

## I rapporti fra i Cristiani e gli Ebrei

### Two Challenging Events

I want to begin by mentioning two major developments in the history of the Catholic Church in modern times. The first is the remarkable change in our Catholic understanding, stemming from the decree *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council. The second is Pope John Paul II's call for a confession of the sins of Catholics through the centuries, particularly sins against unity and sins of violence. Both of these changes are epoch-making developments of a significance that it is hard to exaggerate. Both will take generations for the Church to penetrate fully their significance.

Before the Second Vatican Council, there was no official teaching on the status of the Jewish people. The negative attitudes of centuries have been repudiated in recognition that God has not rejected the Jewish people, who are not to be seen as accursed and as guilty of deicide. This change cannot be regarded as belonging to a peripheral topic, something on the fringes of our Catholic faith. Already in *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*, it was recognised that the relations with the Jews belong within the unity of God's covenant people, not outside the covenant like relations with other non-Christian religions.<sup>1</sup> During his historic visit to the synagogue of Rome in 1986, the Holy Father further developed this teaching, saying that "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. You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers."<sup>2</sup> The Pope is saying that our relationship with the Jewish people touches our identity as Christians.<sup>3</sup> We are being challenged to enter into a new understanding of precisely who we are as Christians, as Church, and that in relation to the Jewish people.

Likewise with the remarkable initiatives for repentance of Pope John Paul II, which are without precedent in the history of the Church. It would seem that this call to repentance within the Church has been brought about above all by the deep challenge posed by the Shoah. For the worst features of Christian history – worst both as to the evils perpetrated and as to their duration and extent – concern the treatment of the Jewish people. This link between Catholic repentance and the Jewish people was dramatically symbolised last year when during his visit to Israel the Holy Father placed in the "Wailing Wall" a copy of the prayer of repentance made at the penitential liturgy in St Peter's, Rome only two weeks before.

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<sup>1</sup> Some ecumenical scholars and theologians were emphasising that the original division was between the Church and the synagogue. "Au regard du plan de Dieu la réconciliation fondamentale n'est pas entre orthodoxes, catholiques, protestants et anglicans, mais entre Juifs et Gentils, entre Juifs et chrétiens. Ce dont il s'agit, c'est bien de l'Oikumené dans les deux parts constitutives de son unité; c'est bien de l'économie du salut dans la continuité des grands événements eschatologiques; et c'est bien de la réconciliation entre les deux aspects de l'élection: l'élection par nature et l'élection par grâce." (Bernard Lambert *Le Problème Oecuménique*, [Paris: Centurion, 1962] Vol. II, p. 600). It is for this reason that relations with the Jewish people come under the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity not under that for Non-Christian Religions.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene J. Fisher & Leon Klenicki (comp.), *Spiritual Pilgrimage: Texts on Jews and Judaism 1979-1995* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> On the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Holy Father said, "The Catholic Church is always prepared with the help of God's grace to revise and renew whatever in her attitudes and ways of expression happens to conform less with her own identity, founded upon the word of God, the Old and New Testament, as read in the Church." (Fisher & Klenicki, p. 55).

## The Mystery of Christ

I want to suggest that the term *mystery* is central to the theme of Kairos 2001. The relations of Jew and Gentile belong to the sphere of revealed mystery. There is no mystery in the past attitudes of rejection and contempt. Respect and love for the Jewish people can only arise from penetration of the mystery of covenant-election. In the New Testament, the term *mysterion* is a key word in the teaching of the apostle Paul. *Mysterion* describes the eternal plan of God hidden from before all creation, but now revealed in Christ to the saints through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 16: 25 – 26; Eph. 1: 9 – 10; Eph. 3: 9; Col. 1: 26). The mystery is centred on Jesus the Christ – it is the “mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3: 4; Col. 2: 3) - and on the recapitulation of all things in him (Eph. 1: 9 – 10, 22 – 23). It embraces the relationship of Jew and Gentile within the Church, the body of Christ (Eph. 3: 4 - 6), the role of Israel in the fulness of salvation (Rom. 11: 25), the indwelling of Christ in the Church (“Christ in you, the hope of glory” Col. 1: 27), and our future transformation in the resurrection of the body (1 Cor. 15: 51).

Nearly all of the important efforts made by Christians to show our deep bonds with the Jewish people have focused on the roots of the new covenant in the covenant with Israel. Out of deference to our Jewish brothers and sisters, and with an increasing sensitivity to their suffering through most of the Christian centuries, we have not addressed these issues specifically in Christ, in the Messiah. But as the passages in which St Paul speaks of the mystery of Christ-Messiah indicate, the death and resurrection of Jesus has had profound implications for the relationship of Jew and Gentile. We cannot ignore this dimension of divine revelation, although we need to learn how to receive it in a way that is respectful of all our Jewish brothers and sisters who do not acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah.

I want to thank the organisers of this conference for having had the courage to address this dimension of the relationship of Jew and Gentile within the new covenant, which is directly raised by the invitation of a Messianic Jew. As we shall discover, there is a much deeper challenge here because it touches more directly on our identity as Church, as Christians.

The challenge is most explicitly formulated in the teaching of Ephesians, in particular from chapter 2, verse 14 to chapter 3, verse 6. It is Jesus the Christ who has “made us both one” (2: 14), that is to say, those “who were far off”, the Gentiles, and “those who are near”, the Jews. This one-ing is realised through the cross (“and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross” 2: 16), so that there might be “one new man in place of the two” (2: 15). This making one is not to be understood as an abolition of the identity of Jew and Gentile, any more than marriage abolishes the identity of man and woman<sup>4</sup>. The making one that does not abolish the differences is made clear from the first verses of Ephesians 3. “When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Messiah, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Messiah Jesus through the gospel.” (Eph. 3: 4 – 6). The associational (ingrafting) character of the reconciliation is especially clear in the Greek, where it is said that the Gentiles are made *synkleronoma*, *sysstoma* and *symmetocha*, . That is to say, we Gentile Christians become heirs, members and sharers of something Jewish. This is totally in line with the prophecy of Jeremiah that the coming covenant would be made with the people of Israel: “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.” (Jer. 31: 33).

This passage from Ephesians 3 clearly has implications for our understanding of the unity of the Church. For this passage is speaking of Gentiles being added to the Jewish body, evidently referring to Jewish believers in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. The same teaching concerning the insertion of Gentiles into a Jewish reality is found with different imagery in

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<sup>4</sup> See Gal. 3: 28.

Romans 11: 17 – 24, that speaks of the ingrafting of wild olive branches into the trunk of the natural olive tree.

### Divisions among God's People

The Ephesians image of the “two made one” that constitutes the unity of the Church confirms the view that the first schism was between the Church and the synagogue. However it is not always noticed that the schism between the Church and the synagogue has two distinct components. The first was the decision of the rabbis at Yavneh to exclude from the synagogue all who confessed Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah. In New Testament terms, this was a schism within Israel. The second schism was the exclusion from the Church of an explicitly Jewish witness to Jesus of Nazareth. This was a schism within the Church. These two schisms through their respective rejections made possible the idea that Judaism and Christianity are totally distinct faiths or religions.

The first schism happened at an identifiable moment towards the end of the first century of the Christian era. The second cannot be assigned to a particular date. The rejection of the Jewish expression of the Church went through various stages, including the intermediate phase, found for example in Justin Martyr, of permitting a Jewish expression but regarding it as a concession to weakness. Far from honouring the church of the circumcision as the “root”, this was to assign it an inferior and marginal role. If one date has a symbolic significance in this second schism, it would be 325, the year of the First Council of Nicaea, the year when the Emperor Constantine decreed a universal date for the celebration of Easter in terms that were highly offensive to the Jewish people. It should be noted that there were no representatives of the Jewish Church present at Nicaea. The fact that this did not seem to have regarded as abnormal shows the extent to which a replacement or substitution view of the Church and Israel had taken hold.

The call to repentance requires that we Catholics – as well as the Orthodox – examine this history of the first centuries so as to identify more clearly the anti-Jewish measures and teaching that developed, and how this contributed to the establishment of anti-semitic mentalities in the Church. The exclusion of Jewish identity and practice from the Church was associated with a denigration of contemporary Judaism.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the Church's later attitude towards the Jewish people cannot be historically separated from this rejection of the Jewish expression of the Church. But the Church was preserved from a rejection of the Old Testament, as Marcion urged; and the greatest Jewish influence that remained was embedded in the ancient liturgies of the Church.

### The Contemporary Messianic Jewish Movement

It is in the light of these two schisms at the origins of the Church that we need to reflect on the contemporary phenomenon of Jewish believers in Jesus as the Messiah claiming the right to form a corporate Jewish expression of Church. The most vocal instance are those known as “Messianic Jews” – of which we have a representative here in the person of Dr Vladimir Pikman of Berlin. What characterises this movement is not the fact of Jews becoming believers in Jesus of Nazareth, which has happened in all centuries of the Church's existence, but their insistence that it is wrong to impose upon them the requirement to become like the Gentiles when they believe in their own Messiah. With this goes the necessary demand that they be able to form their own assemblies so as to live corporately as Jewish believers in Jesus, who live and worship as “Messianic” Jews.

We can see something similar though more modest in the rise of groupings of Hebrew Catholics, seeking a way within the communion of the Catholic Church to live and celebrate their faith as those who still belong to the Jewish people. These Hebrew Catholics have

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<sup>5</sup> A Messianic Jewish leader in Israel has said that the greatest wrong of the Church against the Jewish people has been the gentilising of Jewish followers of Jesus (Gershon Nerel “The Authoritative Bible and Jewish Believers” *Messianic Jewish Life* LXXIII/4, Oct. – Dec. 2000, p. 30).

received great encouragement from the canonisation of St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), who always continued to affirm her Jewishness within the Catholic Church. However, these Jewish Catholics do not have the same freedom within the Catholic structure of authority as the Messianic Jews have to create new Jewish forms of liturgy and congregational life.

How should we as Catholics respond to these new developments? First, the questions about the original schisms are matters of biblical exegesis and historical investigation. The recent declarations by the magisterium of the Church that the covenant with Israel was not revoked form a recognition that the New Testament data about the Church and Israel had not been correctly understood by Catholic preachers and theologians through the ages.

Secondly, these developments among Jewish people touch our understanding of eschatology, for the recovery of a Jewish expression is inseparable from a strong living hope for the coming of the Messiah. This eschatological significance is already recognised in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 674. “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.’”<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, I think it would be a mistake to regard the organisational autonomy of the Messianic Jews as just another schismatic act. From the angle of the different Christian confessions, their independence may be seen as a breaking of communion. However, from the angle of God’s covenant with the Jewish people, it can be understood in terms of covenantal loyalty and obedience in a way that is different from the formation of new denominations in Evangelical Protestantism.

Fourthly, we have to recognise that the existence and the claims of Messianic Jews are shocking and painful to the Jewish community in general. We have here to steer a path between political correctness and naïve enthusiasm. The politically correct would act as though Messianic Jews don’t exist, simply accepting what the wider Jewish community says about them, which is of course not very positive. The naïve enthusiast would accept the Messianic Jews at their own estimate without considering the difficulties involved in a restoration that leaps over the many intervening centuries, and without concern for the pained reactions of the wider Jewish community.

Fifthly, I believe that the Catholic Church could recognise the legitimacy of the Messianic Jewish claim that a Jewish expression of the Church should be restored; but it would be much more difficult for the Catholic Church to recognise the Messianic Jews in their present form as simply the resurrected Church of the circumcision. This is for several reasons: first, there are many Jewish believers who value their Jewishness within the historic Churches, often in a hidden way, significantly including the Russian Orthodox Church<sup>7</sup>. One cannot simply exclude them from the Jewish expression. Then, while there has been a steady growth in the number of Messianic Jews, there is the question of their own unity. Some Messianic Jews I know well recognise that despite the strong bonds of their common Jewishness, they do not have an organic unity, such as they recognise in the Church of the Acts of the Apostles. I think this is perhaps where we Catholics would raise the question of sacraments and liturgy, especially the eucharist, and the question of apostolic succession.

#### Sensitivity to the Wider Jewish Community

If we are to address the place of the Jew within the new covenant of Jesus, as I believe we must, then we also need to ask how to do this in a way that is not needlessly insensitive to the

<sup>6</sup> A compendium of quotations from Rom. 11: 12, 25, Eph. 4: 13 and 1 Cor. 15: 28.

<sup>7</sup> One of the most influential figures in Russian Orthodoxy in modern times, the late Fr Aleksandr Men, was one of these “Hebrew Orthodox”.

wider Jewish community. In particular, we have to ask why the conversion and baptism of Jews to faith in Jesus is such a painful subject for the Jewish community. For many centuries conversion of Jews to Christianity and their baptism were experienced as aggression and oppression, an aggression by those who held all the power against the defenceless, an oppression moreover that threatened the existence of their people. The enforced assimilation of Jewish converts to Gentile ways ensured that conversion would deplete and ultimately destroy the Jewish people. The memories evoked are of forced baptisms, of the choice between expulsion from city or nation and baptism, of compulsory attendance at Christian preaching. These memories are closely allied to the memories of massacres and pogroms, which increased the pressure to convert and assimilate. They are closely linked to memories of violent mobs, perhaps aroused by anti-Semitic preaching.

Lest we should think that these Jewish memories concern merely occasional outbursts involving a small number of Jews, we should recall that in 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain, approximately 600,000 of the Jewish population of 900,000 (about 10% of the whole population) were baptised, and became known as the “new Christians”. Within 50 years of the start of mass baptisms of Jews in Spain, these “new Christians” or Marranos were being constantly harassed to detect whether they were continuing secretly to observe any Jewish rites and practices. This would seem to be one of the most shameful periods of Christian history. It illustrates all too vividly how sin begets sin: the sin of forcing conversion leads to the sin of harassing the dubious convert.

The image of Christian baptism and conversion is also linked in Jewish memory with the enforced removal from Jewish families of children secretly baptised by a Christian nurse or housemaid, of which the most celebrated instance was the Mortara case in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Italy.

If the call to repentance issued by Pope John Paul II is to bear lasting fruit, it will have to address these painful episodes in the history of the Church in a way that is not abstract and evasive. If we are to say to the Jewish people, as I think we must, that converted and baptised Jews have a right to express their faith in Jesus of Nazareth in a Jewish manner, we have to show that we abhor from the depths of our hearts the forced conversions, and all the other oppressive features of Christian contempt and superiority.

### The Challenge to the Messianic Jewish Community

There are also – inevitably – challenges to the Messianic Jewish community. These challenges are very different to those already mentioned, which are challenges to long-standing and deep-rooted patterns of behaviour and thought. With the Messianic Jews, we face a very young movement that is in the process of discovering its calling and creating its own forms of worship, teaching, leadership and association.

The Messianic Jewish movement has been strongly influenced by Evangelical Protestantism. This influence should not necessarily be evaluated by Catholics in negative terms. There are most importantly the positive features of God’s grace among the Evangelicals: the emphasis on personal conversion, the centrality of the cross, the love of the Scriptures, the importance of intercessory prayer. This closeness of spirit between Messianic Jews and many Evangelical Christians is not surprising, seeing that Evangelical Christians were among the first to reject replacement teaching, and almost alone in the Christian world to take seriously the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the return of the Jewish people to the land. However, Catholics who know the Messianic Jews are naturally sensitive to what we would regard as the less positive aspects of Evangelical theology: in particular their negativity towards tradition, institutional religion and ritual. These negative attitudes make it more difficult for Messianic Jews to be authentically Jewish. For Jewish identity is to be a son or daughter of Abraham, having a genealogy; Judaism is inherently the faith of a people with their own institutions, and it is inherently liturgical. The tension between this aspect of Evangelical theology and their Jewishness is leading many Messianic Jews to rethink some of these attitudes. One result of these Evangelical influences is that rabbinic Judaism is often

perceived very negatively by Messianic Jews – as religious tradition. Not only does this make some Messianic Jewish utterances unnecessarily offensive to those with a love for the Jewish heritage, but it reflects mentalities that come out of a Western Gentile logic rather than from anything authentically Jewish.

Unlike the Hebrew Catholics, who are not at all evangelistic, the Messianic Jews have the Evangelical spirit for evangelism, particularly of their fellow Jews. This can hardly be rejected in principle, however difficult this is for the Jewish community to accept. But like many Evangelicals, Messianic Jews are not always sensitive to the proselytism issue, that is to the difference between a legitimate proclamation of the gospel and one that violates human dignity and exploits human weakness. The Roman Catholic – Pentecostal dialogue has produced an important report on *Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness*: some of its warnings against proselytism have an application in regard to Messianic Jewish evangelism of their fellow Jews, particularly perhaps as to how they speak of Judaism and of the rabbinic heritage.<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusion

The thrust of this paper is that the right relationship between Christians and Jews is a very complex issue that cannot avoid the issue of Jewish – Gentile relations within the Church, and that this issue poses an immense challenge to everyone: to the Church and to the Jewish people, but also to the Messianic Jews. To the Church, it is ultimately the challenge to be liberated from all forms of what the Italian Jesuit scholar, Fr Francesco Rossi de Gasperis, has called “auto-sufficienza sostitutiva”<sup>9</sup>.

Finally, I want to ask whether there is an order, perhaps an order of charity, in which these challenges need to be addressed. There would seem to be a strong argument for the Church having to face this challenge first. This is for two reasons: one the depth and extent of the Christian sin, the other our position of power and influence through the centuries of maltreatment of the Jews. We can only expect the Jewish people to be able to recognise the Jewish element within the Church when a deep repentance produces a real honouring of the Jewish element that was not honoured in the early centuries. In a somewhat similar way, the Messianic Jews also need to hear the Catholic (and Orthodox) repentance.

These challenges will be humbling for everyone, but especially for the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches. This is not only because all repentance involves a humbling, but because our sins against the Jewish people represent a long history of arrogance. The whole teaching of replacement – that the Church has replaced Israel as God’s chosen covenant people – is

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<sup>8</sup> The report lists the following as unethical activities:

- all ways of promoting our own community of faith that are intellectually dishonest, such as contrasting an ideal presentation of our own community with the weaknesses of another Christian community;
- all intellectual laziness and culpable ignorance that neglects readily accessible knowledge of the other’s tradition;
- every wilful misinterpretation of the beliefs and practices of other Christian communities;
- every form of force, coercion, compulsion, mockery or intimidation of a personal, psychological, physical, moral, social, economic, religious or political nature;
- every form of cajolery or manipulation, including the exaggerations of biblical promises, because these distortions do not respect the dignity of persons and their freedom to make their own choices;
- every abuse of mass media in a way that is disrespectful of another faith and manipulative of the audience;
- all unwarranted judgments or acts which raise suspicions about the sincerity of others;
- all competitive evangelization focused against other Christian bodies (cf. Rom. 15: 20).” (*Information Service of P. C. P. C. U.* no. 97, 1998: I – II, para. 93, p. 49).

<sup>9</sup> Francesco Rossi de Gasperis, *Cominciando da Gerusalemme* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1997), p. 456.

horrendously arrogant. It seems that the apostle Paul already had some sense of this danger: for in the last part of Romans 11, he warns three times against Gentile arrogance (“do not boast over the branches” v. 18; “So do not become proud, but stand in awe.” v. 20; “Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery” v. 25). The humbling means in some way recognising the prior and the first place of the Jew: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Rom. 1: 16).

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