Pope Francis' Catecheses on the Letter to the Galatians

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On the occasion of some irritations and concerns caused by a series of lessons given by Pope Francis on Paul's Letter to the Galatians, the ICCJ Executive Board asked its Honorary President, Dr Philip A. Cunningham, to provide some background on the Letter to the Galatians and the Pope's recent catecheses.

Ever since the issuance by the 1947 Seelisberg Conference of "An Address to the Churches: The Ten Points of Seelisberg" - whose 75th anniversary we will celebrate in 2022 - the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ) has been actively studying Christian preaching about Jews and Judaism. In addition to the topics of the crucifixion of Jesus and Jesus' relations with Jewish contemporaries, the question of Christianity's attitude to the Torah has also been of concern. The New Testament Epistle of Saint Paul to the Galatians is particularly important in this regard.
At his recent weekly Wednesday audiences, Pope Francis has given a series of lessons on the Letter to the Galatians (see those of Wednesday,11 August and 18 August 2021). According to a Reuters news story, a leading Israeli rabbi has written to the Vatican to express dismay that "in his homily, the pope presents the Christian faith as not just superseding the Torah; but asserts that the latter no longer gives life, implying that Jewish religious practice in the present era is rendered obsolete." This is puzzling since Pope Francis is well known as a friend of the Jewish people and expressed reverence for the Torah during his audience with the ICCJ on 30 June 2015.
Seeing the opportunity to promote further interfaith understanding, the Executive Board has asked our new Honorary President, Dr. Philip A. Cunningham, to provide some background on the Letter to the Galatians and the Pope's recent catecheses. With its thanks, the Board offers this "backgrounder" to the ICCJ family.

Pope Francis' Catecheses on the Letter to the Galatians

Almost from the time they were written, Paul's letters, in the words of another New Testament writer, have been "hard to understand" (2 Pet 3:16). This is perhaps especially true for his letter to the Galatians, which Paul unquestionably wrote in an angry and frustrated frame of mind. So let's first consider the background of that New Testament epistle.

Torah vs. Law
Pauline scholarship over the past several decades has shown that for centuries Christians have misread his letters. The result has been a caricature of Jewish observance of the mitzvot (the commandments in the Torah) as a futile, legalistic effort to earn God's favor. This understanding was abetted by the fact that Jewish writers in Greek such as Paul rendered the Hebrew word "Torah" ("to teach" or "to guide") into the Greek word "nomos" ("Law"). Non-Jews read Paul's harsh words in Galatians as showing that "the Law" is an onerous list of rules. This is an old, false stereotype (see Acts 15:10), but Paul himself describes his own observance as "faultless" or

"blameless" (Phil 3:6; see also Luke 1:6).

Jewish Apostate or Jewish Apostle?
One long-lived Christian misunderstanding is the presupposition that Paul "converted" from Judaism to Christianity and thus saw no reason to observe the Torah after the coming of Christ. However, during Paul's lifetime there was no distinct "Christian" religion for him to convert into. The words "Christian" and "Christianity" appear in none of his letters, likely because they hadn't been coined yet. Moreover, Paul nowhere urges fellow Jews to stop following the Torah since it is part of Jewish identity, one he celebrates in Romans 9:4-5.

In Galatians, Paul writes that earlier he had persecuted those fellow Jews who proclaimed that the crucified Jesus had been raised, but now had himself become an apostle or messenger of that good news (Gal 1:23). But that change of heart made him a different kind of Jew, not a non-Jew, despite centuries of Christian interpretation to the contrary. He had become a Jewish "apostle to the Gentiles" (Rom 11:13; see also Gal 1:16; 2:2).

Time is Running Out for Idolaters
Paul's apostolic work unfolded in a quite different world from those of his later readers, including today's. Perhaps the greatest difference is that Paul believed that "the present form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:31), a transformation that at least in his earlier letters he expected would be completed in his lifetime (1 Th 4:15-17). Agreeing with some contemporary Jewish expectations, he anticipated that when the messiah came all pagan idolaters were doomed (1 Th 1:9-10; 4:1-8, 15-17). For Paul, that messiah was recently revealed to be the crucified Jesus whom God raised from the dead (Rom 1:4). As apostle to the Gentiles, Paul fervently tries to rescue as many non-Jews as possible from being condemned when Christ would shortly return in glory and judgment and do away with all idolaters. He feels so deeply for the Gentiles' plight that he often identifies with them by using the first-person singular or plural in writing to them, e.g., "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit" (Gal 5:25). But elsewhere he distinguishes himself as "a Jew by birth" and not a "Gentile sinner" (2:15). Paul's driving conviction is that non-Jews must turn "from idols to serve a living and true God" (1 Th 1:9), the One God of Israel, in order to be made righteous before the imminent End.

Therefore, a growing body of Pauline scholars maintain that his letters are primarily concerned with the standing of Gentiles before God and with their equal status with Jewish Christ-believers. But most later Christians did not share his urgency that "the appointed time has grown short" (1 Cor 7:29), nor see humanity as divided between Jews in covenant with God and non-Jews "who did not know God" (1 Th 4:5). To put it more starkly, Paul wrote to former pagans who had come to know the God of Israel through Christ. He did not imagine he was writing to "Christians" thousands of years later who constituted a separate religious community that was alienated from and often hostile to Jews.

Abraham: Becoming the Father of Many Nations as God Promised Long Ago
With the raising of Christ, Paul believed that Israel's covenanting with God was coming to its telos (Rom 10:4), its ultimate goal as God had intended all along. God's promise to Abraham that he would be father of many nations (Gen 17:4) was now coming to pass. Gentiles could now become "Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29; cf. Rom 4:11-18), but as non-Jews. For Gentiles to become Jews by receiving circumcision would be nothing new; it had been possible for centuries. For Paul, however, there was now an entirely new situation, one that fulfilled what God promised Abraham. By putting aside idolatry and "putting on Christ" (Rom 13:14), pagans could be found righteous before the God of Israel. But they had to remain Gentiles or else the only people worshipping God would be Jews. "Christ [would have] died for nothing" (Gal 2:21), and the nations would not be "Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29). Paul might be described as a messianically-enthusiastic Pharisee who is reaching out to save

Gentiles from the Torah's curse of their idolatrous and evil practices (Gal 5:16-26).

Galatians is an Angry Letter
In Galatians, Paul contends with unknown opponents (Gal 1:7; 3:1; 4:17; 5:7-12; 6:12-13) who insist that baptized Gentiles also be circumcised. They may be other Jewish believers in Christ or Gentile believers who have been (or are considering being) circumcised or both. These "agitators" (1:7; 5:10) may have argued that since God made a covenant of circumcision with Abraham (Gen 17:10), Gentiles also had to be circumcised to be incorporated into Abraham's lineage.

It is also possible that these "agitators" were well aware of the political implications of Paul's message. Rome recognized that Jews would not worship a city's or the empire's gods. But for a non-Jew to refuse to participate in such worship would be tantamount to treason because in the ancient world the gods protected the city and the empire. Jewish circumcision could protect those pagan converts from that negative political fall-out. And that is what Paul vehemently opposed.

So angry is Paul at these various arguments for Gentile circumcision that he calls the Galatians "stupid" and "bewitched" (3:1) and wishes that those urging Gentile circumcision would castrate themselves (5:12)!

Why is Paul so upset? He fears that his opponents might either cause the Gentile Christ-believers in Galatia to become Jews or perhaps lapse back into pagan idolatry. In either case, Paul's mission would have failed, and Christ would judge his apostleship to have been in vain.

Without appreciating Paul's situation, later Christians misconstrued what he felt was at stake. Paul was not arguing that the Torah was obsolete. Nor he was consumed by a sense of failure in futilely trying to earn God's love by suddenly realizing that no one deserves God's grace—an interpretation that became prominent during the Reformation. As a Jew by birth and not a Gentile sinner (Gal 2:15), Paul knew that Jews had already been favored by God with the gracious gift of the Torah; it was the Gentile Christ-believers who were insecure about their standing with God. To see Paul as he saw himself, as a Jewish apostle, Christians today need to read his epistles with new eyes, as when an optometrist switches lenses and murky letters on a screen suddenly become clearer. There are aspects of Paul's thought that will probably always be "hard to understand" because he wrote—sometimes hastily—in circumstances we now cannot fully reconstruct. But today we actually know more about the world of Paul than previous readers for over a thousand years.

Interpreting Galatians Today
The above description of the context of Galatians is based upon historical and textual studies conducted over the past fifty or sixty years that increasingly see Paul as within Judaism. According to Catholic teaching, reading the Bible in its original context is an essential part of interpreting the Bible: "The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer [such as Paul] intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture" (Second Vatican Council, Dei Verbum, §12). But since Catholics understand that scriptures have meaning "for men and women of today, it is necessary to apply their message to contemporary circumstances" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," §IV, A, 1). The process of discerning the meaning of a biblical text for today's church, called "actualization," involves identifying "the aspects of the present situation highlighted or put in question by the biblical text" (Ibid., §IV, A, 2). Christians have often misread Paul, largely because his original context as apostle to the Gentiles was lost from view. Such contextual knowledge is imperative in a church that seeks "to avoid absolutely any actualization of certain texts of the New Testament which could provoke or reinforce unfavorable attitudes to the Jewish people" (Ibid., §IV, A, 3) or to their religious traditions (Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian

Bible" §II, A).

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In his two lessons on Galatians, Pope Francis seeks to bring that New Testament letter to life, or to "actualize" it, for Catholics today. Interestingly, he makes some of the same points found in the above outline of Paul's first-century context. For instance, he points out that "one should not think … that Saint Paul was opposed to the Mosaic Law. No, he observed it." Francis also notes that Paul describes "the Torah, the Law" as "a tremendous gift that God gave his people. Why? Because at that time paganism was everywhere, idolatry was everywhere and [sinful] human behavior was a result of idolatry" (Catechesis of 11 August 2021).

However, because Francis is concentrating on the meaning of Galatians and "the Law" for Catholics today, he doesn't discuss the meaning of the "Torah" for Jews today. Similarly, Paul, writing to former pagans, stresses how the Torah condemns their earlier idolatry. He did not discuss his own continuing observance of the Torah nor that of his fellow Jews. Just as Paul's readers in later centuries could mistakenly construe his failure to mention Jewish Torah observance (together with his angry tone) to mean that Paul was glad to be rid of it, so, too, Francis' not mentioning the Torah as central to Jewish identity today (while employing Pauline language of freedom from the Law's curse) can easily be misconstrued as implying that Torah has become obsolete for everyone after Christ. Just as Paul used the figure of Abraham to insist that God, through Christ, was now fulfilling the divine promise to bless the Gentile nations, so Pope Francis presents standard Christian teaching that Abraham and the Law both lead "us" to Christ. But it is unclear whether he means that the "us" should include Jews, thus opening the possibility of an implicit criticism of Jewish traditions of biblical interpretation. This is even more the case when Francis stated on August 11 that "the Law … does not give life" (to anyone?) or asked on August 18, "if we [?] still … need the Law."

Shifting Audiences

In Jewish or interfaith contexts, Francis is always respectful of the centrality of the Torah for Jews. In his first major papal instruction, he taught that "God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant and to bring forth treasures of wisdom which flow from their encounter with his word" (Evangelii Gaudium, §249), and, as he later said to the International Council of Christians and Jews on 30 June 2015, "for Jews, the Word of God is present above all in the Torah. Both faith traditions find their foundation in the One God, the God of the Covenant, who reveals himself through his Word." On the occasion of receiving a new printed edition of the Torah on 23 February 2017, he said that the Torah "manifests the paternal and visceral love of God, a love shown in words and concrete gestures, a love that becomes covenant" and he went on to quote Pope John Paul II's 1990 description of the Torah as the "living teaching of the living God." He has repeatedly urged Christians and Jews to study the Torah together. In his preface to the 2019 Italian book La Bibbia dell'Amicizia, to which both Jews and Christians contributed, he invoked the Italian rite of the Jewish Amidah prayer to bless their work: "let the doors of the Torah, of wisdom, intelligence and knowledge, of nourishment and sustenance, of life, of grace, of love and of mercy and gratitude be open before You."

Why is there little trace of such reverential sentiments about the Torah in Pope Francis' catecheses on Galatians and the Law? I suggest that shifting audiences are a primary factor. Just as the words "Torah" and "Law" denote two different mindsets about the same biblical books, there are two different sets of dynamics when Christians preach or teach to Christian audiences rather than Jewish or interfaith ones. Perhaps because Christians have habitually understood Paul in Galatians to be writing directly to them about the Law in their own social situations (rather than to former first-century pagans worried about being cursed by the Law), Christians find it all-too-easy to read Galatians without regard for the rabbinic conviction that knowledge of the Torah is as vital for the people of Israel as water is for the body (b. Bava Kama 82a).

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The Bottom Line

This all leads to the conclusion that, whatever the context, Christians have an obligation to remember that their words affect the living Jewish community of today. Whether they intend to or not, they will promote either respect or disdain for Jewish spiritual lives and traditions when discussing almost any aspect of Christian faith. As Pope Francis said on 18 August, “teaching on the value of the law is very important, and deserves to be considered carefully so we do not give way to misunderstandings and take false steps.”

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Source: International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ).