



## Themes in Post-Nostra Aetate Catholic Ecclesial Documents

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## Themes in Post-*Nostra Aetate* Catholic Ecclesial Documents

**Philip A. Cunningham**

The Second Vatican Council's 1965 declaration *Nostra Aetate* inspired a series of official reappraisals of church teachings about Jews and Judaism that continues to the present day. Vatican commissions, national conferences of Catholic bishops, and Pope John Paul II issued numerous statements concerning Christian-Jewish relations. Although only partially internalized among Catholics worldwide, these documents have developed over four decades into a complex system of interlocking ideas that becomes difficult to chart even when restricted to only Vatican materials. It is no exaggeration to suggest that these texts, together with their counterparts in other Christian communities, represent an unprecedented Christian affirmation of Judaism's positive theological significance for the church — a constructive endeavor that has not been seriously pursued since New Testament times.

The concepts expressed in Catholic documents could be conveniently organized into those that are negatively phrased and those that are positively phrased. In the former category are many statements that directly reject the perennial Christian "teaching of contempt" (to use Jules Isaacs' famous saying). In this quick summary, I will not go into the relative weights of authority of the numerous relevant Catholic documents or exhaustively cite every possible reference, which would produce an unwieldy and repetitive list. The collection of quotations that follows is only meant to illustrate a particular point, not exhaustively authenticate it. The quotations in square brackets concern current or cutting-edge questions that do not (yet) possess the degree of teaching authority commanded by the other quotations. They are included in order to show the developing trajectory of thought and where further research is needed.

## Ideas Expressed Negatively

1. The Jewish people cannot be held collectively responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.
2. The Jewish people are not doomed by a divine curse to wander the earth without a homeland, living on the margins of (Christian) society.
3. Antisemitism is “opposed to the very spirit of Christianity.”
4. “The history of Israel did not end in 70 A. D. It continued, especially in a numerous Diaspora which allowed Israel to carry to the whole world a witness - often heroic - of its fidelity to the one God.”
5. Biblical interpreters must “avoid absolutely any actualization of certain texts of the New Testament which could provoke or reinforce unfavorable attitudes toward the Jewish people.”
6. “The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear and legalism, with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor.”
7. “It would be wrong to consider the prophecies of the Old Testament as some kind of photographic anticipations of future events. All the texts, including those which later were read as messianic prophecies, already had an immediate import and meaning for their contemporaries before attaining a fuller meaning for future hearers.” Since Christian readings of Israel’s scriptures are “retrospective ... It cannot be said, therefore, that Jews do not see what has been proclaimed in the text, but that the Christian, in the light of Christ and in the Spirit, discovers in the texts a surplus of meaning that was hidden there.”

These statements set limits that could be recalled in developing a post-supersessionist Christian theology of Judaism. The term “post-supersessionist” suggests that Christians still have some way to go in naming a positive theology. For now we can only say, negatively, that what we are expressing is NOT the past supersessionist teaching of contempt. How such a “theology of shalom” (right-relationship) toward Judaism might be positively named remains unclear.

## Ideas Expressed Positively

The many affirmative statements in Catholic ecclesial documents can be organized as follows with principle assertions and corollary or consequent ideas:

1. The Historic Christian Sinfulness toward Jews
  1. “There can be no denial of the fact that from the time of the Emperor Constantine on, Jews were isolated and discriminated against in the Christian world. There were expulsions and forced conversions. Literature propagated stereotypes, preaching accused the Jews of every age of deicide; the ghetto which came into being in 1555 with a papal bull became in Nazi Germany the antechamber of the extermination.”

2. "For Christians, the "heavy burden of conscience [for the collective behavior] of their brothers and sisters during the Second World War must be a call to penitence."
3. At the end of this Millennium the Catholic Church desires to express her deep sorrow for the failures of her sons and daughters in every age. This is an act of repentance (*teshuva*), since, as members of the Church, we are linked to the sins as well as the merits of all her children."

## 2. The Proper Christian Disposition toward Jews Today

1. "We recognize with utmost clarity that the path along which we should proceed with the Jewish religious community is one of fraternal dialogue and fruitful collaboration."
2. Christians must "strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism; they must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience."
3. "Christians are invited to understand [Jews'] religious attachment [to the Land of Israel] which finds its roots in Biblical tradition, without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship."
4. [As a result of decades of dialogue, "we Catholics became aware with greater clarity that the faith of Israel is that of our elder brothers, and, most importantly, that Judaism is as a sacrament of every otherness that as such the Church must learn to discern, recognize and celebrate."]

## 3. The Jewishness of Jesus

1. "Jesus was and always remained a Jew,... fully a man of his ... environment – the Jewish Palestinian one of the first century, the anxieties and hopes of which he shared. This cannot but underline both the reality of the Incarnation and the very meaning of the history of salvation ..."
2. "Jesus" human identity is determined on the basis of his bond with the people of Israel. By taking part in synagogue celebrations where the Old Testament texts were read and commented on, Jesus also came humanly to know these texts; he nourished his mind and heart with them, using them in prayer and as an inspiration for his actions. Thus he became an authentic son of Israel, deeply rooted in his own people"s long history."

## 4. The "Old Testament" has great non-christological revelatory value.

1. "Typological reading [of Israel's scriptures] only manifests the unfathomable riches of the Old Testament, its inexhaustible content and the mystery of which it is full, and should not lead us to forget that it retains its own value as Revelation that the New Testament often does no more than resume."
2. "In Judaism, re-readings [of the scriptures] were commonplace. ... What is specific to the Christian re-reading is that it is done, as we have said, in the light of Christ. This new interpretation does not negate the original meaning."

5. Futurist eschatology and messianic expectations

1. "... the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and 'serve him shoulder to shoulder' (Zeph. 3:9)."
2. "... in underlining the [unfinished] eschatological dimension of Christianity we shall reach a greater awareness that the people of God of the Old and the New Testament are tending towards a like end in the future: the coming or return of the Messiah - even if they start from two different points of view. It is more clearly understood that the person of the Messiah is not only a point of division for the people of God but also a point of convergence."
3. "Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain. It can become for us Christians a powerful stimulus to keep alive the eschatological dimension of our faith. Like them, we too live in expectation. The difference is that for us the One who is to come will have the traits of the Jesus who has already come and is already present and active among us."
4. ["But whilst Jews expect the coming of the Messiah, who is still unknown, Christians believe that he has already shown his face in Jesus of Nazareth whom we as Christians therefore confess as the Christ, he who at the end of time will be revealed as the Messiah for Jews and for all nations."]

6. God's covenant of love with the Jewish people is eternal. Jews are also "People of God."

1. The Jewish people have a divinely given vocation in the world that lasts until the eschaton and goes beyond serving as the root of Christianity [various papal speeches].
2. "Christians can and ought to admit that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures from the Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion."
3. Christians can learn from the Jewish experience of God (various documents).
4. "The Church and Judaism cannot ... be seen as two parallel ways of salvation and the Church must witness to Christ as the Redeemer for all, while maintaining the strictest respect for religious liberty..."
5. ["The universality of Christ's redemption for Jews and for Gentiles is so fundamental throughout the entire New Testament (Eph 2,14-18; Col 1,15-18; 1 Tim 2,5 and many others) ... that it cannot be ignored or passed over in silence. So from the Christian perspective the covenant with the Jewish people is unbroken (Rom 11,29), for we as Christians believe that these promises find in Jesus their definitive and irrevocable Amen (2 Cor 1,20) and at the same time that in him, who is the end of the law (Rom 10,4), the law is not nullified but upheld (Rom 3,31). This does not mean that Jews in order to be saved have to become Christians; if they follow their own conscience and believe in God's promises as they understand them in their religious tradition they are in line with God's plan, which for us comes to its historical completion in Jesus Christ."]
6. ["A deepening Catholic appreciation of the eternal covenant between God and the

Jewish people, together with a recognition of a divinely-given mission to Jews to witness to God's faithful love, lead to the conclusion that campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church.”]

7. Christianity and Judaism are intrinsically linked.

1. “It is understood that our two religious communities are connected and closely related at the very level of their respective religious identities.”
2. “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.”

8. Jews and Christians both have a duty to prepare the world for God's kingdom of justice and peace (frequently restated).

1. “As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing for the world [cf. Gen. 12:2ff]. This is the common task awaiting us. It is therefore necessary for us, Christians and Jews, to be first a blessing to one another.”

## The Major Unresolved Question

The most significant unresolved theological topic in Catholic documents is how to conceptualize the relationship between the universal “saving” significance of Christ with the Jewish people's ongoing covenantal life with God. On the one hand, Catholic teaching rejects a religious relativism in which “one religion is as good as the other” because “Jesus Christ has a significance and a value for the human race and its history, which are unique and singular, proper to him alone, exclusive, universal, and absolute.” On the other hand, Catholic teaching also acknowledges that for those outside the Church “salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church, but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit. ... Theologians are seeking to understand this question more fully.”

When considering the particular question of the soteriological importance of Christ for the Jewish people, however, it is necessary also to reckon with the Catholic understanding of the unique, intrinsic, spiritual bond between Christians and Jews and with the dawning Catholic awareness that “the faithful response of the Jewish people to God's irrevocable covenant is salvific for them, because God is faithful to his promises.”

From a Catholic viewpoint, then, Jewish covenanting with God can be seen as “salvific for them,” but this cannot be understood as happening apart from Christ or because there are “two parallel

ways of salvation.” Parallel lines never meet. There are theological approaches that could be pursued in this regard (e.g., from a Christian point of view, Jews are covenanting with a God who is Triune and therefore are in intimate relationship with God’s Word and Spirit), but the issue has not yet been specifically treated in any Catholic ecclesial document.

## **A Concluding Biblical Observation**

The question of how Christian self-understanding has been impacted by the many ecclesial documents on Jews and Judaism issued in the past six decades will unavoidably have to deal with the diverse Christian understandings of biblical interpretation and how scriptural authority relates to other sources of authority in the Church.

In Catholic teaching, which admittedly is not universally practiced in the Catholic world itself, biblical interpretation “is a question of overcoming the distance between the time of the authors and first addressees of the biblical texts, and our own contemporary age, and of doing so in a way that permits a correct actualization of the Scriptural message so that the Christian life of faith may find nourishment.” Therefore, in the Catholic view, biblical interpretation is a “dialogue with the understanding of the faith prevailing in earlier times, [which] must be matched by a dialogue with the generation of today. Such dialogue will mean establishing a relationship of continuity. It will also involve acknowledging differences. Hence the interpretation of Scripture involves a work of sifting and setting aside; it stands in continuity with earlier exegetical traditions, many elements of which it preserves and makes its own; but in other matters it will go its own way, seeking to make further progress.”

This dialogical and interpretive task of preserving and setting aside is of extreme importance in biblically grounding a Christian post-supersessionist theology. This is not only because of the polemical passages in the New Testament or a self-serving christological reading of the “Old” Testament. Understanding the “distance” between the biblical and current generations also involves appreciating the fact that the eschatological enthusiasm of first-century Christians - with all its soteriological and historical implications - cannot simply be “copied and pasted” into the twenty-first century. Those Christians who read the Bible without some type of a dialogical understanding of biblical interpretation and or without an awareness of the historical conditioning of Christian self-understanding, will find it even more challenging to develop theologies of Judaism that respect the Jewish tradition’s self-understanding on its own terms.