

Jews and Judaism in European Catholic Catechisms and Textbooks

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I. French, Italian, and Spanish Catechisms

The aim of this research is to examine, in general terms, the approach to Jews and Judaism found in a selection of Catholic catechisms. The following topics are considered: 1) The “Chosen People” and their replacement by the “New People;” 2) Jesus the Jew and the Pharisees; 3) The texts’ hermeneutics: Jewish and Christian readings of the Bible.

The catechisms examined can be classified in three groups:

- a) Catechisms published by the Conference of Italian Bishops (CEI)¹
- b) Catechisms published by the Conference of Spanish Bishops²
- c) Catechisms from some French diocese (“parcours de catechism”).

The Italian (CEI) catechisms are particularly relevant to this research, both because they are more numerous, covering a wider age range, and because they have been translated into many other languages for use in European and non-European countries.³

A. The “Chosen People” and their replacement by the “New People of God”

In the catechisms of the CEI, developed for the first stages of Christian instruction (from pre-school to 12 years of age), the Jewish people is above all portrayed as Jesus’ people,⁴ a people that is often depicted in negative terms: it has rejected Jesus, has persecuted the first Christians⁵ and is hardhearted.⁶ The category of “Chosen People” is also interpreted negatively: according to the catechism for young people (1993), this concept would have been understood by the Jewish people as an entitlement to God’s special protection, regardless of their behaviour, even including infidelity.⁷

¹ The following are noteworthy: 1) Catechisms for the first stages of Christian instruction: a) Catechism for early childhood [CECh]: *Lasciate che i bambini vengano a me* (1973/1991, for children younger than six years); b) Catechisms for children and young teenagers [CCh/CYT]: *Io sono con voi* (1974/1991, 6-8 years); *Venite con me* (1975/1991, 8-10 years); *Sarete miei testimoni* (1976/1991, 11-12 years); *Vi ho chiamati amici* (1982/1991, 11-12 years); 2) Catechisms for teenagers and young adults [CT/YA]: *Io ho scelto voi/1* (1995, 14-18 years); *Non di solo pane* (1979) and *Venite e vedrete/2* (1997, 18-25 years); 3) Catechisms for Adults [CA]: *Signore da chi andremo?* (1982) and *La verità vi farà liberi* (1995, 25+ years).

² Comisión Episcopal de Enseñanza y catequesis: 1) *Padre Nuestro*. First catechism for the Christian Community (1980, 5-6 years); 2) *Jesús el Señor*. Second Catechism for the Christian Community (1982: for children); 3) *Ésta es nuestra fe, ésta es la fe de la Iglesia*. Third Catechism for the Christian Community (1986, for teenagers and adults).

³ See Catechisms of the Italian Conference of the Bishops: translations.

⁴ CCh, *Io sono con voi*, 1974-75/1991, p. 53.

⁵ CYT, *Sarete miei testimoni*, 1976/1991, pp. 35; 66; 69.

⁶ This definition, that picks up the quotation of Matthew 19:8 in reference to the Mosaic Law, has not been found in a catechism but in P. RAIMONDO, *Guide to catechism: «Vi ho chiamato amici»*, I, Elledici, series Progetto Magnificat, 2005, p. 34.

⁷ CT, *Io ho scelto voi*, p. 122.

Although the accusation of deicide is not explicitly made, the catechisms seem to revive the old category of “substitution,” according to which the Old and unfaithful People of God would be replaced by the New People of God: the Church, the People of the New Covenant.⁸

This concept has a parallel in the third catechism of the Conference of Spanish Bishops (1986), where the Church is not only defined as the New People of God but also as God’s New Israel, and where it is affirmed that between the Old and the New Peoples of God there is continuity, but also a certain disruption as there is between the Old and New Covenant.⁹

Only in 1995, the CEI’s Catechism for Adults rejected the accusation of deicide [441], in accordance with what has been declared in the Second Vatican Council¹⁰ thirty years earlier. This catechism declares explicitly that the ancient covenant has never been revoked but perfected by the new covenant [443].¹¹

In conclusion, even today the official catechesis for children, teenagers and young adults seems to be based on texts that also contain statements that create difficulties in the relationship between Jews and Christians.

B) Jesus the Jew and the Pharisees

A problem that, to some extent, is parallel to that above-mentioned is the issue of Jesus’ Jewishness and his relationship with the Pharisees. The catechisms of the CEI, corresponding to the first stages of religious instruction, seem to acknowledge without difficulty Jesus’ Jewishness: the historical and geographical context of His birth, His adherence to Jewish religious traditions such as the practice of prayer, the observance of the shabbat and His attendance in the Temple,¹² whereas it is harder to find accurate descriptions of the Pharisees.

Associated or identified with the Scribes, the Pharisees are depicted in the catechisms in a variety of contrasting ways: as rabble-rousers,¹³ rigid followers of the traditions of the Fathers, despisers of sinners and of the people ignorant of the Law,¹⁴ but also as a group with a close alliance to the people, showing concern for its problems and object of affection and goodwill.¹⁵

⁸ CYT, *Sarete miei testimoni*, pp. 24; 32; 51; 68. See also *Guide to catechism*, p. 51. A French catechism of a later date seems to go along a different path: it reconstructs the stages of the history of salvation, from Abraham to Jesus, and in doing so it declares that God’s covenant with His people is eternal and definitive, but it needed to be renewed through Jesus the Son, see *Pour grandir dans la foi – Jésus t’appelle à vivre avec le peuple de Dieu- Parcours de Catéchisme, 2^e étape.. Réalisé sous la responsabilité du Service de la Catéchèse du Diocèse de Paris et du Service de la Catéchèse du Diocèse de Fréjus – Toulon*, Publishing House Le Sénévé/Cerp, Paris 2000, pp. 34-35.

⁹ *Ésta es nuestra fe, ésta es la fe de la Iglesia*, 168 “cierta ruptura, como también la hay entre la antigua y la nueva Alianza”.

¹⁰ *Nostra Aetate*, 4. See also *Venite e vedrete*, CT/YA/2, p. 152, where it is clearly stated that there is no valid justification – neither theological nor historical- for the attribution of Jesus’ death sentence to the whole of the Jewish people of the time, and yet less justification for blaming the Jewish people of the successive centuries.

¹¹ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published in 1992 by Pope Paul John II, which inspires the catechism for adults (see *La verità vi farà liberi*, Foreword, p. 8), states in section 63 that “Israel is the priestly people of God...and the first to hear the word of God”. See also the French catechism by La Diffusion Catéchistique de Lyon, *Ta Parole est un Trésor*. Document biblique du parcours Trésors de la foi, Publishing House Tardy, 1994, p. 8 where it is said that: “cette ancienne alliance est toujours valable”.

¹² *Io sono con voi*, pp. 38.53; *Venite con me*, p. 47; *Jesús es el Señor*, pp. 1.17; *Ésta es nuestra fe, ésta es la fe de la Iglesia*, pp. 136-137; *Io ho scelto voi*, p. 67; *Pour grandir dans la foi*, p. 17.

¹³ *Vi ho chiamato amici*, p.35.

¹⁴ *Io ho scelto voi*/1, p. 192.

¹⁵ *Ésta es nuestra fe, ésta es la fe de la Iglesia* , pp. 70-71

The attitude towards the Pharisees shifts towards the positive side in the *Catechism for young adults/2*, where there is recognition of the more complex and structured dimension of the Pharisaic movement of Jesus' times. This catechism also affirms that there is a contrast with the description that seems to emerge from the Gospels, where the figure of the Pharisee has been simplified and some negative traits have been exaggerated.¹⁶

C) The texts' hermeneutics - Jewish and Christian readings of the Bible

This is perhaps the biggest problem regarding Catholic catechesis and the catechisms: the lack of attention to the hermeneutics employed for biblical texts.

This becomes particularly evident in the reference to the Gospels' accounts of the Passion. Ever since the first of the CEI's catechisms, parents and educators have been constantly advised to read passages of the Bible (OT/NT) to children, especially the Gospels' accounts of the Passion, without, however, offering adults any adequate form of interpretation.¹⁷

In Italian and Spanish catechisms of the Episcopal Conferences, the accounts of the Passion are reported in three different ways: (a) through the procedure of harmonising the gospels' texts; (b) by inserting arbitrary additions; (c) summarizing. All three methods - consciously or unconsciously - tend to further accentuate the responsibility of the entire Jewish people in Jesus' death.¹⁸

But, more generally, the problem also concerns the relationship and the difference between the reading of the Bible by Jews and by Christians. In accord with Catholic faith, the catechisms see the Old Testament texts in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection. However, not a word is written - not even in the catechisms for teenagers and adults - about the intrinsic value of the Old Testament as revelation,¹⁹ nor, above all, about the fact that the Christian reading does not necessarily match the Jewish reading of the texts.

As suggested by a document issued by the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews in 1985, "Christian identity and Jewish identity should be carefully distinguished in their respective reading of the Bible".²⁰

Certainly, catechesis is still too far from the official position adopted by the Catholic Church many years ago. Beyond the problems already discussed, two major omissions deserve special mention: (a) There is no mention of the Holocaust in any of the official Spanish, Italian and

¹⁶ *Venite e vedrete*, p. 49. See also *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, section 575.

¹⁷ *Lasciate che i bambini vengano a me*, p. 102.

¹⁸ For example, the catechism for children: *Io sono con voi* (6-8 years), in the Introduction, p. 72, states its intention of following St. Mark's Gospel, but on page 81, to Pilate's question: "Why, what evil has he done?" (Mk 15,14), it is added: "I find no basis for an accusation against this man. (Lk 23,4). See also the Spanish catechism *Jesús el Señor*, p. 38, where in the summary of the account of Mark's 14,32-15,37, in the sentence: "Los hombres le golpearon con látigos" the term "soldados" has been arbitrarily substituted with "hombres". See instead *Ta Parole est un Trésor*, pages 365-376, where there is a synoptic reading of the accounts of the Passion, but the problems regarding these texts, especially that of the guilt of the Jewish people as a whole, is not considered.

¹⁹ See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sections 122-123.

²⁰ *Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in teaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*, II, 6.

French catechisms that have been examined;²¹ (b) The Jewish-Christian dialogue is almost completely ignored.²²

Nevertheless, there is a certain general improvement in the catechisms, regarding the increasing interest towards the Bible, including the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible that - as is said in a French catechism - the people of Israel had passed on for centuries and that Jesus, as well as the Jews of his time, used to read and ponder. The book in which God is revealed in the history of His people and in His Son, Jesus, the Christ.”²³

This common awareness of the revelation, regardless of the diversity of both religious faiths is a reason to feel hopeful about the future.

II. Jews and Judaism in a Selection of Italian Catholic Religion Textbooks (1988-2006)

This section concerns the teaching of Jews and Judaism in fifteen Italian religion textbooks for 12-18 year old students, published between 1988 and 2006.

The issues considered are: a) Attitudes toward Jewish people and the Pharisees: b) the Jewishness of Jesus and the relationship between Jews and Christians today; c) the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and the Old and New Testaments; d) The Holocaust.

A limited number of religion textbooks from some other European countries and countries outside Europe regarding the above subjects have been compared with Italian textbooks in the notes.

A) Attitudes toward Jewish people and the Pharisees

The first problem is connected to the blame placed upon the Jewish people as a whole for the death of Jesus. Some textbooks discuss the overall collective responsibility²⁴ or underline that Vatican Council II finally excused the Jews of this terrible accusation and a new era in the relationship between Judaism and Catholicism began.²⁵ In many textbooks particular interest is shown towards the history, religious practices and festivals of the biblical Jewish people. Some of them also show both the strong connection between Christianity and Judaism²⁶ and the continuity and vitality of Judaism today.²⁷

²¹ The only hints are to be found in *CT Io ho scelto voi/1*, p. 216, where there is a generic call to the condemnation of the persecutions and the hatred –both due to unjustified prejudice- to which the Jewish people has been subjected. See also a French catechism: *Il s'appelle Jésus*, 1998, éd. Tardy-La Diffusion Catéchistique-Lyon, series: *Trésors de la foi*, p. 91.

²² Only *CT Io ho scelto voi/1*, p. 239 remembers the 17th of January as the day dedicated to the dialogue between Jews and Christians.

²³ See Vv.Aa., *Ta Parole est un trésor*, p. 6 “se révèle à travers toute l’histoire de son Peuple et à travers son Fils, Jésus, le Christ”.

²⁴ F. PAJER, *Religione*, Scuola Secondaria di II grado, ed. SEI, 2003, p. 182.

²⁵ See M. GENISIO, *Il tesoro che c’è*, Scuola Secondaria di I grado, ed. Marietti Scuola, 2006, p. 342. In the non-Italian textbooks examined, in effect, the appreciation of this new era was never properly recognized.

²⁶ See G. MARGARIA, *Beati voi*, Scuola secondaria di I grado, ed. Marietti, 2004, p. 84. Compare two ideas which may seem to be conflicting: Vv.AA., *Icons*, A Religious Education Programme for 11-14, 2, Department for Catholic Education and Formation, Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, 2002, p. 70 claims that : “The Catholic Church believes that God’s revelation has come through the Jews..”, whereas SECRETARIADO DE LA COMISIÓN EPISCOPAL DE ENSEÑANZA, *El encuentro con*

However, alongside these positive elements the textbooks also have unresolved problems. The first is the attitude towards the Pharisees, whose depiction is often incomplete and sometimes ambiguous. They are considered as devout laypersons, powerful leaders of a religion based on strict observance of religious precepts, more exterior than fervent, *so much so that they were often used as examples of hypocrisy*.²⁸ They are enemies of Jesus and attack him because of his outrageous preaching and his liberal attitude.²⁹

There is no reference in any of the examined textbooks to the positive relations between Jesus and some of the Pharisees, as they are depicted in the Gospels.³⁰ Only one among the Italian textbooks examined seems to follow the guidelines of the Church documents regarding this issue³¹ and claims that the Pharisees were *deeply religious people who lived their lives according to the words of the Bible*.³² Moreover, albeit without explicit accusation, the question about the blame borne by the Jews for the death of Jesus is still present in textbooks to this day, pervading their presentations of the Gospels' passion narratives. The textbooks often feature an ambiguous and uncertain reading of the events.³³ The depiction of the Jewish authorities' cunning, of the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate's ineptitude, and the stress laid on the crowd's unanimous sentence³⁴ might contribute to the formation of a negative concept of the Jewish people and could lead the students to transfer a negative image of the Jews at the time of Jesus to present-day Jews.

B) The Jewishness of Jesus and the relationship between Jews and Christians today

The idea of the Jewishness of Jesus is introduced into the teaching in the Italian Catholic textbooks with a certain difficulty and perplexity.³⁵ Mainly between the end of the 90s and the beginning of the new millennium and today, the content of the textbooks seems to focus on knowledge of the Bible and its historical and environmental background. The attention paid to the biblical text is precisely the starting point from which the Italian school textbooks

Dios- A través de la historia, Educación Secundaria Obligatoria 3, 1995, pp. 98-99 insists rather on the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish people.

²⁷ See F. BASSI-L. BAVAGNOLI-E. MALVICINI, *Ovunque io sia*, I, Scuola secondaria di I grado, ed. D'Anna-Città Nuova, 2006, p. 81; G. KANNHEISER – W. RUSPI, *Nuovo Obiettivo Vita*, Scuola Secondaria di II grado, ed. EDB, 2002, II, p. 99. See also *Icons*, 2 p. 70, where is studied the story of Jewish community in England and Wales.

²⁸ See *Ovunque io sia*, I, p. 96. The accusation of hypocrisy as seen also in non-Italian textbooks, see L. PAPINEAU, *Mon jardin interieur*, Enseignement morale et religieux catholique, 2^e secondaire, ed. Marie France, Quebec (Canada) 2001, pp. 124-125 e SECRETARIADO DE LA COMISIÓN EPISCOPAL DE ENSEÑANZA, *El encuentro con Dios – Dios toma la iniciativa*, Educación Secundaria Obligatoria 1, 1996, p. 65. It can be said, that generally the attitude towards the Pharisees, also in non-Italian textbooks, appears conflicting and almost always negative: see also the Belgian Catholic Religion textbook by Y. NISSEN, *Le rêve de Dieu*, 1, coll. Passion de Dieu, Passion de l'homme, ed. De Boeck, p. 77; P. GUENETTE, *En avant la musique*, Enseignement morale et religieux catholique, 1^e secondaire, ed. Novalis, Quebec (Canada) 2000, p. 143; L. PAPINEAU, *Mon jardin interieur*, Quebec (Canada), 2001, pp. 124-125 and Aa.Vv., *Icons*, 2, pp. 12-13 and 59.

²⁹ See PAJER, *Religione*, p. 192.

³⁰ See Luke 7,36; 11,37; 14,15; John 3,1.

³¹ See Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching*, Septem ber 1988, n.19.

³² See KANNHEISER – RUSPI, *Nuovo Obiettivo Vita*, Scuola Secondaria di I grado, I, p. 121.

³³ See, for instance, the report of MARGARÌA, *Beati voi*, p. 203. See also *Le rêve de Dieu*, 1, 88-89 that, alongside the responsibility of the Romans and Herod, underlines the insecurity and fear of the Jews regarding Jesus' message, to the point that they: "essaieront de tuer Jésus, ou ils laisseront faire". A tendency which is present in some textbooks is that of completely ignoring the historical question and insisting only on the theological interpretation of the death of Jesus, see *El encuentro con Dios – Dios toma la iniciativa*, 1996, p. 101.

³⁴ *Ovunque io sia*, I, p. 111.

³⁵ See, for example G. DEL BUFALO – A. QUADRINO – P. TROÌA, *L'Altro Perché*, Scuola Secondaria di II grado, ed. EDB, 1996, II, pp. 61-62)

acknowledge the problem of the Jewishness of Jesus, by recognising the strong link between Jesus and Israel and that it is not possible to know Christ without knowing the history of Israel.³⁶ Anyway, this awareness does not seem to include the evidence that the relationship between Jesus and biblical Israel is at the basis of a new relationship between today's Jews and Christians.

The textbooks in fact seem to disregard the changes that have taken place in relations between Jews and Christians during the post-conciliar period. Among the many texts considered, only one refers to the Jewish-Christian dialogue by citing the historical meeting in 1986 between Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff and Pope John Paul II.³⁷

C) The relationship between the Hebrew Bible and the Old and New Testament

In the textbooks, the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and the Old and New Testament is not always clear. The Old Testament seems to be the object of special attention, but we can observe the persistence of a certain difficulty in making the distinction between the Jewish, Christian and Catholic Bibles.³⁸

Moreover, the reduction of the Old Testament into "Law" causes an incomplete and historically biased misunderstanding of Hebrew Bible and Judaism, according to which the Law is opposed to Love, the latter being an exclusive prerogative of the New Testament and Christianity. The stress laid on the novelty of Jesus with respect to the observance of the practices of the Law, and his depiction as He who affirms the love of God and of the neighbour, alienating Him from His environment and His historical background, defines Him as one entirely opposed to Judaism.³⁹ Therefore, the reading of the Gospels lacks both the needed regard for the context in which they were written and the necessary attention to hermeneutics.⁴⁰

D) The Holocaust

In spite of initiatives and projects undertaken by Italian schools in general,⁴¹ one of the biggest problems that still remains is precisely that of the textbooks, especially the religious instruction textbooks. Indeed, they are distinguished by their scarcity, superficiality and unreliability regarding the information they provide.⁴²

Elsewhere, the subject is approached in a generic and wholly insufficient fashion, by linking the question of the Holocaust with the more general one of human suffering⁴³ or of the dialogue with the religions. Reference is made to the Jewish-Christian dialogue, to the Shoah and to the issue of anti-Semitism in the words of John Paul II in the speech he made in St. Peter's Square on

³⁶ M. CONTADINI, *Itinerari di IRC*, Elledici, Scuola Secondaria di II grado, 2004, p. 68. Also in some non-Italian textbooks, the Jewishness of Jesus is clearly stated from the history of the salvation, see *Le rêve de Dieu*, p. 48 ss.; P. GUENETTE, *En avant la musique*, pp. 46-49; *Icons*, II, pp. 7-12.

³⁷ PAJER, *Religione*, p. 73.

³⁸ See G. DEL BUFALO - C. DOTOLLO - A. QUADRINO, *La Parola Chiave*, Scuola Secondaria di II grado, ed. EDB, 2000, I, p. 193.

³⁹ This concept is also clearly expressed in some non-Italian textbooks, see e.g., M. BOUCHER, *Appelé(e) à l'amour*, Enseignement morale et religieux catholique, 4^e secondaire, ed. LIDEC, Quebec (Canada), 1991, pp. 114-115; *Icons*, 3, p. 45; *El encuentro con Dios - Dios toma la iniciativa*, p. 25.

⁴⁰ As previously stated, this is particularly important for the stories of the Passion, see notes 10-11. Also see *Le rêve de Dieu*, I, p. 69, regarding the comment by Mk 7: 24-30.

⁴¹ Find further information about this issue on the website: www.istruzione.it/shoà: "Holocaust Education",

⁴² See, for example, the definition of "holocaust" in *L'Altro Perché*, II, p. 396.

⁴³ See *La Parola Chiave*, II, pp. 1-2 and M.R. POGGIO, *La radice di Jesse*, Scuola Secondaria di I grado, ed. SEI, 1999, p. 109.

April 18th 1993, but any reference to the responsibility of the Church and of Christians is avoided.⁴⁴ Also the visit of Pope John Paul II to the mausoleum of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, on March 23rd 2002 is cited,⁴⁵ but not a word has been written about Yad Vashem, nor about the history of the Holocaust.⁴⁶

In conclusion, the road of Italian Catholic religion textbooks leading toward an accurate education about Jews and Judaism is still a very long one. However, we can observe, as a positive element, the presence of some texts which explicitly recognize the importance and the value of the religious experience of Jewish people for the understanding of Christianity⁴⁷ or affirm their aim to recuperate signs or symbols of the Jewish Christian tradition present in our culture.⁴⁸ But perhaps the most important element to emerge from this research is the recognition of the Jewishness of Jesus, expressed both openly and by intimation. The “incarnation” of Jesus, His humanity and therefore His ability to feel and suffer as a man,⁴⁹ is recognized today in the majority of school textbooks in an accurate historical-geographical context, with His Jewish origin.

As suggested by a Religion textbook published in Quebec, belief in Jesus “c’est admettre l’existence historique de Jésus.”⁵⁰ And it is precisely this recognition that could change the situation between the two different religious communities: Jews and Christians from one of conflict to one of debate and discussion.

⁴⁴ See *Itinerari di IRC*, p. 320.

⁴⁵ KANNHEISER - RUSPI, *Nuovo Obiettivo Vita*, II, p. 169.

⁴⁶ Also the non Italian textbooks showed indifference to this problem.

⁴⁷ See *La radice di Jesse*, p. 1. See also *Icons*, 2, 70 where we can read: “The Catholic Church believes that God’s revelation has come through the Jews; it calls its members to remember that Jesus was born of a Jewish mother and that apostles and first disciples were Jews”.

⁴⁸ See the study of the Passover Seder in L. CIONI-B. PANDOLFI, *Questa è la storia di un capretto...Dall’Esodo alla storia ebraica*. Unità di approfondimento per il biennio della scuola secondaria di 2° grado, Quaderni Itinera, 2005, pp.3-4)

⁴⁹ Vedi, ad esempio, SECRETARIADO DE LA COMISIÓN EPISCOPAL DE ENSEÑANZA, *El encuentro con Dios – Respuesta de fe*, Educación Secundaria Obligatoria 2, 1995, p. 68.

⁵⁰ M. BOUCHER, *Un amour infini*. Enseignement morale et religieux catholique, 3^e secondaire, ed. LIDEC, 1991, Quebec (Canada), p. 117.