

Implementing the Vatican Document, "Notes on Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis"

Eugene Fisher

In 1982 Pope John Paul II spoke on behalf of efforts to clear out what remains of ancient Christian "teaching of contempt" in regard to Jews. Last June the Roman Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued a document to counteract ignorance about and to acknowledge the salvific validity of Judaism. Eugene Fisher confronts the issues raised by that document, particularly in those areas of major concern to Jews such as the state of Israel, the Nazi Holocaust and the condemnation of anti-Semitism, and points out the importance of dealing with these issues in Christian religious education. The document itself follows the Fisher article.

One of the documents published at the close of the Second Vatican Council was the declaration on non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Times"). According to accounts of the time, Pope John XXIII wanted the Council to make a statement on the Jews and commissioned Cardinal Bea to see to it. The development of that statement and its publication as chapter four of *Nostra Aetate* is one of the more suspense-filled stories of the Council.¹

EUGENE FISHER is executive secretary of the Secretariat for Catholic/Jewish Relations. He is co-author with Annette Daum of a dialogic discussion guide to the Catholic bishops' pastoral on peace and war, *The Challenge of Shalom for Catholics and Jews* (1985).

¹See Robert A. Graham's introductory remarks in Walter Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966): 656-59.

In June of this year, by way of commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Nostra Aetate*, the Roman Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued a document entitled "Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church."² Work on the Notes had been underway since March of 1982 when Pope John Paul II, in an address to representatives of episcopal conferences from around the world, encouraged further efforts to clear out what remains of the ancient Christian

²*Origins* (25 March 1982). For the Notes see elsewhere in this issue of *Living Light*. The Notes are also available in *Origins* (4 July 1985) and, together with commentary by Msgr. Jorge Mejia of the Vatican Commission, have been published by USCC Publications.

"teaching of contempt"³ against Jews and Judaism.

Though welcoming the many "positive features" of the Notes, Jewish leaders (who certainly have a valid stake in the way Judaism is portrayed in Catholic texts) expressed serious concerns regarding the adequacy of the treatment in some sections. Although this essay will deal with the major areas of Jewish concern, its focus will be on a proper understanding of the Vatican text and its implications for the Catholic classroom, which I believe to be highly significant. What, in short, do the Notes have to say to us as religious educators in the United States?

The American situation is emphasized because in many ways, as the textbook studies have shown, catechetical materials here tend to be more advanced than others in the subject areas dealt with in the Notes.⁴ Even given this slight edge, however, the

³The term comes from the new classic works of Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (1964) and *Jesus and Israel* (1971), both translated from the French by Claire Huchet Bishop for Holt, Rinehart, Winston. It was a meeting with Isaac on 13 June 1960 that precipitated in Pope John XXIII's mind the idea that the Second Vatican Council should take up the question of the Jews in Catholic teaching.

⁴One can compare the results of studies of U.S. textbooks as reported by John T. Pawlikowski, OSM, in *Catechetics and Prejudice* (Paulist, 1973) with the results of studies of Italian, Spanish and French materials reported in *How Catholics Look at Jews*, by Claire Huchet Bishop (Paulist, 1974). The U.S. studies have been updated by E. Fisher, *Faith Without Prejudice* (Paulist, 1977). The European studies, thus far, have not.

Notes provide real challenges for revision of Catholic textbooks and teaching methods in America.

"To Remedy a Painful Ignorance"

The Notes need to be understood with the line of church documents and church teaching begun twenty years ago by the Vatican Council. These are, chiefly, the statements of the Vatican Commission itself (for example, the 1975 Guidelines for Implementing *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4),⁵ of the Pope, and of national episcopal conferences. Also, the commentary on the text given by Msgr. Jorge Mejia of the Commission in announcing its publication in Rome will be of great help in interpreting the document.

The Notes' first aim, as the conclusion states, is "to remedy . . . a painful ignorance of the history and traditions of Judaism, of which only negative aspects and often caricature seem to form part of the stock ideas of many Christians." This caricature of Judaism (as, for example, a religion of legalism and fear as opposed to the Christian message of love and mercy) can still be found in various guises not only in educational materials but also in theological volumes that many textbook writers still rely upon.⁶ Even

⁵See Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*," *Living Light* 12 (Spring 1975): 143-49.

⁶For example, see the studies of Charlotte Klein, *Anti-Judaism in Christian Theology* (Fortress, 1978); Eva Fleischner, *Judaism in German Christian Theology* (Scarecrow/American Theological Library, 1975); and J. Pawlikowski, *Christ in the Light of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (Paulist, 1983).

basic resource works, such as Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* and the Strack-Billerbeck compendium of rabbinic parallels to the New Testament, have been found to be seriously flawed in their treatments of second-temple Judaism and the Pharisees and biased in their selections of texts cited to show the "moribund" character of "late Judaism" (by which they mean, incongruously, early rabbinic Judaism).⁷

The Notes provide, for the first time, specific guidelines for teachers dealing with Jesus and the Law and Jesus and the Pharisees (Sections III and IV). These sections will be the most immediate and practical help to Catholic teachers on all levels. Jesus is to be taught as "fully a man of his time and environment," that is, a first-century Jew. Far from being against Jewish tradition or the Jewish "religious establishment," as some texts put it, Jesus' teaching is to be understood within his Jewish context: "There is no doubt that he wished to submit himself to the law . . . extolled respect for it and invited obedience to it . . . Jesus shares, with the majority of Palestinian Jews of that time, some Pharisaic doctrines: the resurrection of the body; forms of piety like almsgiving, prayer, fasting and the liturgical practice of addressing God as father; the priority of the commandment to love God and our neighbor . . . If Jesus shows himself

severe toward the Pharisees, it is because he is closer to them than to other contemporary Jewish groups" (III, 12-13, 17, 19).

One might add at this point that many of Jesus' dicta may best be understood not as opposing Pharisaism as such but rather as siding with one group of Pharisees, such as the Hillelites, against an opposed group, such as the School of Shammai.⁸ So, too, the "antitheses" of the Sermon on the Mount should not be portrayed as Jesus teaching against Judaism as such but rather against this or that group within the wide spectrum of Jewish views of his time (III, 13). The only group that taught "hatred of enemies," for example, would seem to have been the Essenes of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Jesus' interpretation of the Lex Talionis ("an eye for an eye") is virtually the same as that which came to predominate in rabbinic circles.⁹

The Notes are equally helpful in providing solid guidelines for handling the passages in the New Testament that are "hostile or less than favorable to the Jews." Many of these, the Notes point out, "have their historical content in conflicts between the nascent church and the Jewish community . . . long after the time of Jesus" (IV, 21, A). Thus, a fundamentalist reading of the New Testament is to be carefully avoided.

⁸On this, see most recently H. Falk, *Jesus the Pharisee* (Paulist, 1985) and J. Pawlikowski, *Christ* (see note 6 above).

⁹E. Fisher, "Lex Talionis in the Bible and Rabbinic Tradition," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 19:3 (Summer 1982): 582-87.

⁷E. Fisher, "From Polemic to Objectivity: The Use and Abuse of Hebrew Sources in New Testament Scholarship," *Hebrew Studies* 20 (National Association of Professors of Hebrew, Fall 1980): 199-208.

The gospels are not eyewitness accounts and should not be presented as such (even, I would presume, at early ages lest confusion arise later on). Implementing this guideline may tax the ingenuity of textbook authors and teachers, since it is easier to run with the flow of the narrative than to comment on the historical limitations of certain texts. Yet according to the Notes it is "of capital importance" and is, after all, simply an application of the general principle of the Council's constitution on revelation (*Dei Verbum*, 19).

Regarding the presentation of Jesus' passion and death, the Notes not only repeat the Council's admonition that "what happened . . . cannot be blamed upon all Jews then living without distinction nor upon the Jews of today" but specify further, drawing on the catechism of Trent, that sin (especially *Christian* sin) is to blame and that Jesus underwent his death freely. The Pharisees, the document notes in passing, had nothing to do with Jesus' death according to the New Testament (III, 19). In fact, the Pharisees tried to save Jesus' life (Luke 13:31) and the Pharisee Gamaliel did succeed in saving the lives of the apostles (Acts 5).

Most of these understandings, it is sad to report, can still be heard from time to time in the classroom and from the pulpit. Strictly adhered to, the guidelines offered by the Notes in Sections III and IV may go a long way toward clarifying Catholic teaching in particularly troublesome areas.

The Church and the Jewish People

The Notes also have something to offer toward a more suitable articula-

tion of how Christian teaching can acknowledge the ongoing salvific validity of Judaism while at the same time maintaining its own central claim concerning the universality of the Christ event (I and II). This, of course, is a much trickier subject to handle than the more straightforward guidelines for biblical presentation discussed above, since at any given point "it needs to balance" a number of ideas and doctrines (I, 5).

In my own studies of teaching materials I found that this particular area was the toughest for Catholic textbooks to handle. Dealing with the relationship between the covenants, whether framed as Old Testament/New Testament or church/Jewish people (the two questions are reciprocal ones), can lead to high percentages of ambiguous statements in textbooks and teacher manuals. It is also an area that tends to give systematic and biblical theologians headaches, as the literature shows (at least when they do not dodge the issue altogether by falling back on the old polemical categories).

So it took some courage for the Commission even to enter this doctrinally sensitive area and attempt to provide some much needed guidance on the matter. Not all issues, as we shall see, are resolved in these sections; but some critical points are made that will help anyone attempting to frame a catechesis. If there is a certain tentativeness to the title of the document itself, "Notes," it may be because of the complexity of the issues dealt with in these two opening sections (I and II).

The document begins where *Nostra Aetate* left off, noting "the spiritual

bonds" linking the church to the Jewish people "at the level of their very identity" (I, 1-2). Thus, the Christian teacher cannot *not* attempt to deal with the relationship. From the church's point of view it is "unique" among all its relations with non-Christian religions, a relationship "founded on the design of the God of the covenant." Dealing with Jews and Judaism, not only in the past (biblical Judaism) "but as professed and lived now as well" (I, 3) is not in any sense "marginal" to catechesis but is "essential" to it (I, 2).

Why? Because to grapple with the "permanent reality of the Jewish people" (VI, 25) is to grapple with an understanding of "the people of God of the Old Covenant *which has never been revoked*" (I, 3 italics mine). Section VI gives some flesh to what is meant here. The perdurance of the people Israel, it states, is "a sign to be interpreted" by the catechist "within God's design." This means that Jews are to be valued, theologically, as Jews, not as potential converts. Judaism possesses on its own grounds "a continuous spiritual fecundity in the rabbinical period, in the Middle Ages and in modern times" (VI, 25). Jewish spiritual tradition and lived reality, in short, are (or should be—my studies show that Jews "drop out" of Catholic teaching around the time of the destruction of the temple and do not reappear until the Holocaust) not peripheral but central to the understanding of Catholic faith.

The "sign to be interpreted within God's design" also includes grappling with why the majority of Jews did not convert either in Jesus' time or through

the centuries of Christian persecution and proselytism backed with the power of the Christian state. Indeed, Jewish refusal to accept Christian claims concerning the Christ event is (and I think rightly) interpreted in this section of the Notes (VI, 25) in a positive sense as a sign of God's will for them, that is, as Judaism's witness, "often heroic—of its fidelity to the one God." In any event it is a fact, however "sad" for St. Paul or earlier generations of Christians, that needs to be dealt with today as "a fact not merely of history but of theological bearing" (V, 21, C). Suggested here, I believe, is the possibility, also noted by St. Paul (Romans 11) that God willed the development of rabbinic Judaism as a proper development of the Jewish covenant "never revoked by God."

One thought that comes to mind for religious educators is that the thousands of Jews killed by the Crusaders and their often brutal successors in Christian European history should be held up in our teaching (and perhaps our liturgy) as true martyrs (heroic witnesses). Their fidelity to God in covenant enriches everyone's faith and provides a model for Christians to emulate today. Another thought is that contemplation of Jewish fidelity can help deepen for catechist and student alike the awareness of the mystery of faith and of divine freedom.

Portraits of two great Pharisees appear in Acts and are referred to in the Notes: Saul and Gamaliel. Of the two, Gamaliel would seem to be by any reasonable standard far more open to the workings of the Spirit, arguing as he does the possibility that the Christian

movement may "come from God" (Acts 5:39). The other, Saul, is first encountered "breathing murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (Acts 9:1)—hardly a likely candidate for conversion. Yet it is to Saul that the Spirit is sent, and that in a rather forcible fashion (Acts 9:3-4). Why did God choose the one and not the other on whom to bestow the gift of faith? Perhaps, as Paul hints in Romans 11 and as two millennia of faithful Jewish witness confirm (Notes II, 10-11; VI, 25), because God willed it so. In any event, to continue to speak of Jewish rejection of Jesus will be far more difficult, perhaps impossible, after these Notes and such reflections. Rather, one is called by the Notes to speak of Jewish fidelity and witness to the One God, the God of Israel. What was previously considered an "either/or" the Notes call upon catechists to envision as a "both/and" (I, 5).

The Notes state quite frankly that "Church and Judaism cannot then be seen as two parallel ways of salvation" and that "the Church must witness to Christ as redeemer for all," though the church's proclamation must at all times maintain "strictest respect for religious liberty" (I, 7). This was a key section causing concern not only in the Jewish community but among Catholic theologians as well. Does it mean that Judaism is to be seen as emptied of any religious, that is to say salvific, significance taken on its own grounds?

Based on the sections already studied, I do not believe that such theological reductionism is a valid interpretation of the passage. In his

comments introducing the text Commission Secretary Jorge Mejia clarified the intent of the passage with precision: "In this section there is the affirmation about Christ and his saving event as central to the economy of salvation—an affirmation which is essential to the Catholic faith (I, 7). This does not mean however that the Jews cannot and should not draw salvific gifts from their own traditions. Of course they can and should do so."¹⁰

Two Problems

The Notes, I believe, have two problems with a model of "parallel paths" as an image for the Jewish/Christian relationship. One is "the unity of the divine plan" (II, 3). The other is the notion of "spiritual bonds" based on a "common spiritual heritage," past and present (I, 1-3). An image of parallel lines which never touch or meet has difficulty in portraying the intimacy of Jewish-Christian relations envisioned in the Notes. More organic images, such as the Pauline "root and branch" (Romans 9-11), or even the sacramental/covenantal image of the marital bond itself, would seem to be preferred by the Notes, though they do not mandate any single image as the sole preferred model, leaving such matters to further theological reflection. The Notes without doubt would agree fully with the 1975 statement of the U.S. Conference of

¹⁰L'Osservatore Romano, 24-25 June 1985. English translation by Msgr. Mejia. The full text of Mejia's commentary is included with the Notes in the USCC publication of the text.

Catholic Bishops that "there is here a task incumbent on theologians, as yet hardly begun, to explore the continuing relationship of the Jewish people with God and their spiritual bonds with the New Covenant and the fulfillment of God's plan for both Church and Synagogues" (cf. I, 8, of the Notes).

The same dynamic of openness to other possibilities underlies the discussion in the Notes of "typology" as a model for the relationship between the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. As Mejia commented regarding the section (II, 3-9), "It should be noted also that the readings of the Old Testament, either in relation with the New or in itself, are not at all excluded, and the limits of typology are acknowledged."

Although typological interpretation sees the Hebrew scriptures as "preparation" for the New, the Notes state (II, 5), this does not exhaust its meaning or challenge for Christians (II, 4, 7). Both testaments find their full meaning only "in the light of the complete fulfillment" which, we are reminded, will come only at the end of days (II, 1).¹²

From the perspective of the eschaton, both Exodus and Calvary, church and Judaism are not fulfilled and await the "definitive perfection" and "final consummation" of God's mysterious

design (II, 8, 9). Hence the Notes call on catechesis to retrieve "the eschatological dimension of Christianity" and to stress throughout an "awareness that the people of God of the Old and the New Testaments are tending toward a like end in the future: the coming or return of the Messiah—even if they start from two different points of view" (II, 10). Since "Jews and Christians meet in a comparable hope"—and this is the point toward which the entire section has been driving—we must, "hanging on the same word," witness together to the one God and learn to "accept our responsibility to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah by working together" for universal justice and peace, the essential characteristics of God's reign (II, 11). It is this vision of a joint witness in and to the world, in which the integrity and uniqueness of both traditions are yet maintained, and which the Pope has called a "holy duty" that, "going beyond simple dialogue," motivates the Christian's renewed attitude of appreciation of Jews and Judaism today.

Section V on the Jewish roots of Christian liturgy and VI on "Judaism and Christianity in History" offer brief outlines of elements that will need to be expanded in a full catechetical cur-

¹¹NCCB, 20 November 1975. USCC Publications, 1975.

¹²The 1975 Vatican Guidelines already distinguish between partial "fulfillment" of the promises in Christ and their "complete fulfillment" which the church and the Jews together await.

¹³Cf. the remarkable statement by Pope John Paul II to the Jewish community of Mainz in 1980 (*Origins* 4 December 1980). See also the commentary on this papal statement by Archbishop John R. Roach, speaking as president of the NCCB (*Origins* 7 May 1981). Both texts are included in my *Seminary Education and Christian-Jewish Relations* (NCEA, 1983): 87-96.

riculum.¹⁴ Regarding liturgy, the text again stresses that the relationship is not simply a past but a present one (V, 23) and that the Passover, for both Jews and Christians, finds hope "in the expectation of what is to come," so that the Passover should never be viewed as something merely subsumed into Christian categories. Christian celebrations of the Jewish seder, then, should respect the integrity of the ritual as a Jewish feast. Ideally, the seder should be led by a rabbi and *never* be used merely as a prelude to the eucharist. The Holy Thursday liturgy itself provides Christian remembrance of the events of Jesus' last supper.

Section VI, as we have seen, acknowledges the validity of Jewish witness, *post-Christum*, on its own terms. It sets "at the heart of their hope" the relationship of the Jewish people to the land of Israel as an integral aspect of God's continuing covenant with them and of their fidelity to God (VI, 25). Catholic catechesis, therefore, needs to provide a full understanding of the "religious attachment" between people and land "which finds its roots in

biblical tradition" and is therefore to be respected by Catholics as essentially valid. It cautions against "any particular religious interpretation of this relationship" at the present time and against viewing the "political options" of the modern state in a purely religious "perspective." Both caveats, I believe, are to warn against biblical fundamentalism, which the document has cautioned against previously (III, 21, A), such as attempting to determine the boundaries of the modern state by referring to this or that biblical passage.

This statement on the land and state of Israel was again one of particular concern to the Jewish community. Yet it should be read as a positive one, as the specific reference to the 1975 U.S. bishops' statement indicates. Catechists should teach that God's people, the Jews, are attached to the land of Israel by reason of God's covenant with them, a covenant that still endures. The modern embodiment of the covenantal relationship, the state of Israel, finds all the justification it needs in "the common principles of international law." Catechesis should affirm the legitimacy of the Jewish state, contemplate the theological implications for Christians as well as Jews of the ingathering of Jews into the land, but not jump to hasty, especially fundamentalistic theological conclusions concerning the "political options" of various policies of the modern state.

From Dialogue to Curricula

The next paragraph is deceptively simple, since in fact it calls for a deep

and thorough revision of catechetical curricula to integrate the results of dialogue with the "spiritual fecundity" of Judaism into catechesis on all levels. The teachings of the rabbis as well as of the Fathers and Doctors of the church, in sum, will need to be taken into account in determining how the Catholic faith is to be taught. This is a tall order that the Notes, while mandating, do not themselves work out in detail. Perhaps it will be the subject of further Notes from the Commission. In the meantime, Catholic teachers will need much more exposure in catechetical formation programs to Judaism and to Jewish writings than they are currently given if the challenge is even to be begun to be met.

Catechesis, likewise, needs to deal directly (and, I would say, at some length) with the meaning of the Nazi Holocaust. Here Mejia's commentary adds that there is a theological significance that must be understood and explained not only for Jews but also for Christians. The Holocaust focuses in a uniquely profound way on the problems of evil and theodicy and, for Christians, the mystery of sin and responsibility as well. For as Bishop James Malone of Youngstown, Ohio, speaking as president of the NCCB, commented so aptly, "The Christian tragedy . . . is that Christians were numbered both among the executioners and among the victims. At one and the same time, Christians were both oppressor and oppressed."¹⁵

¹⁵James Malone, "The State of Jewish-Christian Relations," *Origins* (6 December 1984): 408.

This statement, brief as it is (and as inadequate as it is, taken purely in itself, as Jewish commentators have pointed out), offers important encouragement to efforts by Catholic educators to develop Holocaust curricula. In fact, Mejia, when asked at the press conference what the passage envisaged for catechetical programs, cited as examples the development of Holocaust curricula by three dioceses in the United States.

Finally, the Notes repeat (VI, 26) the conciliar condemnation of anti-Semitism and state that religious education programs should devote themselves to combatting the phenomenon which is "still active in many forms." These forms, it may be added, can range from not so subtle remarks that "Jews control the media" to some of the more blatant types of anti-Zionism (for example, equating Zionism with racism).

The Notes should be viewed not as an end product but as a beginning. They consolidate and give official approval to many of the initiatives already taken by Catholic educators in this country (such as Holocaust curricula). They open up several new areas for catechetical implementation and point to crucial issues of theological reflection that are still unresolved in the church. While not perfect, and while calling for further efforts beyond themselves, they will enable the church, I believe, to take one more step toward the goal of a fully positive presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic education.

¹⁴On liturgy, see L. Klenicki and G. Huck, eds., *Spirituality and Prayer: Jewish and Christian Understandings* (Paulist, Stimulus 1983); E. Fisher and D. Polish, *Liturgical Foundations of Social Policy in the Catholic and Jewish Traditions* (University of Notre Dame, 1983); and E. Werner, *The Sacred Bridge: Liturgical Parallels in the Synagogue and the Early Church* (Vol. I, Schocken, 1970; Vol. II, KTAV, 1984). On history, see J. T. Pawlikowski, *Sinai and Calvary* (Bensinger, 1976); F. M. Schweitzer, *A History of the Jews* (MacMillan, 1971); and E. H. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews* (Paulist, 1985).