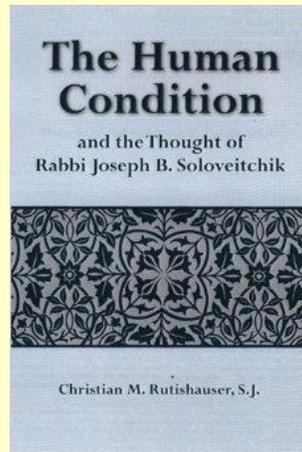


# The Jewishness of Jesus: Renewing Christian Appreciation



## The Third Annual John Paul II Lecture in Christian-Jewish Relations

Rev. Dr. Christian M. Rutishauser, S.J.

February 16, 2014  
Center for Christian-Jewish Learning  
Boston College



[www.bc.edu/cjlearning](http://www.bc.edu/cjlearning)

## Introduction

A large enthusiastic audience welcomed our third speaker in the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning's Annual John Paul II Lecture. The event possessed a special dimension because it was held less than three months before that Pope, in company with Pope John XXIII, was proclaimed a Saint by the Catholic Church. The Center's activities are a continuation of their Papal ministry of reconciliation and friendship between Christians and Jews. Father John Pawlikowski of Chicago and Rabbi Michael Cook of Cincinnati had delivered the first two lectures in the series and we thought it time to reach beyond our national borders with our invitation for the 2014 presentation. We were very pleased that Father Christian Rutishauser, of the Society of Jesus, was able to accept our invitation. He is the current Provincial (religious superior) of the multi-lingual communities that make up the Jesuit Society of Switzerland. Provincials have customarily been people who work behind the scenes and, thus, unlike leaders of institutions such as churches or schools, live in a certain obscurity. However, now with the election last year of Pope Francis, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, former Jesuit Provincial of Argentina, that office may become a steppingstone to the Papacy. It is amazing to think that Father Rutishauser may come from the wrong continent, however, as the Catholic Church looks to create a more global leadership.

As a Swiss, Father Rutishauser's presence among us was a reminder that one of the earliest meetings that was held after World War II in the interest of promoting a new relationship between Jews and Christians took place in Seelisberg, Switzerland. Certainly Father Rutishauser has carried forward the aspirations of that 1947 ecumenical gathering in his own teaching and writing. After studies in Switzerland, Israel, and France, he completed his doctorate at the University of Lucerne and a revised version of that work was published in an English translation last year as *The Human Condition and the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (KTAV Publishing House, 2013). In addition, he has published numerous articles on Jewish-Christian themes and he lectures regularly at Jesuit institutions in Munich and Rome. Father Rutishauser also became something of a television personality by leading a pilgrimage on foot from his native country to Jerusalem and a film by Christof Wolf of that pilgrimage has received awards (*Die Schrittweisen zu Fuss nach Jerusalem*). He published his experience and thought on the significance of his seven-month on-foot pilgrimage to Jerusalem for interreligious dialogue and peace: *Zu Fuss nach Jerusalem. Mein Pilgerweg für Dialog und Frieden* (Patmos, 2013). I first met Christian at various conferences that the Society of Jesus has sponsored for Jesuits who are in dialogue with Jews. We have met in Krakow near Auschwitz, in New York City and in Zug, Switzerland, where Father Rutishauser welcomed the group to the Lassalle House Center where he continues to direct retreats. I had hoped that he would make a contribution to the conference that our Center hosted at Boston College in the Summer of 2012, from which a selection of papers has just been published as *"The Tragic Couple": Encounters Between Jews and Jesuits* (Brill, 2014). Unfortunately his Jesuit duties necessitated his presence in Kenya during our conference. Among his other important responsibilities is his membership on the Commission for Jewish-Christian Relations of the Swiss and German Bishops Conference and he is a permanent Vatican consultant for Jewish-Catholic relations.

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## **The Jewishness of Jesus: Renewing Christian Appreciation**

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### **I: Rediscovering the Origins of Christianity**

#### **The historical Jesus and his faith**

The Church's image of Jesus has changed greatly over the past 60 years. The Son of God in whom people believed and who was defined by dogmatic theology has increasingly been eclipsed by the figure of the wandering preacher from Nazareth. Historical-critical interpretations have undercut the theological and dogmatic view of Jesus, whom scholars began treating as simply another historical figure from the ancient world. This shift represented liberation from ossified, formulaic articulations of belief and was part of the secularization of faith in modern culture. Jesus the proclaimer of the Kingdom of God, Jesus the Jewish teacher of wisdom, was viewed through the lens of secular historical scholarship, and as historians strove to transcend the viewpoint of the devout from which the New Testament books were written, they did their best to pinpoint as accurately as possible the objective history behind the sacred texts. Although everyone was aware that the surviving evidence was insufficient for reconstructing a biography of Jesus, exegetes remained committed to the ideal of getting as close as possible to the bare historical facts and to closing the historical gap by replacing the proximity brought about by faith with Jesus's human proximity.

Once the Church had affirmed the historical-critical method, many of the faithful also espoused this view of Jesus. The euphoria over new historical discoveries and the decoding of the original meaning of the biblical texts was so strong that nobody worried about the New Testament – and the Bible in general – being relegated to the status of nothing but a history book. The secular, historical view was irresistible, and although the Bible's declared theological status as divine revelation had not yet been discarded, many believers gradually came to realize that history alone could not provide adequate spiritual nourishment. Additionally, there was a danger that Jesus would become simply one early religious founder figure among many. Most importantly, however, these developments made it clear that Christianity cannot be based on the historical Jesus alone, as his death and resurrection transcend the historical dimension. The secular, historical perspective on Jesus had to be widened to include the history of the New Testament period as a whole, and that of the Old Testament too. The text of the Bible must be read as a document written by believers in Antiquity. There is no alternative. It was necessary to regain the faith perspective, namely that God's providence and guidance work mysteriously in and through the history narrated in the Bible. And of course, God works through the process of collecting the writings and putting them together in one canon, the Bible. The notions of revelation and providence have to be redefined.

In this context, the faith and religious practice of Jesus and his followers began to receive greater attention. Jesus emerged as a devout first-century Jew who was associated with the Pharisaic movement. His relationship with the Essenes of Qumran and with John the Baptist's disciples was debated along with his conflicts with the Jerusalem establishment. Judaism at the time of Jesus was a multi-faceted phenomenon not only in the Promised Land itself, but also among the diaspora communities of Egypt, Asia Minor, and Mesopotamia. The Jews were small in number, but their culture and their history and relationship with God had a disproportionately great impact on the dominant pagan Hellenistic society. Historical research has also shown how the new messianic movement spread within Judaism and beyond after Jesus's death and resurrection. Here, too, the attraction of the Jewish messianic movement was universal. But the period was characterized by grave crises, for the Romans destroyed Jewish culture in and around Jerusalem in two wars. The destruction of the temple in 70 AD robbed Judaism of its religious center. The temple was the scene of liturgical and propitiatory rites. Here, Jewish law was interpreted and literature and prayers collected. All Jewish life crystallized here, since the *one* place was meant to be a sign of the *one* God. After two wars and the destruction of Jerusalem, Jewish culture and Jewish faith had to be redefined and reorganized.

### **The messianic and rabbinic movements**

Two religious movements were to emerge victorious from this Jewish catastrophe: the messianic Jesus movement and the rabbinic movement. Both were lay initiatives that placed a high premium on the word of God in Holy Writ. Both sought to reinterpret the history of God's guidance, which had already been set down with considerable authority in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Christian movement strove to decipher a messianic figure whose mission had ended in failure on the cross. The rabbis struggled to gain a new understanding of religious life in the presence of God after the loss of his cultic presence in the temple. The followers of Christ added a New Testament to the sacred scriptures and attempted to define the relationship between God and his Messiah in terms of dogmatic confessions of faith. The rabbis collected their legal tradition in the Mishnah and with the Talmud created an oral tradition that would keep the old written tradition alive and carry it into the future. Modern research has made us aware of how extremely complex and protracted the development of both movements was. They were at once mutually influential and mutually exclusive; they shared core elements of faith but interpreted them in opposite ways. The fourth to the seventh centuries saw the emergence of what are today termed Judaism and Christianity as world religions. Up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century they were called two *secta* (parties), two *leges* (laws), and two *fides* (faiths). In the final phase of their full-fledged development, a third party, a third law, and a third faith was born in the form of Islam.

All three, rabbinic Judaism, patristic Christianity, and Islam, are heirs to biblical history. Islam, however, did not begin to develop until Judaism and Christianity were already fully formed worldviews, and its growth has not been as closely linked to Judaism and Christianity as these two traditions are to each other. Nor does Islam perpetuate biblical tradition in the same way as Christianity, since the Koran represents

an entirely new book of revelations. Islam takes up the themes, but not the sacred text. Fundamental categories such as history and liberation, covenant and people, Sabbath/Sunday, and the centrality of Jerusalem are not taken any further, or rather Islam does not lay claim to them in the same way. So while all three faiths are sister religions, it is only Judaism and Christianity that are twins (to extend the sibling metaphor). Only Christians and Jews have sacred texts in common. I shall therefore confine my inquiry to the links between Judaism and Christianity.

## **II: The Fruits of *Nostra Aetate***

### **Christianity in the light of Judaism**

Exactly 50 years ago, Vatican II started to produce a “Decree on the Jews.” The document went through a dramatic process involving multiple revisions, during which its focus was widened. The text on Jews was at one point integrated into the document on ecumenism. Indeed, the separation of Jews and Christians itself can be perceived as an original schism, similar to later divisions within Christianity. David Flusser went so far as to describe Christianity as Judaism for non-Jews. The final result of the Council’s process was the document *Nostra Aetate*, which deals with the relationship of the Church to the non-Christian religions. Its relationship with Judaism was thus subsumed into general interreligious dialogue, but without watering down the unique links between Church and Synagogue. *Nostra Aetate* devotes a separate section to Judaism, which opens with the words: “As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham’s stock” (No. 4). In *Nostra Aetate*, therefore, Judaism is not treated as something external as the other religions are. Nor is it regarded simply as a cultural answer to humanity’s great existential questions, as the other religions are. Rather, Judaism snaps into focus when the Church examines its own mysteries. Reflections on the nature of Christianity automatically point to Judaism. In an address to the Central Council of Jews in Germany and the Conference of Rabbis in Mainz in 1980, Pope John Paul II said: “The first dimension of Christian-Jewish dialogue — the encounter between the people of the Old Covenant, which was never revoked by God, and the people of the New Covenant — is also a dialogue within our Church: a dialogue, so to speak, between the first and second parts of its Bible.” In the intervening years, numerous official statements have been issued by the Church and many theological works have been published about the close and inseparable bond between Christians and Jews. The Center for Christian-Jewish Learning here at Boston College studies, reflects on, and contributes to this fascinating process.

What has transpired from all these efforts is a rich, shared heritage. Almost every single biblical and theological concept has been re-examined in the Jewish and Christian context. Three theological questions, however, remain particularly controversial to this day: 1.) What is the relationship between the old covenant of God with Israel, which was never revoked, and God’s new covenant with the Church through Christ? Is there one single covenant, or are there two? Are we dealing with the renewal of a covenant, its

extension, or a shift in its content? What is the relationship of the Church as God's people to the Jews as God's people? 2.) What does it mean for Jesus's status as the universal saviour if Judaism is already in a covenant with God? Is it still necessary for Jews to be converted to Christ, or to the Church? If yes, should they convert in the same way as non-Jews? If no, is there a salvific meaning of the covenant that was never revoked? And what kind of meaning could Jesus have for the Jews? The same as for us Christians, or a different one? 3.) Where do we Christians stand on the issue of the Promised Land? The Torah speaks of the path that leads Israel through the desert, out of idolatry and slavery into the land of freedom and of God's just order. Do we as the Church take this message of the Hebrew Bible seriously? What does it mean for Judaism, for the modern State of Israel, and what does it mean for us? Thus there are three hot issues: the covenant, the salvific mission of Jesus, and the Holy Land. In the United States in particular, the publication of *Dabru Emet* (2000) on the Jewish side and *A Sacred Covenant* (2002) and *Covenant and Mission* (2002) on the Catholic side have made important contributions to this debate.

### **The sacrament of otherness**

The dialogues and discussions of the past decades have at any rate made one thing clear for the Catholic Church: the Church is tied to the Synagogue, and this is no coincidence. Whenever the relationship is denied or repressed, the core of the Christian message is reduced and misinterpreted. What is more, if Christianity forgets its relationship with Judaism, it begins to exhibit anti-Judaic behaviour, since it cannot then refrain from putting itself in the place of the Jews in its reading of Sacred Scripture. This would make the Church the sole recipient of the Hebrew Bible and would deny the Jews their right to exist. The Church would read the internal Jewish conflicts recorded in the New Testament as a fundamental critique of Judaism per se. This has happened too often in history. But it was precisely this substitution of the Church for Israel that Vatican II rejected. Opposing substitution theory is John Paul II's teaching about the "covenant never revoked." Too often in history, Church reform and reversion took place at the expense of the Jews, and this price often went unnoticed. During the Crusades and the Reformation they produced violence against the Jews, although the initiatives were not aimed towards them. And as recently as during negotiations with the Society of St. Pius X a few years ago, the Jews sustained the collateral damage resulting from the Church's self-reassurance. You remember the debate on the Good Friday Prayer in the Tridentine Rite. It is therefore crucially important that Christians remember their relationship with Judaism constantly.

The Church must grapple with the Synagogue until the outcome is a blessing. "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me" (Gen 32:26) are the words not only of Jacob in his battle with Esau. They are also the words, if I may thus interpret them, of the Church to Israel. The Church must grapple with Judaism until it can say, in Jacob's words: "I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (Gen 32:30). Jacob and Esau were warring twin brothers, just as rabbinic Judaism and patristic Christianity emerged from Antiquity as two polemically divided faiths. Rabbinic Judaism, of course, always related the conflict of Jacob and Esau to the conflict between the Synagogue and the Church.

There can be no objection to this interpretation. But we must take our exegesis one step further. Jacob not only represents Judaism but also the Church. And more important: Jacob and Esau were reconciled. And today, Church and Synagogue should finally learn to live with each other in reconciliation and mutual enrichment. Only in this way can they bear witness, in the Promised Land and throughout the world, to God's willingness to enter into relationships and covenants with man.

Subsequent to *Nostra Aetate*, the Jews were rightly termed the "sacrament of otherness." The Jews are to the Church "the Other." So God, as the Other, can reveal himself in this relationship. This proximity and disassociation, dependency and attachment may be understood as God's providence and guidance. We must be careful, however, not to draw judgmental distinctions of the kind that were made by some Reformation theologians: the law for the Jews and grace for the Christians, judgment for the Synagogue and mercy for the Church. Nor is the Old Testament exclusively a typological preparation for the New Testament. It is not only a shadowy premonition of Christian salvation, as the patristic theologians repeatedly claim. Rather, the Hebrew Bible sets out the truths which made the unfolding of the story of Jesus Christ possible. Later rabbinic Jewish history is as legitimate an interpretation of biblical revelation as the Christian interpretation. Both traditions, that of rabbinic Judaism and that of patristic Christianity, must therefore be favourably evaluated. Both emanate from a covenant with God: struggle and forgiveness, dependency and relational capacity are expressed symbolically in the world by the Jewish-Christian relationship, which thus becomes an image of the relationship between God and man for all mankind. What from the perspective of pre-conciliar ecclesiology represents a narcissistic wound emerges now as wholesome self-relativization on the part of the Church. The relationship between Church and Synagogue really is a sacramental one, pointing symbolically towards God and calling him to mind. Thus to be Christian is ultimately to exist in dialogue. Christians are quintessentially and paradigmatically dependent on the Jews. Of course, dialogue must be extended to all religious traditions and all other cultures. But for the Church, esteem for the Other attains a sacramental level in its esteem for Judaism, and its core lies in its esteem for the Jewish Jesus of Nazareth.

### **III. The Feast of the Circumcision of Christ**

My concern is not so much with the aforementioned, contentious theological questions as with the need to learn about, and appreciate, the Jewish tradition itself. And that is the point for this lecture: How we will become more aware of the abiding Jewish elements within Catholic faith and tradition. I would like to use two examples: the *Feast of the Circumcision of Christ* and the *Day of Judaism*. The Church's relationship to Judaism must be entrenched in the liturgical calendar, in the celebration of the faith and in prayer itself.

## A deeper understanding of the Incarnation

“He who encounters Jesus Christ encounters Judaism,” said John Paul II. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the *Feast of the Circumcision of Christ*. Circumcision marks the Jewish male’s entry into the covenant with God, and the New Testament stresses that Jesus, too, entered into this covenant. Thus Paul’s Epistle to the Romans begins with a brief formula about Jesus: “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, (which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures,) concerning his son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.” (Rom 1:1-4) “According to the spirit” and “According to the flesh” are paralleled. “According to the flesh,” Jesus is of the house of David, the Jewish royal dynasty. It is more than a statement of biological fact. It identifies Jesus’s cultural and religious origin. The royal dynasty of David embodies the covenant with God and fidelity to the law par excellence. In Galatians 4,4f., Paul mentions Jesus’s birth and entry into the covenant in the same breath, and points out its deep theological significance: “But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.” The Gospel of Matthew, too, underscores the Davidic lineage of the new-born Jesus in the infancy narrative (1:1-17) and later quotes these programmatic words of Jesus: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, nor the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” (5,17f). This overture to the Sermon on the Mount alludes to Mount Sinai and the Old Testament covenant. Jesus’s disciples are charged with fulfilling the law and preaching the gospel to others. Jesus is a man of Jewish law, and he, according to Matthew, distinguishes between two intended recipients of the good news: in the Mission Discourse, Jesus sends his disciples to the Israelites only (Mt 10); the risen Christ, however, sends them to all nations with the command to baptize (Mt 28:16-20). It might be said that Jews and Christians are addressed in two separate speeches. Thus, the circumcision of Jesus and his entry into the law has crucial theological implications. He has not just one uniform message for all human beings but he respects the structure of the history of salvation, the structure of the covenant, which creates a distinction between the Jewish people and the nations. Luke goes in the same direction when stating that the new born Jesus is a light to the nations and a glory to Israel (Lk 2:32). A group of theologians of which I am a member wrote to Pope Benedict XVI in 2008 and to Pope Francis in 2013, presenting arguments for the introduction of a *Feast of the Circumcision of Christ* into the liturgical calendar, in order to mark this distinction.

In the opening paragraph, we wrote: “The Nativity-Circumcision-Presentation cycle (Lk 2:1-39) expresses the meaning of the Incarnation in relation to the fulfilment of the Promises, just as the Resurrection-Ascension-Pentecost cycle (Luke-Acts) does for the Paschal Mystery of Redemption. In a nutshell, the circumcision ultimately points to a deeper understanding of the Incarnation. The Early Church expressed this mystery of faith in general, human terms by saying that God took on human nature, or, in the words

of the Council of Chalcedon (431): Jesus Christ is God and man, unconfusedly and indivisibly. Faith in the Incarnation is here cast into axiomatic form in Hellenistic language and Greek thought. It speaks universally and with an awareness of God's salvific action for all mankind. But it does not explicitly state how this salvific action is propagated in history. It does not spell out the larger context of salvation history. "God becomes man" is a mythic proposition. One might think that God could just as well have become incarnate in a Roman or a German. One might think that God descended to walk among men in the world, as the Greek gods did. And Acts 14:11 attests to the fact that this ambiguity existed. Many Christians today have equally heretical beliefs about the nativity, especially when they speak indiscriminately of the divine birth with no reference to the history of salvation. For them, Incarnation is regarded first and foremost as the birth of Christ, completely disconnected from God's intervention in the history of the Hebrew Bible.

In reality, however, God had spoken many times before (Heb 1:1). He had not done so arbitrarily or among mankind in general; he had not offered "his covenant to man" several times before, as the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer states, but he had formed a covenant with the Jewish people and spoken through the Jewish prophets since the call of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). It is especially important to be explicit in this point, for there are tendencies in India and Asia to replace the Old Testament with local tradition. This is then seen as the narrative preparing for Christian faith. But, God did not simply become man; his "word became flesh", as the Prologue to the Gospel of John states (Jn 1:14). Historically speaking, this word was given in the covenant of Mount Sinai and in the Torah. To avoid any possible ambiguity from the beginning of time, the Creator God of the Bible certainly addresses himself to all people and all creatures. But his qualified addressing and calling of people to serve the world did not begin with the Incarnation, but rather with Abraham and the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Jesus Christ is part of this tradition, which becomes visible only when Christians celebrate not only Christmas and Epiphany, but also the circumcision of Christ and his presentation in the Temple. Luke writes:

And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called Jesus, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; as it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord (2:21-23).

The eighth day as the day of circumcision and the fortieth day as the day of presentation in the Temple are named here according to Jewish ritual. That the Church commemorates the fortieth day on February 2 while suppressing the eighth day is devoid of all logic.

Thus we need the reestablishment of the *Feast of the Circumcision of Christ* in order to create awareness of salvation history prior to the Incarnation. Jesus is not man in the abstract and general sense; he is a Jewish man. What is at stake here is the particular and the historical, for which there is no substitute. The human being as such does not

exist. The point is that the human being is a cultural creature. He always exists only in a particular form. Being human is never merely biological or natural; it is always linguistically, culturally, and historically transmitted. What is at stake is the theological value of history and language, which is central to biblical thought. Imagine how different the average Christmas sermon would sound if Christmas was celebrated under the overarching belief that “God became a Jew.”

The Byzantine liturgy has always celebrated the *Feast of the Circumcision of Christ*, and the Ambrosian rite, too, commemorates the circumcision on January 1, the Octave of Christmas. In the Roman Catholic liturgy, however, this feast was abolished in 1960, for reasons which to this day remain somewhat unclear. Perhaps it seemed too historicizing, too loosely rooted in tradition, and too insignificant alongside the feast of the Mother of God, which is traditionally celebrated on this day in the Roman tradition. As I indicated above, in recent years Roman Catholic theologians, too, have begun calling for the reintroduction of this feast. The liturgical readings and prayers, however, would have to be carefully recompiled to reflect the revised understanding of the Jewish-Catholic relationship after the Council. After all, the pre-conciliar order of celebration was characterized by disregard for Israel and even had some anti-Jewish features. Physical circumcision was compared disparagingly with the circumcision of the heart. Fulfilment of Mosaic law was contrasted negatively with the new covenant of grace in Christ. The prayers, texts, and readings should express both Christianity’s positive proximity to and disassociation from Judaism.

The Council’s liturgical order, with its celebration of the Mother of God and its commemoration of peace on January 1, would need to be supplemented but not eliminated. The feast of Christ the Prince of Peace would be undergirded by the “sacrament of otherness.” Peace can prevail only where people live in dialogue with, in relation to, and with respect for, the Other and the stranger. After a long history of rejection and persecution, the relationship of the Christians to the Jews is indeed a hallmark of true peace. And even the Feast of Mary the Mother of God, celebrated on this day, would gain greater definition through the Christological connection with the circumcision of Jesus. Miriam, the Jewish mother, is just as central to salvific, incarnational thought as the mother conceived without original sin is central to the order of salvation. The commemoration of the birth of Jesus within a cultural and religious context of family and community would also help to prevent the Holy Family from being too easily appropriated by an ideology of the family. Additionally, the Jewish family of origin provides an element of tension in its juxtaposition with the Virgin Birth. The truth is only to be won by dialectic means.

### **Corporeality and language**

Thus there are many references to the faith that would become clear from a revival of the *Feast of the Circumcision of Christ*. Let us add a few others: the significance of circumcision in the Jewish context has remained a topic of debate to this day. This discussion has to be a positive point of reference for Christian theology. At the same time, the prophetic texts on the circumcision of the heart (Jer 9:15, 4:4; Ez 44:7)

and the New Testament texts referring to them (Gal 2; Col 2) must be brought into the discussion. Colossians 2:11–12 in particular was interpreted in anti-Jewish terms in the past and must be reinterpreted: “In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.” Circumcision as a mark of the covenant for the Jews correlates with the act of immersion in baptism. Like circumcision, baptism creates religious identity and confers membership on the people of God. A Platonizing interpretation pitting the corporeal sign against the more spiritual one does not work. Both Jewish tradition and Catholic sacramental theology hold that spiritual reality and the invisible action of God become visible in material, “corporeal” signs. Faith in the incarnation underscores the Hebrew Bible’s doctrine of creation, which affirms and values spirit and matter alike. Our valuation must not be based on the ontological distinction between spirit and matter, one good, one bad, but on the ethical distinction between constructive and destructive acts. Both circumcision and baptism have the purpose of dying to sin, and the action they take against sin is of an ethical and creative nature.

The feast of the circumcision of Christ deepens our faith in creation and our understanding of corporeality. Since circumcision is performed on the male member, it not only references procreation and sexuality, but actually makes them the main focus. Viewing them in a positive light in the context of Jewish-Christian relations goes a long way towards overcoming anti-Jewish thought. The corporeal, the flesh, and sexuality have often been contemptuously ascribed to Judaism in the past, while the more spiritual and intellectual Christian culture claimed to rise above these things. For centuries, the Church repressed the libidinous and projected it onto the Other. Yet sexuality must be acknowledged as an integral aspect of the state of being created, and interpreted and reflected on as such. Both the Church and Judaism know that not only properly lived sexuality is a great cultural achievement, but it must also be interpreted from the perspective of salvation history. Not for nothing was marriage declared a sacrament and a sign of the covenant between God and his people by the Church. Modern gender research, moreover, continues to make increasingly nuanced contributions to our knowledge of the function and meaning of sexuality and corporeality. We learn to understand a wide variety of cultural expressions of sexuality. If the Church wishes to remain true to its principle of integrating knowledge about creation into its theological thought and to bringing the liberating message of the Gospel to bear on the sexual and corporeal dimension, then it would do well to support these reflections without anxiety: nowhere has the shift from the creation-theological and ethical to the Platonic-ontological distinction had such negative consequences as in the realm of sexuality. Reflecting on circumcision, which marks a clear distinction between men and women in Jewish tradition, could prove to be an important contribution to a theology of gender.

For Christians, the *Feast of the Circumcision of Christ* primarily points towards baptism, as we saw in the verse of Colossians quoted earlier. The feast of St. Stephen, the day after Christmas, recalls the saint’s martyrdom and imitation of Christ in the last consequence. It would be no more than fitting for a commemoration of baptism to take

place on the Octave of Christmas. Christian life is a life baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. Baptism and martyrdom are spiritually linked. After all, the blood that flows during circumcision has frequently been associated with the blood of Christ shed on the Cross and with its salvific and redemptive effect. The “sacrifice of the foreskin”, a sign made on the male member stands for the sacrifice that underpins all cultural development. It corresponds to the “sacrifice on the Cross” that confronts the destructive forces of death. Being born and dying are cultural processes, not merely natural and biological processes of growth and decay.

Another great advantage of celebrating the first day of the year with a commemoration of the circumcision of Jesus and the baptism of every Christian is that it would constitute a more fitting preparation for the *Feast of the Baptism of the Lord*, which is celebrated on the Sunday after Epiphany. All too often, the baptism of Jesus by John in the River Jordan is associated with Christian baptism, irrespective of the fact that the two rituals have different meanings. Jesus’s baptism in the Jordan is a rite of atonement. Jesus’s baptism by John is most closely paralleled in Christian tradition by the sacrament of Confession, not by Christian baptism. The *Feast of the Circumcision of Christ*, occurring so close to the *Feast of the Baptism of the Lord* in the liturgical order, could intensify our understanding of the connection between these aspects of the faith.

### **The name of Jesus**

Another aspect of the Lord’s circumcision is the fact that Jesus was also given his name at his circumcision. Thus the feast of the circumcision is inextricably linked with the *Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus*. Unfortunately, this feast was likewise abolished by the Council. When John Paul II restored it, he transferred it to January 3. The feast of the name of Jesus should be connected again with the feast of his circumcision on January 1.

The feast of the Holy Name of Jesus is deeply rooted in Byzantine tradition, while in the West, the veneration of the Holy Name was spread by the Franciscans and later by the Jesuits. The feast of the Holy Name of Jesus dates back to the fifteenth century and was officially introduced into the liturgical calendar of the Roman Catholic Church in 1721. The veneration of the Holy Name, alongside the commemoration of Jesus’s circumcision, is an expression of the highest esteem for Jesus’s Jewish identity. According to biblical tradition, the name of God was revealed to Moses in the burning bush on Mount Sinai (Ex 3:14). From then on, the silent and unspoken Tetragram of the “I am” permeated the language of the Jews and continues to do so today. It is a sign of faithfulness to the covenant that is put upon the children of Israel as a blessing. To bless means to put the name of God on somebody (cf. Num 6:27). After the defection of the Israelites who danced around the Golden Calf (Ex 33:1–6), God renewed and reaffirmed his name as the embodiment of forgiving, merciful love:

And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him (Moses) there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity

and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. And Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped (Ex 34:5–8).

This name of true mercy is explicated further by the name of Jesus: Jesus, Yehoshua: the name saves, the name redeems. Jesus is the way to salvation, for in his face the glory of God shone forth (2 Cor 4:6) that once descended onto Mount Sinai (Ex 24:16). That is why the first Christians sang: "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:9–11). The Old Testament's Yehoshua led the Israelites out of the desert into the Promised Land, completing the liberation from slavery which Moses had begun. Yehoshua of Nazareth leads all those into the heavenly Jerusalem who follow him from the cross to the resurrection: "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the land" (Mt 5:5). The earthly Promised Land ought not to be regarded in isolation from, or played off against, the heavenly one – just as Jews and Christians ought to stand shoulder to shoulder. Thus *Nostra Aetate* states: "In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle (Paul), 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' (Soph. 3:9)."

### **A sequence for the feast day**

To conclude my remarks on the feast of the circumcision of Christ, I should like to present a sequence by Jean Gerson (1363–1429) which was written for the feast of the circumcision on January 1:

Apparuit hodie  
Mira virtus gratiae,  
Quae Deum circumcidit.

This day there was made manifest  
the wonderful power of grace  
in the circumcision of God.

Nomen ei coelicum,  
Nomen et salvificum,  
Quod est Jesus, indidit.

To him a heavenly name,  
a salvific name,  
was given, which is Jesus.

Nomen salus homini,  
Nomen quod os Domini  
Ab aeterno nominat.

A name that is man's salvation,  
a name which the mouth of the Lord  
utters from eternity.

Dudum Matri Numinis  
Hoc et sponso Virginis  
Angelus denuntiat.

Previously, the Mother of God  
and the Virgin's spouse  
had heard this name from the angel.

Tu nequam vim Zabuli,  
Tu peccatum saeculi

You overcome the vile power of Satan  
and the sin of the world,

Nomen sacrum superas.	o sacred name.
Jesu, nostrum pretium, Jesu, spes moerentium, Mentes sana miseras. Quod deest in homine Supple tuo nomine, Quod est salutiferum.	Jesus, our ransom, Jesus, hope of the afflicted, heal our sick souls. What is lacking in man supply by your name, which brings salvation.
Tua circumcisio Cordis sit praecisio Efficax cauterium.	Let your circumcision be a circumcision of the heart and its effective healing.
Sanguis fusus sordidos Lavet, riget aridos, Moestis det solatium.	Let your shed blood purify the unclean, refresh the parched, and give comfort to the sad.
Anni nunc initio, Pro felici xenio Para, Jesu, praemium.	Now, at the start of the year, as a happy gift of friendship, prepare, o Jesus, our heavenly reward.
Amen.	Amen.

The sequence begins with a liturgical visualization and recalls the grace that is conferred on this day by the circumcision of Jesus. Verses 2 to 7, however, are entirely devoted to Jesus's name. They recall the biblical account of the naming (verses 2 to 4) before invoking the highest of all names in the middle of the sequence, just as the passage from Philippians prescribes. Verses 6 and 7 recall that the name overcomes violence and sin and confers salvation, hope, solace, and healing on the soul. Above all, however, the name supplies what is lacking in man. The name of Jesus stands for Christ. Christ is glorified and hallowed in the name, just as the name of God is hallowed in the Lord's Prayer: "Hallowed be thy name" (Mt 6:9; Lk 11:2). From verse 8 onwards, the sequence returns to the circumcision, praying for the circumcision of hearts in the spirit of the New Testament. The blood of the circumcision gives purification and solace. The sequence, written for the first day of the year, prays for happiness and the reward of heaven to be conferred through Christ's circumcision. This brings us back to the here and now of the liturgical celebration on January 1. The words of the sequence recall a complex theology; the biblical and theological references express the mystery of the feast in its fullest measure. It could easily be used and sung again in today's liturgical celebrations.

## IV. The Day of Judaism

### Origins and significance

Let us turn to the *Day of Judaism*. Its commemoration is observed in several European countries. It was introduced in Italy in 1990, in Poland in 1998, in Austria in 2000, in the Netherlands in 2008, and in Switzerland in 2011. It began on the initiative of Catholics engaged in Judeo-Christian dialogue, who wanted to raise public awareness of the redefinition of the Church's relationship with the Synagogue. Thus the *Day of Judaism* was conceived as a day of dialogue. At the same time it is a day for reaffirming the Church's Jewish heritage. Following the example of the original initiative in Italy, January 17 was chosen as the date of it, that being one day before the start of the *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*. The date thus recalls how all ecumenical understanding rests on the relationship of Christians to the Jews.

The *Day of Judaism* has the support of the Bishops' Conferences in all the countries mentioned above. Their committees for Jewish relations are closely involved in preparing the day's celebrations and are sometimes in charge of the planning. On the Jewish side, the initiative was so well received that in 2004, the then Chief Rabbi of Israel, Jonah Metzger, asked Pope John Paul II to institute a *Day of Judaism* for the entire Roman Catholic Church. After the commemoration of the fortieth jubilee of *Nostra Aetate*, Cardinal Walter Kasper sent a survey to all of the Bishops' Conferences about the desirability of introducing a *Day of Judaism* for the Church as a whole. As relations between Church and Synagogue vary considerably around the world, the Vatican ultimately decided to leave the matter to the discretion of the Bishops' Conferences. While recommending that a Day of Judaism be introduced, it left the local bodies free to decide on the details. Here in the US, there is still some hesitation.

In Germany, for example, the introduction of a *Day of Judaism* is currently under discussion. Such a day would have special significance in Germany, given the country's Nazi past. The persecution of the Jews is already remembered in many German cities on November 9, the date of the "Kristallnacht" pogrom in 1938, when most of the country's synagogues and Jewish stores were destroyed, ushering in the deadliest phase in the Nazis' campaign of unbridled violence against the Jews. Germany also commemorates the liberation of Auschwitz on January 27, which the United Nations officially declared Holocaust Remembrance Day. The *Day of Judaism* would be a more theological contribution to the culture of remembering days.

### Celebration on the second Sunday of Lent

Of particular interest is the form in which the *Day of Judaism* is celebrated in Switzerland. In order to reach churchgoers and give it a central place in the liturgical calendar, the Bishops' Conference chose not January 17, but the second Sunday in Lent. The faithful are thus called upon to engage consciously with Judaism during the annual period of atonement and preparation for Easter. Lent is not only a fitting time in which to ask forgiveness for anti-Judaism, but it is also a time for deepening the faith. Jesus was

killed in the context of Passover, and the Gospels present his death as a sacrifice on the eve of the Jewish feast celebrating their emancipation from slavery and the forging of a nation. This relationship between Passover and Easter should become conscious on the Day of Judaism.

The choice of a Sunday for the *Dies Iudaicus* is likewise symbolic. Sunday is the Christian day of observance and shows that the Christians derived their seven-day week from Judaism. The Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Sunday are brothers. What Sunday is to the Christians, the Sabbath is to the Jews, namely a day of creation and salvation. The Day of Judaism is not meant to be a theme Sunday in the Church year, but it should underscore the theological meaning of the seven-day rhythm.

On the *Day of Judaism*, the celebration of the Eucharist should illustrate the links and contiguities with Judaism. The Swiss Bishops' Conference provides sermon preparation materials for the *Day of Judaism*. The Old Testament readings – dealing with Abraham in all three reading cycles – along with the New Testament reading and the Gospel of the Transfiguration of Christ are provided alongside commentary by Jewish and Christian exegetes. But we should not forget the Psalm with which the congregation responds to the first reading. The Psalms remain the prayer book that all Jews and Christians share. The homily of the day could center on the Eucharist itself, for example on the prayers of the Offertory which are classical Jewish blessings; or on the Sanctus which echoes the vision of Isaiah in the Temple and the Psalms of the Temple liturgy of Jerusalem; or on the *Lord's Prayer*. In addition, the fourth Eucharistic Prayer is particularly suitable for the *Day of Judaism*, since it begins with thanksgiving for creation and then narrates God's salvific action. It should be pointed out, however, that the generalization "Time and again you offered them (the human beings) covenants and through the prophets taught them..." is somewhat lacking in conviction. It would be more precise to say "You made a covenant with Israel". The history of salvation should be made explicit here without suppressing mention of Judaism.

These are some thoughts how to celebrate the *Day of Judaism*, in order to deepen Catholic Faith, to reach out to the churchgoers, and to promote dialogue. I hope together with a restored Feast of the Circumcision of the Lord we can become more and more aware of being Christian as being in dialogue.