

Reassessing Catholic Anti-Semitism

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in these 1975 guidelines is the call for dialogue between Christians and Jews. "To tell the truth," the guidelines remind us, "such relations as there have been between Jew and Christian have scarcely ever risen above the level of monologue. From now on real dialogue must be established.

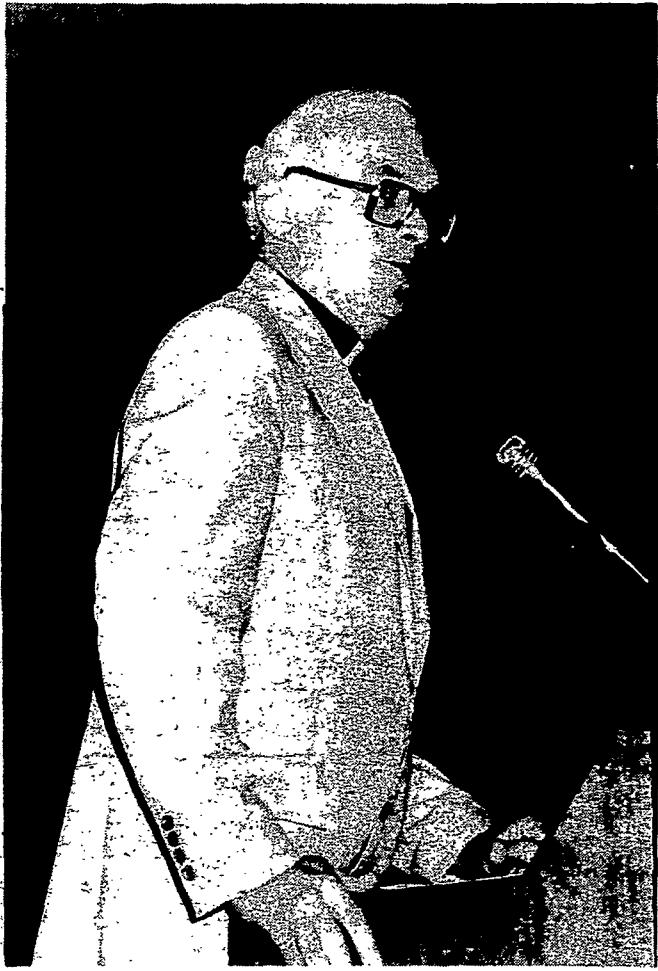
"Dialogue presupposes that each side wishes to know the other, and wishes to increase and deepen its knowledge of the other. It constitutes a particularly suitable means of favoring a better mutual knowledge and probing the riches of one's own tradition, dialogue demands respect for the other as he is, above all, respect for his faith and his religious convictions."

The working document, which served as a basis for these guidelines, had spelled out very specifically at this point that in true dialogue "all intent of proselytizing and conversion is excluded," and indeed, the Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish relations issued by the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1967 (eight years before the Vatican guidelines) do clearly state that "proselytizing is to be carefully avoided in the dialogue." Here again, the Vatican document strikes one as being a bit hesitant and over cautious, but it certainly does mark a step forward in the Christian effort to "learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience, and to approach Jews with better mutual understanding and renewed mutual esteem," as the 1974 guidelines state.

One of the concrete problems which the Vatican guidelines tackled for the first time is the anti-semitic, anti-Jewish coloring of many passages in the Roman Catholic liturgy. There had already by this time been an extensive reform of the liturgical rites and texts of the Church, resulting in a much more positive attitude towards Judaism, as for example in the Good Friday Liturgy. But while it was possible to revise liturgical texts with relative ease, the words of the New Testament, considered by Christians to be, with the Law, the Prophets and the Writing, God's inspired Word, presented, and still present, an intractable problem. It is well known, for example, that the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, consistently refer to the leading role played by the chief priests and elders of the people, in their account of Jesus' trial and execution.

John, on the other hand, obliterates the distinction between people and leaders, and consistently refers to the Jews. This practice has often in the past led to Good Friday pogroms following the reading of John's narrative during the Christian liturgy, and many Christians today feel acutely uneasy when they listen to, or read, these words which have provoked not love and compassion and thankfulness, but hatred and frenzy.

The 1975 guidelines at least acknowledged this



Father Brennan during talk.

difficulty for the first time, even if they are not terribly helpful in dealing with it. Nor, to the best of my knowledge, has much been achieved since 1975 except the heightening of awareness among Catholics about the nature of the problem.

The guidelines proposed that "commissions entrusted with the task of liturgical translation will pay particular attention in which they express those phrases and passages which Christians, if not well-informed, might misunderstand because of prejudice. Obviously one cannot alter the text of the Bible itself. The point is that, with a version designed for liturgical use, there should be an overriding preoccupation to bring out explicitly the meaning of the text, while taking scriptural studies into account. (Thus the formula 'the Jews' in St. John, sometimes according to the context means 'the leaders of the Jews,' or 'the adversaries of Jesus,' terms which express better the thought of the evangelist and avoid seeming to arraign the Jewish people as such. Another example is the use of the words 'pharisee' and 'pharisaism,' which have taken on a largely pejorative meaning.")

While I am not convinced by this line of argument, I find it heartening that an official Church document at least acknowledges the problem, and attempts to find a solution for it.

These 1975 guidelines, with their tentative and cautious admission of Christian guilt, their call for genuine dialogue, and their acknowledgement of anti-Jewish tendencies within the New Testament writings, have in their turn opened the way for further developments which I should like to outline briefly now.

First of all, the admission of Christian guilt for the terrible persecutions of the Jews has been increasingly recognized in official statements of the national hierarchies of the Catholic

Church throughout the world. The bishops of the Federal Republic of Germany, for example, in 1975 wrote:

"Our country's recent political history is darkened by the systematic attempt to wipe out the Jewish people. Apart from some admirable efforts by individuals and groups, most of us during the time of national socialism formed a church community preoccupied with the threat to our own institutions. We turned our backs to this persecuted Jewish people and were silent about the crimes perpetrated on Jews and Judaism. We feel particularly distressed about the fact that Christians even took part in these persecutions. The honesty of our intention to renew ourselves depends on the admission of this guilt incurred by our country and our Church... On our Church falls the special obligation of improving the tainted relationship between the Church as a whole and the Jewish people and its religion." This statement is, by the way, paralleled by another, in similar words, by the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany in the same year.

The distance that we have come can be gauged, I think, by recalling a canon approved by a Provincial Synod of the Dutch bishops in 1924: "Relations with Jews must be avoided because this people is very estranged from the doctrine of the cross of Christ, a scandalous thing for them. Parish priests must take care that Christians do not work for Jews who would use them as servants or subordinates. If there is no danger of faith or morals, paid daily work may be undertaken for Jews, either in agriculture or factories. A grave warning is given, however: such services must not lead to others which would endanger the soul, arising above all from a desire for lucre. Moreover, the faithful must take care, according to the warning of Benedict XIV, never to need the help or support of Jews." Small wonder that nine

years after that canon, a Hitler could find such a warm welcome in next-door Germany!

But still, reading these statements, one would hope for something more forthright and explicit from the pope himself who, while often alluding to Jewish suffering in the past, has never, to my knowledge, formally acknowledged Christian complicity in them.

The second point raised by the 1975 guidelines, the call for dialogue between Jews and Christians, has raised the related question of proselytism amongst the Jews, or Christian missionary activity amongst them. When the guidelines speak of the wish to "increase and deepen our knowledge of each other," and "to respect the other as he is, above all in his faith and his religious convictions," they seem to me to preclude any thought of proselytism or missionary activity, even though this is not made explicit. Already in 1970, the Pastoral Council of the Netherlands had voted: "To the extent that Christianity rediscovers in Judaism the roots of her own faith and no longer considers Judaism an errant or obsolete religion, the missionary witness of the church will no more attempt a conversion of the Jews in the current sense of the term — that is, annexation or proselytism."

I might mention in passing that Pope John Paul II was widely quoted as saying in an address in Rome on March 6 of this year that the Church should "abandon any and all attempts to convert the Jews." I tried to trace this statement, but in reading both the French original and the English translation, I find nothing quite so categorically clear. What the Pope did say, however, seems to me to be in line with the statements which I have just quoted. After alluding to the terrible persecutions suffered by the Jews in various periods of history which have opened many eyes and troubled many hearts, the Pope continues: "Christians are on the right path, that of justice and brotherhood, when they seek with respect and perseverance, to gather with their Semitic brethren around the common heritage which is a wealth to us all. Is there any need to point out, above all to those who remain skeptical or even hostile, that such a rapprochement should not be confused with a certain religious relativism, still less with a loss of identity... May God grant that Christians and Jews may hold more in-depth exchanges based on their own identities, without ever allowing the one side or the other to be obscured, but always seeking the will of the God who revealed Himself."

Statements like these must, I think, be seen as somewhat faltering attempts on the part of the Church authorities and theologians to come to terms at last with the continuing existence of Israel, and to abandon the mindset according to which Israel and Judaism have lost all title to exist. If it seems at

times that such statements are lacking in the clarity and firmness of intent that we might wish, then we can draw some comfort by comparing them with earlier pronouncements of Church leaders, such as that of Pope St. Pius X, who is reported to have replied to Theodore Herzl's request for papal support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine: "We are unable to favor this movement, we cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem, but we cannot sanction it. As head of the Church I cannot answer you otherwise. The Jews have not recognized our Lord. Therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people. And so, if you come to Palestine to settle your people there, we shall be ready with churches and priests to baptize all of you."

We Catholics are still far from having a true theology of Judaism which is faithful on the one hand to the data of the New Testament and Christian tradition, and on the other hand to the respect and reverence which we owe to the Jewish people. We are, however, moving in that direction, however slowly, as the U.S. bishops urged in their most recent statement, of 1975: "Much of the alienation between Christian and Jew found its origins in a certain anti-Judaic theology which, over the centuries, has led not only to social friction with the Jews, but often to their oppression. One of the most

hopeful developments in our time, powerfully assisted by Nostra Aetate, has been the decline of the old anti-Judaism, and the reform of Christian theological expositions of Judaism along more constructive lines."

What the bishops of the U.S. do not say in this statement, of course — and this is my final point — is that this anti-Judaic theology is imbedded in the New Testament writings themselves, and that the devaluation of Judaism that we find there is one of the greatest — I would say the greatest — challenges that faces the Christian Church today in its relationship with Judaism and the Jewish people. As long as we Christians continue to hear Jesus say to Pilate on Good Friday, "Mine is not a kingdom of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered to the Jews;" as long as we continue to hear John himself say to us on the Sunday after Easter that "Jesus came and stood among his disciples in the room where they were hiding, with the doors closed for fear of the Jews," for just that long, we are creating an atmosphere or environment in which revulsion and contempt for Jews will find a welcome. In this area we have barely begun to work, because we have hardly recognized the enormity of the problem.

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