

Jewish followers of Yeshua and other Jews in Catholic thought after Vatican II

As a Jewish Catholic, I want to speak about a major event in the life of my community this year – the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the document that redefines the Catholic Church's teaching on the relationship with members of other religions. The document was formulated during the Second Vatican Council, a council that brought together the leaders of the Catholic Church from all over the world. They deliberated for three years, from 1962 until 1965, redefining the Church's relationship with the modern world and formulating the Church teaching within the context of the twentieth century. We, as Catholics, are still trying to assimilate the teaching of this Council and its significance in our lives.

Many in the Catholic Church had awoken to the need for repentance and radical change, especially after the *Shoah*. A Vatican document, published in 1998, declares: “*The fact that the Shoah took place in Europe, that is, in countries of long-standing Christian civilization, raises the question of the relation between the Nazi persecution and the attitudes down the centuries of Christians towards the Jews.*”¹

I am delighted that one of my Messianic brothers, Rabbi Mark Kinzer, has recently published an entire book on *Nostra Aetate* and its significance for Jews and Christians, *Searching Her Own Mystery: Nostra Aetate, the Jewish People and the Identity of the Church* (Eugene, Cascade Books, 2015). I have read the book with great interest and have learnt much. In my talk I will echo some of his points and critique others.

Nostra Aetate initiated a revolution in the thought and language of the Church with regard to the Jews. I believe that if I had asked the average Catholic what came to his or her mind when I said Jew one hundred years ago, they would have responded: “They killed Christ” or “They rejected their Messiah” or “God has cursed them”. I believe that if I ask this question today to Catholics who know the Church's teaching the response would be “They are the people of Christ” or “They are God's chosen people”. I tend to largely agree with Rabbi Kinzer's definition of the four major changes evoked by the document in its long paragraph on the Jews and Judaism:

- The rejection of the claim that the Jews killed Christ. This tragically wrong interpretation of the Gospel has had devastating consequences for the Jews throughout the past two thousand years of history. The Council denounced anti-Semitism and all forms of racism!

- The reminder that Jews and Christians have a shared heritage not only focused on the Old Testament as a common patrimony but also emphasized that Yeshua, his Blessed Mother, the apostles and the early Church are Jewish.

¹ COMMISSION FOR THE RELIGIOUS RELATIONS WITH THE JEWS, *We Remember: A reflection on the Shoah* (1998) II.

- The insistence that the Jews are a chosen people and have an irrevocable vocation. They are not rejected by God because God is always faithful despite our faithlessness. In a particularly revolutionary formulation, the document, basing itself on Romans 11:29, a text never cited before in the Magisterium of the Church, said: “*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.*”

- Finally, Kinzer claims that the document drives home the realization that the Church and the Jews are inextricably linked in the sight of God. It is from here that he derives the title of his book, quoting the beginning of paragraph 4: “*As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock*”. I certainly agree although we might differ on how this comes to its fullest expression in the Church.

The renewal and purification of memory led to a change in thought and language that transformed a “*teaching of contempt*”, a phrase formulated by the Jewish French historian Jules Isaac, who encountered Pope John XXIII in 1960, into a “teaching of respect”.

Since 1965, the Church has been deepening the intuitions that derive from *Nostra Aetate*. Dialogue with the Jewish people has contributed enormously to the changes in language and encounter. It was in 1974, that the Church published another document on the relationship with the Jews, in which it was said: “*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.*”² The ongoing dialogue with Jews revealed that the Jews read the Scriptures that they share with Christians in ways that could be meaningful for Christians too. A 2001 document buried another contemptuous image of the Jew as blind and ignorant: “*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 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.*”³ This work is in progress and I would say that the biggest danger today is that the dialogue stagnates and things are left where they are. The past five decades have opened huge construction sites where we must continue working in order to root these insights and intuitions in coherent discourse and teaching.

Time does not allow to develop further the “teaching of respect” that has devolved from *Nostra Aetate* but I do want to briefly underline two ongoing and interlinked challenges that need to be worked on.

Many Jews, who do not believe in Yeshua, have tended to think that a “teaching of respect” means burying the Christian conviction that Yeshua is Savior of Jew and Gentile

² COMMISSION FOR RELIGIOUS RELATIONS WITH THE JEWS, *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Document Nostra Aetate n. 4* (1974), preamble.

³ OP CIT, 22.

alike. Needless to say, Rabbi Kinzer shares the conviction of the Church that Yeshua is the Savior of all humanity. In recent years, the Church has delicately reminded us that this is a foundational aspect of her faith. Pope Francis recently re-emphasized this: “*God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant and to bring forth treasures of wisdom which flow from their encounter with his word. For this reason, the Church also is enriched when she receives the values of Judaism.* While it is true that certain Christian beliefs are unacceptable to Judaism, and that the Church cannot refrain from proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Messiah, *there exists as well a rich complementarity which allows us to read the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures together and to help one another to mine the riches of God’s word. We can also share many ethical convictions and a common concern for justice and the development of peoples.*”⁴ In fact, the Catechism of the Church reclaims the teaching of Saint Paul in this regard: “*The glorious Messiah’s coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by “all Israel”, for “a hardening has come upon part of Israel” in their “unbelief” toward Jesus (cf. Romans 11:20-26). (...) St. Paul (writes): “For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?” (Romans 11:15) The “full inclusion” of the Jews in the Messiah’s salvation, in the wake of “the full number of the Gentiles” (Romans 11:11-12), will enable the People of God to achieve “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”, in which “God may be all in all” (Ephesians 4:13).*”⁵ In her dialogue with the Jews and all other believers from the world religions who do not believe in Yeshua, the Church is not promoting a two or many-ways-salvation theology but rather engaging with these believers in a *tikkun olam*, a repairing of a broken world, that prepares humanity for the coming (Second coming) of the Messiah in his glory. At the same time, the Church continues to bear witness to salvation in Messiah Jesus.

A second challenge relates to the way the Church responds to the way that the Jewish people defines itself. Within the dialogue, Jews have pressed the Church to recognize Jewish peoplehood. Kinzer tries to ground this with a developed ecclesiology. However, once the Church recognizes the permanence of the election of Israel as well as the inextricable relationship between Church and Israel, it becomes necessary to understand how Messiah brings Gentiles and Jews together in one Church. This is indeed an ecclesiological challenge. What is the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the Church? Here I would not follow Kinzer to his end point. I would maintain that first and foremost, the Church is more aware than ever that a true conversion of the Gentiles means that they are conformed to the Jewish Messiah. This means, in a very real sense, that they are no longer Gentiles but conform to the Israel of God. The full conversion of the Gentiles to Messiah must mean that their “old man” is crucified with Messiah on the cross and that the “new man” raised up is a member of the body of Messiah. However, this is where Israel’s permanent and ongoing vocation is: to show the Gentiles the way to be the People of God, a people chosen for the salvation of all peoples, “*a kingdom of priests*”. The Jewish people are called to be a people at the service of all peoples and their service must indeed be Christ-like: opening themselves up to accepting the Gentiles into

⁴ POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2014), n. 249.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993), n. 674.

their midst and bringing down the “walls of division” erected in order to separate the chosen people from the pagans.

The suffering of the cross, the call to give oneself for others, is integral to conforming to Messiah. Boundaries and self-definitions are challenged and stretched until death, dividing walls are destroyed and disappear. Israel’s mission is to show the way, carrying this cross behind Israel’s Messiah and King. As the Epistle to the Ephesians describes it: “*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).

Kinzer takes up this very passage but attempts to use it to argue that the distinction between Jew and Gentile has “*enduring theological significance even within the one body of Christ*”⁶. Although there are many points of agreement in my reading of Kinzer, ultimately we do not agree on the question of identity within the Body. Jews are indeed in Messiah before Yeshua’s coming. For as long as we are in the process of conforming to Messiah, becoming His Body, we are Jews and Gentiles, Jews (first and foremost, the Apostles) leading the Gentiles unto death and into new life, in the image of Yeshua. However, the ultimate goal is conforming to one Body of Messiah in which ultimately there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile. Kinzer’s concern with how Jews remain Jews in the Body will have to be left to further discussion but this is not simply a question of Torah, a traditional Jewish lifestyle, but a deep reflection of Cross and Resurrection..

Both Gentile and Jewish identities are eschatologically transformed as Jews and Gentiles become one in the Church – forming one Israel of God. Yeshua, his apostles and the early Church led the way as true sons of Israel. Whereas Kinzer and I both deeply appreciate the groundbreaking changes provoked by *Nostra Aetate*, we both recognize the ongoing vocation of Israel as “people of God”, we both understand that in searching her own mystery, the Church is brought back to Israel, we do not see the Church that is born out of the encounter with Yeshua with the same contours. However, this dialogue must continue in its multifaceted aspects that embrace Gentiles, Jews who yet do not believe in Yeshua and those of us who are Jews and have encountered and embraced Yeshua our Messiah and our Lord.

⁶ M. KINZER, *Searching Her Own Mystery: Nostra Aetate, the Jewish People and the Identity of the Church* (Eugene, Cascade Books, 2015), 66.