

Bishops Urge Christians Find Jewish Roots

Following are excerpts from a statement on Jewish-Catholic relations issued last October by the U.S. Catholic bishops.

(Continued from last week)

Most essential concepts in the Christian creed grew at first in Judaic soil. Uprooted from that soil, these basic concepts cannot be perfectly understood. It is for reasons such as these that *Nostra Aetate* recommends joint "theological and biblical studies" with Jews. The Vatican Guidelines of 1975 encourage Catholic specialists to engage in new research into the relations of Judaism and Christianity and to seek out "collaboration with Jewish scholars." The renewal of Christian faith is the issue here, for renewal always entails to some extent a return to one's origins.

The council document cites St. Paul, particularly in chapters 9 to 11 of his letter to the Romans. We find in these rediscovered, precious passages of that epistle Paul's love for his kinsmen and a firm basis for Christian reverence for the Jewish people. Admittedly, Paul's theology of Judaism has its more negative aspects; they have been adequately emphasized over the centuries in Catholic teaching. It would be well today to explore and emphasize the positive elements of Paul's thought that have received inadequate attention.

In these chapters, Paul reveals his deep love of the Jewish people. He tells of his willingness to accept damnation itself for the sake of his kinsmen (9:3), even though he also expresses his painful disappointment and incomprehension at Israel's failure to accept Jesus as its Messiah. Crucial to his admiration of the Jewish people and to a Christian understanding of their situation is the following text written after the midpoint of

the first century. Paul refers to his "kinsmen according to the flesh who are Israelites who have the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the legislation and the worship and the promises who have the fathers and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh" (9:3-5) thus making clear the continuing validity of Israel's call. Paul, moreover, insists that God has by no means rejected his people. "Is it possible that God has rejected his people? Of course not. An Israelite descended from Abraham through the tribe of Benjamin, could never agree that God has rejected his people, the people he chose specially long ago." (11:1-2) What proof does Paul offer for the enduring validity of Israel's relationship to God even after the founding of the Church? "God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice" (11:29).

Paul warns fellow Christians against showing contempt for the Jewish people by reminding them that they (Christians) are wild branches grafted into the olive tree itself to share its life. Remember that you do not support the root; it is the root that supports you" (11:18). And he invites his listeners to love the Jews, who are "still loved by God for the sake of their ancestors" (11:28).

To revere only the ancient Jewish patriarchs and prophets is not enough. The all too common view of Judaism as a legalistic and decadent form of religion that lost all validity with the coming of Christ and all vitality after the destruction of the Temple has lingered on in the Christian centuries. The 1975 Guidelines put us on guard against such a view and urge us to see post-biblical Judaism as rich in religious values and worthy of our sincere respect and esteem.

In dialogue with Christians Jews have explained that they do

not consider themselves as a church, a sect, or a denomination, as is the case among Christian bodies, but rather as a peoplehood that is not solely racial, ethnic or religious, but in a sense a composite of all these. It is for such reasons that an overwhelming majority of Jews see themselves bound in one way or another to their traditional land of Israel. Most Jews see this tie to the land as essential to their Jewishness. Whatever difficulties Christians may experience in sharing this vision, they should strive to understand this link between land and people which Jews have expressed in their writings and worship throughout two millennia as a longing for the homeland, holy Zion. Appreciation of this link is not to give assent to any particular religious interpretation of this bond. Nor is it to adopt any political stance in the controversies over the Middle East, which lie beyond the purview of this statement.

On this tenth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* we reaffirm our wholehearted commitment to the principles of that document, as well as to the directives of the Guidelines of 1975. Aware of the magnitude of the task before us and of the excellence of the many practical guidelines and suggestions contained in the documents, we urge that special attention be given to the following exhortations:

1. That all dioceses, according to their needs and circumstances, create and support whatever instrument or agency is appropriate for carrying out the recommendations of *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4, the Vatican Guidelines of 1975 and the American Bishops' Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations of 1967.

2. That homilists and liturgists pay special attention to the presentation and interpretation of scripture so as to promote among the Catholic people a genuine appreciation of the special place of the Jewish people as God's "first-chosen" in the history of salvation and in no way slight the honor and dignity that is theirs.

3. That Catholic scholars

address themselves in a special way to the theological and scriptural issues raised by those documents which deal with the relationships of the Church with Judaism. We are firm in our faith that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and He whom we consider Israel's fairest Son will sustain us in this holy endeavor.

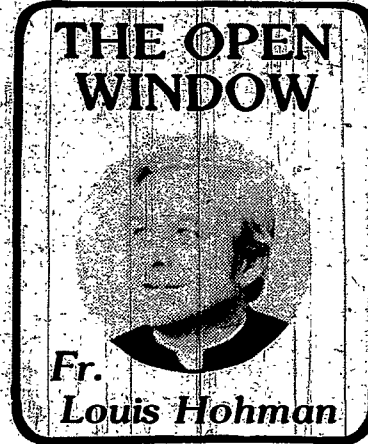
Dec. 17, you did not answer the question which was "Why have so many of the churches removed the altar rails?"

Sincerely,
H.E.H.

Dear H.E.H.,

That is a very interesting idea you bring up about the altar rail representing the table around which the people of God gather. As a matter of fact, it called back to my mind the situation at St. Joseph's Church many years ago when a cloth suspended from the altar rail was placed over the hands of those receiving Communion. It was something like a tablecloth. It also had not occurred to me that lining up is not exactly a dignified procedure. You said I did not answer the question about the removal of altar rails. I guess I thought I was answering it when I said that the rail represented a barrier between clergy and laity and in that sense prevented a feeling of direct involvement in what was taking place at the altar. Perhaps, however, I was not all that clear.

As I read your letter, I begin to wonder if perhaps we were not too hasty in doing what we did. However signs can be interpreted in ways which are meaningful and it does not seem to me as though the significance of this has all that much importance as to be made an issue. It is fairly unlikely that any churches are going to have the altar rail replaced at this particular time! Perhaps in another generation it will happen for such very good reasons as yours.



Dear Father Hohman,

In reference to your column of Dec. 17, 1975, I know nothing about the history of how the altar rails came into being. I am of the understanding that they were removed because they were viewed as a barrier between the people and God. [It is very possible that I am wrong about this.] Isn't it possible that the altar rail could symbolize the table to which the faithful are invited to partake of the body (and blood) of Jesus Christ? It seems to me that kneeling at an altar rail [symbolizing a table] with other members of the community is much more of a sharing, communal experience that the present method of lining up. I realize that many people who would kneel at the banquet table in this way would, because of their previous experience, do so in a solitary rather than a communal attitude.

Since we are already so involved in re-education, couldn't we do some along those lines.

Incidentally, in your column of

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