

TEACHING IN A POST-NOSTRA AETATE CHURCH: THREE CENTRAL MESSAGES

It is often said that the Second Vatican Council, the great Council of reform of the 1960s inaugurated by Pope John XXIII, was a watershed moment in the history of Jewish-Christian relations. So, what did Vatican II say that was so ground-breaking? And how does it influence what is taught in Catholic schools?

Three statements are of fundamental importance:

1. Jesus the Jew and the Jewish Roots of the Church

The first relates to the Council Fathers' call to remember the Jewish roots of the Church: "Sounding the depths of the mystery which is the Church, this sacred council remembers the spiritual ties which link the people of the new covenant to the stock of Abraham" (Nostra Aetate, 4).

In doing so, we remember that Jesus was, and always remained, a Jew. As a faithful 'son of Israel' he was circumcised as a baby, raised on the stories of his ancestors, prayed Jewish prayers, celebrated Jewish festivals. As an adult he based his life and teaching on the Torah. Whatever debates he entered into with other Jews were intra-Jewish debates. He was fully a person of his Jewish first-century environment, as also were Mary, the apostles and most of the early disciples.

All this is expressive of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. As God in human form, Jesus of Nazareth was not some kind of abstract, general, neutral human being. He was Jewish.

Today the Church embraces the fact that Christianity's deepest roots lie in Judaism; that the New Testament is grounded in the divine authority of the Old Testament scriptures. These Jewish origins are significant not only as an historical backdrop, or as a 'preparatory' phase. Rather, they inform the core of Christian self-understanding. Recall that John's Gospel depicts Jesus as saying, "Salvation is from the Jews" (Jn 4:22). With its roots in Judaism, Christianity cannot live apart from the soil in which it is planted.

Pope John Paul II put it this way: "The church of Christ discovers her 'bond' with Judaism by 'searching into 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."

2. The Jews as the Beloved of God

Secondly, echoing the words of St Paul in Romans 11:28-29, Vatican II taught that "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" (Nostra Aetate, 4; Lumen Gentium, 16).

Subsequent Church documents and papal teachings illuminate the significance of this statement. No longer can the Church be viewed as simply 'replacing' Israel. Gone is the insidious 'language of contempt' whereby Jews were accused of being 'Christ-killers' rejected from God's

embrace. Rather, the Jewish people are recognised as God's beloved, as a people in a living covenantal relationship with God who never reneges on divine promises.

What is extraordinary is that, in the 1960s, in order to speak of the Jews as the beloved people of God, the Council Fathers had to reach back nearly two millennia to find an authoritative Christian text to ground their statement. This gives you some idea of how deeply entrenched were anti-Jewish attitudes and how ground-breaking the Vatican II teaching. Not since St Paul had official ecclesial documents spoken like this!

The Council's teaching has given rise to new challenges. A question for Christian scholars today is "the highly complex theological question of how Christian belief in the universal salvific significance of Jesus Christ can be combined in a coherent way with the equally clear statement of faith in the never-revoked covenant of God with Israel" (CRRJ, *Gifts and Call*, 2015). This is a profound question with which theologians continue to grapple. Meanwhile, affirmation of Jewish covenantal life can be consistently traced in official ecclesial documents in the decades since the Council. We see this most recently in the revised Vatican *Directory for Catechesis* issued (March 2020) which reaffirms that God's covenant with the Jewish people "has never been revoked (cf Rom 11:28-29) and retains its validity" (n. 348).

3. Rejection of Antisemitism

A third important statement of Vatican II was its rejection of antisemitism. Although this may strike Catholics as an 'obvious' thing to say, we need to be aware of the tragic legacy of Christian animosity towards Jews, and how confronting it is for the Church to face the fact that the Shoah (Holocaust) occurred in a Europe shaped by a long Christian tradition. The Shoah is not only part of Jewish history; shamefully, it is Christian history. Nazism, in itself, was not a Christian phenomenon; however centuries of church-sanctioned anti-Jewish attitudes helped to create the cultural conditions that allowed Nazism to emerge.

Today the Church maintains an imperative to remember these diabolical events, recognising that overcoming antisemitism is not a finished task. Pope John Paul II spoke of an "enduring call to repentance." No community can completely purge itself of two millennia of anti-Jewish influences in just fifty years. It takes time. And it requires vigilance towards the new guises under which antisemitism can reappear.

Engaging with 'Living' Judaism

As the Church today applies the teaching of Vatican II, it urges its members to engage with "living Judaism". In the Vatican's phrasing, Christians "must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience" (*Guidelines*, 1974; *Notes*, 1985). This is an important statement. It exhorts Christians to stop presuming and to start listening to and learning from present-day Jews. The Jewish religion today is not the same as ancient Judaism. Just as Christianity has evolved since the time of Jesus, so has Judaism. We cannot simply read something in the Bible and presume to know what Jews today believe and practise.

LIGHT OF TORAH

All this affects how the Catholic faith is taught. In the voice of the Vatican, “The Jews and Judaism should not occupy an occasional and marginal place in catechesis: their presence there is essential and should be organically integrated” (*Notes*, 1985). The 2020 *Directory for Catechesis* re-echoes that catechesis “must pay special attention to the Jewish religion and to the themes of Judaism”.

Finally, through its many statements, the Church acknowledges that Christians and Jews both place their hope in a future known to God. With this comes a responsibility to stand shoulder to shoulder in the task of preparing the world for God’s kingdom of justice and peace. In that task alone, there is much to unite Christians and Jews for the sake of the world.

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