found myself in the Christianity of the New Testament. I had to admit in all honesty that I had become a Christian, and that is why I began to prepare myself systematically for the reception of Baptism."

Zolli saw his transition from Judaism to Catholicism not as a break with the past but as a continuation along the road of salvation. When his co-religionists began accusing him of betrayal, he



replied sadly: *"My conscience is clear. I have renounced nothing. Isn't the God of Saint Paul also the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Saint Paul converted. Did he forsake the God of Israel in doing so? Did he stop loving Him? It would be absurd to say yes."*

After being baptized, Professor Zolli devoted considerable time every day



to prayer and partook earnestly of the Eucharist. He often expressed his great joy over being a Catholic. *"You cradle Catholics do not realize what great treasures the faith and Christ's grace represent. People such as I, who have received the grace of faith only after long years of seeking, can appreciate the greatness of this gift and experience the enormous joy of being a Christian."*

After several months, Zolli was able to find living quarters on the outskirts of Rome and resume family life with his wife and daughter. He began teaching Hebrew language and literature at the Biblical Institute. All the while he lived a life of intense prayer. With all the zeal of a new convert, he gave guest lectures at various universities throughout Europe and the United States. His apostolic zeal was naturally directed toward his former co-religionists, whom he sought to bring closer to the truth of Christ. He paid special attention to recent converts, offering them both moral and material support.

A scholar to the end of his days, Zolli increased his apostolic activity through the publication of numerous books and articles in Italy and abroad. Heart problems plagued his final years. His last lecture, on divine justice and mercy in the Scriptures, took place in Vallicelli, in January of 1956. He died on March 2, 1956. On receiving the viaticum on his deathbed, he said: *"I trust the Lord will forgive my sins. I commit myself entirely to God's mercy."*