



Catholic-Jewish Relations: Twelve Key Themes for Teaching and Preaching

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**Teresa Pirola: Catholic-Jewish Relations: Twelve Key Themes for Teaching and Preaching
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Teresa Pirola

relationship with the Jewish people despite decades of scholarly dialogue and the release of dozens of documents and statements since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965. That is the premise driving Catholic educator and author Teresa Pirola's *Catholic-Jewish Relations: Twelve Key Themes for Teaching and Preaching*. It is a guidebook for teachers, parents, clergy, and laity that could also serve as a basis for organizing a Jewish-Christian dialogue.

The slim volume—only 194 pages—has an easy-to-use format which provides excerpts from relevant Church and other documents to support and explain her twelve themes. For example, she begins by showing that Jesus was a faithful Jew (chapter one) and by emphasizing the Jewish roots of the Church (chapter two). Later, she argues for an end to efforts to proselytize Jews (chapter eleven) and discusses the importance of the land of Israel to Jewish self-understanding (chapter twelve). Throughout, Pirola introduces key points, provides a short exploration of each theme, includes questions that help to clarify the lessons learned, excerpts important primary texts, and offers suggestions for future discussion and study. The book also includes an afterword, two appendices, a glossary of terms, lists of works and websites cited, and additional links for further inquiry. She helpfully footnotes claims she makes.

The layout lends itself to both self-study and classroom use, as well as to interfaith dialogue. While the book is aimed at Catholics and particularly Catholic educators, Jews will find the way it introduces key Catholic documents and traces the 20th and 21st century history of Catholic commentary about the Church's relationship to Jews, Jewish history, and Jewish sacred texts both stimulating and constructive.

Now based in Sydney, Australia, Pirola grew up with Jewish neighbors and friends in New Rochelle, New York, in the 1970s. A period of study at the Bat Kol Institute in Jerusalem convinced her of the monumental importance of *Nostra Aetate* for the life of the Church, though she realized that both priests and parishioners lack awareness of "the far-reaching impact" of the statement (xiv).

Pirola is sensitive to the fraught history of Jewish-Christian relations and the asymmetry of Christian interest in Judaism and Jewish interest in Christianity. The Church itself "is still at the beginning of rediscovering relations to the Jewish people" (xxi), she writes. In rejecting the charge of deicide, the church also clearly rejected antisemitism and "charted the beginnings of ... a way of thinking about and relating to Jews and Judaism that signaled the recovery of an authentic continuity with deep defining truths of Christianity" (9).

Pirola grapples with some difficult theological concepts. In chapter three, "God's Covenant with the Jewish People is Alive and Active," she writes, "Judaism is not an outdated, nullified, obsolete religion, and the church does not 'replace' the Jewish people" (25). In addition to quoting from *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*, she includes quotations from popes John Paul II and Francis, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. She engages one of the most challenging questions: Since Catholic doctrine does not allow for a two-covenant theory, how are Catholics to recognize the Jewish rejection of theological claims about Jesus yet still affirm they are in a saving relationship with God? "Theologians today readily admit that the questions they wrestle with may find resolution in a future known only to God" (32), she writes.

In another chapter, Pirola addresses the relationship between the Old and New testaments, differences in interpretation and understanding, and the need to avoid anti-Jewish bias (chapters four, five, and seven). Many Christians continue to be influenced by a long tradition of hostility to Judaism. "Addressing supersessionism, including its 'softer' and more subtle forms, remains an ongoing challenge for Catholic religious education and clergy formation today" (86), Pirola writes.

She confronts the history of Christian antisemitism and its connection with the Holocaust. Yet

people and institutions can change. “We must also recognize that change takes time ... We Christians have a particular responsibility to be alert to the scourge of antisemitism where it reappears in the world around us” (99-100).

A long history of Christian anti-Judaism has left many Catholics ignorant of Jews and Judaism and has “impoverished Christians, feeding inadequate information and at times blatantly false accusations into channels of catechesis and homiletics” (107). Because Judaism is a “Living Tradition” (61), Pirola reminds readers that “Christians learn best about Judaism from Jews” (102). She urges Catholics to meet Jews in person and to listen to how Jews define and understand themselves, acknowledging that it may be difficult in areas where there are few or no Jews.

In the last and longest chapter in the book, she tackles an important topic: “The Land Is Integral to Jewish Experience” (138). Pirola recognizes that for many centuries Christians dismissed as obsolete Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel. However, “Today...Catholic teaching seeks to respect Jewish self-definition and Catholic scholars ponder anew the theological significance of the Land” (138). On this topic, she makes a minor mistake, confusing in which season diaspora Jews pray for rain in Israel (144). It is a small error in an otherwise incredibly accessible and worthwhile book.

Emily Soloff, now retired, was associate director for interreligious and intergroup relations at the American Jewish Committee.

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