

# The People of the Covenant

## part one



Fr Peter Hocken, a member of the new International Theological Commission for the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, looks at how the Catholic Church has changed its teaching and understanding about the place of the Jewish people in Salvation history and the implications of this for us

One of the most remarkable changes in Catholic teaching and attitudes resulting from the Second Vatican Council concerns the Jewish people. For the first time the Catholic Church gave an authoritative teaching on this subject. The teaching corrects the exegesis and thinking that had shaped Catholic attitudes to the Jews throughout the ages. Since the Council, the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews has issued three further documents: Guidelines on Religious Relations with the Jews (1974); Notes on the Correct Way to present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church (1985) and We Remember (1998), a reflection on the Holocaust. In this first article, I will first summarise the teaching of the Council, noting how this has been developed by the Catechism of the Catholic Church and Pope John Paul II. Where the Catechism and the Pope add to the Council's teaching, these points are mentioned subsequently.

### The Teaching of Vatican Two

The teaching of the Council on the Jewish people is found in para. 4 of the Decree on Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate* (1965).

1. "The beginning of the Church's faith and election is to be found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets." (NA, 4). The Pope developed this thought when he made history by visiting the synagogue of Rome: "The Jewish religion is not "extrinsic" to us, but in a certain way 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 could be said that you are our elder brothers." The Catechism expresses this succinctly: "When she delves into her own mystery, the Church ... discovers her link with the Jewish People" (CCC, para. 839).
2. God has not rejected the Jewish people, and they remain God's chosen covenant people: "the Jews remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made." (NA, 4).
3. "Neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during [Jesus's] passion" (NA, 4). "... the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from Holy Scripture." (NA, 4). The 1985 Vatican document states: "We must in any case rid ourselves of the traditional idea of a people punished, preserved as a living argument for Christian apologetic. It remains a chosen people". "Christians and Jews have "a common spiritual heritage" (NA, 4). Thus the proper mode for relationship to further "their mutual understanding and appreciation" is dialogue (NA, 4). 5. "The Church deplores all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-semitism leveled at any time or from any source against the Jews." (NA, 4). On the contrary, there is to be a deep Christian respect for the Jewish people.

### The Catechism

The new Catechism of the Catholic Church, issued in 1994, reflects an exegesis of Scripture that recognises in a new way the Jewishness of Jesus and the first generation in the Church. Under "Jesus' temptations", we find: "Jesus fulfilled Israel's vocation perfectly: in contrast to those who had once provoked God during forty years in the desert, Christ reveals himself as God's Servant, totally obedient to the divine will." (para. 539). An important addition in the Catechism concerns the role of the Jews in the climax of salvation history. Under the striking heading, "The glorious advent of Christ, the hope of Israel", we read: "The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by 'all Israel,' for 'a hardening has come upon part of Israel in their 'unbelief' towards Jesus. ... The 'full inclusion' of the Jews in the Messiah's salvation, in the wake of 'the full number of the Gentiles,' will enable the People of God to achieve 'the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ,'" (CCC, para. 674). The Catechism notes in relation to our shared hope: "God's People of the Old Covenant and the new People of God tend towards similar goals: expectation of the coming (or the return) of the Messiah." para. 840).

### John Paul II

Pope John Paul II has given his full encouragement to this new openness towards the Jewish people. But maybe the Pope's most distinctive contribution is his call for Catholics to repent for the sins of the past. This appeal was first made in the Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (1994), repeated in the encyclical on ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995). While these documents did not specifically mention the Jewish issue, it seems that this question has impelled the Holy Father towards the call for repentance. Thus, as part of the Church's preparations for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 the Pope set up two commissions to study the Catholic treatment of the Jewish people through the ages and the Spanish Inquisition. The liturgy of repentance in St Peter's Basilica on 12th March, 2000, included this prayer:

"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." Two weeks later in Jerusalem, the Holy Father followed Jewish custom by placing this prayer in a crevice of the Western (wailing) wall. This gesture more than anything else symbolised a revolutionary change opening the door to a different future. A further article will look at some of the implications.

## Footnotes

1 A footnote refers to Rom. 11: 28 - 29. The CCC, para. 839, explicitly cites Rom. 11: 29. "for the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable".

2 See CCC, para. 597. The Catechism teaches that all sinners carry responsibility for the sufferings of Jesus (para. 598)

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This article was published in the magazine Good News, november/december 2003

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