

# A Radical Challenge

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*Fr Peter Hocken, a member of the new International Theological Commission for the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, reflects on the implications of the Catholic Church's recognition of the special on-going covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people and the recent phenomena of Messianic Jews and Hebrew Catholics*

The teaching of Vatican Two on the Jewish people might seem at first sight to be a minor theological adjustment on a borderline issue. However, the more we dig into the questions that it raises, the clearer it becomes that the place of the Jewish people touches on very foundational issues such as the relationship between the two Testaments and the two covenants, the nature of the Church and the human identity of Jesus. It is then not surprising that it is taking the Catholic Church some time to work out all the implications of this remarkable transformation in understanding.

Throughout most of the Christian centuries, the Jews were seen as outside the covenant, and therefore their situation was no different theologically to that of other non-Christians. The Jews were simply objects for Christian mission and evangelisation. However, once we say with the fathers of Vatican Two that the covenant with Israel still stands, we have to rethink our approaches towards the Jewish people. We can no longer approach the Jews as no different from other non-Christians.

But what does this mean in practice? First, it has meant making dialogue the principal pattern of relationship. As the Vatican Guidelines of 1974 state: "Dialogue demands respect for the other as he is; above all, respect for his faith and his religious convictions."<sup>1</sup> As the dialogue between Catholic scholars and Jewish leaders got under way, the Catholics have been made aware of Jewish sensitivities, including their abhorrence for Christian attempts to convert Jews, which are seen as yet another attempt to destroy Judaism and the Jewish people. Newly aware of Jewish memories of forced baptisms, compulsory attendance at Catholic sermons and other forms of public humiliation, these scholars have insisted that all proselytism must be avoided.

Does this mean that it is wrong to tell the Jews about Jesus Christ? Or that it is wrong to encourage a Jew to be baptised? There is no dispute

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<sup>1</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Guidelines on Religious Relations with the Jews*, 1 December 1974, sect. I.

about the duty of any individual to follow their conscience, and thus about the right of any Jew to act on his faith who believes in conscience that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the world.

### The Significance of Jewish believers in Christ

In recent decades, there have been moves by some Catholics of Jewish origin to reaffirm their Jewishness within the Catholic Church. Thus there is now an Association of Hebrew Catholics, founded in Israel by a Carmelite, Fr Elias Friedman, but now based in Michigan, USA (website: [www.hebrewcatholic.org](http://www.hebrewcatholic.org)). These Hebrew Catholics see their patron as St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) who continued to affirm her Jewishness after her conversion to the Catholic faith. Outside the Catholic Church, the Messianic Jews go even further: they are saying that when a Jew believes in Jesus as Messiah of Israel and Son of God, not only do they not cease to be Jews but there is no need for them to join what they see as a completely Gentile Church.

This is a new debate. The existence and the claims of the Hebrew Catholics and the Messianic Jews highlight the dilemma facing the Church since Vatican Two. If the covenant of the Jewish people with the God of Abraham still holds, as the Council and the Catechism assert, then it cannot be right to persuade Jews to abandon their Jewishness, and to leave behind their culture and their history in order to join the Church. We cannot stop them doing this, if this is their choice, but we should do nothing to encourage it. This point the Catholic scholars in dialogue with the Jews see clearly, that traditional Christian evangelism of the Jews destroys Judaism and the Jewish heritage, and it should not happen any more.

But the Hebrew Catholics and the Messianic Jews insist on the right of Jewish people to hear about Jesus, one of “their own”, and in fact their own Messiah. They protest rightly against all attempts to limit the gospel of salvation in Christ to the Gentiles, as in some “two covenant” theologies saying Jews are saved by their covenant and Christians by theirs. For the New Testament witness is clear that the gospel is first for the Jews, and then for the Gentiles (Rom. 1: 16).

The Hebrew Catholics and the Messianic Jews point to the root problem as the prohibition through the centuries of explicitly Jewish expressions of the Church. This forced Jewish converts to be totally assimilated to the nations. It ensured that Christian conversion meant a destruction of Judaism and Jewishness.

### The Present Situation

However, the patterns of many centuries cannot simply be reversed overnight by new church decisions or by the desire of Jewish converts to be Jews who believe in Jesus. The Jewish authorities do not recognise these Jewish converts to Jesus as still Jews. For them, they are ex-Jews who are now Christians. To them, the Hebrew Catholics look like ordinary Catholics, and the Messianic Jews look like Evangelical Christians.

In this situation, I believe that we have to respect both the hesitations and the scepticism of the Jewish people as a whole towards all forms of “Jewish Christianity”, and the desire of contemporary Jewish believers in Jesus to live as Jews within the body of Christ. For it will take time for the deep wounds of the past to be healed, and for the Jewish believers in Jesus, both within and outside Catholic communion, to discover what it means to be both Jewish and believers in the Jewish Messiah. We can be confident that with time the Jewish believers in Jesus will be more manifestly Jewish in a way that will look different from Gentile Christianity and in a way that their fellow Jews can recognise as Jewish.

At the same time, we need to avoid simplistic formulations that attempt to sew up a logical solution – whether by a two-covenant theology saying in effect that the Jews do not need to recognise Jesus as they are saved through their own covenant or by affirming the need to evangelise Jews into the Church in a way that denies their specific covenantal status.

This article was published in the magazine Good News, november/december 2003  
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Document 0104uk tells more about Peter Hocken.

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