



Developments in the liturgy of Holy Week

| Pawlikowski, John

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The Liturgy of Holy Week still presents a great challenge to Christian-Jewish relations. For centuries, Holy Week was the week of the year most feared by Jews as Christian preachers stirred up passions which on occasion resulted in mob violence against local Jewish communities. But even if the worst antisemitic excesses connected with Holy Week are now past history, we still face the challenge of insuring that, come Easter Monday, the theological bonds linking Christian and Jew affirmed at Vatican II have made it through, not merely intact but even strengthened. After our celebration of Holy Week, do our people feel a new sense of linkage to Judaism and the Jewish people, or have classical attitudes been once more reaffirmed? That is the ultimate barometer.

Implementing Vatican II's Vision of Christian-Jewish bonding during Holy Week requires a concerted effort that goes beyond a few changes in terminology and/or a few positive prayers for the Jewish people. It involves helping the congregation understand the strong rootage of events commemorated during Holy Week with the renewal of the Jewish religious tradition occurring during the time of Jesus' public misery.

Holy (Maundy) Thursday commemorates the so-called Last Supper of the Lord where it is traditionally said Jesus instituted the Eucharist. Unfortunately such language can give the impression that the Eucharist was a totally new liturgical act. This is simply not the case. Certainly what Jesus said and did added a new theological dimension to the ritual. But it is crucial to recognize that the setting was a Jewish sacred meal. Scholars may disagree whether or not it was a Passover *seder*. In some ways that is a secondary discussion because the Seder meal is in many ways only an amplification of a Shabbat meal. It is the meal setting that was important.

Meals formed an integral part of Jewish ritual for centuries. There are references to such meals throughout the Jewish biblical tradition. But in post-biblical Pharisaic Judaism the meal setting was taking on major importance in the process of Jewish religious renewal. The Pharisees began to emphasize the "priesthood of all the faithful", an echo of which we find in the New Testament. As a result, they put greater emphasis on the meal liturgies where the father of the family or the leader of a Pharisaic brother hood presided.

The Pharisees had come to the recognition of a personal God who interacted both with the community of Israel and with its individual members no matter what their social class. The Pharisees felt a need to ritualize this new perception of the God-humanity relationship. Hence they turned to the sacred meal for their ordinary liturgical act. Here the community assembled around the table of the Lord to break bread and to share wine. Bread and wine and the gathering of the community became in a sense a sign of the very presence of God to the people.

This "table fellowship" ritual with its emphasis on God's real presence among the people through the sharing of the meal became the all-important setting for Jesus' establishment of the Christian Eucharist. As we celebrate the festival of the Lord's Supper on the Holy Thursday, recognizing the Jewish sacred meal context and its underlying theological vision will not only enhance our sense of bonding as Church with the Jewish tradition, it will also help us better appreciate the original meaning of Eucharist.

Moving to Good Friday, we come to the most challenging day of the entire liturgical year in terms of Vatican II's theology of Christian-Jewish bonding. Experiencing the liturgy in many churches on Good Friday can be a painful experience for anyone who has become committed to the vision of *Nostra Aetate*. However, it need not be the case. In fact, it is possible to transform the liturgy of Good Friday into an experience that can unite Christians with Jews rather than deepen their separation.

The Jewish historian Ellis Rivkin has often said that the question "who crucified Jesus?" should be replaced by "what crucified Jesus?" The change in emphasis is crucial, because what crucified Jesus were certain entrenched political forces that always want to rid society of those who present new ideas, question entrenched power that has gone awry and denounce exploitation.

It is wrong to present the events of Good Friday as involving wholesale Jewish opposition to Jesus. At best, Jesus' struggle was against the entrenched occupying powers which some Jewish leaders in the Temple aided and abetted for personal gain. So despite the history of Good Friday in terms of Christian-Jewish relations, I believe it is possible to understand it as a time for reconciliation between the two faith communities. For Jesus on Calvary symbolizes not only the sufferings of all humankind but, in particular, the sufferings which his brother and sister Jews were experiencing in occupied Palestine. Jesus' death represents the suffering, the trials, the aspirations of many ordinary Jewish people of the time. Certainly there is a long history to overcome in transforming Good Friday into a period of Christian-Jewish reconciliation. But if we better understand the concrete political dynamics that brought Jesus to Calvary, we will be well under way towards beginning that process of transformation.

Moving on to the Easter Vigil and Easter we come upon, first of all, the Vigil Scriptural readings. In one sense these readings link Jesus with Judaism, but only in the classical sense that the Hebrew Scriptures "foreshadowed" the teachings of Jesus. To accentuate this, in many churches the readings from the "Old Testament" are read with the church in darkness. The lights come on with the reading of the New Testament texts. This action itself symbolizes a theological outlook on the Christian-Jewish relationship which *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent Church documents have challenged.

Gestures such as reading the Hebrew Scripture texts in darkness are so ingrained in Christianity that we often fail to reflect on their theological significance. At the chapel at Princeton University there are a series of stained glass windows with biblical scenes so located by their designer that the sun shines through the New Testament windows but not the Old Testament ones. Clearly this legacy of viewing the "Old Testament" in terms of "darkness" must be overcome if the liturgy of Holy Week is to serve the enhancement of Christian-Jewish relations; and two thousand years of bitterness and suffering to be finally transformed.

This article is an edited extract.

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