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Towards the Ends of the Earth
Land in the Jewish-Christian Dialogue

Paragraph 4 of *Nostra Aetate*, the longest paragraph in the document, bears witness to one of the greatest revolutions in the 20th century, the transformation of relations between Jews and Christians, from suspicion and contempt to respect and collaboration. According to *Nostra Aetate*, Christians need to be constantly reminded of “the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock.” Furthermore, the Church “cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles.”¹

Foundational to the revolution was the awakening of Christians to the fruits of a “teaching of contempt” with regard to Jews and Judaism.² However, the increasing respect and understanding of Jews and Judaism must not obscure where Jews and Catholics might indeed differ. One difference concerns the Christian view on the role of Jesus Christ in the salvation of humanity. I will focus, here, on another sensitive issue in the dialogue between Christians and Jews: attitudes towards the Jewish claim to the Land of Israel.

The December 2015 document, “*The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable*”³, published to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*'s paragraph 4, is an important summing up of the fifty years of progress in the dialogue between the Church and the Jews. Whereas the question regarding salvation, a very Christian question, is omnipresent in the new document, Rabbi David Rosen lamented the absence of the Land, in his presentation of the new document in the Vatican on December 10, 2015: “to fully respect Jewish self-understanding, it is also necessary to appreciate the centrality that the Land of Israel plays in the historic and contemporary religious life of the Jewish People, and that appears to be missing”.

In 2000, prominent Jewish religious, civil and intellectual figures published a short document “*Dabru Emet* (Speak the truth)”⁴ that defined their position on the

¹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Nostra Aetate*, n. 4 (1965).

² The term “teaching of contempt” has been formulated by French Jewish historian Jules Isaac, who met with Pope John XXIII in 1959 and asked him to put an end to this kind of teaching in the Church.

³ The document can be read here:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20151210_ebraismo-nostra-aetate_en.html

⁴ The document can be read here: <http://www.jcrelations.net/Dabru+Emet+-+A+Jewish+Statement+on+Christians+and+Christianity.2395.0.html?L=3>

increasing openness of Christians to Jews and Judaism and the third of the eight paragraphs explicitly formulates their position on the Land:

Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel. The most important event for Jews since the Holocaust has been the reestablishment of a Jewish state in the Promised Land. As members of a biblically based religion, Christians appreciate that Israel was promised -- and given -- to Jews as the physical center of the covenant between them and God. Many Christians support the State of Israel for reasons far more profound than mere politics. As Jews, we applaud this support. We also recognize that Jewish tradition mandates justice for all non-Jews who reside in a Jewish state.

Two years later, a group of Christian scholars in the United States published a document entitled *A Sacred Obligation*, calling on Christians to reexamine their traditional assumptions about Jews and Judaism.⁵ The ninth of ten short paragraphs declares:

We affirm the importance of the land of Israel for the life of the Jewish people. The land of Israel has always been of central significance to the Jewish people. However, Christian theology charged that the Jews had condemned themselves to homelessness by rejecting God's Messiah. Such supersessionism precluded any possibility for Christian understanding of Jewish attachment to the land of Israel. Christian theologians can no longer avoid this crucial issue, especially in light of the complex and persistent conflict over the land. Recognizing that both Israelis and Palestinians have the right to live in peace and security in a homeland of their own, we call for efforts that contribute to a just peace among all the peoples in the region.

Ruth Langer has analyzed the notable difference between the two texts.⁶ *Dabru Emet* argues that Christians can embrace the Jewish claim that the Land of Israel was given by God to the Jews as the physical center of their relationship with God, based upon a shared Biblical heritage and this includes support for the State of Israel. *A Sacred Obligation* affirms the importance of the Land of Israel in the life of the Jews, but it notably avoids any religious justification for this importance and does not mention the modern State of Israel. According to *A Sacred Obligation*, "Christian theologians can no longer avoid this crucial issue, especially in light of the complex and persistent conflict over the land".

The Catholic interpretation of Biblical sources, the tradition and history of the Church as well as the Church's commitment to justice and peace in the world are woven together as the Church formulates a position on this complex question.

⁵ The document can be read here: <http://www.cjcr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/ecumenical-christian/568-csg-02sep1>

⁶ RUTH LANGER, "Theologies of the Land and State of Israel The Role of the Secular in Christian and Jewish Understandings" *Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations*, 3 (2008), 1-17.

- *Reading the Bible*⁷

After the Shoah, the new relationship with the Jewish people was stimulated by a renewed interest among Christians in the Old Testament and the story of Israel. The Catholic Church reminded its faithful at the Second Vatican Council:

The plan of salvation foretold by the sacred authors, recounted and explained by them, is found as the true word of God in the books of the Old Testament: these books, therefore, written under divine inspiration, remain permanently valuable.⁸

Meditating again on the long chapters in the history of salvation as contained in the Old Testament, refocused attention on Israel, the people and the land. God's election of Israel and the gift to Israel of the land are central themes in the Old Testament, understood by Christians as preparation for the coming of Jesus, son of Israel. Traditionally, Christians had generally assumed that Jews were blind in their reading of the Old Testament because they did not perceive the figure of Christ, prefigured and promised in these ancient Scriptures.⁹ This had been an important pillar in the "teaching of contempt".

However, after the Council, Christians are encouraged to respect the Jewish reading of the Scriptures that are also theirs. Christians now admit that they see Christ in the Old Testament not because he is objectively there but because he becomes perceptible to the Christian reader of the Old Testament text, read in the light of the New. As a 2001 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission explained:

Although the Christian reader is aware that the internal dynamism of the Old Testament finds its goal in Jesus, this is a retrospective perception whose point of departure is not in the text as such, but in the events of the New Testament proclaimed by the apostolic preaching. 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 text an additional meaning that was hidden there.¹⁰

The Jewish reading of the Scriptures, according to the teaching of this revolution, is not an expression of blindness but rather an authentic understanding of these Scriptures:

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

⁷ For a Christian theology of the Land see: WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, *The Land: Place as gift, promise and challenge in Biblical faith* (Minneapolis, 2002) and ALAIN MARCHADOUR AND DAVID NEUHAUS, *The Land, the Bible and History* (New York, 2007).

⁸ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Dei Verbum*, n. 14 (1965).

⁹ The accusation of blindness goes back to Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians: "their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside" (3:14).

¹⁰ PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001), n. 21.

Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion. Both readings are bound up with the vision of their respective faiths, of which the readings are the result and expression. Consequently, both are irreducible.¹¹

An integral part of the revolution in Jewish-Christian relations is the realization that Jews and Christians share a language and a spiritual heritage that is based on the Scriptures they share – called the Old Testament by Christians, the TaNaKh by Jews. Implicit in the understanding of *Dabru Emet* is that because Jews and Christians share a language, based on the Scriptures of Israel, they can also share an understanding of the Land of Israel as promise and gift to the people of Israel.

However, is the understanding of the land in the Bible indeed part of the vocabulary that Jews and Christians share? Faith in Jesus distinguishes the Christian reading of the Bible from the Jewish one. A consequence of this faith touches upon the issue of land and boundaries. The Land of Israel is undoubtedly central in the Old Testament.¹² The land is promised to Abraham and his descendants and eventually conquered as the place where Israel is called to live out the covenantal relationship with God in observing the Torah. At the center of the land is Jerusalem, Holy Zion, and at the center of Jerusalem, the Temple, sacred place of God's enduring presence. The land is lost in Exile because of the sins of Israel and regained in the Return to Zion because of the outpouring of God's grace in God's faithfulness to the promises God made.

In the Jewish reading of their Scriptures, the Land of Israel remains throughout a focus of attention. In fact, the Jewish Scriptures end with the words from the epistle of Cyrus, King of Persia, to the exiles in Babylon: "*Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up (to Zion)*" (2Chronicles 36:23). However, the Christian reading differs from the Jewish one because the Old Testament is read in the light of the New Testament, pointing to Christ.¹³ Christians understand the Old Testament as preparation for the New and the unity between the Old and the New throws a different light on the content of the Old. This changes the significance of land when Jesus is recognized as Christ.

At first glance, the land seems to have almost disappeared in the writings of the New Testament.¹⁴ There is an impression that the real homeland is in heaven:

They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind,

¹¹ OP CIT, 22.

¹² The 2001 Pontifical Biblical Commission document develops a reading of land in the Old And New Testaments, cf. OP CIT, 56-57.

¹³ The differing interpretation of the text also results in a different ordering of the books contained in the Old Testament when compared with the TaNaKh. Instead of ending with 2Chronicles, the Old Testament ends with Malachi's prophecy of the return of the Prophet Elijah.

¹⁴ An oft cited exception is the verse in the Gospel of Matthew that refers to the Holy Family's return from Egypt: "*Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel*" (Matthew 2:21).

they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:13-16).

However, the impression that land is absent in the New Testament is misleading. It is not the land that has disappeared in the New Testament but rather the borders that separate one land from another, one people from another. In 1993, the Pontifical Biblical Commission insisted that the “re-readings” of the Biblical text develop new aspects of meaning:

Thus it is that the inheritance of the Land, promised by God to Abraham for his offspring (Genesis 15:7.18) becomes entrance into the sanctuary of God (Exodus 15:7), a participation in God’s “rest” (Psalm 132:7-8) reserved for those who truly have faith (Psalm 95:8-11, Hebrews 3:7-4:11) and finally, entrance into the heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews 6:12.18-20), the “eternal inheritance (Hebrews 9:15).¹⁵

The 2001 document further points out:

One of the beatitudes transforms the geographical and historical meaning into a more open-ended one, “the meek shall possess the land” (Matthew 5:5); “the land” is equivalent here to “the kingdom of heaven” (5:3,10) in an eschatological horizon that is both present and future. The authors of the New Testament are only deepening a symbolic process already at work in the Old Testament and in inter-testamental Judaism.¹⁶

Pope Benedict XVI, further deepening the Christian understanding of land, commented on this same Beatitude:

Conquerors come and go, but the ones who remain are the simple, the humble, who cultivate the land and continue sowing and harvesting in the midst of sorrows and joys. The humble, the simple outlast the violent, even from a purely historical point of view. But there is more. The gradual universalization of the concept of the land on the basis of a theology of hope also reflects the universal horizon... Peace aims at the overcoming of boundaries and at the renewal of the earth through the peace that comes from God.¹⁷

In the New Testament, there is a progressive expansion of the concept of land as the gospel spreads from place to place, to the ends of the earth, particularly evident in the Acts of the Apostles. Land is no longer exclusively the Land of Israel but rather in ever

¹⁵ PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, (Vatican, 1993), III, A. 1 (86-87).

¹⁶ PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001), 57.

¹⁷ POPE BENEDICT XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, (New York, 2007) 83-84.

widening circles tends towards every place where the gospel is preached and lived. The writer of the Epistle to the Ephesians underlines the newness of Jesus Christ's mission in bringing down borders and expanding the concept of land:

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, (Ephesians 2:14-19)

The "land" of the Church is the face of the earth as the apostles spread the message of the gospel from Jerusalem to the farthest corners of the earth.

This New Testament vision of land as a universal space uniting all peoples as the children of God has not always been promoted by Christians and thus, the tradition of the Church has sometimes been at odds with this Biblical understanding.

- Reflecting on Tradition and History

For Christians, the land called Holy by tradition is full of historical memories – Jesus was born, lived and taught there, suffered, died, was buried and rose from the dead there. Before him, in this same land, the patriarchs, priests, kings, sages and prophets of the Old Testament, who had prepared for his coming, guided Israel in their vocation to be a light to the nations. The Church was born in this land and sent out from here to the ends of the earth. The land's geography and topography echo in the Church's readings from the Bible, homilies and catechism. As soon as Christianity became a tolerated religion, the Church started to build shrines all over the land, commemorating the events of the history of salvation. The stream of pilgrims coming to renew their faith at these Holy Places has never stopped. Here, the pilgrims refuel, meditating on the Fifth Gospel, the land where God first engaged Israel, Christ and Church.

In its early stages, Christianity did not seek to rule this land or any other. Rather, it conceived of its world as one without borders in which Christians were a leaven, the only meaningful border being the one that separated heaven from earth. The missionary impulse drove Christians to travel to new lands, preaching the Gospel and thus stretching ever anew the borders of the Church on earth. In a second century epistle, a Christian author writes: "Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. (...) They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven".¹⁸

¹⁸ ANON, *Epistle to Diognetus* (Translated by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 1, 1885).

The gradual adoption of Christianity as the official religion of an empire transformed the understanding of land and borders. The rise of empowered Christianity, first tolerated and then dominant in the Roman Empire, promoted an awareness of borders that needed defending and territories that awaited conquest. Christian emperors had Christian armies at their service. In the Middle Ages, Christendom went to war to liberate Jerusalem from the Muslims. For many during the Crusades, the war was a double one: against the enemy within (the Jews) and the enemy without (the Muslims). The Crusaders were inspired by stories in the Bible and saw themselves as God inspired conquerors. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, in a homily preached to promote the Second Crusade, proclaimed:

Fly then to arms; let a holy rage animate you in the fight, and let the Christian world resound with these words of the prophet, "*Cursed be he who does not stain his sword with blood!*" (Jeremiah 48:10).¹⁹

Echoes of the Crusades can be heard throughout the long history of European colonialism and the treatment of indigenous peoples. European conquest often went hand in hand with spreading the Christian religion, explorers and conquerors paving the way for missionaries and preachers. Conquering land, claiming it for Christianity and setting up empires was a sign of the triumph of Christianity, supposedly due to God's favor.²⁰

The Jews who lived within Christian territory were faced with increasing marginalization. Perceived as those had killed Christ and continued to reject him, Jews had lost the land of their forefathers and were condemned forever to be a wandering people without a land. The destruction of the Temple in the year 70AD by the Romans was already linked in the New Testament to an understanding of punishment for the sin of not recognizing Christ. Luke writes about Jesus looking over Jerusalem: "*As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God"* (Luke 19:41-44).

Tertullian, a Church Father writing in the early third century, described Jews in very blunt terms, likening them to Cain, who had murdered his innocent brother, Abel:

Scattered, wandering about, deprived of land and sky of their own, they roam the earth without man or God as king, a race to whom there is not accorded the right granted to foreigners to set foot upon and greet one land as home.²¹

¹⁹ BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, "Why another Crusade?" (1145).

²⁰ See MICHAEL PRIOR, *The Bible and Colonialism*, (Sheffield, 1997).

²¹ TERTULLIAN, "Apology" in *Apologetic Works* (Washington DC, 1962), 7.

Saint Augustine continued this line of thought in the fifth century, writing:

The former Jerusalem, indeed by the Jews is not now inhabited for after the crucifixion of the Lord, vengeance was taken upon them with a great scourge and being rooted up from that place where with impious licentiousness, being infuriated, they had madly raged against their Physician, they have been dispersed throughout the nations...²²

Saint Augustine developed this idea of the dispersion of the Jews further by understanding that this exile serves the mission of the Church:

They were dispersed all over the world – for indeed there is no part of the world where they are not to be found – and thus by the evidence of their own Scriptures they bear witness for us that we have not fabricated the prophecies about Christ.²³

Augustine compared the Jews to the slaves of the Roman aristocratic school boys who carry the books of their young masters to school, the *capsarii*:

Blessed is the God of Israel. The Jews are our *capsarii*, we who are Israel. Otherwise the pagans might have supposed that what is said of the Christ and the Church is simply fable, but they are won over by the testimony of our enemies.²⁴

Christians continued to see the “exile” of the Jews from the Land of Israel as divine punishment but by the 17th century, alongside this view, there were theologians who were proposing that the Exile of the Jews would end and a return of the Jews to their land would herald the End of Time. Some even claimed that this was a necessary condition for the return of Christ.²⁵ The return of the Jews to their land would propel them to accept baptism and enter the Church. This kind of Christian Zionism long preceded the formulation of Jewish Zionism in the second part of the 19th century. Christian Zionism holds that the promises to the Church for the end of time, regarding the universal recognition of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, will be preceded by the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to Israel. These promises include the return of the Jews to their land and the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth. This would ultimately provoke the end time war that must precede the Second Coming of Christ. In the 19th century, an Anglican priest, Darby, who argued that at the end of time Christian believers would be miraculously removed from the world arena in order to be saved from the cataclysmic catastrophes that were foreseen²⁶, disseminated the idea of

²² AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, “On Psalm LXV,” in Expositions on the Book of Psalms in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* (New York, 1894), volume 8, 268.

²³ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *City of God* (London, 1972), Book XVIII, chapter 46, 827.

²⁴ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO quoted in *Glossa ordinaria* cf *Patrologia latina* 13:904.

²⁵ STEVEN SIZER, *Christian Zionism: Roadmap to Armageddon?* (Downer’s Grove, 2004)

²⁶ This was termed “the Rapture” and was based on a reading of 1Thessalonians 4:16-18. This belief is questioned by some in Christian Zionist circles and seems to have greatest currency among Pentecostals.

“premillennialism”.²⁷ God would then use Israel as a divine instrument in the punishment of the unbelievers. In this kind of thinking, Jews remain tools and means of Christian salvation.

In November 1917, an alliance between Christian and Jewish Zionists gave birth to the Balfour Declaration, published by the British government, the first official formulation of recognition for the Jewish claim to the land, providing for “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”. Lord Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary in a cabinet headed by Christian Zionist Prime Minister David Lloyd George, explained:

For in Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country ... the Four Great Powers are committed to Zionism. And Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires or prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land ...²⁸

A week after the publication of the Balfour Declaration, Britain occupied Palestine and in the decades that followed Jewish migration to Palestine was facilitated.²⁹ Since the end of the Second World War, with the horrific revelation of the fate of the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, some Christians have enthusiastically proposed new understandings of the relationship with Jews and Judaism and have embraced various forms of a Jewish claim to the Land of Israel and welcomed the establishment of the State of Israel. While the “inhabitants of the country” (the Palestinians) were indeed ignored in these political processes, some in the Jewish-Christian dialogue have maintained that Christian support for the State of Israel is the way that Christians can concretely manifest their repentance for centuries of anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic attitudes. Furthermore, a positive theological attitude to Jewish possession of the land and the establishment of a state concretizes the theological understanding of the unrevoked covenant between God and God’s chosen people, the Jews, a reversal of traditional supersessionism.³⁰

The post-Vatican II revolution in Jewish-Christian relations recognizes that Jews have suffered in history in the wake of Christian empowerment and the theologies that justify it. These mechanisms of empowerment and marginalization with regard to the Jews have been uncovered and transformed. However, Christian theological support for Jewish claims on the land is increasingly troubling when one considers the dispossession and marginalization of the Palestinians, which are often ignored or even justified.

²⁷ The theme of “the thousand years” relies on an interpretation of the Apocalypse of Saint John 20:1-3.

²⁸ Quoted in DOREEN INGRAMS, *Palestine Papers 1917-1922, Seeds of Conflict*, (London, 1972), 73.

²⁹ When the Balfour Declaration was signed, there were about 60 000 Jews in Palestine, by the time the British ended their Mandate in Palestine, there were 600 000 Jews in Palestine.

³⁰ For example JOHN PAWLIKOWSKI, “Land as an Issue in Christian Jewish Dialogue,” *CrossCurrents* 2/59 (2009), 197-209.

- *Working for Justice and Peace*

The Second Vatican Council promoted a vision of the Church's involvement in society, not avoiding this-worldly affairs but rather standing alongside the dispossessed and powerless: a preferential option for the poor. The Church realized that being silent about the affairs of this world strengthened the powers that be to the disadvantage of those without a voice. The Church, in exercising its prophetic ministry, must tirelessly exert itself in the promotion of justice and peace.

(The Church) cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply.³¹

Concern for justice and peace is not simply a political or diplomatic issue but rather an integral part of how the Church sees herself. It is along these lines that the Church formulates her position on the present situation of conflict in Israel/Palestine, analyzing the actual political, socio-economic and cultural context and not restricting its discourse to Biblical texts or tradition.

The Holy See did not immediately recognize the State of Israel after its establishment in 1948. It was deeply concerned both with the status of the Holy Places and the destiny of the Christian Palestinians, many of whom lost their homes alongside their Muslim compatriots in the first Arab-Israeli War in 1948. When Pope Paul VI visited the Holy Land in 1964, meeting with both Israeli and Jordanian political authorities, he made no explicit mention of the State of Israel. *Nostra Aetate* made no mention of the Land either. Much of the opposition among the Council Fathers during the Second Vatican Council to paragraph 4 in the document, was formulated by those who feared the political implications of the paragraph within the context of the Middle East and the ongoing war between the Arab countries and the State of Israel. A positive attitude to the Jews, it was feared, would be used in the conflict to garner support for Israel. Undoubtedly for this reason the document insisted:

(I)n her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and *moved not by political reasons* but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.³²

When the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews was established, it too made no mention of the land in its first document "Guidelines and

³¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), n. 28.

³² SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Nostra Aetate* n. 4 (1965).

Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Document *Nostra Aetate n. 4*". However, the document did insist:

Christians must therefore 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 the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.³³

Many Jews with whom Catholics dialogued were insistent that Jews defined themselves in the modern age as intimately tied to the Land of Israel and demanded that Catholics take this into consideration. The General Secretary of the World Jewish Congress, Gerhart Riegner, expressed this to Pope Paul VI at the 1974 meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee:

We welcome the call on Christians to "strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience". We are hopeful that this striving will lead to a wider appreciation that peoplehood and the land of Israel are essential to Jewish faith.³⁴

In its 1985 document, the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews spoke about the land and the State of Israel for the first time. In a section entitled "Judaism and Christianity in History", the document said:

The history of Israel did not end in 70 A.D. (cf. Guidelines, II). It continued (...) while preserving the memory of the land of their forefathers at the heart of their hope (Passover Seder). Christians are invited to understand this religious attachment which finds its roots in Biblical tradition, *without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship* (cf. Declaration of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 20, 1975). The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law.³⁵

The document gives a clear direction to thinking on the land, insisting that while Christians can understand the Jewish "religious attachment" to the land, "the common principles of international law" cannot be ignored. The question of land is not simply a question of Biblical exegesis but also of contemporary history, justice and peacemaking. The document warns against adopting any Christian "religious interpretation" of the Jewish "religious attachment" to the Land.

³³ COMMISSION FOR RELIGIOUS RELATIONS WITH THE JEWS, *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Document Nostra Aetate n. 4* (1974), preamble.

³⁴ "Address to Paul VI (10.1.1975)", translated from *Documentation catholique*, n. 1669 (1975), 111.

³⁵ COMMISSION FOR RELIGIOUS RELATIONS WITH THE JEWS, *Notes on the correct way to present Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* (1985), VI, 1.

When the Fundamental Agreement was signed between the Holy See and the State of Israel in 1993, the document underlined the new relationship between the Church and the Jewish people but clearly stated that the Church was not affirming any religious interpretation of claims to territory:

The Holy See, while maintaining in every case the right to exercise its moral and spiritual teaching-office, deems it opportune to recall that, owing to its own character, it is solemnly committed to remaining a stranger to all merely temporal conflicts, which principle applies specifically to disputed territories and unsettled borders.³⁶

In fact, the Church's commitment to dialogue with the Jewish people to advance reconciliation developed alongside her awareness that the Palestinians were demanding justice. Pope Paul VI became the first Pope to explicitly affirm the Palestinians as a people rather than simply a group of refugees. In his Christmas message in 1975, he said:

Although we are conscious of the still very recent tragedies which led the Jewish people to search for safe protection in a state of its own, sovereign and independent, and in fact precisely because we are aware of this, we would like to ask the sons of this people to recognize the rights and legitimate aspirations of another people, which have also suffered for a long time, the Palestinian people.³⁷

In 1987, Pope John Paul II appointed the first Palestinian Arab Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, the Holy Land's highest Catholic authority. Patriarch Michel Sabbah became an outspoken voice inside the Church, proclaiming the injustices that his people had suffered as a result of the establishment of the State of Israel and its continuing occupation of Palestinian lands. In a 1993 pastoral letter, Sabbah wrote:

Could we be victims of our own salvation history, which seems to favor the Jewish people and condemn us? Is that truly the Will of God to which we must inexorably bow down, demanding that we deprive ourselves in favor of another people, with no possibility of appeal or discussion?³⁸

It was the beginning of the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians in the early 1990s that provoked the Holy See to establish diplomatic relations with both the State of Israel (in 1993) and the Palestine Liberation Organization in lieu of a future State of Palestine (in 2000). Further development of a teaching on the Land was provided when three pontiffs visited the Holy Land, Israel and Palestine, in 2000, 2009 and 2014. In examining closely the gestures and discourses of the Roman Pontiffs during their visits to the Holy Land, four elements are closely woven together in the teaching that emerges: the

³⁶ FUNDAMENTAL AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE HOLY SEE AND THE STATE OF ISRAEL (1993), n. 11.

³⁷ Translated from the French in *Documentation catholique*, n. 1690 (18.1.1976), 55-56.

³⁸ MICHEL SABBABH, *Reading the Bible Today in the Land of the Bible* (1993), n. 7.

reference to Scripture, concern for the Holy Places and the indigenous Christians, the dialogue with Jews and with Muslims and the promotion of justice and peace.

Pope John Paul II's visit to the Holy Land in 2000 was ground breaking as it set in place the gestures that were repeated by the pontiffs who followed in his footsteps. More than diplomatic tightrope walking, John Paul II was concerned with expressing the fullness of what had been achieved in the dialogue with the Jews, fruit of *Nostra Aetate*, without forgetting the concern for the Christians of the Holy Land, predominantly Palestinian, and the commitment to justice and peace. The Pope not only visited Israeli and Palestinian leaders, Jewish and Muslim shrines, but also went to Yad VaShem, the monument that commemorates the victims of the Shoah, and Deheisheh Refugee Camp, where Palestinians have been languishing since 1948. His visit came at a time of optimism as Israelis and Palestinians were engaged in dialogue too.

Pope Benedict XVI, during his visit in 2009, developed the conceptual clarity of the Church's teaching on the land. Without flinching, he evoked over and over again the Church's vocation to build bridges rather than walls. In clear words he addressed the distressing reality of the Holy Land where walls are more in evidence than bridges when he addressed the Israeli political leadership at Ben Gurion Airport:

One of the saddest sights for me during my visit to these lands was the wall. As I passed alongside it, I prayed for a future in which the peoples of the Holy Land can live together in peace and harmony without the need for such instruments of security and separation, but rather respecting and trusting one another, and renouncing all forms of violence and aggression.³⁹

He formulated a clear vision for a political solution to the conflict:

Let it be universally recognized that the State of Israel has the right to exist, and to enjoy peace and security within internationally agreed borders. Let it be likewise acknowledged that the Palestinian people have a right to a sovereign independent homeland, to live with dignity and to travel freely. Let the two-state solution become a reality, not remain a dream.⁴⁰

Pope Francis, following in the footsteps of his predecessors, came to the Holy Land in 2014. He captured headlines when in Bethlehem he referred to his host country as "*the State of Palestine*" rather than simply referring to the Palestinian people. As he stopped to pray at the Separation Wall, built by Israel in the name of security, he provided an icon of solidarity with the Palestinians. The following day, at Yad VaShem, he cried out the pain of a God whose children have been mercilessly slaughtered during the Shoah. However, what wove the various elements of the whirlwind visit together was that wherever he went, Pope Francis referred to those he met as "brothers", Israelis,

³⁹ POPE BENEDICT XVI, Discourse at Ben Gurion Airport, (15.5.2009).

⁴⁰ POPE BENEDICT XVI, Discourse at Ben Gurion Airport, (15.5.2009).

Palestinians, Jews and Muslims. A short time after his return to Rome, Pope Francis hosted Israeli President Peres and Palestinian President Abbas and at the “invocation for peace” held in the Vatican gardens, he explained this insistence on being brothers:

We know and we believe that we need the help of God. We do not renounce our responsibilities, but we do call upon God in an act of supreme responsibility before our consciences and before our peoples. We have heard a summons, and we must respond. It is the summons to break the spiral of hatred and violence, and to break it by one word alone: the word “brother”. But to be able to utter this word we have to lift our eyes to heaven and acknowledge one another as children of one Father.⁴¹

Ultimately, the Church is called to preach pardon and reconciliation rather than endorsing a theology of bordered land.

Conclusion: Land in the Dialogue with the Jews

Dabru Emet considers that “Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel”. This respect, as the argument goes, is based upon a shared Biblical heritage and the common language it engenders. Christians are indeed “members of a biblically based religion” and as such share a vast heritage with the Jews. Although many Christians might indeed “support the State of Israel for reasons far more profound than mere politics,” as *Dabru Emet* claims, it is perhaps even more important that Christians remind their Jewish sisters and brothers that the exploitation of Biblical texts in order to found political claims has been a disastrous element in Christian history. The duty of Christians within the Jewish-Christian dialogue might be to warn Jews that they should not fall into a trap Christians know only too well from their own history – the trap of a religiously justified empowerment that ignores the cry of those they have marginalized. This needs to be brought into the dialogue with the Jewish people, in humility, while continuing on the way of repentance, so that Jews and Christians can indeed work together for a real repairing of a broken world (*tikkun olam*), a repairing that also binds and heals the wounds of the Palestinians.

⁴¹ POPE FRANCIS, Discourse at the Invocation for Peace, (8.6.2014).