

Israel and the Unity of the Church

Lecture for Poznan: January 18, 2016

The last two to three months have seen widespread celebration of the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the declaration of the Second Vatican Council on non-Christian religions. Probably a majority of these celebrations have been joint Jewish-Catholic events, celebrating para. 4 of *Nostra Aetate* on the Jewish people.

The hope for a break-through in Jewish-Catholic relations was triggered by the election of Pope John XXIII in October 1958 and his announcement of an Ecumenical Council in January 1959. 1960 was a key year. In June 1960, a leading Jewish historian from France, M. Jules Isaac, had an audience with Pope John during which he requested that the Church's relationship with Israel should be included in the agenda of the Council, and that false presentations of the Jewish people should be repudiated. M. Isaac had authored a book *Jésus et Israël* (1946), that questioned the dominant Christian narrative that the Jewish people had rejected the ministry of Jesus: He had published on the influence of Christianity on the rise of anti-Semitism. He had long studied the history of Christian, particularly Catholic, inculcation of contempt for the Jewish people.

Also in 1960 there were three Catholic initiatives regarding the Jewish people in the context of the preparations for the Council: (1) a petition from 19 Jesuit scholars at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome; (2) a request from the Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, USA; (3) a memorandum from the Apeldoorn group of Catholics already working for Jewish-Christian reconciliation. In the early summer of that year Pope John set up in the Vatican a Secretariat for Promoting the Union of Christians, and appointed Cardinal Augustin Bea, a German Jesuit biblical scholar, as its president. The petitions concerning a conciliar treatment of the Church relations with the Jewish people were then entrusted to

Cardinal Bea. Although associating Judaism with other Christian churches could be seen by Jews as problematic, this was in fact a wise choice. Any draft statement on the Jewish people would certainly run into strong opposition, as in fact happened. As a German, Bea was aware of the evils inflicted on the Jewish people, and as a biblical scholar, he had a deep knowledge of the Scriptures and of the Jewish world of the first century. No other office in the Vatican at that time was capable of initiating this work in a constructive way.

From the beginning of this work, two concerns were closely associated that stood in marked tension with each other. The first concern was the healing of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people. This concern expressed itself in the affirmation of respect and honour instead of contempt, in the rejection of all anti-Semitism, and in the repudiation of the charge of deicide against the entire Jewish people. The second concern was for a genuine reconciliation between the Church and the Jewish people or in the words of the Apeldoorn memorandum “a restoration of separated Israel to the unity of the one people of God.”¹ The entrusting of the Jewish issue to the office handling Christian ecumenism had the effect of linking these concerns.

In consequence, the first draft of a statement on the Jewish people was prepared as a chapter within the proposed Decree on Ecumenism. The knowledge of this preparation had two major and totally contrasting consequences. The first, very positive, was that the attention of Catholic scholars open to ecumenism was drawn to the role and significance of Israel for Christian unity. This was not something totally new. A remarkable book had been written by a French monk of the Orthodox Church while he was exiled in England during World

¹ Cited from *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 3 (ed. Herbert Vorgrimler), art on the Declaration on the relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions by John M. Oesterreicher, p. 13.

War II: *Communion in the Messiah*.² There had been some articles in the 1950s, mostly in French-speaking literature, raising this question,³ but the news from Rome triggered more interest and some more substantial writings. For example, the 2-volume work in French, *Le Problème Oecuménique*, by the French Canadian Dominican, Bernard Lambert, had a 55-page chapter entitled “Israël et la Réunion des Chrétiens: L’Église des Juifs et des Gentils”⁴. Earlier, an article by Dom Emmanuel Lanne, osb of the Monastery for Unity in Chevetogne, Belgium, had explored the significance for Christian divisions of the schism between Judah and Israel, the southern and the northern kingdoms after the death of Solomon.⁵ Both these authors, for example, highlighted the original unity between the *ecclesia ex Judaeis* and the *ecclesia ex Gentibus*, and the promise of their final coming together. In these approaches the total Jewishness of Jesus and of the mother church of Jerusalem are fundamental.

The opposed reaction was from those strongly opposed to any positive statement about the Jews. Three groupings used every tactic possible to prevent such a statement, and conducted a propaganda campaign among the Council fathers. The three groupings were (1) bishops from the majority Muslim nations, especially the Arab bishops; (2) right-wing highly conservative Catholic forces with a history of anti-Semitic phobia (among whom a leader was Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, later excommunicated and founder of the Society of St Pius X; and (3) diplomats from Islamic nations instructed to do all they could to block such a document.

² London and Redhill : The Lutterworth Press, 1942.

³ For example, Paul Démann, « Israël et l’Unité de l’Église » in *Cahiers Sioniens* (1953).

⁴ Bernard Lambert, *Le Problème Oecuménique* (Paris: Ed. du Centurion, 1962), Vol. II, 595-652.

⁵ Dom Emmanuel Lanne, osb “Notes sur la situation d’Israël par rapport aux schismes dans l’Église chrétienne”, in *1054-1954 ; L’Église et les Églises: neuf siècles de douloureuse séparation entre l’Orient et l’Occident* (Chevetogne : Éditions de Chevetogne, 1955), 67 - 86.

It became clear that the only way in which an official statement concerning the Jewish people could obtain clear majority support would be for the Council to make statements both about the Jews and about the Muslims. Thus was born *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, in which para. 3 treats of the Muslims, and the final para. 4 treats of the Jewish people.⁶ The fact that *Nostra Aetate* had its origin in a focus on the Jewish people finds significant acknowledgment in the new Vatican document issued for the declaration's 50th anniversary: "However, the fourth article of this Conciliar Declaration, which deals with a new theological relationship with Judaism, represents almost the heart of this document, in which a place is also made for the Catholic Church's relationship with other religions. The relationship with Judaism can in that sense be seen as the catalyst for the determination of the relationship with the other world religions." (para. 19).

This enforced separation of the two concerns or thrusts of Catholic interest in Israel, was necessary and providential. The healing of relationships and the building of bridges to the Jewish community required a focus on removing all the barriers possible to mutual trust and respect. This opening of the doors of dialogue with the Jewish community meant that the issue of the relevance of Israel to the unity of the Church had to disappear from view, at least for a substantial time. For Catholics to devote any attention to the *Ecclesia ex Judaeis* and their relevance for Christian unity would trigger all the deep-rooted Jewish fears about Christian motivation arising from the long history of forced or pressurized conversions and of compulsory sermons for Jews aimed at their conversion. The priority in Catholic-Jewish relations had to be the re-establishment of trust and respect between the two communities. This priority required a new humility on the Catholic side, and a willingness to discover the depth of the

⁶ *Nostra Aetate*, para. 2, treats of non-monotheistic religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

wound of the Jewish people, the depth and extent of their suffering during the centuries, often at the hands of the Catholic people and the Catholic authorities. The Catholic confession of the evils inflicted on the Jews became a necessity for healthy relationships to be formed.

Developments under St John Paul II and Francis

John Paul II made explicit what was only implicit in *Nostra Aetate*, para. 4, that God's covenant with Israel was "never revoked by God"⁷, and he refers to the Jewish people simply as "the present-day people of the Covenant concluded with Moses."⁸ The new Vatican document of December 10, 2015 "The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable" naturally upholds this teaching, but states that "it cannot be explicitly read into "Nostra aetate" (No 4)." (para. 39).

In fact, it is not possible to establish authentic relations with the Jewish community by totally ignoring the Christian claims about Jesus of Nazareth and the need of the Church to rediscover her own Jewish roots. But the Catholics involved in dialogue with the rabbis have understood this requires a real delicacy on the Catholic side and a new awareness of Jewish sensitivities. John Paul II took things deeper when he picked up on the opening phrase of *Nostra Aetate*, para. 4, *Searching her own Mystery*, "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."⁹

The new Vatican document underlines this uniqueness of the Jewish – Christian encounter: "the dialogue with Judaism occupies a unique position for Christians; Christians is by its roots connected with

⁷ Address to the Jewish community in Mainz, Germany on Nov. 17, 1980, para. 3. This statement is repeated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (para. 839).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Address of John Paul II in the synagogue of Rome, Apr. 13, 1986.

Judaism as with no other religion. Therefore the Jewish-Christian dialogue can only with reservations be termed ‘interreligious dialogue’ in the true sense” (para. 20).

Exploring more deeply the unique character of the Jewish-Christian encounter is not immediately problematic for the Jewish community, as it is an expression of profound honour and respect. But it inevitably has a less comforting and more challenging side! This challenge is in fact equally great for both parties. The Church and the synagogue have both grown accustomed over centuries to defining themselves without reference to the other. The Church has done so by means of replacement theology so that Israel has no further role as a people within the Christian view of salvation. The synagogue did so by banishing the person of Jesus-Yeshua from Jewish life, and excluding from the Jewish community any person confessing faith in Yeshua and receiving Christian baptism.

Taking up first the Jewish challenge to Christian self-understanding, we have in the new Vatican document of December 2015 another important advance on previous church statements. It contains the first explicit Catholic repudiation of replacement teaching: “On the part of many of the Church Fathers the so-called replacement theory or supersessionism steadily gained favour until in the Middle Ages it represented the standard theological foundation of the relationship with Judaism: the promises and commitments of God would no longer apply to Israel because it had not recognised Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, but had been transferred to the Church of Jesus Christ which was now the true ‘new Israel’, the new chosen people of God.” (para. 17).

This statement has great significance. It is true that the teaching on God’s covenant with Israel being irrevocable is an implicit rejection of replacement teaching. But by making this repudiation explicit, this statement acknowledges for the first time that something had gone

wrong, and had not been rightly understood in the Church of the Fathers. This failure in understanding can hardly be dismissed as a minor blemish of marginal relevance to Christian faith. We will return to this point.

The repudiation of replacement teaching requires that the Christian world purify itself from all the results of distancing itself from Israel and the Jewish people. Here the new document repeats what was recognized in the Catholic Catechism of 1993 that “Jesus is a Jew” and that “the first Christians were Jews” (para. 14), but it then draws this consequence: “One cannot understand Jesus’ teaching or that of his disciples without situating it within the Jewish horizon in the context of the living tradition of Israel; one would understand his teachings even less so if they were seen in opposition to this tradition.” (para. 14). If we are honest, we have to confess that this is a massive challenge to the way most Christians (including most Catholics) think and speak.

At the end of para. 15, we have this clear recognition of the original character of the Church: “In the early years of the Church, therefore, there were the so-called Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians, the *ecclesia ex circumcisione* and the *ecclesia ex gentibus*, one Church originating from Judaism, the other from the Gentiles, who however together constituted the one and only Church of Jesus Christ.”

Later the section headed “The Church’s mandate to evangelize in relation to Judaism,” sees this bipolar foundation as definitive for the Church: “It is and remains a qualitative definition of the Church of the New Covenant that it consists of Jews and Gentiles, even if the quantitative proportions of Jewish and Gentile Christians may initially give a different impression.” (para. 43). This is getting nearer to revealing what could be called “the great absentee” or “the ghost in the closet” in the Jewish-Christian encounter, namely the issue of

Jewish disciples of Jesus in a Jewish expression of the Church, a contemporary *ecclesia ex Judaeis*.

Here we rejoin the huge challenges to the Jewish community. Before speaking of this in more detail, it is important to salute the important and generous statement of many Orthodox rabbis “To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians,” also related to the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, but in fact issued slightly before the Vatican reflection (on December 2). This statement illustrates the great progress made on the Jewish side in their heart-attitudes towards Christians and Christianity.

Jewish disciples of Jesus and Messianic Jews

The new Vatican document is reticent here, which is wise. But by its statement that the Church of the New Covenant by definition consists of Jews and Gentiles, it raises the question of an *ecclesia ex Judaeis* today. It is another dimension of the massive historical problem we have both inherited that for many centuries Jews seeking baptism were required to renounce their Jewish identity and to cease all Jewish practices. The Church was agreeing with the rabbis that any Jew being baptized ceased to be a Jew.

At the same time as there were some initial attempts on the Catholic side to provide a Hebrew home for Jewish converts, there has been the rise of the Messianic Jewish movement. This should be seen as a congregational movement seeking to make it possible for Jews coming to faith in Yeshua to live corporately as Jewish disciples of their Messiah and Lord. There are questions as to how Jewish are the Messianic Jews, but here we must realize that this is a young movement still in gestation as they seek how to be Jewish disciples of Yeshua. This phenomenon raises big issues that ultimately neither the Churches nor the synagogue can avoid. That is why when the existence of Messianic Jews came to the attention of John Paul II, an

informal dialogue between Catholics and Messianic Jews was initiated by the then theologian to the papal household, Fr (later Cardinal) Georges Cottier, op. This dialogue was kept fairly confidential in its beginnings in the year 2000 out of concern that publicity could endanger the renewed relationships between the Church and the Jewish community. But as Cardinal Schönborn of Vienna has explained, when unexpectedly there appear communities of Jews who believe in Jesus, and seek to follow him as Jews, the Church cannot ignore such a development. This is certainly the position of Pope Francis today.

The Messianic Jews pose even bigger challenges to the Christian churches than the wider Jewish community. There are several ways of expressing these challenges, but they all arise from the existence of Jews who read and interpret the New Testament in very distinctive ways from us Christians. They face us in a way that the Jewish community in general does not with the question as to the ways replacement thinking has distorted our understanding of Jesus, of the Church, of the coming Kingdom. However, the Messianic Jews have been much influenced by Evangelical free church thinking - because it was among the Evangelicals that Christians arose who believed in the continuing validity of the Old Testament promises to Israel. So as a Catholic encountering the exegesis and teaching of Messianic Jews, which is not at all monochrome, the big questions are: 1. What in their teaching and life comes from a fidelity to the Jewish Scriptures of both Old and New Testaments and from the light of the Holy Spirit thereon? 2. What comes from Evangelical Christian sources and thinking? This requires a discernment as to what in Evangelical thinking is incompatible with Jewish thinking. For example, the Evangelical negativity towards liturgy and tradition will be immediately suspect, because to refuse liturgy and tradition is to be less Jewish.

The Messianic Jews face the Churches with the continuing relevance of the bipolar ecclesiology of the letter to the Ephesians: the one Church made up of Jews and Gentiles, who are made one while remaining Jews and Gentiles. In this way, we are being brought back to the time of Vatican Two, when the importance of Israel for Christian unity was prominent among some Catholic ecumenists.

The existence of the Messianic Jews also enables Catholics involved in the dialogue with Judaism to deal more adequately with the issues of mission to the Jews and Christian evangelism. A later section of the Vatican document deals with this question: “The Church’s mandate to evangelize in relation to Judaism” (section 6). This paragraph starts with the observation: “It is easy to understand that the so-called ‘mission to the Jews’ is a very delicate and sensitive matter for Jews because, in their eyes, it involves the very existence of the Jewish people.” (para. 40). What the document does not admit is that in the era of replacement theology Christian mission and evangelization did mean, as the Jews insisted, the destruction of Judaism. For the presupposition was that baptized Jews cease to be Jews and enter the Church of the nations. Christian talk of leaving behind a narrow ethnicity to embrace a Christian universalism could not hide the reality that conversion meant assimilation.

The new document states that “The concept of mission must be presented correctly in dialogue between Jews and Christians.” (para. 41). It then says, “Christian mission has its origin in the sending of Jesus by the Father. He gives his disciples a share in this call in relation to God’s people of Israel.” (para. 41). This is not explained in relation to an earlier acknowledgment: “God entrusted Israel with a unique mission, and he does not bring his mysterious plan of salvation for all peoples (cf 1 Tim 2,4) to fulfilment without drawing into it his first-born son’ (Ex. 4, 22).” (para. 36). Here the Orthodox monk Lev Gillet had written: “the word ‘mission,’ used in connexion with Israel,

has a twofold meaning: there is, and there ought to be, a mission of the Christian Church to Israel; but there is also a Mission of Israel to the Christian Church”.¹⁰

Nonetheless, the new document does represent some progress in regard to the Christian mission to Israel. While it confesses clearly the “universal salvific significance of Jesus Christ and consequently the universal mission of the Church ... as being of fundamental importance” (para. 40) it then says: “The Church is therefore obliged to view evangelization to Jews, who believe in the one God, in a different manner from that to people of other religions and world views.” (para. 40). This recognition requires that the Catholic Church prepare a distinct liturgy for the initiation of Jewish converts different from the current R.C. I. A., which makes minimal reference to the covenants with Israel. But the statement in this paragraph that reassures the Jewish community but has upset many Messianic Jews and some Evangelicals is the following: “this means that the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews. While there is a principled rejection of an institutional Jewish mission, Christians are nonetheless called to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews, although they should do so in a humble and sensitive manner, acknowledging that Jews are bearers of God’s Word, and particularly in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah.” (para. 40).

The Messianic Jews present us with the possibility of Jewish believers in Jesus evangelizing their fellow Jews with the aim of drawing them into a Jewish expression of *qehila* or church. At present this is not possible within the communion of the Catholic Church. An institutional mission to the Jews from within a Catholic Church without any Jewish expression of church has to be impossible.

¹⁰ Lev Gillet, *Communion in the Messiah*, p. 172.

We are dealing here with the question of how the Jewish people will come to accept Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah and Lord. Here the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that this is to be expected as an eschatological event of the last days: “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’ toward 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 fullness of Christ,’ in which ‘God may be all in all.’”(para. 674). Some Protestant Christians also hold this position. For example, a French Reformed pastor, Louis Dallière, who pioneered thinking in this area taught that the final entry of the Jews would come about by a sovereign act of God (a “coup d’état” in Dallière’s words) and not by Christian evangelism.

There is a further consideration for Catholics concerning any official evangelization of the Jews, that is not addressed in the new document. Some Catholics would argue that an institutional mission to the Jews has been rendered impossible by the history of Catholic treatment of the Jewish people and in particular by the history of forced and coerced baptisms, as well as by compulsory sermons urging conversion. Until there has been a profound repentance for this history, an official Catholic evangelization of the Jews lacks the necessary credibility.