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Christian-Jewish Bonding and the Liturgy of Holy Week

One of the most remarkable theological transformations introduced at Vatican II was the new theology of Christian-Jewish bonding. For centuries, literally since the early patristic era, Christian theology had marginalized and at times even totally displaced the Jewish people from a continuing covenantal relationship with the Creator God. In a few paragraphs, chapter four of Vatican II's Declaration on the Church's Relationship to Other Religions (*Nostra aetate*) dramatically reversed that classical theological posture. It strongly affirmed the continued covenantal link of the Jewish people and underlined the inherent bonding between Christians and Jews as a result. Subsequent Vatican documents have expanded this new theological vision of Christian-Jewish bonding, and Pope John Paul II has made it a centerpiece of his own theological outlook, referring to this bonding as integral to the identity of Christians.

No liturgical season presents a greater challenge to the implementation of this new theological vision than Holy Week.¹ For centuries this was the week of the year most feared by Jews as Christian preachers stirred up passions in the course of liturgies that on occasion resulted in mob violence against local Jewish communities. But even if the worst antisemitic excesses connected with Holy Week are now past history, we still face the challenge of ensuring that come Easter Monday the theology of Christian-Jewish bonding affirmed at Vatican II has made it through not merely intact, but even strengthened. After our celebration of Holy Week do our people feel a new sense of linkage to Judaism and the Jewish people, or have classical attitudes been once more reaffirmed? That is the ultimate barometer. And un-

¹For further reflections see Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, *God's Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching* (Washington, D.C.: U.S.C.C. Publications, 1988); John Pawlikowski and James A. Wilde, *When Catholics Speak about Jews* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1987).

less we can truly answer in the affirmative to a deepened sense of bonding, our Holy Week liturgy has not met the test laid out by the council in *Nostra aetate*.

Implementing Vatican II's vision of Christian-Jewish bonding during Holy Week requires a concerted effort that goes beyond a few changes in terminology and or a few positive prayers for the Jewish people. It involves helping the congregation understand the strong roots of events commemorated during Holy Week in the wholesale renewal of the Jewish religious tradition occurring during the time of Jesus' public ministry. Biblical scholars such as James Charlesworth and Daniel Harrington have stressed Jesus' profound roots in the Judaism of his day. But that Judaism was undergoing a major transformation. Jesus and the early Christian community were strongly impacted by that transformation.

Taking days of the Triduum individually we can underline their positive links with the renewal of Judaism under way in Jesus' day. Holy Thursday commemorates the so-called Last Supper of the Lord, where it is traditionally said that Jesus instituted the Eucharist. Unfortunately such language can leave the impression that the Eucharist was a totally new liturgical act. This is simply not the case. Certainly what Jesus said and did added a new theological dimension to the ritual, but it is crucial to recognize that the setting was a Jewish sacred meal. Scholars may disagree whether or not it was a Passover seder. To some degree that is a secondary discussion because the seder meal is in many ways only an amplification of a Shabbat meal. It is the meal setting that was important.

Meals formed an integral part of Jewish ritual for centuries. There are references to such meals throughout the Jewish biblical tradition. But in post-biblical Judaism the meal setting was taking on major importance in the process of Jewish religious renewal. A segment of Judaism I would call the Pharisaic movement—the movement that the 1985 Vatican *Notes on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis* emphasizes bore the closest affinity to the teachings of Jesus—was gradually moving away from the focus on Temple sacrifice and Temple priesthood in terms of worship. The Pharisees began to emphasize the “priesthood of all the faithful,” an echo of which we find in the New Testament. As a result, they put greater emphasis on the meal liturgies where the father of the family or the leader of a Pharisaic brotherhood presided.

The sacrificial liturgies of the Temple, still promoted in Jesus' day by the Sadducees, centered on a vision of a God who was distant and someone to fear. Only a select few were really capable of approaching this God (i.e., the Temple priests whose status was determined by bloodline). The Pharisees had come to the recognition of a much more personal God who interacted both with the community of Israel and with its individual members no matter what their social status. The Pharisees felt a need to ritualize this new perception of the God-humanity relationship. Hence they turned to the sacred meal for their ordinary liturgical act. Here the community assembled around the table of the Lord to break bread and to share wine. Bread and wine and the gathering of the community became in a sense a sign of the very presence of God to the people.

This "table fellowship" ritual with its emphasis on God's real presence among the people through the sharing of the meal became the all-important setting for Jesus' establishment of the Christian Eucharist. As we celebrate the festival of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, recognizing the Jewish sacred meal context and its underlying theological vision will not only enhance our sense of bonding as Church with the Jewish tradition, it will also help us better appreciate the original meaning of Eucharist. While there is certainly a memory of the Jewish Passover tradition in the Jewish meal setting that formed the context for the Last Supper, and that certainly included references to the sacrificial ritual practices of earlier forms of Judaism, the Eucharist emerged out of a process of Jewish liturgical renewal. Contact with the Creator God is now to be maintained not primarily through the old-style animal sacrifices, but through the creation of human bonding ("where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst") and through human service, profoundly symbolized on Holy Thursday by the ritual of washing feet.

Moving on to Good Friday, we come to the most challenging day of the entire liturgical year in terms of Vatican II's theology of Christian-Jewish bonding. Experiencing the liturgy in many churches on Good Friday can be a painful experience for anyone who has become committed to the vision of *Nostra aetate*. However, it need not be the case. In fact, it is possible to transform the liturgy of Good Friday into an experience that can unite Christians with Jews rather than deepen their separation. While that may sound preposterous at first, an enhanced understanding of

why Jesus was crucified can lead us to a sense of reconciliation with Jews instead of the traditional rejection.

The Jewish historian Ellis Rivkin has often said that the question “who crucified Jesus” should be replaced by “what crucified Jesus.” The change in emphasis is crucial, because what crucified Jesus were certain entrenched political forces that always want to rid society of those who present new ideas, question entrenched power that has gone awry, and denounce exploitation. The Jerusalem Temple at the time of Jesus was controlled by the Sadducees, who opposed the Pharisaic renewal of Judaism in which Jesus and his disciples were rooted. While the Temple was still regarded as the spiritual center of Jewish life, even by the reformers, it had also taken on a political dimension under Roman occupation. It became in fact the local administrative authority for the Jews with ultimate control in the hands of the Roman authorities. It appears evident through a number of sources, both Jewish and Christian, that at least some of the people connected with the Temple were variously engaged in exploiting the ordinary people. This was likely one of the reasons for Jesus’ invasion of the Temple.

The New Testament generally portrays Jesus as rather cautious in his approach. That is why the invasion of the Temple stands out so strikingly. When we understand how the Temple functioned at the time—as the seat of the local political administration—we can see that his bold act represented something beyond a protest against inadequate worship. In challenging the power of the Temple authorities Jesus was highlighting the exploitation that had become endemic in the Temple system. That is why he was quickly perceived as a threat to the Temple authorities and ultimately to Rome itself. His death on Calvary, which we commemorate on Good Friday, can never be understood merely as a theological statement about human salvation. Calvary was the historical and theological culmination of Jesus’ continuous stand for human integrity throughout his public ministry, which the invasion of the Temple highlighted in a particularly dramatic way.

What must be remembered on Good Friday is that Jesus did not stand alone in his affirmation of human dignity. While his invasion of the Temple may have moved him beyond the parameters of the Jewish reform movement of the day, he was by no means a loner in his challenge of the Temple system. Many other Jews of the time were also working to undermine the power of the

Temple system, albeit in more discrete ways. So often, when we depict the events of Good Friday, Jews appear as the opponents, and even executioners, of Jesus. In most passion plays virtually no Jews in the "crowds" show support for Jesus. The reality is, however, that almost all his support initially came from Jews. And even those who did not join his company often shared his basic commitment to human dignity.

And so it is wrong to present the events of Good Friday as involving wholesale Jewish opposition to Jesus. At best, Jesus' struggle was against the entrenched occupying powers that some Jewish leaders in the Temple aided and abetted for personal gain. So despite the history of Good Friday in terms of Christian-Jewish relations, I believe it is possible to understand it as a time for reconciliation between the two faith communities. For Jesus on Calvary symbolizes not only the sufferings of all humankind, but in particular the sufferings that his brother and sister Jews were experiencing in occupied Palestine. Jesus' death represents the suffering, the trials, the aspirations of many ordinary Jewish people of the time. Certainly there is a long history to overcome in transforming Good Friday into a period of Christian-Jewish reconciliation. But if we better understand the concrete political dynamics that brought Jesus to Calvary, we will be well under-way toward beginning that process of transformation.

Moving on to the Easter Vigil and Easter we come upon, first of all, the Vigil scriptural readings. In one sense these readings link Jesus with Judaism, but only in the classical sense that the Hebrew Scriptures "foreshadowed" the teachings of Jesus. To accentuate this in many places the readings from the Old Testament are read with the church in darkness. The lights come on with the reading of the New Testament texts. This action itself symbolizes a theological outlook on the Christian-Jewish relationship that *Nostra aetate* and subsequent Church documents have challenged.

Gestures such as reading the Hebrew Scripture texts in darkness are so ingrained in Christianity that we often fail to reflect on their theological significance. Yet this is part and parcel of a long legacy of ritual and architecture in Christian churches that embodied the pre-Vatican II "displacement" or "foreshadowing" theologies. There is the famous depiction of the church and synagogue at the cathedral in Strasbourg, France, where the synagogue is blindfolded and sad, depicting the condition of the Old Testament. And at a Princeton University chapel a series of

stained glass windows are arranged so that the sun shines through the windows depicting New Testament scenes, but not through the Old Testament scenes. Clearly this legacy of viewing the Old Testament in terms of darkness must be overcome if the liturgy of Holy Week is to serve the enhancement of Christian-Jewish bonding.

The core of the Easter celebration is, of course, the resurrection. In one sense, this certainly will remain a central theological barrier. We should not think otherwise. But we can enhance a sense of Christian-Jewish bonding in our celebration of Easter if two things occur. First, if excessive triumphalism is removed. Most biblical and theological scholars today emphasize both the inauguration and the *incompleteness* of God's reign. Second, we need to understand that the notion of resurrection was not a totally unique idea in Christianity. It grew up as a central belief within the Pharisaic renewal movement with which Jesus and his disciples had such close association. It is interesting that Matthew, the most Jewish of the gospels, argues strongly for the messiahship of Jesus based on the notion of the resurrection precisely because that notion would carry considerable meaning for Pharisaic Jews. It would have carried negative significance for the Sadducees.

The notion of resurrection as it emerged in Pharisaic Judaism involved far more than a miraculous one-time event. It marked the final step in the growing appreciation of God's intimate relationship with each individual person. For Pharisaic Jews human persons were held in such high esteem that they were now believed to participate personally and directly in the Messianic age. So there is some basis for affirming a connection between Judaism and Christianity in terms of resurrection despite the major differences that continue to exist. We can celebrate the resurrection of the Jewish people, as individuals and as a community, to whom, as Pope John Paul II has reminded us, we remain inextricably bonded.

In concluding this brief overview of the new theology of Christian-Jewish bonding and the liturgy of Holy Week we need to extend the discussion into Eastertime. The readings for the weeks following Easter can prove especially troublesome. For one, nothing is included from the Hebrew Scriptures. This tends to reinforce the notion that the Hebrew Scriptures play no constructive role in the self-identity of the Christian community whose origins are being retold during this period. Second, some

of the texts from Acts and Peter appear more harsh toward Jews and Judaism than anything in the Gospels themselves.

It is necessary to put the readings of Eastertime in their context. Most come from the late first century when there was an apparent struggle between the Jewish community and the Christian movement. Harsh words were spoken by both sides. These should not be canonized. We should also remember that the Church and synagogue were in competition for converts at this period, which added to the hostility at times. All these texts must be measured against the affirmation of Judaism's continued validity in Romans, which Vatican II used as the biblical basis for its affirmation of Christian-Jewish bonding.

Therefore, the pastoral challenge of Holy Week comes down to a question of whether we can begin to make this most sacred period of the liturgical year a time of genuine reconciliation between Christians and Jews. It will be a long uphill battle because the theology of displacement and fulfillment has been deeply intertwined with the celebration of Holy Week, causing much pain for Jews over the years. But stressing the connections I have highlighted above can begin to move us in the right direction.

Cardinal Carlo Martini of Milan has emphasized that Jesus was born, lived, and died as a believing Jew. Somehow the liturgy of Holy Week and Eastertime must reflect this basic reality far better than it has in light of the mandate of *Nostra aetate*. Ultimately the theology of Christian-Jewish bonding will become firmly rooted when it moves from theological vision to ritual experience. And that, I might add in closing, applies to Jews as well. Can the day come when Jews, during Passover for example, recall Jesus as a person who was born, worked, and died a believing Jew? If we can ever get to that point where we not only admit intellectually but somewhat ritualize Cardinal Martini's perspective in our own ways, then we will have broken through two thousand years of hostility, bitterness, resentment, and even physical suffering and death.

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