

Lithuania Priests

Talk Six

Israel and the Unity of the Church

Many of us have been brought up on the idea that at the beginning God chose Israel, but when Jesus came he was rejected by the Jews, so God rejected the Jews and replaced Israel with the Church. This was never official teaching, but it was commonly believed. It led to many terrible things being said about the Jews, denouncing them as “Christ-killers” and so on. All that was decisively rejected at Vatican 2 and made more explicit since especially by Bl. John Paul II.

“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.” (John Paul II in Synagogue of Rome, 1986). In Buenos Aires, Cardinal Bergoglio lived out this closeness in his friendship with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, the first Pope to have a rabbi as a close friend.

Why is the Jewish faith in a certain way intrinsic to our faith as Christians? Because the whole beginnings of the Church were Jewish: the Holy Family, Jesus, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, the Twelve apostles (not only Judas), the holy women, Stephen, Barnabas and Paul. So I want to illustrate this with some reflections on Mary, the mother of Jesus and our mother in Him.

Mary is Jewish, a daughter of Israel and a daughter of Jerusalem (Cardinal Ratzinger’s book *Tochter Zion*). She is chosen to be the mother of the Messiah-Saviour: the Messiah of Israel who becomes the Saviour of the world. “He will be called Son of the Most High.” So Mary is the first believer in her Son when she totally accepts the message of the angel. Elizabeth acclaims her faith (Luke 1: 45).

In this Mary is fulfilling not just a personal call but the call of her people, the chosen people. A key element in their calling is to bring the Messiah-Saviour into the world. This calling of Israel is fulfilled and embodied in Mary. Mary’s hymn of praise after the Visitation fully recognizes this fulfillment of promises given to Israel: “He has helped his servant Israel remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers.” (Luke 1: 54 – 55). Mary is steeped in the life of her people. She has received deep into her spirit the promises given to the patriarchs. So when Elizabeth’s husband recovers his speech, he says after the birth of John: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.” (Luke 1: 68).

Here we have the beginnings of the Church, wholly within Israel, years before the call of the Twelve. It is the core of those who have believed and rejoiced in the Son born to Mary. Here we can see that Mary is the link between the two Testaments. It is through her that the Son of God receives his humanity. Her faith is totally one with her motherhood. From the moment she says Yes to the angel “Be it done unto me according to your word”, the Son of God is conceived in her womb. The faith of the Church begins with the faith of Mary. But she is representative of Israel, receiving into herself the promise made to Israel.

Let us go further. In Luke 2, we have the story of the Presentation. In Simeon's song of praise and wonder at seeing "the Christ of the Lord" he says: "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2: 31 – 32). This echoes Is. 42: 4 and 49: 4. But then he gives a prophetic word to Mary only: "This child is destined to cause the rising and the falling of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against" (Luke 2: 34). Jesus will cause Israel to be divided, between those who reject him (the origins of Judaism) and those who accept him (the origins of the Church, thus in Israel). But I want to come now to a further word Simeon gave to Mary: "And a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2: 35). Catholics have paid a lot of attention to this line, seeing in it the Mater dolorosa, who will suffer at the foot of the cross (Stabat mater), suffering in spirit as her son suffers the agonizing death of crucifixion. This is real and true. But we have forgotten the first part of Simeon's word to Mary, that her son will provoke division in Israel. Surely this is an important part of Mary's suffering: she is suffering deeply because of her Son's crucifixion, but an important dimension of this suffering is seeing her son, whom she knows to be Messiah and Son of God, being rejected by her people through their leaders. She who rejoiced at his conception over the faithfulness of God now agonizes over the unfaithfulness of her people. Mary's suffering has much in common with the anguish of Paul: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart" (Rom. 9: 2).

Mary is there with the apostles and disciples in the Upper Room waiting for the promise of the Holy Spirit. This group of 120 is wholly Jewish, the nucleus of the Church, to which non-Jewish believers will later be added. The motherhood of Mary inseparable from her faith in the message of the angel is a motherhood in the Holy Spirit. She conceives by the Holy Spirit, that is she becomes mother by the Holy Spirit. Mary as the first believer in her Son represents the Church that is totally open to the Holy Spirit. (Pope Francis on being open to the Spirit and the surprises of the Spirit.)

A paradox. Mary who is a divisive issue between Catholics and Protestants, is key to the unity of the Church. In her womb God and humanity are united through the Holy Spirit. Her grief at the foot of the cross is over the division of Israel that becomes the antagonism between the Church and the Synagogue. Here we can sense that it was significant that Vatican Two as a Council for the renewal of the Church dealt with the issue of the Jewish people (renouncing all hostility and affirming their ongoing election) and with Christian unity. Mary's heart for the unity of the body of her Son.

With the death and resurrection of Jesus, salvation spreads out to the nations. Here we need to see that salvation, reconciliation and unity always go together. They are different aspects of the one plan of God. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Cor. 5: 18 – 19). "His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two [Jew and Gentile], thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility." (Eph. 2: 15 – 16).

Renewal requires ecumenism. "Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some way it is always an "exchange of gifts". (UUS, 28). We need the gifts of the other communions, and they need ours.

With renewal of Church, the ministry of the Pope becomes more and more a service to the whole Body of Christ, not just to the Catholic Church. A big change since 1958.

John Paul II: Petrine ministry as service to unity. “With the power and the authority without which such an office would be illusory, the Bishop of Rome must ensure the communion of all the Churches. For this reason, he is the first servant of unity.” (UUS, para. 94).

Pope Francis: 1st Pope to have long-standing friendship with a rabbi; first Pope to have strong relationships (including regular prayer) with free church pastors (Evangelical and Pentecostal). Both are signs of the times.

We cannot exclude building relations with other Christian leaders from our responsibilities.

The Holy Spirit is bringing the eschatological vision back into focus: always in the liturgy but much more explicit in the Catechism. Here we come back to Israel and the Jewish people. Paul speaks in Romans 11 of the “fullness of Israel” (v. 12) and of “the fullness of the nations” (v. 25). “Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” (Luke 21: 24). Paul says in Romans 11 that in God’s providence the hardness of the Jews led to the Gospel going out to the nations (the non-Jews), so that the Gentiles make the Jews envious and they come in. “And so all Israel will be saved.” This is actually the teaching of the Church: “The glorious Messiah’s coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by all Israel” (CCC 674). Schönborn at Albert Hall. “I think the deepest wound in the Body of Christ, the unique Body of Christ, is the wound between Israel and the Gentiles. But Pope Benedict in his famous prayer for Good Friday which was so badly received but which is so profound: he said, and he wrote it himself this prayer, he said this intense prayer, ‘that the time of the time of the Gentiles may be accomplished, that the mission to the Gentiles may be accomplished, so that the fullness of Israel may re-join full salvation’. And that is what we are doing, what you are doing with Alpha. Evangelisation is the deepest desire of the Lord. That the time of the Gentiles may be accomplished – He alone knows, the Father alone knows when this will be accomplished. But it is Jesus’ great desire, only through the cross that this can be achieved”.

This process of re-reading the Scriptures in the light of God’s ongoing love for Israel is a necessary element in biblical renewal. My discovery of the total faithfulness of God.