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The Church's Bond with the Jewish People

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil., *Seton Hall University*



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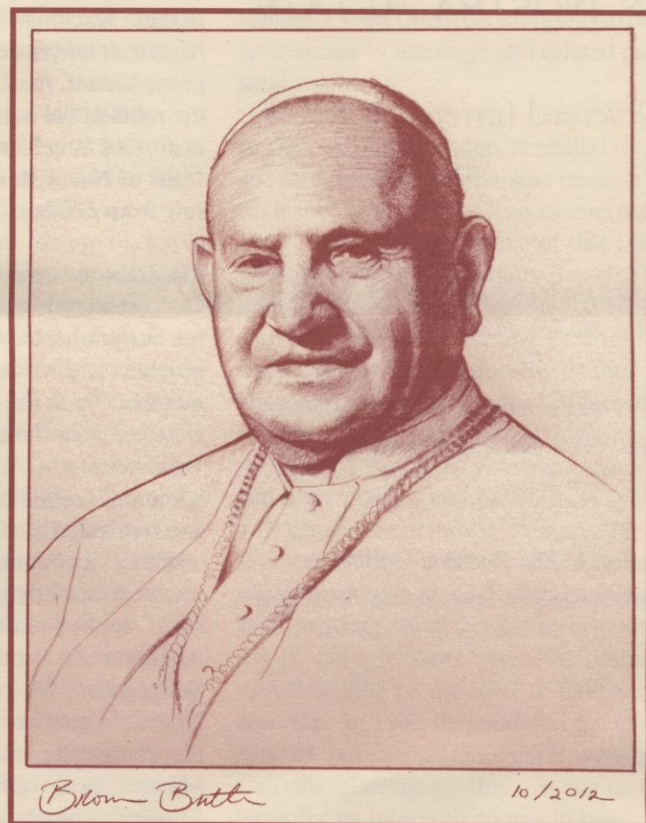


YEAR OF FAITH 2012-2013

50TH ANNIVERSARY OF VATICAN II

Illuminated by the light of this Council, the Church...will become greater in spiritual riches and...she will look to the future without fear. In fact, by bringing herself up to date where required, and by the wise organization of mutual cooperation, the Church will make individuals, families, and peoples really turn their minds to heavenly things.

Blessed John XXIII
Opening Address, Vatican II
October 11, 1962



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THE CHURCH'S BOND WITH THE JEWISH PEOPLE

UNIVERSAL AND LOCAL REFLECTIONS ON *NOSTRA AETATE*

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell,
STL, SSL, D. Phil.

Associate Professor and Chair of Jewish-Christian Studies, Department of Religion

Director of the Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies, Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey

Consultant to The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Vatican 2008-2013

AN IMPORTANT INITIATIVE

The Second Vatican Council, convoked by Pope John XXIII (1958-1963), examined the pastoral needs of the universal Church in four sessions from 1962-1965. For the first time an ecumenical council explored "The Church's Relationship to Non-Christian Religions" through its Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (NA) of October 28, 1965. The key section (NA, 4) might be called "The Church's Bond with the Jewish People," to quote Msgr. John M. Oesterreicher who founded the Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University in 1953. This and the fifteen other documents promulgated in the Council were addressed to the Catholic communities throughout the world but people of good will outside the Church also showed considerable interest in these teachings. First, the core text of *Nostra Aetate* reviewed the fact that to know herself, the Church must appreciate the roots of her self-understanding in the history of Israel since she was founded by Jesus of Nazareth who lived and died as a Jew from Galilee.

The Church is nourished by the Word of God preserved by the Jewish people in the Scriptures, the Bible of Torah, prophets and writings. The Church's members from the nations of the world are seen from the books of the New Testament to be Abraham's children by adoption, grafted onto the venerable olive tree cultivated by God himself.¹ The teaching of continuity within God's plan was expressed by the title "people of God," applied to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah through the Scriptures. "The people of God of the New Covenant" is the full title given to the Church; it complements that of "the Mystical Body of Christ" (the Messiah) in St. Paul's epistles and Pope Pius XII's encyclical of 1943.²

The Council then repudiated misinterpretations of the New Testament writings by many Christian teachers and declared that the death of Jesus must not be charged against all Jews of that time, much less the Jews in later centuries. (NA, 4) The secular press declared that "the Church absolved the Jews;" no, rather the Church proclaimed that the Jewish people as such are innocent. They had been falsely charged of deicide, of knowingly killing

the Son of God. That vicious canard should never be repeated.

Hatred, persecutions, or displays of anti-Semitism directed against Jews at any time and by any source was deplored by the Council. (NA, 4) Legislation of earlier Councils that discriminated against Jews was rejected and no form of anti-Jewish bigotry should ever be expressed again by Catholics. As Pope John Paul II declared in 1990, taking up a statement of the World Council of Churches, "anti-Semitism is a sin against God and humanity."

The text challenged priests and all teachers of religion to express the mysteries of faith without stereotypes and generalizations regarding the Jewish people, whether in preaching, in the classroom or other settings. We must learn, live and instruct the faithful in "the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ." (NA, 4). Each passage of the New Testament should be interpreted in the light of this two-fold principle. The Good News intends to purify and bring a change of heart (repentance) so that disciples of Jesus would imitate his spirit of reconciliation, the gift of God the Father to be shared in the world, generation after generation. The task has been taken up by many people of good will. May they flourish and multiply!

The Declaration offers the biblical foundation for the Church to develop an integral vision of the divine plan for humanity, initiated when God called Abram and Sarah to become a blessing for the nations.³ As St. Paul taught, all baptized into Christ become children of God and of Abraham⁴.

The Declaration then grappled with various forms of Christian anti-Jewish teaching that has led to bigotry against, and persecution of, Jews in many lands over the centuries. Although the negative contents of such preaching and catechesis were not the result of official doctrines of the Church, they were widespread and wreaked havoc on many Jewish communities. Three subsequent texts of the Holy See (in 1974, 1985 and 1998) have presented detailed guidelines for those writing catechetical texts and for teachers of faith in every part of the world. Because correct teaching must be a universal con-

cern, this work is primarily a matter for the Church's integrity; only secondarily does it touch interfaith relations. Important as these relations are, the correct appreciation of Judaism must be conveyed with more profound reasons than merely to show good will between neighbors.

As Catholics, whether theologians and pastors or those in the congregation wishing to deepen our understanding of the Bible and liturgy, we can learn much from those Jews who know their traditions well. The riches of each spiritual heritage can be enhanced by exploration of the Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament) together, searching for "the mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit of above all biblical and theological studies, and of brotherly dialogue" (NA, 4). Before the Council this shared research and reflection on the Bible was already taking place in several universities; in the 1970s and later many Catholic institutions of higher learning brought Jewish teachers into seminars and undergraduate programs. Seton Hall University sponsored the first graduate program focused on the history of Christian-Jewish relations, drawing on biblical heritage to promote a new era of mutual understanding as a basis for amity and collaboration.

RESPONSES IN NEW JERSEY

Even before the Council, many religious and ethnic communities in New Jersey tried to function as enclosed enclaves to preserve their historic traditions. Among other benefits, this tended to promote marriage within the group. This is the hope of every religious community and should be promoted along with the continuing education into adulthood of all adherents to a faith and its traditions.

Unfortunately members of these isolated units often failed to notice prejudice and bigotry except when it was against their own. However, unlike many of the European cultures from which they came, the various communities of Christians and Jews in the United States sensed that values promoted by the larger society allowed for an atmosphere wherein people could work together on many levels while preserving their own identity. As the National Conference of Christians and Jews and other organizations advocated "Brotherhood Week," some Protestants

In her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism directed against Jews at any time and by anyone. (*Nostra Aetate*, 4)

and Reform Jews felt safe to discuss topics that related to faith and practice. A few Catholics became involved in these exchanges. Father John M. Oesterreicher soon lectured on the Jewish roots of Christian faith to appreciative audiences nationwide. They came, he insisted, not because of the speaker, but because many were thirsting for the insights offered by a fresh look at the biblical heritage shared by Jews and Christians.

In the Archdiocese of Newark, the "brotherly dialogue" recommended by the Council fathers led to many exchanges on a regular basis from the late 1960s. The theological dialogue begun with Rabbis Joachim Prinz, David Panitz, Eli Pilchik, Barry Friedman and Gerald Meister became a regular feature of Seton Hall University's curriculum when Rabbi Asher Finkel joined the faculty of the Master's Program in Jewish-Christian Studies in 1975.

A few years later, through the efforts of Msgr. John Gilchrist and the leaders of two local Jewish organizations, "living room dialogue" brought Catholics and Jews together to explore a variety of topics. Progress on the international level, especially the *Fundamental Accord between the Holy See and the State of Israel* on December 30, 1993, brought joy to all. When diplomatic relations were placed on the highest level with the exchange of ambassadors, a local Jewish leader asked: "What else do we have to dialogue about?" My reply was that, after several points of tension were removed, we can begin to explore deeper questions regarding the life of faith and religious practice. A good beginning is to have Jewish teachers explain the developments from the biblical heritage into Jewish practices regarding prayer and its symbols. This will allow Christians to appreciate the meaning of the instruments whose exaggeration was criticized by Jesus.⁵ Also, we should together learn how to grapple with the challenges facing

everyone in our world, from local issues regarding justice and harmony to international peace.

At the turn of the millennium Rabbi Jack Bemporad, founder of the Center for Interreligious Understanding, now in Carlstadt, NJ, and colleagues nationwide responded to the Holy See's call for theological dialogue by founding the Rabbinic Committee for Interreligious Dialogue. In the United States their work included seminars with Christian clergy to explore approaches to marriage and related pastoral issues.

In the past, some leaders hesitated to encourage interfaith dialogue because such socializing might lead to intermarriage. However, the source of that challenge in this country usually lies elsewhere. Young people meeting on secular campuses often fail to bring their faith seriously into the relationship as they choose a marriage partner. Leaders in all religious communities work to strengthen the faith of their own younger generation and hope that a common spiritual heritage will deepen their resolve to marry for a lifetime. When interfaith marriages take place the couple should be assisted in their ongoing effort to explore how shared values can contribute toward mutual understanding on the level of faith and practice. In 1983 the Archdiocese of Newark published "Guidelines for Jewish-Catholic Marriages;" this text can be the basis for an interfaith couple to begin a serious preparation for marriage.

INSIGHTS FOR WORSHIP AND PRAYER

Every culture has strengths and weaknesses in its effort to provide happiness for its adherents. People should frequently step back and evaluate the courses of influence on their lives. This should be a dimension of personal and community prayer. Those who draw upon the Bible for guidance toward spiritual ideals will be able to test the way the culture in which they live is shaping their decisions and their attitudes.

Because the Bible is the record of approximately two millennia of traditions and documents, a set of interpretative principles is essential for the balanced understanding of its message on a great variety of questions. Over the two millennia of Christianity, the teaching authority of the Church is of fundamental importance to the faithful for application of biblical insights regarding spiritual and moral issues. Just as immigrants are able to compare the approach to life's challenges from two cultural experiences, so Christians should consider that they are "bi-cultural." At times, North American culture and its politicians and pundits will use traditional and even explicitly biblical terms to describe their ideas and ideals. But do these viewpoints resonate well with the *content* of the biblical vision?

To be bi-cultural in this sense requires that adults are familiar (in the best sense) with the Bible and its interpretation in the life of the Church. For the liturgical worship of the Church to have a deep effect on the faithful, "it is necessary to promote that warm and living love for Sunday Scripture to which the venerable tradition of both Eastern and Western rites give testimony." (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 24) We take for granted that the three-year cycle of Sunday Scripture reading almost always begins with a passage from the Jewish Scripture, but this was one of the changes initiated by the Council. "The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided at the table of God's Word." (SC, 51) Much has been offered for those who participate in the Sunday eucharistic liturgy week after week, and even more for those who also come to the weekday Mass. However, preparation for the liturgy by personal or group study should enhance the congregation's awareness of the context for the selection of texts each week.

Dom Hubert von Zeller, OSB, noted that "more has gone into the Scripture than man will ever take out of it." Prayerful immersion in the Bible by individuals and families on a daily basis will enable them to hear God's word in liturgical worship on a deeper level as the cycle of readings recur after three years. Progressively they will be able to apply its principles to life as a congregation and as individuals or families.

OUR JEWISH NEIGHBORS

Word on Worship published my essay, "The Church and the Jews in the Liturgy" in Spring 2009⁶ in which I discussed several points regarding the Church's teaching during Lent and the Easter Triduum. Now I wish to reflect on another perspective of the Council's Declaration concerning the Jewish people. "The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: 'Theirs is the sonship and the glory, the covenants and the giving of the Law, the worship and the promises; theirs the Patriarchs and from them is the Christ (Messiah) according to the flesh.'" (NA, 4)

The list of seven privileges of the Israelites is part of St. Paul's extensive reflection on the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people about AD 57-58, a generation after the Death-and-Resurrection of Jesus. The Greek text is a sentence without a verb, which indicates the present tense. This means that, in spite of the rejection of Jesus' claim to be the Messiah (the Anointed One) and the Son of God, the Jews still have a role in the divine plan. They are the firstborn children of God⁸ with the vocation of manifesting divine glory, i.e., God's impressive, illuminating presence. The covenants, both unilateral (with Abraham) and bilateral (through Moses at Mount Sinai) provide the foundation for the gift of the Torah (Law) and for worship in the context of Abraham's and Isaac's obedience⁹ and with orientation toward divine promises.

Had some Christians forgotten that Jesus of Nazareth was born of a Jewish Mother? St. Paul reminded the Galatian Christians that "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law."¹⁰ From the perilous times of the early Church, a number of important teachers saw the Jews as competitors for converts, so they portrayed them as obtuse, stubborn and blind to the Gospel and the Church's teaching. These and even harsher caricatures of Jewish beliefs and practices were part of a two-sided polemic that served only to alienate the communities that draw upon the same Sacred Scriptures (the Old Testament for Christians).

After the French Revolution, those Jews in France and elsewhere who ventured

beyond their close-knit communities would have encountered such stereotypes on the part of Christians so they sought the company of Deists and others alienated from traditional Christianity. Then came the terrible persecution instigated by Nazi neo-pagan ideology which perpetuated anti-Jewish attacks from all earlier cultures. From the ashes of this devastating war against the Jewish people Christians heard a call to appreciate the fidelity of so many Jews to our biblical heritage. We can learn from each other to draw upon the Word of God to grapple with the challenges of our age.

CONCLUSION

During his long pontificate Blessed Pope John Paul II exerted an enormous, positive influence on Catholic-Jewish relations. We have only begun to analyze and apply his teachings to the faith and practice of Catholics. A great tool for this work is the book edited by Dr. Eugene Fisher and Rabbi Leon Klenicki, *The Saint for Shalom: How Pope John Paul II Transformed Catholic-Jewish Relations* (New York: Crossroads, 2011). In his "Reflections on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Uprising of the Warsaw Ghetto" (April 6, 1993) Blessed John Paul II wrote:

As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing for the world. (cf. Gen 12:2ff) This is the common task awaiting us, Christians and Jews, to be first a blessing to one another." (see Matthew 5:9)

As Catholics take up this challenge we can be assured that we will be enriched spiritually and will be beneficiaries of the blessing promised to all peacemakers, imitators of the God who creates peace.

¹ see Romans 11:17-24

² "On the Mystical Body of Christ" (*Mystici Corporis Christi*)

³ Genesis 12:1-3; 17:1-8

⁴ Galatians 3:26-29 ⁵ Matthew 23:5

⁶ *Word on Worship*, Volume 26, No. 2

⁷ Romans 9:4-5

⁸ Exodus 4:22

⁹ Genesis 22

¹⁰ Galatians 4:4