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Rabbis from around the world thank Pope John Paul

In the largest private audience ever given by a Pope to Jewish leaders, John Paul II received 160 Jewish rabbis and cantors from Israel, the United States and Europe.

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The Holy Father pointed out that "this year we will be celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration 'Nostra

aetate', which has significantly contributed to the strengthening of Jewish- Catholic dialogue.

"May this be an occasion for renewed commitment to increased understanding and cooperation in the service of building a world ever more firmly based on respect for the divine image in every human being."

The rabbis, who all belong to the Pave the Way Foundation, thanked the Holy Father for "all the efforts he has sustained over 26 years of pontificate to reconcile the two faiths and demolish the wall of hatred," according to a communique from the Foundation published last evening. During the audience, they recited a prayer in honor of John Paul II.

Gary Krupp, founder and president of the Pave the Way Foundation, affirmed that the aim of his group is "to unite men and women of good faith, beyond any religious belief and

without prejudice, and to remove with determination all obstacles in the way of this objective. The Pope has done this for decades. The least we can do is to thank him humbly for all he has done for the Jewish people in the world; and in our turn we undertake to make serious efforts for peace on Earth," he said.

Rabbi Jack Bemporad, director of the Center for Inter-religious Understanding, said "since Vatican Council II, and under the guidance of Pope John Paul II, the Church has made many extremely significant steps to create new bonds with Jews on a foundation of sincere affection and reciprocity."

"No Pope before John Paul II has ever done as much, or been so concerned to create fraternal relations between Catholics and Jews. ... I am convinced that Pope John Paul II will be considered a great healer of relations

between Catholics and Jews. ...

Coming to the Vatican from all over the world, we rabbis say thank you!"

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