



NCCB, USA: Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations

09/04/1985 | National Conference of Catholic Bishops (U.S.A.)

Revision of the original Guidelines of 1967 of the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (BCEIA). This update was approved by the BCEIA on April 9, 1985

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Perspectives

In its *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* of 1965, the Second Vatican Council issued an historic statement on the Jews and summoned all Catholics to reappraise their attitude toward and relationship with the Jewish people. The statement was, in effect, a culminating point of initiatives and pronouncements of recent pontiffs and of numerous endeavors in the Church concerned with Catholic-Jewish harmony.

The call of the council to a dialogical encounter with Jews may be seen as one of the more important fruits of the spirit of renewal generated by the council in its deliberations and decrees. The council's call is an acknowledgement of the conflicts and tensions that have separated Christians and Jews through the centuries and of the Church's determination, as far as possible, to eliminate them. It serves both in word and action as a recognition of the manifold sufferings and injustices inflicted upon the Jewish people by Christians in our own times as well as in the past. It speaks from the highest level of the Church's authority to serve notice that injustices directed against the Jews at any time from any source can never receive Catholic sanction or support.

The message of the council's statement is clear. Recalling in moving terms the "spiritual bond that ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock," the Fathers of the council remind us of the special place Jews hold in the Christian perspective, for "now as before God holds them as most dear for the sake of the patriarchs; he has not withdrawn his gifts or calling." Jews, therefore, the Fathers caution, are not "to be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from Holy Scripture." The Passion of Jesus, moreover, "cannot be attributed without distinction to all Jews then alive, nor can it be attributed to the Jews of today." The Church, the statement declares, "decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and by anyone."

In light of these principles the Fathers enjoin that "all see to it that nothing is taught, either in catechetical work or in the preaching of the Word of God, that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ." Rather should Christians and Jews "further their mutual knowledge

of and respect for one another, a knowledge and respect deriving primarily from biblical and theological studies and fraternal dialogues."

The council's vision has been further specified and given urgency by subsequent pronouncements of the Holy See and of episcopal conferences and dioceses throughout the world. The 1975 Vatican guidelines, especially, detail catechetical, liturgical and social action steps that now need to be taken to implement the council's call for renewal. The statement of the American bishops of November 1975 refers to the task "as yet hardly begun, to explore the continuing relationship of the Jewish people with God and their spiritual bonds with the New Covenant and the fulfillment of God's plan for both Church and Synagogue."

In a series of remarkable statements, Pope John Paul II has sought to give positive direction to the dialogue, reminding us that "the links between the Church and the Jewish people are grounded in the design of the God of the Covenant" (March 6, 1982). The Holy Father has underscored time and again, the vital importance of collaboration with the Jews for the working out of the Church's own mission in the world:

Our common heritage impels us toward this, our common heritage of service to humanity and its immense spiritual and material needs. Through different but finally convergent ways we will be able to reach, with the help of the Lord who has never ceased loving his people (cf Rom 11:1), this true brotherhood in reconciliation and respect, and to contribute to a full implementation of God's plan in history (March 6, 1982)

The Roman Catholic Church in this country is provided with an historic opportunity to advance this cause—an opportunity to continue the leadership taken in that direction by our American bishops during the great debate on the declaration at the council. In the years since that time, much has been done in the United States to develop an atmosphere of mutual respect and spiritual kinship between Jews and Catholics

The largest Jewish community in the world lives in the United States. In a land that has welcomed immigrants and refugees from persecution, our Church has committed itself without reserve to the ideal of equal opportunity and justice for all. In such a setting the American Catholic community is providentially situated to distinguish itself in pursuit of the purposes of the council's mandate for the Church as a whole.

General Principles

1. It is recommended that in each diocese a commission or secretariat, or member of an ecumenical commission, be assigned to Catholic-Jewish relations. "The question of Jewish-Christian relations concerns the Church as such, since it is when 'pondering her own mystery' that the Church encounters the mystery of Israel. Therefore, even in areas where no Jewish communities exist, this remains an important concern" (*Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration*).
2. In keeping with the spirit of the council's *Decree on Ecumenism and Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, Catholics should take the initiative not only in Catholic-Protestant and Orthodox affairs, but also in fostering Catholic-Jewish understanding. Public and formal projects, however, should have the approval of the ordinary of the diocese.
3. The general aim of all Catholic-Jewish meetings is to increase our understanding both of Judaism and the Catholic faith, eliminate sources of tension and misunderstanding, initiate dialogues or conversations on different levels, multiply intergroup meetings between Catholics and Jews, and promote cooperative social action.
4. These meetings should be marked by a genuine respect for the person and religious

- convictions, freedom of all participants, and a willingness to listen and to learn from the other party. They should be jointly planned and developed.
5. It is recommended that in order to maintain the dialogue on the highest possible level its organization be accomplished in consultation with those experienced in the structural, doctrinal and interpersonal skills that the dialogue requires.
 6. Proselytism, which does not respect human freedom, is carefully to be avoided. While the Christian, through the faith life of word and deed, will always witness to Jesus as the risen Christ, the dialogue is concerned with the permanent vocation of the Jews as God's people, the enduring values that Judaism shares with Christianity and that, together, the Church and the Jewish people are called upon to witness to the whole world.
 7. Prayer in common with Jews should, when mutually acceptable, be encouraged, especially in matters of common concern, such as peace and the welfare of the community. Such prayer should meet the spiritual sensibilities of both parties, finding its inspiration in our common faith in the One God (cf. *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration*, n. 1).
 8. Acknowledging the difficulties in interreligious marriages, preparation for them should expect each party to know well both religious traditions so as to be cooperative with the religious duties of the spouse. Continuing pastoral care, as several diocesan interreligious guidelines already recognize, is also suggested.
 9. A central principle of dialogue, cited by the 1975 Vatican guidelines, underlies all the above, namely, that Christians should "strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experiences." Topics such as the Nazi attempt to annihilate the Jewish people and the rebirth of a Jewish state in the land of Israel will obviously come up for discussion under this principle. While, as in the case of the latter, Christians may experience difficulties in sharing Jewish views on such questions, especially regarding specific, contemporary political controversies, an honest effort should be made "to understand the link between land and people which Jews have expressed in their writings and worship throughout two millennia as a longing for the homeland, holy Zion" (*NCCB Statement on Catholic-Jewish Relations*).

Recommended Programs

1. Catholic-Jewish relations should be advanced on all levels: clergy and lay, academic and popular, religious and social.
2. A favored instrument is the dialogue, a form of group conversation in which competent participants discuss assigned topics or themes in openness, candor and friendship. Those not well versed in interreligious affairs run the risk of unwittingly offending by inaccurate portrayal of each other's doctrine or way of life.
3. Diocesan and parochial organizations, schools, colleges, universities and especially seminaries should organize programs to implement the conciliar statement and subsequent official documents.
4. The pulpit should also be used for expounding these teachings and exhorting participation in programs fitted to the parochial level. Special care should be taken never to use the pulpit to portray Judaism as rejected by God or in any way unworthy of our love and esteem. (*Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration*, n. 2).
5. School texts, prayerbooks and other media should, under competent auspices, continue to be examined in order to remove not only those materials that do not accord with the content and spirit of the Church's teaching, but also those that fail to show Judaism's continuing role in salvation history in a positive light.
6. It is recommended that Catholic-Jewish understanding be fostered effectively at the popular level by means of so-called *open houses* in places of worship, mutual visits to schools, joint social events and *living room dialogues*.
7. Catholic-Jewish cooperation in the field of social action designed to promote public welfare

and morality, and especially peace and justice, should be encouraged.

8. Orientation and resource material for the foregoing recommendations may be sought from the various Catholic and Jewish organizations that have been active in the field of Christian-Jewish relations. It is also suggested that contact be made with Protestant and Orthodox agencies and experts in this area of endeavor.
9. While parish and local programs to improve Catholic-Jewish relations must be pressed forward without delay, slower and deeper explorations of pertinent issues by Catholic and Jewish scholars must also be given a high priority. Since many of the problems in this area of Catholic-Jewish relations are intellectual in nature, research in history, psychology, sociology and the Bible by individual Catholic and Jewish scholars as well as collaborative scholarly enterprises are to be highly commended. Catholic seminaries and institutions of higher learning are especially important centers for such ongoing scholarly activity. The establishment of chairs of Jewish studies in Catholic institutions is encouraged, wherever possible.
10. The following themes, which, among others, are viewed by Christians and Jews involved in the dialogue as important issues affecting Christian-Jewish relations, merit the attention and study of Catholic educators and scholars.
 1. Scholarly studies and education efforts should be undertaken to show the common historical, biblical, doctrinal and liturgical heritage shared by Catholics and Jews, as well as their differences. This involves not only appreciation of the Hebrew Scriptures as a source of faith with their own perpetual value, but also a recognition of Judaism as a living tradition that has had a strong and creative religious life through the centuries since the birth of Christianity from the common root.
 2. As the council statement requires, the presentation of the Crucifixion story should be made in such a way as not to implicate all Jews of Jesus' time or of today in a collective guilt for the crime. This is important for catechesis and homilies, especially during Lent and Holy Week, as well as for any dramatizations of the events, such as Passion Play.
 3. In keeping with the Church's strong repudiation of anti-Semitism, a frank and honest treatment is needed in our history books, courses and seminary curricula of the history of Christian anti-Semitism, which climaxed in so much persecution, and of the Nazi attempt to destroy the Jewish population of Europe.
 4. Continuing studies are needed of the life of Jesus and of the primitive Church in the setting of the richly diverse and creative religious social and cultural life of the Jewish community in the first century.
 5. 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. Many Jewish teachers adopted positions similar to those of Jesus on the critical religious and social issues of the time.
 6. Catholic scholars need to assess the living and complex reality of Judaism after Christ for example in rabbinic literature and the permanent election of the Jewish people alluded to by St. Paul (Rom 9:29) and to incorporate the theological and spiritual results into Catholic teaching.
 7. Further analysis of the use and implications for today of such expressions as "the Jews" by St. John and other New Testament references that appear to place all Jews in a negative light is also called for. (These expressions and references should be fully and precisely clarified in accordance with the intent of the conciliar statement and subsequent teachings that Jews are not to be "presented as rejected or accursed by God as if this followed from Holy Scripture.")

11. Given the pluralistic and diverse character of both the American Catholic and American Jewish communities interethnic and interracial group dialogue, e.g. Polish-Jewish, Hispanic-Jewish, Black-

Jewish, etc., is to be encouraged where appropriate.

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