

A Brief Overview of:

NOTES ON THE CORRECT WAY TO PRESENT JEWS AND JUDAISM IN PREACHING AND CATECHESIS IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ)

Vatican Curia | 24 June 1985

Context

This document (abbreviated title: “Notes”) was issued 24 June 1985, forty years after World War II, twenty years after Vatican II’s ground-breaking Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, and eleven years after the CRRJ’s inaugural document, the 1974 *Guidelines* for interpreting *Nostra Aetate*, 4.

The purpose of *Notes* is made clear in its Preamble: to further authentic “Catholic teaching and catechesis regarding Jews and Judaism” and serve the “thorough formation of instructors and educators” at all levels of Christian teaching. The Preamble makes clear that *Notes* is building upon prior statements in Catholic-Jewish relations, particularly *Nostra Aetate*, and also a notable 1982 address of Pope John Paul to Episcopal Conference delegates, as well as the CRRJ’s 1974 *Guidelines*.

Readability and Significance

Notes consists of six main sections, each exploring a key theme for educators. Like its 1974 predecessor, *Notes* is very readable, though somewhat longer. Issued twenty years later, one can detect how Catholic teaching is maturing in this area; the intricacies of dialogue are becoming apparent. *Notes* is frequently quoted in the Jewish-Christian dialogue today. It should be studied in the context of the Second Vatican Council and as part of a developing corpus of documentation emerging from the Catholic-Jewish dialogue up to the present day.

Content: A selection of key points

I. Religious Teaching and Judaism

Section I reiterates a number of themes from *Nostra Aetate* (the spiritual bonds and common patrimony linking Christians and Jews; repudiation of antisemitism) as well as from papal addresses and 1974 CRRJ *Guidelines* (the importance of listening to Judaism as a living tradition; of witnessing to Jesus as universal Saviour; Judaism and Christianity are not two parallel ways of salvation).

A new statement that appears in *Notes* is this: “*Because of the unique relations that exist between Christianity and Judaism . . . the Jews and Judaism should not occupy an occasional and marginal place in catechesis: their presence there is essential and should be organically integrated*” (no. 2).

Further, *Notes* highlights a remarkable theological formula articulated by Pope John Paul II (Mainz, 1980) which has since proved a catalyst for a significant development in Catholic teaching with respect to the permanent reality of the Jewish people: “*The people of God of the Old Covenant, which has never been revoked*” (no. 3).

This latter theme resonates, too, in Section VI: “[*Israel*] remains a chosen people, ‘the pure olive on which were grafted the branches of the wild olive which are the gentiles’ (John Paul II, 6 March 1982, alluding to Rm. 11:17-24).”

Notes (no. 5) calls for a clearer, nuanced understanding of pairs of ideas which express the relation between the Old and New Testament: Promise & Fulfillment; Continuity & Newness; Singularity & Universality; Uniqueness & Exemplary Nature.

II. Relations Between the Old* and New Testaments

*In a footnote, *Notes* explains: “*We continue to use the expression Old Testament because it is traditional (cf. 2 Co. 3:14) but also because ‘Old’ does not mean ‘out of date’ or ‘outworn.’*”

Section II addresses: the permanent value of the OT as a source of Christian Revelation (cf. DV, 3); the unity of Biblical Revelation; how OT and NT shed light on each other; the richness of typology, while also noting the difficulties that accompany its use.

“Christian identity and Jewish identity should be carefully distinguished in their respective reading of the Bible. But this detracts nothing from the value of the Old Testament in the Church and does nothing to hinder Christians from profiting discerningly from the traditions of Jewish reading.” (No. 6)

Christians are encouraged to identify personally with the great figures and saving events of the OT. *“Our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea (1 Cor 10:1).”*

Like *Guidelines*, *Notes* points out that the Christian view of ‘fulfilment’ in Christ has a futurist as well as a present-day component. In view of the eschatological dimension of Christianity, *“Jews and Christians meet in a comparable hope, grounded on the same promise made to Abraham”* (no. 10).

III. Jewish Roots of Christianity

Section III emphasises the Jewish identity of Jesus. *“Jesus was and always remained a Jew, his ministry was deliberately limited “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 15:24”* (no. 12).

“The Son of God is incarnate in a people and a human family (Gal 4:4; Rom 9:5)” (no. 15).

This section contains examples of how Jesus’ message and ministry were expressed in a way faithful to the Mosaic law and the traditions of his Jewish ancestors. In fact, Jesus’ beliefs and methods often resonated with Pharisaic doctrines and practices of his day. *Notes* cautions against inaccurate, wholesale negative views of the Pharisees in the Gospels, noting a number of positive or neutral references to Pharisees which are often overlooked by Christians.

The Pauline image of the “root” and the “branches” (Rom 11:16ff) tells us that Christianity originates in a Jewish milieu and in the design of God. The Church emerges as a community of Jews and Gentiles: Christian tradition speaks of *Ecclesia ex circumcisione* and *Ecclesia ex gentibus*.

IV. The Jews in the New Testament

- This section delves into the problem of negative stereotyping of Jews and Judaism through faulty interpretation of the Gospels (a topic raised briefly in the 1974 *Guidelines*).
- Repudiated is the notion that the Jewish people are collectively to blame for Jesus’ death. *Notes* reinforces the traditional Christian teaching that *“Christ in his boundless love freely underwent his passion and death because of the sins of all . . . , so that all might attain salvation”* (NA, 4).

V. The Liturgy

Starting from the common ground of a shared Scripture, this Section acknowledges the origins of Christian liturgical feasts, prayers and rituals in Judaism: e.g., the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Hours, the Eucharistic Prayer, the Our Father, and Passover itself.

VI. Judaism and Christianity in History

Section VI affirms the enduring vitality of Jewish life through the centuries to the present: *“We must remind ourselves how the permanence of Israel is accompanied by a continuous spiritual fecundity, in the rabbinical period, in the Middle Ages and in modern times.”* This statement stands as a direct, conscious correction of the “traditional idea of a people *punished*” which served Christian apologetics for many centuries. We must remember the history of Christian antagonism towards Jews, overlapping the terrible years of 1939-1945. Today, the Church firmly condemns antisemitism.

In *Notes* the question of “the land” is raised for the first time, albeit cautiously. *“Christians are invited to understand this religious attachment [of Jews to the land of their ancestors] which finds its roots in Biblical tradition, without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law.”*

Remember: at the time that *Notes* was issued, the Holy See was still eight years away from establishing formal diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. Nonetheless, in the same breath *Notes* goes on to acknowledge that *“the permanence of Israel (while so many ancient peoples have disappeared without trace) is a historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God’s design”*.

Conclusion

Notes sees its own contribution in 1985 as remedying “a painful ignorance of the history and traditions of Judaism, of which only negative aspects and often caricature seem to form part of the stock ideas of many Christians” (no. 27).

The document closes by commending practical implementation of the 1974 CRRJ *Guidelines*.

The points above are a guide to the 1985 CRRJ *Notes*, however nothing replaces a reading of the document itself. [Access it here](#) at the *Dialogika* online library (maintained by the Council of Centres on Jewish-Christian Relations and the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations of Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia).

Quotations from the 1985 *Notes* have been accessed at the [Dialogika](#) website.