

CATHOLIC TEACHING ON JEWS AND JUDAISM:
AN EVOLUTION IN PROCESS

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In 1943, the eminent French historian, Jules Isaac, went into hiding in France. A scholar, he used his time to research and put on paper thoughts that would change the course of the ancient, too often tragic relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish People. He sought in history an answer, as Claire Huchet Bishop put it, to “why was there such silence and apathy in the Christian world concerning the fate of the European Jews?”¹ The results of Isaac’s covert wartime scholarship would deeply influence the Second Vatican Council’s *Nostra Aetate no. 4*,² the first statement by any council in the Church’s history to consider directly the Church’s relationship with “the Mystery of Israel.” The Council would focus the Church’s attention on the twin theological issues at the heart of that long and painful history: the rejection of the deicide charge³ and the implications of God’s “irrevocable” covenant with the Jews.

After the war in 1947, Isaac published the results of his research in a 600-page volume, *Jesus and Israel*. The book had a great impact in France. Later that year, Isaac met in Paris with a group of French Christians and Jews that included three Catholic priests (Jean de Menasce, Paul Demann, and Jean Daniélou) and presented them with eighteen points aimed at the “purification of Christian teaching regarding the Jews.” These became the basis for the “Ten Points of Seelisberg,” issued internationally later that year from Switzerland.

In 1949, Isaac met with Pope Pius XII, presenting him with the Ten Points and arguing for the suppression of the term “perfidious” from the Good Friday Prayer for the Jews. Isaac noted that Catholics did not kneel for the Jews as they did for others during the prayer. Pius did authorize a milder translation of *perfidis* as “unfaithful” or “unbelieving,” and restored kneeling for the Jews in 1955. But it was not until 1958 that *perfidis* was eliminated. And it was not Pius but his successor, Pope John XXIII, who did so. Indeed, consideration of the more fundamental Seelisberg Points and their implications for the basic triumphalistic and conversionist tone of the Church’s theology and liturgy would only, as we shall see, be taken up by the Second Vatican Council itself.

Again, Isaac played a key role. After meeting with Isaac in 1960, John XIII established a commission charged with developing a draft on the Jews for consideration by the Second Vatican Council. He entrusted leadership of this commission to Cardinal Augustin Bea, a Jesuit biblical scholar.

Nostra Aetate: In Our Time

The draft of the statement on the Jews (originally *De Iudais*) went through many adventures, first being attached to the ecumenical document and then separated and surrounded with statements on other world religions (Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, native traditions), the latter to encourage votes from bishops in those regions where Christianity was (and is) a minority. The bishops of Europe, the scene of the Shoah, and North America, which after World War II had the world’s largest Jewish population, pushed strongly for the document. Bishops in Arab countries opposed a document on Jews, as

did some traditionalist bishops. In the end, however, the bishops offered overwhelming support: 1,763 affirmative votes, 250 negative ones, and 10 abstentions.

NA no. 4, promulgated on October 28, 1965, is distinctive among Conciliar documents in not including any references to the Fathers of the Church or to previous ecumenical councils. This, as Cardinals Bea and Johannes Willebrands emphasized, was because no previous council had taken up the issue of the church's relationship with the Jewish people directly. Nor had the charge that the Jews were collectively guilty for the crucifixion of Jesus ever been seriously debated. While first appearing in the late second century, and often embroidered, the charge of "deicide"—in killing Jesus, the Jews had killed God—had never really been challenged over the centuries; it was simply assumed. So *NA* represented a sea change. While acknowledging the historical involvement of some Jewish authorities of the time, *NA* affirms that "what happened in His (Christ's) passion cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, nor upon the Jews of today." Thus, "the Jews should not be presented as repudiated or cursed by God, as if such views followed from Sacred Scripture."

For a positive understanding of Judaism, *NA* turns to the New Testament itself: "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" (Rom 11:28-29). It acknowledges as well the Church's ongoing "spiritual bond" and "common spiritual patrimony" with Jews. Deploring any form of antisemitism, the Council urged instead "that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit above all of biblical and theological studies, and of brotherly dialogues."

Controversy and Growth in Understanding

The reception of *NA* was mixed, with both plaudits and substantive criticism extended. Critics asked whether the Council had truly closed the door on proselytism, and noted its failure to mention either the Shoah or Israel. They questioned the use of the weaker term “deplore” rather than “condemn” in reference to antisemitism. Such criticisms, among other issues, were taken up almost immediately in dialogues in the United States and Europe, and then in the official dialogue with the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Relations (IJCIC), which held its first meeting in Paris in 1971.

Similarly, every subsequent document issued by the Holy See on Catholic-Jewish relations has received as much criticism as praise, sometimes for omissions, sometimes for ambiguous or misleading wording. Indeed, significant issues remain on the agenda of Catholic-Jewish dialogue. The 1985 Vatican “Notes on the Correct Way To Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church, for example, calls typology the sign of “a problem unresolved.” Yet the 1994 Catechism of the Catholic Church, relies heavily on typology in its use of Scripture.

These criticisms, however, have been and continue to be quite healthy for the Church, since subsequent documents often, though not always, address them through clearer or fuller explorations than earlier ones. *NA*, for example, made no mention of post-biblical Jewish thought or traditions. The 1974 *Guidelines* note simply that “the history of Judaism did not end with the destruction of Jerusalem but rather went on to develop a religious tradition.” The 1985 *Guidelines* contains an entire section on

“Judaism and Christianity in History” and states that Christians can “profit discerningly from the traditions of Jewish reading of Scripture.”

Similarly, the insights of contemporary Catholic biblical and theological scholarship, in this area as in others, take time to be integrated into teaching and preaching for a billion people of diverse cultures. Hence, the use of the image of “evolution” in the subtitle of this paper. The official documents of the Church with which this paper deals may quite accurately be called “revolutionary,” but fitting all the new insights into the old wineskins of pre-conciliar theological categories is impossible without re-thinking the categories themselves. So following up on the implications of revolutionary insights in the magisterium will inevitably at best be “evolutionary.”

Implementing *Nostra Aetate* Locally and Universally

The U.S. Catholic bishops in January of 1967 were the first to come out with guidelines for the local implementation of the Council’s decree. Their “Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations” point to the incompatibility of dialogue with proselytism, and urge the involvement of Catholic scholars and educators on all levels. In 1974 the Holy See’s newly-formed Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (so named because the Vatican Secretariat of State handles all political relations with the State of Israel) issued its own, universal *Guidelines and Suggestions* for implementing NA §4. This document reflects the influence of statements from various national conferences of bishops, most notably that of the French bishops in 1973. “Deliberately practical” in nature, the 1974 *Guidelines* draws out some of the rich liturgical and educational implications of the dialogue, noting laconically that over the centuries “such relations as

there have been between Jew and Christian have scarcely ever risen above the level of monologue.” Key to the dialogue, of course, is “respect for the faith and religious convictions” of the other, “a common meeting in the presence of God, in prayer and silent meditation.”

Noting “the existing links” between Christian and Jewish liturgies, it reminds Christians that much that in the Jewish Scripture “retains its own perpetual value...[and] has not been cancelled by the later interpretation of the New Testament.” While Christians believe that the biblical promises were in one sense “fulfilled with the first coming of Christ,” it is equally the Church’s proclamation that “we still await their perfect fulfillment in his glorious return at the end of time.” These two points reappear in even sharper language in the 1991 statement of the Pontifical Biblical Commission: Teachers, preachers, liturgical translators and biblical commentaries are to have an “overriding preoccupation, taking scriptural studies into account,” not to “distort” the meaning of the sacred texts, “especially when it is a question of passages which seem to show the Jewish people as such in an unfavorable light.” As with virtually all of the Catholic documents, this Pontifical Biblical Commission statement urges joint social action and witness.

Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi

The emphasis on liturgical and catechetical aspects of the relationship is characteristically “Catholic.” In the liturgical reform of the 1970s following the Council, the Good Friday prayer that had referred to “faithless Jews,” and the “blindness of that

people” was eradicated. The new prayer, instead of praying for the conversion of the Jews, reads:

Let us pray for the Jewish people, the first to hear the word of God, that they may continue to grow in the love of his Name and in faithfulness to his covenant.

Almighty and eternal God, long ago you gave your promise to Abraham and his posterity. Listen to your Church as we pray that the people you first made your own may arrive at the fullness of redemption.

The phrase, "fullness of redemption," is not historical but eschatological. Like St. Paul in Romans 11, the prayer leaves the issue in God's hands, to be revealed at the end of time with the Second Coming of Christ. Since the Catholic community takes seriously the ancient principle, *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer is the law of faith) this change in the Church's only prayer for the Jews has great significance.

The Role of John Paul II

The numerous addresses and reflections of Pope John Paul II during his remarkable pontificate bear great significance.⁴ In meeting with Jewish leaders in Mainz (Germany) in 1980, for example, the pope, built upon a statement of the German bishops issued earlier that year calling for respect for “the spiritual heritage of Israel for the Church.” In his own statement, the pope emphasized that this legacy is to be understood as “a living heritage, which must be understood and preserved in its depth and richness by us Catholic Christians.” He boldly stated that “the true and central dimension of our dialogue is [that] of the meeting between the people of God of the Old Covenant, never

revoked by God (cf. Rom 11:29), and that of the New Covenant.” This meeting, the pope continued, “is at the same time a dialogue within our Church, that is to say, between the first and second part of her Bible.” This now-frequently cited affirmation heightens the enduring character of God’s covenant with the Jewish people. It also sharpens the understanding that in some way Christian-Jewish dialogue is for the church not so much an “interreligious” or “interfaith” exercise as an internal one between members of the one People of God, Jews and Christians.

As the 1974 *Guidelines* note, paraphrasing the Council, “it is when the Church delves into her own mystery that she encounters the mystery of Israel.” Because of the shared scriptures, shared biblical history, and the fact that Jesus, Mary and the apostles were all Jewish, the subsequent “parting of the ways” between the Jewish and (increasingly gentile) Christian communities, was in a real sense the first schism experienced by nascent Christianity. Thus, Catholic-Jewish dialogue may have as much in common with the ecumenical movement as it does with the interfaith agenda. Nevertheless, it differs substantially from ecumenical goals and concerns in that its goal is not “visible unity” of the Christian churches, but “reconciliation” between Jews and Christians, who remain at once bound by common origins and yet distinct as peoples of God until the end of time.

The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, therefore, does not function under the rubric of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Affairs in the Holy See, but, rather, is attached to the Council for Christian Unity. Yet it is independent of it, lest any conclude that this commission is an agent for proselytizing. As the Pope put it during his 1986 visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome, “The Jewish religion is not

‘extrinsic’ to us, but in a certain sense is ‘intrinsic’ to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it can be said that you are our elder brothers.”

The pope’s understanding of the intimacy and distinctiveness of the Jewish-Christian relationship can be considered normative teaching of the magisterium and has now found its way into the universal *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Citing *NA* and Good Friday prayer, the *Catechism* states that “the Jewish faith, unlike other non-Christian religions, is already a response to God’s revelation in the Old Covenant” (§839).

Echoes of the Dialogue: Local and Universal Statements

Such an “echo effect” between Catholic documents can also be seen in the relationship of statements issued by local episcopal conferences (the organization of bishops in a nation) and statements of the Holy See. Thus, to interpret the latter it is often helpful to examine the former. For example, the 1973 statement of the French bishops, mentioned above, was the first to raise the theological implications of the rebirth of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. The U.S. bishops’ 1975 Statement on Catholic-Jewish Relations distilled the fuller reflections of the French bishops, and added a caveat, reflecting the American experience of certain millennial evangelical claims:

“Appreciation of this link (between the People and the State of Israel) is not to give assent to any particular religious interpretation of this bond.” The 1985 Vatican *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis* repeats the

US bishops' statement almost verbatim and, unusually, footnotes their statement explicitly. The terms "link" and "bond" are important, since they are which are sacramental terms used primarily for the sacrament of matrimony, which Catholic teaching considers unbreakable. In 1993 the Vatican signed the historic "Fundamental Agreement" with the Jewish State, noting in its preamble the implications of the diplomatic agreement for the larger effort for reconciliation between the Catholic Church and the Jewish People.

The 1985 Vatican *Notes* goes in unprecedented depth into a number of theological issues, such as typology, affirming it as a valid approach to Scripture on the one hand, yet relativizing it on the other by noting that it "only manifests the unfathomable riches of the Old Testament, its inexhaustible content." Similarly, the 2001 statement of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible" expands this statement by acknowledging the validity and significance *for Christians* of Jewish readings of common scriptural texts over the centuries and today. The Pontifical Biblical the Commission states that both Jewish and Christian traditions of interpretation may be true on "analogical" or different levels of meaning. This "layering" of statements over the years illustrates what I have called the "evolution" of Catholic magisterial tradition following the Second Vatican Council.⁵ It should be noted as well that this interrelatedness among various statements of the Holy See makes it difficult to interpret them in isolation from one another.

The *Notes* also makes explicit the ways in which Jewish liturgy has shaped Christian worship. Moreover, it recognizes the problematic nature of some New Testament passages, attributing these texts to the times and circumstances of the

evangelists rather than to Jesus himself. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops provided a framework for implementation of these two concerns regarding worship and biblical texts in two statements issued in 1988. The Committee on the Liturgy issued *God's Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching*, and the Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs published *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion*.

Continuing Controversies and Further Challenges

The Holy See's *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* (1998) has some ambiguous language that has raised many questions. In speaking of the anti-Jewish sins of the "sons and daughters of the Church," it seems to exculpate the higher levels of ecclesial leadership. In distinguishing traditional Christian anti-Judaism from modern, racial antisemitism, *We Remember* seems to deny a causal relationship between centuries of anti-Judaism and modern antisemitism. The U.S. Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, taking advantage of clarifications made by Cardinal Edward Cassidy, then president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, under whose authority *We Remember* was promulgated, issued a resource book, *Catholics Remember the Holocaust* (1998) and then a more definitive statement, *Catholic Teaching on the Shoah: Implementing the Holy See's "We Remember."* In these monographs, the bishops made clear that all Catholics on all levels, including the popes, were to be counted among Catholics who sinned against Jews over the centuries. The authors, however, were reluctant to say that the *church itself* had sinned because of the Catholic understanding that the church has a heavenly as well as an earthly dimension.

Likewise, while maintaining the distinction between traditional Christian anti-Judaism and modern racial antisemitism, the bishops acknowledged explicitly that anti-Judaism was a major cause of the development and spread of antisemitism, though by no means the sole cause:

But Christian anti-Judaism did lay the groundwork for racial, genocidal anti-Semitism by stigmatizing not only Judaism but Jews themselves for opprobrium and contempt. So the Nazi theories tragically found fertile soil in which to plant the horror of an unprecedented attempt at genocide. One way to put the ‘connectedness’ between the Christian teaching of anti-Judaism (leading to anti-Jewishness) and Nazi antisemitism is that the former is a ‘necessary cause’ to consider in explaining the development and success of the latter in the twentieth century—but not a ‘sufficient cause.’ To account for the Holocaust, one must acknowledge the historical role of Christian anti-Judaism. But Christian anti-Judaism alone does not account for the Holocaust. Semi-scientific racial theories and specific historical, ideological, economic and social realities within Germany must also be taken into account.⁶

Many issues remain unresolved. For example, although in his public lectures Walter Cardinal Kasper, current president of the Pontifical Commission on Religious Relations with Jews, speaks of “God's unrevoked covenant with his people and of the permanent and actual salvific significance of Jewish religion for its believers,” it is not clear how widely such views are shared.⁷ Moreover, the implications of that acknowledgement for other aspects of the Church’s teaching are just beginning to be debated. The limitations of some traditional theological categories were illuminated in

the discussions following the release of "Reflections on Covenant and Mission" in 2002. This dialogue document was issued by the ongoing consultation of delegates of the National Council of Synagogues and the U. S. Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, which consists of bishops, rabbis, academicians, and diocesan and denominational leaders. The Catholic section's claim that that the church, which no longer officially prays for the conversion of Jews, might best leave the sacred mystery of God's will for the Jewish people in the hands of God precipitated an intense, internal Catholic discussion that continues to the present.⁸

Rome Comes to Jerusalem

Finally, the teaching role of Pope John Paul II's gestures toward the Jews deserves mention. When assessing the official teaching of the Catholic Church on relations with Jews and Judaism, it is important to consider that John Paul II is the first bishop of Rome to visit a synagogue—and the first to pray with a Jewish congregation and listen to its rabbi expound the Scriptures (Genesis 17, the covenant with Abraham, including the promise of the land). So, too, must people take account of his visits to Auschwitz in 1979 and to Yad Vashem (Israel's Holocaust Museum) in 2000, as well as the pope's liturgy of repentance at St. Peter's in Rome on Lent's first Sunday in 2000, which expressed repentance for the sins of the church against the Jews over the centuries, culminating in the Holocaust. Addressing the Pontifical Biblical Commission at the beginning of its deliberations leading to the publication in *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (note the pronoun "their), the pope had acknowledged that "unjust and erroneous interpretations" of the New Testament,

beginning as early as the first century, had by the twentieth so “lulled the consciences of Christians” that many failed to act as Christians should act during the Shoah.

In many respects, the changes begun at Vatican II and still in process can be captured in one poignant scene in March 2000: The once robust Pope John Paul II, now an elderly and frail man, walks haltingly to the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Like thousands of Jews before him, he places a petition in one of its cracks—the text of his prayer of repentance prayed only weeks earlier at St. Peter’s Basilica. It reads:

God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your Name to the Nations We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant (Jerusalem, March 26, 2000).

Would that Jules Isaac had lived to witness this moment.

1. Claire Huchet Bishop, “A Biographical Introduction,” in Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 8.

2. Hereinafter *NA*. The title comes from the opening words in Latin of the document, “In our time.” Unless otherwise noted, all documents discussed in this chapter may be found

in one of two volumes edited by Helga Croner, *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Christian Relations and More Stepping Stones to Jewish Christian Relations* (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1977 and 1985, respectively).

3. “Deicide” is the incongruous term used to ascribe collective and perennial guilt to the Jews as a whole for the death of Jesus.
4. See E. Fisher and L. Klenicki, eds., *Spiritual Pilgrimage: Pope John Paul II: Texts on Jews and Judaism 1979-1995* (New York: Crossroad, 1995); and Fisher and Klenicki, eds., *Pope John Paul II on Jews and Judaism, 1979-1986* (Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and New York: The Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, 1987).
5. See Eugene Fisher, “The Evolution of a Tradition: From Nostra Aetate to The Notes,” in International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, eds., *Fifteen Years of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988) 239-254.
6. Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Catholic Teaching on the Shoah* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 2001), p. 10.
7. Cardinal Walter Kasper, “The Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Foundations, Progress, Difficulties and Perspectives,” Israel Museum, Jerusalem, November 21, 2001. See http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/research/cjl/articles/kasper_21_Nov_01.htm
8. For “Reflections on Covenant and Mission,” see http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/documents/interreligious/ncs_usccb120802.htm. Debate about seeking to convert Jews may be found in *America* 187/12 (October 21, 2002); cf. Avery Cardinal Dulles, “Covenant and Mission” and Mary C. Boys, Philip A. Cunningham, and John

Pawlikowski, "Theology's Sacred Obligation: A Reply to Cardinal Dulles," available at <http://www.americamagazine.org/gettext.cfm?articleTypeID=1&textID=2545&issueID=408>.

Further Reading

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