

Talk 5

The Nerve Issue of the Jewish People

What caused the Church to address the issue of the Jews at Vatican Two? Above all, it was the Holocaust, with the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis. As the full horror of this massacre became known, it faced all the Christian Churches with a big question? Could this have happened without the long history of anti-Jewish preaching, of the teaching that God had rejected the Jews, that they were “God-killers”, etc?

How is it that, for the first time in history, a Council of the Church came to address theologically the question of the Jewish people and their place in God’s plan? The short answer is Pope John XXIII. During his service as apostolic delegate in Bulgaria and in Istanbul, he had experienced at first hand the sufferings of the Jews under Nazi tyranny. When details of deportations and other atrocities were reported, Archbishop Roncalli never delegated these matters, but took action himself. He risked his reputation and position by providing thousands of Turkish visas, ‘temporary’ baptismal certificates and immigration documents to Jews seeking to flee the Nazi extermination machine. It is estimated that Archbishop Roncalli issued as many as 80,000 documents to needy Jews, thus helping to save many lives.

Probably decisive for the Pope was a visit paid to the Vatican in June 1960 by a leading Jewish historian from France, Jules Isaac. Monsieur Isaac presented John XXIII with a dossier concerned with the correction of anti-Jewish elements in Christian teaching. By this time, the Pope had received at least two requests from Catholic scholars along the same line¹. Only three months later in September 1960, the Pope commissioned Cardinal Bea in his capacity as President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity to prepare a theological document on the relationship between the Church and the people of Israel. Such a task had never been undertaken before.

In the Decree *Nostra Aetate*, para. 4 on the Jews, the Church taught:

As this Sacred Synod searches into the mystery of the Church it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham’s stock.

Thus the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God’s saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among

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the Patriarchs, Moses and the Prophets². She professes that all who believe in Christ – Abraham’s sons according to faith – are included in the same Patriarch’s call, and likewise that the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people’s exodus from the land of bondage. The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His Inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles. Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross Christ Our Peace reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making both one in Himself.

The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: ‘theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenant and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh.’ (Rom 9: 4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary. She also recalls that the Apostles, the Church’s mainstay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ’s Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.

As Holy Scripture testifies, Jerusalem did not recognise the time of her visitation, nor did the Jews, in large number, accept the Gospel; indeed not a few opposed its spreading. Nevertheless, God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues – such is the witness of the Apostle. In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle, the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and ‘serve him shoulder to shoulder’ (Zeph. 3: 9).

Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this Sacred Synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion **cannot be charged against all the Jews**, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, **the Jews should not be presented as rejected by God or accursed, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures**. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.

² “When she delves into her own mystery, the Church, the People of God in the New Covenant, discovers her link with the Jewish people, ‘the first to hear the Word of God.’” (CCC, para. 839).

...she deplores all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism levelled at any time or from any source against the Jews.”

Obviously from any source included Catholic sources. But at the time of the Council, there was no official acknowledgment of Catholic responsibility for much of this hatred, persecution, contempt, etc. In fact, the time was not ready. This step has in effect taken some thirty years.

At the core of the Council’s statement was the recognition that God’s covenant with Israel was not revoked. This has left open the right understanding between the two covenants, old and new. But it gives the Jewish people a privileged position. Instead of seeing the Jews as our enemy, we are to give them a particular honour as a people. So when John Paul II visited the synagogue in Rome in April 1986, he told the Jewish congregation: “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.”³

“As regards the gospel they are enemies of God, for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.” (Rom. 11: 28).

The Confession of Past Sins

What led Pope John Paul II to make his unprecedented call for a Catholic confession of the sins of the past? In one way, it came right out of his suffering and prayer over the oppressive evils of Nazism and Communism. He saw and knew deep in his heart the devastation that such tyranny works on the human person and society. [Comment of the women at Biele vody in July 2002]. When people have been wounded, there has to be healing. When there has been evil inflicted, there must be confession of sin. It is a fundamental law of the Christian life. The healing of the wounds is impossible without a confession of sin followed by a granting of forgiveness. We will look tomorrow at what this means in practice.

But it seems certain that for John Paul II the sufferings inflicted over many centuries on the Jewish people played a major role. With the shady side of the Church’s history, the treatment of the Jews would seem to be the worst – because it lasted longer than any other oppression and especially because it was given a theological basis [the Jewish rejection of Jesus, the Jews as “deicides” and an “accursed people”]. This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that directly after issuing TMA, John Paul II set up two international study commissions of reputed scholars, not all Catholics, to study two major historical issues: (1) The Treatment of the Jewish People throughout the Centuries and (2) the Inquisition.

³ The year before, the Pope had spoken of “a relation which could well be called a real ‘parentage’ and which we have with that religious community alone” (Fisher & Klenicki, *op. cit.*, p. 56).

The Jews are of course highly sensitive as to who are their enemies and their persecutors. And it was clear when John Paul II died, that the Jews knew that the Pope loved and respected them. This was new. The Pope's visit to Israel in March 2000. [What I was told there two weeks later: before he came, there was not much Jewish interest in the Pope's visit – they saw it as another Christian event that had nothing to do with them. Then once it began, many glued to their TV sets. Why? Because JP2 visited Yad Vashem and went to pray at the Western Wall. At Yad Vashem, he met a woman he had carried to safety at the end of the war. At the Wall, he left in the cracks of the wall a piece of paper with the wording of the prayer he had said in St Peter's two weeks before. The Jews knew that there had been a radical change in the Catholic Church.