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“God Holds the Jews Most Dear”

Learning to Respect Jewish Self-Understanding

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1. INTRODUCTION

As is well known, a new and positive relationship between Catholics and Jews became possible on October 28, 1965, with the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council declaration, *Nostra Aetate*. It is perhaps less well known that intense opposition and parliamentary maneuvering almost scuttled the prospects for such a document.¹

In this essay, I will focus on one particular cause of difficulty: the pervasive Christian outlook that saw suffering and vulnerability as the

1. See Giovanni Miccoli, “Two Sensitive Issues: Religious Freedom and the Jews,” in Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, eds., *History of Vatican II*, vol. 4, *Church as Communion: Third Period and Intersession, September 1964–September 1965* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 95–193; John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2008), 218–26, 250–52, 275–77; Alberto Melloni, “*Nostra Aetate* and the Discovery of the Sacrament of Otherness,” in Philip A. Cunningham et al., eds., *The Catholic Church and the Jewish People: Recent Reflections from Rome* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 129–51.

inevitable fate of Jews until they accepted Christ. An unchallenged part of the air Christians breathed, this stance gave them little reason to think they had much of anything to learn from Jews. Regarding Jews as lost until they accepted Christ fostered a perennial Christian interest in organizing initiatives to bring Jews to baptism. So long as Jews were seen only as prospective and destined converts to Christianity, there was little likelihood of any Jewish and Catholic rapprochement.

This essay explores these themes by discussing certain events before, during, and after the Council. It begins with one of the unsung heroes of this story, a German theologian named Karl Thieme. Baptized a Lutheran, he became Catholic before the Second World War and dedicated his life to combating anti-Semitism among Christians.

2. “THE JEWISH PEOPLE ENJOYS SPECIAL GUIDANCE AND SPECIAL GRACE.”

In an intriguing book, John Connelly traces the slow, incremental progress of Catholic pioneers in mid-twentieth-century Europe, who struggled against the attraction that Nazi racism held for many Catholics.² Ensnared themselves by the long-lived notion that Jews were destined to suffer and that only baptism into the church could save them, their theological hands were tied, so to speak, as they sought to devise effective religious arguments against anti-Semitism.³

As Connelly relates, Karl Thieme experienced a five-year crisis of conscience between 1945 and 1950 after being accused of writing an anti-Semitic book. The allegation was based on Thieme’s use of a mistranslation of Rom 11:28 to characterize Jews as “enemies of God.” As someone who had labored for years to fight anti-Semitism, Thieme was greatly distressed by this charge from a prominent rabbi.

During his period of soul-searching, Thieme corresponded with several Jewish thinkers, including Martin Buber. His encounter with

2. John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933–1965* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

3. This is also evident in the draft of a prospective encyclical prepared for Pope Pius XI, *Humani Generis Unitas*. Although it condemned Nazi racism, it asserted that there was an “authentic basis of the social separation of the Jews from the rest of humanity” because their leaders “had called down upon their own heads a Divine malediction” by rejecting Jesus Christ. See Georges Passelecq and Bernard Suchecky, *The Hidden Encyclical of Pius XI* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1997), 246–59.

Jewish self-understanding caused him to reevaluate unexamined theological presuppositions. In one notably frank letter, Buber wrote:

I had been persuaded up to now that you were interested in real understanding with those religious Jews who have understanding for people acting as faithful Christians. But how should such understanding be possible if you identify spiritual life for the Jews with their readiness to be converted? I have my spiritual life in a direct contact between God and myself, and in addition I have my bodily life. I cannot believe that God would allow a Christian to question this fact, and equally I cannot believe that God would allow me to act this way toward a Christian.⁴

Buber's matter-of-fact reference to a direct connection with God called into question the widespread Christian view that this was possible only by explicit faith in Christ. His combining of his "spiritual life" and his "bodily life" also flew in the face of a long-lived Christian distinction (based on a certain reading of 1 Cor 10:18) between "Israel after the flesh" (i.e., living Jews) and the church as the "spiritual Israel." Thieme must also have been taken aback by Buber's suggestion that thinking of Jews only as the likeliest candidates for baptism would be offensive to God.

By 1950, after similar exchanges with other Jews, Thieme spoke of undergoing a personal "conversion." He began saying that Christians must abandon their efforts to baptize Jews, writing to Buber in 1954 that the Jewish people are "God's 'special possession,' and remains sanctified in a way that is hardly accessible to us 'believers from the peoples of the world.'"⁵

Thieme's breakthrough insight was perhaps best expressed in a 1950 article in the *Freiburger Rundbrief*: "a Jewish person not only as an individual person, but also in a certain sense precisely as 'Jew can be pleasing to God.' Precisely for the Jews according to the entirety of divine revelation certain promises continue to be in force, so that one can assume that even in distance from Christ the Jewish people enjoys special guidance and special grace."⁶

In this period, Thieme was wrestling with key Christian questions about Jewish identity. First, were living Jews the "same people" as the biblical Jewish people? Second, if so, were today's Jews still in covenant with God, and could Christians acknowledge this without relativizing the new

4. Buber to Thieme, June 25, 1949. Quoted in Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother*, 201.

5. *Ibid.*, 199.

6. *Ibid.*, 204–5.

covenant of Christ? Third, if Jewish covenantal life endured, what was the relationship between the Jewish people and the Church?⁷ Thieme would give affirmative answers to the first two questions, and for the third he spoke of Jews as “elder brothers.” He used this phrase with the Parable of the Prodigal Son in mind (Luke 15:11–32). Thieme wrote to Buber that if Jews were the elder son, the one who was always loyal to the father, then it was to them that the father said, “Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours” (15:31). This, reasoned Thieme, amounted to the “legitimation of Jewry” until the end of time.⁸

Thieme fully expressed his new perspectives in a series of theses prepared for a 1954 conference of the World Council of Churches in Evanston, Illinois. He urged dialogue with Jews “until the day arrives where ‘there shall be *one* fold, and *one* shepherd’ (John 10:16), where ‘all the peoples . . . may serve him shoulder to shoulder’ (Zeph. 3:9).”⁹

Thieme’s new perspective was such a change that his longtime co-worker, John Oesterreicher, long argued against it. Oesterreicher, an Austrian Jew who had become a Catholic priest in 1927, had lost his family to the *Shoah*. For many years, he vigorously opposed Nazi anti-Semitism and its corruption of the Christian gospel, but he was also dedicated to the conversion of Jews to Christianity. He gradually changed his mind, in part because of his exchanges with Thieme.

Connelly nicely sums up their relationship: “Their views, the explicitly pro-Jewish (Thieme) and the explicitly anti-racist (Oesterreicher), though in tension, in fact complemented each other.”¹⁰ But in the 1950s, Oesterreicher strongly opposed calling Jews “elder brothers” and resisted Thieme’s contention that Catholics ought not to proselytize Jews. After 1960 they ceased their decades-long correspondence, but Oesterreicher would remember Thieme’s arguments and writings.

7. Ibid., 219.

8. Ibid., 202.

9. For the full text of Evanston theses, see <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/naprecursors/1227-evanston1954/>.

10. Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother*, 237.

3. “THE CHURCH AWAITS THAT DAY . . . [WHEN] ALL PEOPLES WILL ADDRESS THE LORD IN A SINGLE VOICE.”

On June 13, 1960, the French Jewish historian Jules Isaac arrived at the Vatican for a private audience with Pope John XXIII. He presented the pope with a dossier summarizing his research into the history of the Christian “teaching of contempt.” Also included was a text from a 1947 conference in Seelisberg, Switzerland, in which Isaac had participated, sponsored by the nascent International Council of Christians and Jews.¹¹ Titled “An Address to the Churches,” it offered ten points “to prevent any animosity towards the Jews which might arise from false, inadequate or mistaken presentations or conceptions of the teaching and preaching of the Christian doctrine.”¹² Isaac asked for the upcoming Second Vatican Council to issue a statement on these topics that would condemn anti-Semitism.

John XXIII was sympathetic. As a Vatican nuncio during World War II, the future pope had provided false baptismal certificates and visas to thousands of Jews fleeing the Nazi persecution.¹³ Three months after Professor Isaac’s visit, he instructed Cardinal Augustin Bea, SJ, president of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, to prepare for the Council’s consideration a draft on relations between the Church and the Jewish people. Bea assembled a team of experts to undertake this task, including John Oesterreicher. But the road ahead was not easy. Looking back afterward, Bea is reported to have said, “If I had known all the difficulties before, I do not know whether I would have had the courage to [proceed].”¹⁴

Four years later, on September 25, 1964, after surmounting various parliamentary maneuvers, Bea was finally able to introduce to the Council Fathers a text titled, “On the Jews and Non-Christian Religions.” For various reasons the draft displeased him. His secretariat’s previous text had been significantly reduced and altered by the Coordinating

11. O’Malley, *What Happened*, 219.

12. <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/ecumenical-christian/567-seelisberg/>

13. George H. Tavard, “*Nostra Aetate*: Forty Years Later,” in Michael Attridge, ed., *Jews and Catholics Together: Celebrating the Legacy of “Nostra Aetate”* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2007), 21.

14. Cardinal Walter Kasper, “The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews: A Crucial Endeavour of the Catholic Church,” Address at Boston College, Nov. 6, 2002, §1.

Commission of the Council, apparently to more closely resemble conventional, hostile teaching about Jews.¹⁵ Over the summer this “watered down”¹⁶ draft was leaked in American media and provoked public controversy with the words,

The union of the Jewish people with the Church is a part of Christian hope. With unshaken faith and deep longing, the Church awaits, in accordance with the teaching of the Apostle Paul, the entry of this people into the fullness of the People of God which Christ has founded.¹⁷

These words were understood by many to mean that Catholics should actively seek to bring Jews into the Church. On Sept 3, 1964, a prominent American rabbi and scholar, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who had been corresponding with Bea for some time, wrote the cardinal that this phrasing amounted to “spiritual fratricide,” and that he was “ready to go to Auschwitz any time, if faced with the alternative of conversion or death.”¹⁸ Other Jewish leaders expressed similar sentiments in media reports.

In his presentation to the Council on September 25th, by setting forth counterarguments, Bea implicitly challenged the Coordinating Commission’s text for suggesting that all Jews in the time of Jesus bore guilt for the crucifixion. His remarks were clearly intended to spur the Council Fathers to make corrections. Cardinal Joseph Ritter of Saint Louis obliged by saying,

15. Miccoli, “Two Sensitive Issues: Religious Freedom and the Jews,” in Giuseppe Albergio and Joseph A. Komonchak, eds., *History of Vatican II*, vol. 4, *Church as Communion: Third Period and Intersession, September 1964—September 1965* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 149.

16. See a June 13, 1964, letter from New York’s Cardinal Francis Spellman to the Vatican Secretary of State and to the Council’s Secretary: “any watering down of the text presented during the [Council’s] second period would have disastrous consequences” (in Miccoli, “Two Sensitive Issues,” 147). This was likely a reaction to a front-page story in the previous day’s *New York Times*, with the headline “Vatican Said to Mute Its Text on the Jews,” which described that the Coordinating Commission of the Council had “dramatically watered down” the previous draft from Bea’s secretariat. See http://www.nytimes.com/1964/06/12/vatican-said-to-mute-its-text-on-the-jews.html?_r=0/.

17. John M. Oesterreicher, *The New Encounter between Christians and Jews* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1986), 186.

18. Beatrice Bruteau, ed., *Merton and Judaism: Recognition, Repentance, and Renewal* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003), 223–24.

Let the declaration more fully and more explicitly speak of the religious patrimony that so closely, even today, unites the Jewish and Christian peoples. The promises that God . . . made to Abraham still belong to the Jews. The same divine love is extended to Jews and Christians in a special way; because of it a very close unity of love and esteem should thrive between us and them. Therefore, that spirit of love that was found in the original draft should shine out even more in this declaration. Let our debt and relationships to the Jews, which are hesitantly and, as it were, unwillingly acknowledged in this draft, be proclaimed with great joy.¹⁹

Some speakers took up the controversial addition that spoke of the union of the Jewish people with the Church. They urged that the question of Jewish conversion to Christianity be understood as an eschatological matter; in other words, that it was not the task of Catholics in historical time to try to baptize all Jews. Coadjutor-Archbishop Arthur Elchinger of Strasbourg, for example, stated, “We Christians . . . are not permitted to look upon the Jews as the rejected members of God’s people.” He concluded that the “declaration should avoid . . . every type of any present calling to conversion of the entire Jewish people . . . We do not yet know, nor can we know, that hour of God, that Paul speaks of in the Epistle to the Romans concerning the definitive union of all the chosen people.”

Archbishop Patrick O’Boyle of Washington DC echoed this: “The destiny of the Jewish people depends completely on the dispositions of divine Providence and the grace of God. [If our words lead Jews] to interpret them as a definite and conscious intention to work for their conversion, we will build another high wall that separates us from a holy and fruitful dialogue with the Jewish people . . . Better if we would admit the limitations of our knowledge, and the hidden ways of divine Providence.”

After two days of deliberations, it was the task of Bea’s team to revise the text accordingly. John Oesterreicher incorporated a phrase from Thieme’s 1954 Evanston theses: “the Church awaits the day, known to God alone, when all people will call upon the Lord with a single voice and ‘serve him with one accord’(Zeph 3:9).” The Council record explained this specific revision in this way: “The paragraph concerning the church’s eschatological hope is changed. Many fathers asked that in the expression

19. The texts of all the statements during the so-called Great Debate of September 28–29, 1964 have been translated into English by Patrick T. Brannan, SJ, and may be found at <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/na-debate/>.

of this hope, since it concerns the mystery [of Israel], any appearance of proselytism be avoided. Other fathers requested that it somehow be expressed that Christian hope also embraces all peoples. By this present paragraph we wish to satisfy all these desires.”²⁰ The formulation was retained into the final version of *Nostra Aetate* despite the many hurdles the declaration still had to overcome.

About a year later, when the vote on a final text was imminent, the *New York Times* described the new phraseology as “an expression of the long-term ‘eschatological’ hope of the Church for the eventual unity of all mankind . . . But there is no call to active proselytization and no presentation of conversion as the price of brotherhood” (Oct 4, 1965). Three days before the vote, the self-designated “International Group of Fathers” (the *Coetus Internationalis Patrum*) protested the eschatological perspective. A handful of bishops, including the later excommunicated Archbishop Marcel Lefèbvre, declared it “unworthy of the Council” to have framed “the future conversion of Israel” so as to preclude proselytizing.²¹ Nonetheless, when the Council voted on October 14–15, 1965, there were 1,937 votes in favor of the section that included Thieme’s eschatological phrase, and only 153 votes against it.²² Heschel later rejoiced that the declaration was “devoid of any expression of hope for conversion.”²³

Since both friends and foes of *Nostra Aetate* and media reports all shared a common understanding of the words “the Church awaits the day . . .,” it seems clear that the Council Fathers were aware its implications when they overwhelmingly voted their approval. Sadly, Thieme had died of cancer in 1963 and so didn’t live to see his contribution enshrined in the conciliar declaration.

Among the many notable features in the story thus far is the importance of personal interactions between Christians and Jews. Constructive exchanges—such as those between Karl Thieme and Martin Buber, John XXIII and Jules Isaac, Augustin Bea and Abraham Heschel—gave Catholics a transformative glimpse into Jewish self-understanding. The

20. *Acta Syn.* III.8, 648. My thanks to Thomas Stransky, a member of Bea’s team, for this reference.

21. See Oesterreicher, *New Encounter*, 272, 274.

22. *Ibid.*, 275.

23. Reuven Kimelman, “Rabbis Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Abraham Joshua Heschel on Jewish-Christian Relations,” *The Edah Journal* 4/2 (2004) 6, citing Abraham J. Heschel, “From Mission to Dialogue,” *Conservative Judaism* 21 (Spring 1967) 10.

experience made intolerable the idea that Jews were not in genuine relationship with one, true God.

This newfound respect for Jewish covenantal life found expression in *Nostra Aetate's* rendering of Rom 9:4–5 in the present tense (“theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises”) and its quotation of Rom 11:28–29 (“God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues”).

It also led the 1974 Vatican document to implement *Nostra Aetate* to state that “Christians . . . must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.”²⁴ This principle could be negatively expressed as an enduring commandment to future Catholic theologians: “When speaking of Judaism, thou shalt not theologize without respect for Jewish self-understanding.”

In the decades of the “reception”²⁵ of *Nostra Aetate* into the Church community, Catholics came to see Jews more as dialogue partners and less as prospects for conversion. As John Paul II said in 1979, “we recognize with utmost clarity that the path along which we should proceed with the Jewish religious community is one of fraternal dialogue and fruitful collaboration.”²⁶ Though the Council’s eschatological perspective effectively “took the wind out of the sails” of conversionary efforts and focused on dialogue with covenantal colleagues in the here and now, Catholics continued to debate the question.

4. “THE CHURCH MUST NOT CONCERN HERSELF WITH THE CONVERSION OF THE JEWS.”

The ramifications of the new Catholic respect for Jewish self-understanding have unfolded ever since the Council. John Paul II, for example, repeatedly insisted that God’s covenant with the Jewish people was never

24. Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, No. 4” (1974), preamble.

25. In Catholic usage, “reception” is the process by which teachings or practices may be assimilated by the people of God.

26. “Address to Representatives of Jewish Organizations,” March 12, 1979. See <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/231-jp2-79mar12/>.

revoked,²⁷ and expounded on its significance in writings that today occupy a hefty volume.²⁸

An important corollary to this developing tradition was expressed in 2001 when Cardinal Walter Kasper, the new president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, stated at an official Vatican dialogue with worldwide Jewry: “[The Catholic Church] declares that God’s grace, which is the grace of Jesus Christ according to our faith, is available to all. Therefore, the Church believes that Judaism, i.e. the faithful response of the Jewish people to God’s irrevocable covenant, is salvific for them, because God is faithful to his promises.”²⁹ Considering that for centuries Christians felt Jews were destined to suffer until they accepted Christ, the idea that Jews in divine covenant experience God’s saving grace—the grace of Jesus Christ in Christian understanding—bespeaks a remarkable transformation. This includes thinking of covenant as primarily an intimate and living relationship, instead of a lifeless legal contract.

In 2002, after American evangelicals launched new conversionary projects toward Jews, a paper from the dialogue between the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the National Council of Synagogues discussed why Catholics did not mount similar efforts. After being vetted by relevant USCCB staffers, “Reflections on Covenant and Mission” (RCM) explained that, “A deepening Catholic appreciation of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people, together with a recognition of a divinely-given mission to Jews to witness to God’s faithful love, lead to the conclusion that campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church.”³⁰

The cochairs of the dialogue saw the text as part of a larger process. Cardinal William Keeler noted that it “echoed the words of Pope John

27. Mainz, Germany (Nov 17, 1980); Sydney, Australia (Nov 26, 1986); Miami, USA (Sept 11, 1987); Vienna, Austria (June 24, 1988); in the Vatican (Sept 26, 1990; Nov 8, 1990; Apr 28, 1999; June 29, 1999); and Mount Sinai, Egypt (Feb 26, 2000). All available at <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/>.

28. Eugene J. Fisher and Leon Klenicki, eds. *The Saint for Shalom: How Pope John Paul II Transformed Catholic-Jewish Relations* (New York: Crossroad, 2011).

29. “*Dominus Iesus*,” 17th meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, New York (May 1, 2001). See <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/641-kasper01may1/>.

30. <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/jewish/upload/Reflections-on-Covenant-and-Mission.pdf/>.

Paul II, praying that as Christians and Jews we may be ‘a blessing to one another’ so that, together, we may be “a blessing to the world.” Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal felt that the “joint Catholic-Jewish statement on mission is yet another step in turning a new page in the often stormy relationship between the Jewish people and the Roman Catholic Church.”³¹

In a fascinating reprise of questions that engaged Karl Thieme in the 1940s and 1950s, critics of RCM made “neosupersessionist” claims about Judaism, questioning or denying the vitality of ongoing Jewish covenantal life with God.³² Some resorted to hyperbole³³ and even to apocalyptic rhetoric.³⁴ Sadly, as had occurred during *Nostra Aetate*’s composition, so now: “Messages were conveyed by indirection or through third parties, so that . . . it became impossible to know how to interpret what was really going on and to whom to address grievances.”³⁵ As a result, confusion abounded.

A parallel debate erupted in 2008 when Pope Benedict XVI composed a new intercession for Jews to be used in the Tridentine Good Friday liturgy. It asked God to “illuminate their hearts so that they may recognize Jesus Christ as savior of all men.”³⁶ Since the new prayer was issued without explanation and published as *pro conversione Iudeaorum*, it seemed that the proselytization of Jews was being encouraged. An

31. <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/interreligious/bceia-ncs/1091-ncs-bceianews2002aug12/>.

32. See Cunningham, “Official Ecclesial Documents to Implement Vatican II on Relations with Jews: Study Them, Become Immersed in Them, and Put Them into Practice,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 4/1 (2009) 1–36, <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/view/1521/1374/>.

33. Thus, Cardinal Avery Dulles, e.g., alleged that RCM “seems to say that Christians can evangelize without pronouncing the name of Jesus [“Covenant and Mission,” *America* (Oct 21, 2002)], though RCM had stated that the Catholic Church “will always witness to its faith . . . in Jesus Christ to Jews and to all other people.” RCM argued that the form evangelization takes with regard to Jews is through dialogue in which Catholics give witness to their faith in Christ. See also Cardinal Kasper: “mission understood as call to conversion from idolatry to the living and true God (1 Thess 1:9) does not apply and cannot be applied to Jews” [“Christians, Jews and the Thorny Question of Mission,” *Origins* 32/28 (Dec 19, 2002)].

34. E.g., John Echert feared that “we are moving into one of the signs of the end times, namely apostasy.” He opined that “precisely because Jews share an expectation of the coming of the Messiah, they *should* be targeted and the primary efforts of our efforts for converts to Christ” [emphasis added]. Quoted in “On File,” *Origins* 32/13 (Sept. 5, 2002), 214.

35. O’Malley, *What Really Happened*, 226.

36. <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-benedict-xvi/425-b1608feb5/>.

article by Cardinal Kasper, printed in *L'Osservatore Romano* at the pope's request, argued that the prayer shared the eschatological perspective of Vatican II: “In this prayer the Church does not take it upon herself to orchestrate the realization of the unfathomable mystery. She cannot do so. Instead, she lays the *when* and the *how* entirely in God's hands. God alone can bring about the Kingdom of God in which the whole of Israel is saved and eschatological peace is bestowed on the world.”³⁷

Meanwhile in the United States, in the absence of any ecclesiastical effort to bring contrasting perspectives into dialogue with one another, the similar questions that had been raised by RCM continued to simmer. In the summer of 2009, critics of RCM, who now staffed relevant offices of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, released, “A Note on Ambiguities Contained in ‘Reflections on Covenant and Mission.’”³⁸ This statement's most controversial words struck at the very nature of inter-religious dialogue as understood ever since the Second Vatican Council: “Though Christian participation in interreligious dialogue would not normally include an explicit invitation to baptism and entrance into the Church, the Christian dialogue partner is always giving witness to the following of Christ, to which all are implicitly invited.”

The prospect that occasionally dialogue *could* be the venue for “an explicit invitation to baptism” immediately alarmed Jewish interlocutors. It will be recalled that this potential had been foreseen forty-five years earlier by Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle during the Second Vatican Council when he warned that words that could be interpreted “as a definite and conscious intention to work for their conversion . . . will build another high wall that separates us from a holy and fruitful dialogue with the Jewish people.”³⁹

The egregiousness of this ill-advised sentence was soon seen in an unprecedented, unanimous letter of the major American Jewish organizations and religious denominations to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops: “We pose no objection to the position that Christians must bear witness to the truth of their faith and expound on it forthrightly, candidly

37. “Striving for Mutual Respect in Modes of Prayer,” *L'Osservatore Romano* (April 16, 2008) 8–9, <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/651-kaspero8apr16/>.

38. Original text available at <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/themes-in-todays-dialogue/conversion/559-usccb-09june18/>.

39. <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/na-debate/1020-v21964sept29b/>.

and passionately. However, once Jewish-Christian dialogue has been formally characterized as an invitation, whether explicit or implicit, to apostatize, then Jewish participation becomes untenable.”⁴⁰ Subsequently, leading bishops replied that “Jewish-Catholic dialogue, one of the blessed fruits of the Second Vatican Council, has never been and will never be used by the Catholic Church as a means of proselytism—nor is it intended as a disguised invitation to baptism.”⁴¹ They also took the exceptional step of deleting the problematic sentence about implicit and explicit invitations, rendering the “Note on Ambiguities” somewhat inchoate.

The fundamental problem was that most of those who thought of Jews primarily as potential converts rather than as covenantal partners from whom they could learn was their disinterest in Jewish spiritual life. In other words, they violated the post-Vatican II axiom, “When speaking of Judaism, thou shalt not theologize without respect for Jewish self-understanding.”

However, Pope Benedict plainly *did* respect Jewish covenantal life. At the Great Synagogue of Rome in January 2010, he pointed to Vatican II as marking “our irrevocable commitment to pursue the path of dialogue, fraternity and friendship.” He described Jews as “the people of the Covenant of Moses” and called for a renewed Catholic “respect for the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament.” By citing a rabbinic text, he showed that Christians can learn from the ongoing, post-New Testament Jewish tradition.⁴² All these points contradicted those Catholics who had treated Jewish covenantal life after Christ as essentially moribund.

Benedict’s commitment to respectful dialogue was also apparent in a 2011 book in which he wrote, “After centuries of antagonism, we now see it as our task to bring these two ways of rereading the biblical texts—the Christian way and the Jewish way—into dialogue with one another, if we are to understand God’s will and his word aright.”⁴³ Clearly, the pope desires Jews and Christians to learn from each other about God.

40. “National Jewish Interfaith Leadership Letter on USCCB ‘Note on Ambiguities’” (Aug 18, 2009), <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/themes-in-todays-dialogue/conversion/574-njilo9aug18/>.

41. “Statement of Principles on Catholic-Jewish Dialogue” (Oct 2, 2009), §3, <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/themes-in-todays-dialogue/conversion/583-usccbdialogue09oct2/>.

42. <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-benedict-xvi/660-b1610jan17/>.

43. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Part Two, *Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 35.

This essay has highlighted the inescapable links among respect for Jewish self-understanding, the desire for trusting interreligious dialogue (in which Christians and Jews each witness to their faith), and the disavowal of long-lived Christian efforts to convert Jews. It is, therefore, inevitable that the same connections that were manifested in the story of Karl Thieme, in the deliberations over *Nostra Aetate* at Vatican II, and during the debates over the following decades, should also be evident in Benedict’s thinking. In his 2011 book he also discussed the question of a Christian conversionary “mission” to Jews:

Here I should like to recall the advice given by Bernard of Clairvaux to his pupil Pope Eugene III on this matter. He reminds the Pope that his duty of care extends not only to Christians, but: “You also have obligations toward unbelievers, whether Jew, Greek, or Gentile” (*De Consideratione* III/i, 2). Then he immediately corrects himself and observes more accurately: “Granted, with regard to the Jews, time excuses you; for them a determined point in time has been fixed, which cannot be anticipated. The full number of the Gentiles must come in first . . .” (*De Consideratione* III/i, 3)

Hildegard Brem comments on this passage as follows: “In the light of Romans 11:25, the Church must not concern herself with the conversion of the Jews, since she must wait for the time fixed for this by God, ‘until the full number of the Gentiles come in’ (Rom 11:25).”

In the meantime, Israel retains its own mission. Israel is in the hands of God, who will save it “as a whole” at the proper time, when the number of the Gentiles is complete.⁴⁴

The question that Benedict answered negatively here—if Catholics should be organizing to seek Jewish converts—can now be seen as a crucial thread that runs through the past seventy-five years or so. The work of early pioneers, the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, and specific writings of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI are key benchmarks along the way. It is becoming “settled teaching” that Catholics should not seek to convert Jews, but instead should dialogue with them so that we can learn from one another’s experiences of covenanting with God.

44. *Ibid.*, 44–45, 47.

As noted earlier, an underlying Christian theological question is, can a people be covenantally related to a saving God even if they do not acknowledge the incarnation of God's Word in Christ?⁴⁵

That the answer to this question is becoming more and more a solid yes in Catholic thought is clear in a 2012 address by the president of the Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, Cardinal Kurt Koch:

On the one hand, from the Christian confession there can be only one path to salvation. However, on the other hand, it does not necessarily follow that the Jews are excluded from God's salvation because they do not believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah of Israel and the Son of God. Such a claim would find no support in the . . . understanding of St Paul, who in the Letter to the Romans definitively negates the question he himself has posed, whether God has repudiated his own people: "For the grace and call that God grants are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29).⁴⁶

Clearly, a lot of weight has been placed on Romans 9–11 ever since the Second World War. It raises the question of how best to exegete and actualize Paul's eschatological speculations in our world today. But that is a topic for the future. For now, it is good to recall that it was inconceivable in 1940 that Christians could think positively of Jews as covenanting with a saving God in a non-Christ-centered way. Or as Cardinal Koch has put it: "That the Jews are participants in God's salvation is theologically unquestionable, but how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery."⁴⁷

Yet thanks to *Nostra Aetate* it is today the new norm. On its fiftieth anniversary, let us be grateful to the many laborers along the way for all that has been accomplished and all that yet will be.

45. See: Philip A. Cunningham et al., eds., *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

46. "In the Service of Jewish-Catholic Understanding" (Oct 29, 2012) §6, <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kurt-cardinal-koch/1177-koch2012oct29/>.

47. *Ibid.*