

Discussion Group "Jews and Christians"  
Central Committee of German Catholics

**Reflections on the Shoah: The Catholic Church's Share of the Blame and Responsibility: A Statement Concerning the Declaration of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relationships with the Jews of March 16, 1998.**  
A Position paper of September 4, 1998

On March 16, 1998 the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews published the document *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* which had been in preparation for ten years. On September 1, 1987 Pope John Paul II had already emphasized that the planned publication was "important for the Church and the World" and that the Shoah was "a warning, a testimony and a mute outcry for the whole human race."<sup>1</sup>

The declaration has had a remarkable resonance throughout the world. There was both approval and criticism. The discussion group "Jews and Christians" of the Central Committee of German Catholics, which consists of eleven Jewish and seventeen Catholic members, has analyzed the declaration and is presenting its position here. While recognizing the significance of the document, the group would like to make some suggestions in view of the papal message scheduled for the year 2000, the "Year of Reconciliation".

We gratefully acknowledge that the Roman declaration is a further step on the path to establishing a new relationship with Judaism. The declaration "Nostra aetate" of the Second Vatican Council was the first step on this path, and since then many pronouncements and initiatives of the Catholic Church have continued this work. Important insights garnered from this process can be found again in the document "We Remember". It refers emphatically to the Jewish roots of the Christian Faith. It gives historical examples of the guilt of Christians with respect to Jews. In agreement with the way Jews see themselves, it recognizes "the unique witness of the Jewish people to the Holy One of Israel and to the Torah." For the first time ever a Vatican document uses the term "Shoah", i.e. annihilation or calamity (cf. e.g. Is 10:3), which excludes any religious interpretation whatsoever such as the one suggested, for example, by the term "Holocaust", i.e. burnt offering (cf. e.g. Gen 22:2). With great urgency the Christian duty to remember the Shoah is insisted upon again and again.

In spite of remarkable statements the document in its historical and theological propositions unfortunately falls short of earlier declarations made by Pope John Paul II, the National Conference of German Bishops and several French Bishops.<sup>2</sup> More than anything else we miss a forthright statement concerning the Church's share of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted according to the *Freiburger Rundbrief*, new edition, Issue 3/1998, p.161.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Pope John Paul II, "Speech at the Synagogue of Rome", April 13, 1986; "Accepting the Burden of History", message of the Berlin, German and Austrian Conferences of Bishops, October 20, 1988; declaration of several French bishops in Drancy, 1997.

the blame and responsibility. It is not enough simply to mention the "errors and failures of ... sons and daughters of the Church." Following the lead of the Council, the German bishops rightly emphasized in 1988 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Pogrom-Night ("Night of the Broken Glass") "that the Church, which we profess to be holy and revere as a mystery, is also a sinful Church in need of repentance."<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Slow Disassociation of the Church from Judaism

The Vatican document gives the impression that the process in which the "early Church" and the "Jewish People" split apart already began immediately "after the crucifixion of Jesus". We consider this to be historically inaccurate. The long process during which the Church disassociated herself from the Jewish people must be seen in a more differentiated way.

A Vatican declaration from the year 1985 states: "Jesus was and always remained a Jew ... Jesus was fully a man of his time and of his environment in the Jewish-Palestinian one of the first century, the anxieties and hopes of which he shared ... Paul also, like Jesus himself, used methods of reading and interpreting Scripture and of teaching his disciples which were common to the Pharisees of their time."<sup>4</sup> The controversial discussions found in the books of the New Testament are initially inner-Jewish disputes.

Seeing Jewish hopes reconfirmed and fulfilled in Jesus as the Christ, New Testament communities gradually began to disassociate themselves from Judaism. When the Greek-speaking communities reverted to the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint), the process was accelerated, not least of all through the assimilation of Greek ideas. The inclusion of the New Testament books in the canon of biblical books is an expression of a particular identity and witnesses to the belief in God's acting through Jesus of Nazareth. The Christianity which finally took shape, increasingly entered into rivalry with Judaism to an ever greater degree. "In the Christian world ... erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability ... circulated," and these even led to the destruction of some synagogues. This assertion of the Roman document is indeed accurate but not adequate as regards the first centuries.

Gentile-Christian Theologians (Apologists and Church Fathers) reinforced the praxis of the Church to view the New Testament texts exclusively with Gentile-Christian eyes and to change the condemnation of Jews into a condemnation of the Jewish people. What originally started out as a "family conflict" within Judaism developed more and more into a theologically justified enmity toward another religion.<sup>5</sup> As a rule the Church Fathers, whose writings would become important for subsequent history, laid claim to the salvation history of the Old Testament as a prehistory of the

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<sup>3</sup> "Accepting the Burden of History", no. 2; cf. the Second Vatican Council, "Lumen Gentium", no. 8.

<sup>4</sup> "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church" declaration of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 24 June 1985, no. 12 and 18.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the "Adversus Judaeos"-literature of the Church Fathers.

Church and denied the Jewish people their entitlement to biblical election and promise (substitution theory, disinheritance theory).

This development was further intensified when Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. The political theology at the time of Constantine (Eusebius) regarded this historic turning point as subsequent proof of the messianic status of Jesus Christ. The Jews, on the other hand, had to resign themselves to becoming an insignificant minority in the Christian empire. In the period which followed, the Church emphasized her superiority more and more and forgot the root  $\text{B Israel B}$  from which she permanently stems.

Only with the Second Vatican Council was a redefinition of the relationship with the Jewish people inaugurated. Referring to Paul's Letter to the Romans, the declaration "Nostra aetate" urgently calls upon Christians to stop denying Jews their religious right to exist, and it leaves it up to the hidden will of God how the salvation of "all Israel" will take place (cf. Rom 9B11). Is the humility of not knowing why the dramatic separation between Christianity and Judaism occurred not part of the respect owed to the mystery of God? It should be recognized, as Cardinal Ratzinger said, we must acknowledge: "It is not within our power to overcome this separation. Rather, this separation keeps us together on the path towards what is coming and therefore must not be enmity between us."<sup>6</sup>

This brief overview already shows that only the most precise possible study of the gradual process of separation will enable us to set a different course in the relationship between Jews and Christians as drawn from the experience of our own century. We therefore call upon everyone who studies in this period the history of the first centuries, to discover and present the connections between Jews and Christians and thus to do the work of reconciliation.

## **2. Problematical Decisions by Ecumenical Councils as Statements of the Whole Church**

With respect to the self-evaluation of the Church in relation to Judaism, the Vatican text seems to us to be unconvincing when it assigns blame to individual Christians, yet excludes from blame the Church herself as a constituted faith community. This was already not true of the medieval Church, and it is just as invalid for the first half of the twentieth century.

The significance of the ecumenical councils for the formation of the Christian understanding of faith is undisputed. They are official statements of the Church, particularly when they are not developing a new body of thought, but defining in a binding way an awareness which is already present in the Church. In the Middle Ages intertwining historical, ecclesiastical-political and economic relationships gave rise to an anti-Jewish sentiment which continued to be influential far into the Modern Age. The Vatican declaration says that "there have been centuries-old sentiments of mistrust and hostility that we call anti-Judaism."

Not only individual Christians have been guilty, however, but also ecumenical

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<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Die Vielfalt der Religionen und der Eine Bund*, Hagen 1998, p. 113.

councils, in particular the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which was to enjoy special standing in the West. At this council the general accusation was made that the Jews are guilty of faithlessness (perfidia). Regulations which, for the most part, had long since been in effect were made binding. They pertained to the money-lending businesses of the Jews, the requirement to wear identifying marks or garments, the limitation of movement and curfews and the ban on holding public office. Above all, strict regulations for baptized Jews were decreed.<sup>7</sup> In 1434, the Council of Basel endorsed a text which was no less explicit. Since this was an assembly which was exceptionally consensus-oriented and which took all minority votes into consideration, it is surprising that the Decree on the Jews could apparently pass without any struggle around the balloting. This is a further proof of a widespread anti-Jewish attitude in the Church. The Basel Decree on the Jews concluded with the directive that it should be proclaimed "at least once a year at Mass in the individual cathedrals and collegiate churches and in other religious establishments in which the faithful assemble in large numbers."<sup>8</sup> Finally, in the Bull of Union with the Coptic Church dated February 4, 1442 the Council of Florence applied the phrase "outside the Church there is no redemption" to the Jews as well and denied that they could attain salvation.<sup>9</sup>

In this situation the decrees issued repeatedly by the popes for the protection of the Jews ("Sicut Judaeis") could prevent neither the pogroms nor the accusations that Jews were guilty of supposed ritual murders, poisoning wells and desecrating hosts.

Finally, we should note that in contrast to the practice of all the other Western European countries the Papal States, which had been established anew after the Napoleonic Wars, readopted the discriminatory policy toward the Jews by establishing ghettos and requiring the Jews to wear identifying marks or garments. Once again the Jews were strictly forbidden to employ Christian servants; "compulsory sermons" were reintroduced: five times a year the Jews had to listen to sermons given for the purpose of proselytizing them. The baptism of Jewish children without parental consent, which often led to the removal of the baptized person from the family (the Mortara Affair of 1858 in the Papal States), had a very negative effect on the relationship between the Catholic Church and Judaism.

In "Nostra aetate" the Second Vatican Council broke with the previous tradition for the first time and risked taking a new approach to Christianity's relationship with Judaism. With this development all that had gone before was de facto revoked.

### **3. The connection between Christian anti-Judaism and pagan anti-Semitism**

"The Shoah was the work of a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime. Its anti-Semitism had its roots outside Christianity." We must contradict this assertion of the Vatican declaration. It is true that, compared with the anti-Judaism of the Church, the anti-Semitism of the Nazi Regime attained a new dimension with its racial doctrines and its determination to exterminate the Jews. But we are

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, p. 265-267.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, p. 483-485, quote p. 485.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, esp. 578.

convinced that this pagan anti-Semitism would not have been possible if Christian anti-Judaism had not laid the foundation. This is supported by the historical indications we have cited.

The statements of the Vatican text concerning the behavior of Church figures during the National Socialist period are also inadequate, even misleading. This is particularly true in the cases of Cardinal Faulhaber, Cardinal Bertram and Pope Pius XII.

In December 1933, the Archbishop of Munich, Michael Cardinal von Faulhaber preached on the great respect Catholics have for the Old Testament. He claimed the OT as belonging to Christianity with the assertion that it did indeed originate within Judaism, but that it was not really a Jewish book. One should therefore not transfer antipathy toward contemporary Judaism to the Old Testament, as the National Socialists and the German Christians had done by rejecting it as a "Book of the Jews". The courage of the Munich Archbishop was admired because of his Advent sermons. From that point on he was regarded at home and abroad as the guarantor and spiritual leader of Catholic resistance.

He could not, of course, live up to such high expectations. It should be remembered that Faulhaber had no objection to "genuine racial research and the cultivation of one's race". His sermons were also marked by a classical anti-Judaism (rejection and flight as a divine stigma of the "eternal Jew"). Neither he nor any of his fellow German bishops protested against the boycott of the Jews on April 1, 1933 or against the Nuremberg Laws.

The clear criticism in the sermons of Bernhard Lichtenberg, dean of the cathedral of Berlin, stands in stark contrast to the silence of the German bishops. He spoke out against the forced sterilization of the chronically ill and the euthanasia-murders of the disabled. His assistance to persecuted "Non-Aryans" and his public prayer for the victims of the Pogrom-Night ("Night of the Broken Glass") ultimately resulted in his being harassed and arrested. After two years of punishment in prison he died while on transport to the Dachau concentration camp. His exceptional witness may not be mentioned in the same breath with that of Faulhaber or even Bertram, which is what the Vatican document does. Other men and women as we are thinking, for example, of the dauntless Gertrud Luckner from Freiburg as should have been mentioned.

The letter of the Berlin Bishop Graf von Preysing is one of the few interventions which became known after 1945. He had asked Cardinal Bertram, the Chairman of the National Conference of German Bishops, to make public at least one of his many petitions to the National Socialist government. Preysing, however, could not prevail over Bertram and the majority of the bishops.

On March 6, 1943 Preysing had turned to Pope Pius XII. The pope, however, decided "to exercise restraint in order to avert greater harm." Pius XII abided by this decision even when thousands of Jews were deported from Rome before his very eyes in order to be taken to Auschwitz, which he knew. Regardless of how the role of this pope as head of the whole Church will be judged in the end with regard to

the Jewish question, we are convinced that Pius XII, as Bishop of Rome, should have intervened publicly, at least on behalf of the Jews of his city. Even if he could maybe not have saved them from death, his action would have been a model for other bishops.

The Pope did, however, speak out in favour of hiding of Jews in monasteries and convents. Jewish emigrants thanked him for this. But after 1945 it came to light that in some of the monasteries and convents zealots had baptized Jewish children against their will. Enormous efforts were required in order to return them to their Jewish families.

After the end of the war, it was soon public knowledge that Church agencies, especially in Rome, disposed of safe channels to neutral foreign countries. These Church organizations also assisted people who were deeply involved in the criminal machinery of the National Socialists. In this way, with the help of the Church, criminals also succeeded in fleeing to the Middle East and from there to Latin America with the help of the Church.

All in all, the stance of the Catholic Church toward the Shoah is ambivalent, if not one to be ashamed of. The words of Pope John Paul II, with which the Vatican Document begins, are accurate: that Christians, "instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith manifested ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counter-witness and scandal."

#### **4. Admission of Blame and Responsibility for History**

The Vatican declaration emphasizes the reconciling power and the duty of remembering: "The common future of Jews and Christians demands that we remember, for there is no future without memory."

The duty of remembering presupposes an exact knowledge of historical facts and demands a scientific analysis of the past without any kind of apologetic. As the declaration states, many studies on the period of National Socialism are yet to be undertaken: "Historians, sociologists, philosophers, politicians, psychologists and theologians are all trying to gain a deeper insight into the reality of the Shoah and its causes." Therefore, in our understanding, it follows that the Vatican Archives must be opened so that the relevant documents can be studied.

The relationship between Judaism and Christianity must be sustained by mutual respect and recognition since "Jews and Christians encounter each other in a comparable hope founded on the same promise made to Abraham."<sup>10</sup>

The integrity of our will to seek renewal requires of all members of the Church that they admit that they can be blamed and are responsible for history. We continue to hope that in the papal message already scheduled for the year 2000, the "Year of Reconciliation", the Church, precisely as an institution, will recognize and confess

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<sup>10</sup> "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism ¶" (see note 4), no. 10; there is a reference to Gen 12,1-3 and Heb 6,13-18.

her share of the blame and her responsibility.

In his covering letter Pope John Paul II expresses his hope that the declaration *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* may "enable memory to play its necessary part in the process of shaping a future in which the unspeakable iniquity of the Shoah will never again be possible." It is the duty of all Christians at all levels of Church activity to proceed along the path taken by the Second Vatican Council.

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