



Jubilee: Renewing Our Common Bonds with the Jewish Community

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It shall be a jubilee for you:

you shall return every one of you,

to your property and every one of you

to your family.(Leviticus 25:10)

An Invitation to Members of the Catholic Church in Canada

Declaring a Jubilee

As members of the Catholic Church, we are celebrating this year a "Great Jubilee", marking the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Christ. The book of Leviticus highlights the commitment of such a jubilee: to reflect on our life as a community, to return to the origins of our faith, and to renew our

faith experience itself. Remembering leads us to celebrate the abundant signs of God's gifts. In remembering we are called to refocus; this spirit of jubilation within and among us invites a renewed commitment to follow Jesus Christ more courageously and coherently.¹

Jesus of Nazareth was born of the Jewish people, and was rooted in the tradition of Moses and the prophets. Although his teaching had a profoundly new character, in many instances Christ took his stand on the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures and often employed the methods of the rabbis of his time. "Jesus was and always remained a Jew."² The Jewishness of Jesus, the fact that he was a man of his century and environment, "cannot but underline both the reality of the Incarnation and the very meaning of the history of salvation, as it has been revealed in the Bible."³ Thus, the more familiar we become with Judaism, particularly in its traditions but also in its lived experience, the better will we understand Jesus.

A Time to Remember

Celebrating the Christ event truly invites remembering - remembering the two thousand years that comprise the story of the Christian community, from its beginnings within the Jewish community in Jerusalem, through the dramatic evolution that occurred as the Church took root in Gentile communities of other cultures, to its present situation as a worldwide faith community. In the expression of Christian self-understanding, however, the continued presence and inspiration of the Jewish tradition cannot be denied. In fact, "Christians must strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious traditions of Judaism; they must strive to understand by what essential traits Jews define themselves in light of their own religious experience."⁴ The Jewish people are "dear to God", their election and mission have a permanent validity and they play a decisive role in the religious history of humanity.

As it is from Judaism that the Church has learned the practice of the Jubilee Year, should not this year mark a further step forward in our attitudes toward the Jewish people? In this year, could we not take some concrete steps towards a new relationship marked by understanding, peace and mutual respect? As we continue to heal the wounds that divide Jewish and Christian communities, we will contribute to healing the wounds of the world which the Talmud describes as a necessary action in preparing for "the kingdom of the Most High."

Common Spiritual Bonds

The Church of Christ discovers her "bond" with Judaism by "searching into her own mystery"⁵. In the scriptures but also in theology and liturgy, Christianity remains vitally linked with the Jewish religion. On his 1986 visit to the Synagogue of Rome, Pope John Paul II stated: "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."

Jews and Christians find in the Bible the very substance of their liturgy.. The prayer of the Hours and other liturgical texts have their parallels in Judaism as do the very formulas of our most cherished prayers. The eucharistic prayers, so central to our worship, also draw their inspiration from the great "berakhot" or blessing prayers of the Jewish tradition. It is important that we appreciate the riches of our faith for which we are indebted to Judaism, and to affirm the insights that can come from an awareness of Jewish liturgy and Jewish commentaries on scripture.

In coming to know members of the Jewish community, we want to appreciate their history and traditions without taking over. While much can be learned through participating in Jewish festivals, care must be taken to avoid any semblance of appropriation or re-staging of events in Jewish history. Words and symbols have a coherence and meaning within the whole of a tradition and can be distorted if they are simply imported into another tradition.

Ambiguities of a Shared History

The early Church and Rabbinic Judaism both took shape about the same time, both rooted in biblical Judaism. In spite of, and to some extent because of, their close association, the original first century separation became a rivalry, then an alienation, and finally a centuries-long hostility. While "the history of relations between Jews and Christians is a tormented one"⁶, "the spiritual bonds and historical links binding Christianity to Judaism condemn, as opposed to the very spirit of Christianity, all forms of anti-semitism and discrimination".⁷ The profoundly un-Christian character of anti-semitism has been clearly affirmed in the teaching of the recent popes from the statement of Pius XI that "Spiritually, we are all Semites"⁸ to the unqualified declaration of Pope John Paul II that "Anti-semitism has no justification and is absolutely condemnable."⁹

Concerning the charge of "deicide" (responsibility for the death of Christ), which had been a major factor in the history of "tormented" relations between Jews and Christians, the Second Vatican Council clearly asserts: "neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his [Jesus'] passion."¹⁰ In the teaching of the Catholic Church, Jesus went freely to his death for the sins of the world. Thus, there is no theological or scriptural justification for the accusation of deicide. This calumny should never again be repeated, and "the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed."¹¹ Further, the Council's *Declaration on Religious Liberty* is clear in its teaching that faith is a free gift of God which may never be commanded or coerced. The lighting of the candles ushers in the Sabbath, just before sunset.

A Call to Reconciliation

On March 12, the first Sunday of Lent in this Jubilee year, Pope John Paul II led the Catholic Church in a prayer for pardon that made specific reference to the sins of its members regarding the people of the first covenant, Israel.¹² By placing the confession of sins within the context of the liturgy, the pope wished to demonstrate the inner meaning of this act: purification of memory and reconciliation. During his recent pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Pope John Paul II became the first pope to pray at the Western Wall, the most sacred place in Judaism. There he placed a written prayer for forgiveness. Prayer is central to the repentance and reconciliation to which we are called.

The call to reconciliation is an essential part of Jesus' message. It is a primary category for understanding God's work in the world as well as the Church's mission to participate in that work. "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself in Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, ... and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." (2 Corinthians 5:18-20) According to Pope Paul VI, the gospel is to influence and even upset human values, points of interest, lines of thought and models of life which are in contrast with God's word and plan of salvation. Christian witness means "bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming it from within and making it new."¹³ Thus, Christian commitment to a life of reconciliation will have an impact not only on personal relations but also on human society as a whole.

Reconciliation begins with repentance, a firm commitment to turn away from the sources of division and from attitudes of rejection. Repentance may occur in response to a sudden insight or as a result of a more gradual growth in understanding. In either case, it will lead to a basic change of life, a complete abandonment of former attitudes and practices. The Scriptures remind us that remembering is central to our fidelity to God's covenant: "He is the Lord our God; his judgements are in all the earth. Remember his covenant forever." (1 Chronicles 16:14-15) Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, (Luke 15:11-24) highlights remembrance as a key factor in the individual's recognition of the need to repent. Is this not the kind of remembrance to which we are called in a time of Jubilee?

Practical Steps

Over the past number of years, the Church has come to an acknowledgement of God's call to profound change in our relations with Judaism and with the Jewish people. How can we express our Jubilee commitment to this?

- *Prayer*: In light of our shared spiritual heritage, Christians and Jews may find it appropriate to pray together on certain occasions. Shared prayer which is faithful to both traditions may be a powerful stimulus to mutual understanding and reconciliation.
- *Visits and Social Events*: Understanding may be fostered through combined or separate visits to places of worship, schools, museums, or other similar sites. Joint social events might provide a good opportunity to meet Jewish neighbours.
- *Conversations*: Group conversations and home dialogues in which participants discuss various topics or themes in openness, candour and friendship, may be a concrete step in promoting understanding. This is the beginning of a process in which we hope to engage respectfully.
- *Study of Church Documents*: Diocesan and parochial organizations, schools, and especially seminaries might plan programs to explain and implement *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent official documents. The liturgical season of Lent with its focus on repentance and reconciliation seems a particularly appropriate time to offer such programs.
- *Preaching and Teaching*: The goal in preaching and teaching is to present Jews and Judaism not only in an honest and objective manner, free from prejudice and without giving offence, but also with full awareness of our sharing in a common heritage of faith.
- *Printed Texts and the Media*: School texts, prayer and hymn books, must reflect the content and spirit of Church teaching. Of particular importance is the Jewish tradition of not saying aloud the Holy Name of God which is usually printed as *YHWH* or *Yahweh*. Thus, where it appears in Bible translations or hymns, an appropriate replacement such as "The Lord", "The Eternal One", or simply "God" should be said instead.
- *Cooperation on Issues of Justice and Peace*: Founded on the Word of God, Jewish and Christian traditions are aware of the unique value of the human person. Wherever possible, cooperation is to be encouraged in social endeavours designed to promote public welfare and morality, especially in issues related to peace, justice, and human rights and dignity. Participation in programs to commemorate the Holocaust (*Shoah*) may help to raise consciousness of these issues and promote joint Christian and Jewish commitments to them.

Hope for the Future

At Pentecost, the first disciples of Jesus were suddenly caught up in an amazing, even bewildering, outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4). The divisiveness of the tower of Babel gave way to an astonishing experience of unity in the Spirit through the diversity of language and culture. In our own time we too are called to recognize the wonders of God across linguistic and cultural diversity.

As children of Abraham, Jews and Christians are called to be a blessing for the world. (Genesis 12:2 ff.) This promise and call of Abraham invites a common commitment to the promotion of peace and justice among all peoples. In the words of Pope John Paul II, "Jews and Christians share an immense spiritual patrimony flowing from God's self-revelation. Our religious teachings and our spiritual experience demand that we overcome evil with good ... For us, to remember is to pray for peace and justice, to commit ourselves to their cause."¹⁴

Endnotes

1. A profound change in the Church's attitude towards Judaism was initiated at the Second Vatican Council with its declaration on relations with other religions, *Nostra Aetate*. This direction has been continued and affirmed by authoritative post-conciliar documents issued by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews: *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* (no. 4), (1974); *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*, (1985); *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* (1998).
2. *Notes*, 12.
3. *Notes*, 12.
4. *Guidelines*, Preamble.
5. *Nostra Aetate*, 4.
6. *We Remember*, III.1.
7. *Guidelines*, Preamble.
8. Addressing a group of Belgian pilgrims in September 1938, *La Documentation catholique*, 1938, col. 1460.
9. November 1, 1997.
10. *Nostra Aetate*, 4.
11. *Nostra Aetate*, 4. Addressing Jewish leaders in Mainz, Germany on November 17, 1980, Pope John Paul II acknowledged God's covenant with the Jewish people that has never been revoked, recalling the affirmation in St. Paul's letter to the Romans 11:29.
12. On March 7, five days before the liturgical ceremony in St. Peter's, the International Theological Commission issued its study, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and Faults of the Past*, which "clarifies the reasons, the conditions and the exact form of the requests for forgiveness for the faults of the past." In this document, one specific section deals with the relationship between Christians and Jews which is identified as "one of the areas requiring a special examination of conscience." See *Origins* 29 (2000), 625, 627-644, for the entire text.
13. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18.
14. Yad Vashem, March 23, 2000.

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