

Respecting Judaism and Jewish Traditions during Lent and the Paschal Triduum

Particularly during Lent, when the Church proclaims the Passion accounts from one of the synoptic Gospels on Palm Sunday and from the Gospel of John on Good Friday, questions often arise regarding the teaching of the Church regarding the Jewish people, their covenant, and their relationship with Christians. Beginning with the Second Vatican Council's document *Nostra Aetate*, the Church has consistently engaged in a peaceful and constructive dialogue with representatives of the Jewish faith, and many assert that relations between the Catholic Church and Jews are the best they have been since the first century after Christ.

In 1988, the then-Committee on the Liturgy published its own statement on how to understand and preach regarding the role of the Jews in salvation history entitled, *God's Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching* (GMEF). Catechesis on these questions, however, is never ending and, especially with the upcoming visit of Pope Francis to Israel, Jordan, and the West Bank on May 24-26, 2014, the Secretariat of Divine Worship reproduces here for the benefit of our readers a recent article (posted on the USCCB website) on some key questions for Catholic-Jewish relations of a liturgical, theological, and pastoral nature.

What does the Church say about Christians celebrating a Jewish Seder?

Many Christians are given the opportunity to participate in a Passover Seder during Holy Week. "This practice can have educational and spiritual value. It is wrong, however, to 'baptize' the Seder by ending it with New Testament readings about the Last Supper or, worse, turn it into a prologue to the Eucharist. Such mergings distort both traditions" (GMEF, no. 28). Ideally, then, Christians who wish to attend a Passover Seder should do so at the invitation of Jewish friends, families or synagogues that often welcome guests to this important meal. This allows Christians to experience the Seder as a Jewish family liturgy, still deeply meaningful to Jews everywhere. However, in the event that Christians celebrate the Seder alone, the following advice should prove useful:

[W]hen Christians celebrate this sacred feast among themselves, the rites of the *haggadah* for the Seder should be respected in all their integrity. The seder... should be celebrated in a dignified manner and with sensitivity to those to whom the seder truly belongs. The primary reason why Christians may celebrate the festival of Passover should be to acknowledge common roots in the history of salvation. Any sense of "re-staging" the Last Supper of the Lord Jesus should be avoided... The rites of the Triduum are the [Church's] annual memorial of the events of Jesus' dying and rising. (BCL *Newsletter*, March 1980; see GMEF, no. 28)

What does the Church say about the Jewish Covenant and the place of the Jewish people in the economy of salvation?

Some have argued that the New Covenant "abrogated" or "superseded" the Old Covenant, and that the Covenant made at Sinai was discarded by God and replaced with another made by Jesus. The Second Vatican Council, in *Dei Verbum* and *Nostra Aetate*, rejected these ideas. In a major address in 1980, Blessed John Paul II linked the renewed understanding of Scripture with the Church's own understanding of her relationship with the Jewish people, stating that the dialogue, as "the meeting between the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God (cf. Rom 11:29), and that of the New Covenant is at the same time a dialogue within our Church, that is to say, between the first and the

second part of her Bible” (Meeting with the representatives of the Jewish community, November 17, 1980, no. 3). (See also GMEF, no. 6.)

In short, the Church believes that the Jewish Covenant is still valid and that Jews are still called to fidelity to that Covenant. Further, the Church teaches that the Jewish people belong, in some mysterious way, to the community of the Church. We also believe that the Jewish Covenant finds its fullest expression (fulfillment) in the Covenant of Jesus. “While the biblical prophecies of an age of universal shalom are ‘fulfilled’ (i.e., irreversibly inaugurated) in Christ’s coming, that fulfillment is not yet completely worked out in each person’s life or perfected in the world at large. It is the mission of the Church, as also that of the Jewish people, to proclaim and to work to prepare the world for the full flowering of God’s Reign, which is, but is ‘not yet.’ Both the Christian ‘Our Father’ and the Jewish Kaddish exemplify this message. Thus, both Christianity and Judaism seal their worship with a common hope: ‘Thy kingdom come!’” (GMEF, no. 11; see 1974 “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4”).

Are the Jewish people guilty of killing Christ?

“Another misunderstanding rejected by the Second Vatican Council was the notion of collective guilt, which charged the Jewish people as a whole with responsibility for Jesus’ death. From the theory of collective guilt, it followed for some that Jewish suffering over the ages reflected divine retribution on the Jews for an alleged ‘deicide.’ While both rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity saw in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in A.D. 70 a sense of divine punishment (see Lk 19:42-44), the theory of collective guilt went well beyond Jesus’ poignant expression of his love as a Jew for Jerusalem and the destruction it would face at the hands of imperial Rome. Collective guilt implied that because ‘the Jews’ had rejected Jesus, God had rejected them. With direct reference to Luke 19:44, the Second Vatican Council reminded Catholics that ‘nevertheless, now as before, 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,’ and established as an overriding hermeneutical principle for homilists dealing with such passages that ‘the Jews should not be represented as rejected by God or accursed, as if this followed from Holy Scripture’ (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 4; cf. 1985 Notes, VI:33)” (GMEF, no. 7).

How does the Church understand groups mentioned in the Gospel such as “the Jews,” “the Pharisees,” and “the Chief Priests, Scribes, and Elders?”

The Jews: This is a designation unique to the Gospel of John and is often used to refer to certain members of Jesus’ own people, who rejected him. To some extent, it may reflect the “bitterness felt by John’s own community after its ‘parting of the ways’ with the Jewish community, and the martyrdom of St. Stephen illustrates that verbal disputes could, at times, lead to violence by Jews against fellow Jews who believed in Jesus” (GMEF, no. 24). Nevertheless, this designation can never be understood as referring to the Jewish people as a whole at the time of Jesus, much less to the Jewish people of today.

The Pharisees: “Jesus was perhaps closer to the Pharisees in his religious vision than to any other group of his time. The 1985 Notes suggest that this affinity with Pharisaism may be a reason for many of his apparent controversies with them (see no. 27). Jesus shared with the Pharisees a number of distinctive doctrines: the resurrection of the body; forms of piety such as almsgiving, daily prayer, and fasting; the liturgical practice of addressing God as Father; and the priority of the love commandment (see no. 25). Many scholars are of the view that Jesus was not so much arguing against ‘the Pharisees’ as a group, as he was condemning excesses of some Pharisees, excesses of a sort that can be found among some

Christians as well” (GMEF, no. 19). “An explicit rejection should be made of the historically inaccurate notion that Judaism of that time, especially that of Pharisaism, was a decadent formalism and hypocrisy. Scholars are increasingly aware of the closeness on many central doctrines between Jesus’ teaching and that of the Pharisees” (*Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations*, no. 10e). Indeed, the New Testament names many Pharisees as disciples of the risen Christ (Acts 15:5).

The Chief Priests, Scribes, and Elders: These names refer to a part of the Jewish religious leadership at the time of Jesus. They were responsible for the Temple worship and, apart from the court of Herod and the Roman authorities, effectively constituted the ruling elite of the Jewish people, especially in Jerusalem. While there was growing hostility toward Jesus on the part of some Pharisees, it was some of the chief priests, scribes, and elders who played a more direct role in the events leading to his death.

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