

On the Jewish - Christian relations "Christ has broken down the dividing wall"
P. Raniero Cantalamessa

Good Friday, Vatican, 1998

Summary of the content:

What is the source of all anti-Semitism? Fundamental misunderstanding. The Christian world has kept alive for far too long inaccurate interpretations of the New Testament with regard to the Jewish People.

What happened in the transition from the primitive Judeo-Christian Church to the Church of the Gentiles? The Gentiles picked up from Jesus and the apostles the arguments leveled against Judaism, but none of their love for the Jews.

Conversion to the "Israel of God", a reality not entirely identical with the "political Israel", but neither to be separated from it.

The dividing wall, broken down by the cross (Eph. 2), over the centuries has been rebuilt and made even thicker. We must tear it down again, by our repentance and by asking for the forgiveness of God and of our Jewish brothers and sisters.

Kees Slijkerman, February 20th, 2007

The Apostolic Letter, As the Third Millennium Approaches (Tertio Millennio Adveniente), is like a bright comet guiding the Church toward the Jubilee of the year 2000. In that letter, Pope John Paul II wrote: "As the second millennium of the Christian era draws to a close, it is right that the Church should consciously shoulder the blame for the sins of her own children.... She cannot cross the threshold of the new millennium without urging her children to purify themselves through repentance, of their errors, infidelity, division, and delay" (n. 33).

Among those sins, one that stands out in sharp relief is the sin committed against the Jewish People. At the conclusion of the Symposium on Christians and anti-Semitism held at the Vatican from 30 October to 1st November last year, the Pope remarked: "The Christian world has kept alive for far too long erroneous and inaccurate interpretations of the New Testament with regard to the Jewish People and their so-called "guilt," and its consequent feelings of hostility towards them. These wrong interpretations dulled consciences to such an extent that, when a flood of persecution, inspired by pagan

anti-Semitism, inundated Europe, the spiritual resistance of many was less than what humankind had every right to expect from the disciples of Christ" (see the discourse to the participants in the symposium, 31 October 1997).

For some time now the theological foundations have been made abundantly clear which allow us to courageously assume that responsibility without at all lessening our faith in the Church, in herself "holy and without blemish" (see Lumen Gentium 8: the Church is "holy and at the same time always in need of purification"). When the Church begs for forgiveness, there is something that we must not let pass unobserved, because it, too, is theologically significant. When the Church assumes responsibility for the faults of her members, she does what is perhaps the most beautiful thing she could do on earth: she takes all blame away from God; she proclaims: God is innocent, anaitos o Theos!, it is not God who bears the blame for what happened, it is we who have sinned.

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Through the ages, Good Friday has been our “occasion of choice” for furthering our misunderstanding of the Jews and for cultivating hostility towards them. It is only right, then, that our reconciliation and the “healing of memories” should begin on a Good Friday.

St. Paul interprets the crucifixion in this way: “Christ 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. ... 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 him, both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph 2:14-18). The “two groups” Paul is talking about are the Jews and the Gentiles.

This prophetic vision of the apostle was seriously obscured over the course of time. In fact, it was during a Good Friday homily by Melito of Sardis in Asia Minor in the second century [we read an extract from it in yesterday’s Liturgy of the Hours] that the first indiscriminate accusation of deicide was leveled against the Jewish People: “Israel, what have you done? You killed your Lord, during the great festival Gentiles, take note and pay attention. The King has been profaned, God has been murdered ... at Israel’s hand” (On Pascha, 73 - 96; ed. S.G. Hall, Oxford, Clarendon 1979).

In the context of such anti-Jewish sentiment, a literary genre known as the *Improperia* or the “Reproaches” began to develop from as early as the time of Melito of Sardis. Later, it even found its way into the Latin liturgy of the adoration of the cross. One after another, the good things God had done for Israel were listed, and then contrasted with the ingratitude of the Jewish People. “I led you from slavery to freedom ... but you I sustained you with manna in the desert ... but you ...”

With this and similar texts we need to bear in mind that much of it was mere rhetoric, and the diatribe was a rhetorical tool in vogue then. Nonetheless, the seed was sown, and left its traces in art, folklore, and in the liturgy [I have in mind the infamous adjective, now rejected, which had been used in the prayer for the Jewish People), all of which helped to spread negative, anti-Jewish stereotypes.

Byzantine icons of the crucifixion almost always portrayed, at the sides of the cross of Christ, two female figures. At times both are facing the cross, but more often than not, one is gazing on the cross while the other has either turned her back to it, or is being directed by an angel to leave. The two figures represented the Church and the Synagogue. Paul’s affirmation that Christ died on the cross to unite the two, not to divide them, is totally out of the picture.

As the Holy Father observed, all of this made Christians of our century less vigilant when the Nazi fury was unleashed against the Jews. It eased the way, albeit indirectly, for the coming of the Shoah, the Holocaust. Long before that fatal episode, this “logic” was used to justify a multitude of oppressive measures inflicted against the Jewish people, causing them no little suffering at the hands of Christian populations and Church institutions.

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Let me come to the point that most urgently needs to be made clear. The recent publication of the Pontifical Commission for Christian Unity’s document, “We Remember,” stirred up quite a debate. In a front-page article for a major daily newspaper, a well-regarded, educated man expressed a radical view of the whole question: “The source of all anti-Semitism is found in the New Testament, particularly in the letters of St. Paul and the Book of Revelation. A son of Israel cannot simply ignore the fact that the Age of the Patriarchs, which he had been brought up

to regard as the time when the Law was given, and the trusting relationship with God was at its apex, had been judged by Paul as a time dominated by sin and death. Nor could he ignore the fact that Jerusalem, the holiest of all places, had been regarded by the author of Revelation as the concentration of all evil, both physical and spiritual, where the Dragon and the Beast held sway.”

The author went on to say that the only solution would be “to denounce St. Paul, to censure the Book of Revelation, and those Gospel passages that express anti-Semitic sentiments.” Since that is something one cannot ask Christians to do (and, moreover, were they to do it, it would be a loss), the only thing left for us to do is to let people cultivate their own individual religious roots, in a spirit of tolerance, holding to those universal values that stand above individual religions and bring them all together (P. Citati, “Le radici dell’odio contro gli ebrei” (The roots of hatred against the Jews) in “La Repubblica,” 18 March 1998).

It seems to me that we are facing here a fundamental misunderstanding. It was not only the Age of the Patriarchs that Paul considered “a time under the dominion of sin and of death,” but all of human history prior to Christ. “All, both Jews and Greeks,” Paul says in the letter to the Romans, “are under the power of sin” (Rom 3:9). At the core of this universal condition of sin and death, one has, moreover, to recognize that the Jewish People have a clear advantage. “Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom 3:1-2).

How could one accuse Paul of not recognizing in Abraham the “apex of the trusting relationship with God?” It was precisely for that reason that Paul defined

Abraham as “the father of all believers” (cf. Rom 4:16). With regard to St. Paul, much of the commotion stems from the fact that arguments Paul addressed against Jewish Christians have been misapplied to the Jews in general.

On the other hand, the things that Paul and John say about Jews are nothing in comparison to the things they say about pagans, who are said to be “without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). And we know that the “Babylon” of the Book of Revelation, headquarters of the Beast and the Dragon, did not refer to Jerusalem, but primarily to pagan Rome, city of “the seven hills” (Rev 17:9).

I believe that the correct answer to the problem is found in the words of the Pope already quoted: “The Christian world has kept alive for far too long erroneous and inaccurate interpretations of the New Testament with regard to the Jewish People.” Anti-Semitism was not born out of fidelity to the Christian Scriptures, but out of infidelity to them. In this sense, the new situation created by the dialogue between Jews and Christians is proving to be beneficial for a better understanding of our own Scriptures. This, too, is a sign of the times. We will see in what sense.

If we return to the most ancient formulation of the paschal mystery, the kerygma, Jews are not at all mentioned as the cause of Christ’s death, but rather, our sins. “Jesus was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25; 1 Cor 15:3). When addressing the crucifixion and death of Christ, the ancient creeds always mention Pontius Pilate, but never the Jews.

Of course, certain Jewish leaders played an active role in the condemnation of Jesus. They were mentioned in the Passion

Narrative we just proclaimed. But they were material causes. To the extent that factual circumstances are stressed, giving them a theological significance beyond their simple, historical meaning, we lose sight of the universal and cosmic impact of the death of Christ. We trivialize the drama of redemption, making it the result of mere happenstance. "He," wrote John, "is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn 2:2). The sins of the whole world, even the sins of those who do not know it, or who do not believe it!

One other fact is obscured in the anti-Jewish controversy: those who were involved acted out of ignorance (without meaning to imply that they were guilt-free). Christ said it from the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). "And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers," Peter said after Pentecost (Acts 3:17; see also Acts 13:27). Paul talks of the wisdom of God as a wisdom "[that] none of the rulers of this age understood; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor 2:8).

After all this, do we really want to continue talking about "deicide"? Surely we can, since according to the Scriptures and the teaching of our faith, a deicide was, in fact, committed. But let us be clear that we, all of us, and not the Jews alone, took part in committing it.

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If "the source of all anti-Semitism" is not in the New Testament, where is it to be found? How, and when did the rift take place? I believe the answer is not difficult to discover. Jesus, the apostles, and Stephen the deacon (see Acts 7) all spoke out against the Jewish leaders, and at times very harshly. But in what spirit did they do this? Jesus wept when he foretold the

destruction of Jerusalem, as he did at the death of Lazarus, his friend. Stephen died crying out: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" (Acts 7:60).

Paul, who is most often blamed for all this, said something that surely must make us shudder: "I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit, I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh" (Rom 9:1-3). Paul, for whom Christ was everything ("mihi vivere Christus est", "for me, Christ is life itself"), would choose separation from Christ, being cut off from all fellowship with him, if that would in any way help his fellow Jews accept Christ as the Messiah!

These men were speaking as members of the Jewish People; they identified as Jews and were one with their people, members of the same religious and human family. They could say, "Are they Jews? So am I!" When you love someone, you can talk like that. Were the prophets, Moses himself, any less harsh in confronting Israel? At times, they were even more harsh. It was from them that the most severe expressions found in the New Testament were borrowed. The sources of the "Impropria" themselves are ultimately traced back to them, and to the genre of the "sacred trial" (the *rîb*), examples of which are to be found in the Old Testament where God brings charges against his people? (see Deut 32; Mic 6:3-4; Pss 77 and 105).

But did the Jewish people take offense at Moses and the prophets for saying such things to them, or did they accuse them of anti-Semitism? They knew very well Moses was ready to have his name deleted from the Book of Life rather than being saved alone, without his people. At the heart of the matter, we act that same way. Dante Alighieri aimed such invective against the Italians that, had a foreigner

dared to direct even the littlest part of it at us, we would have reacted bitterly. From Dante we accept it; we know that he is one of us, and that he speaks out of love and not to disparage us.

What happened in the transition from the primitive Judeo-Christian Church to the Church of the Gentiles? The Gentiles picked up from Jesus and the apostles the arguments leveled against Judaism, but none of their love for the Jews. The polemic was passed on, but the love was not. When, later on, the Fathers of the Church speak of the accomplished destruction of Jerusalem, they do not shed tears. On the contrary!

It is here that we discover the entire root of the problem, in our lack of love, our infidelity to the central precept of the Gospel. Right up to the outbreak of the Shoah, we Christians were still whining about the Jews harboring hatred for Christians and opposing the spread of the Gospel (as, in fact, they had, especially at the beginning), but we failed to notice the plank in our heart!

We are not now trying to put the past on trial. "A correct view of history," the Pope writes in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, "cannot neglect to take proper account of the influence of the cultural circumstances of the time." In past centuries people used to think that the rights of truth take precedence over the rights of the individual person. There is no question of bringing a case against the past. Nonetheless, the Pope's letter continues, "the fact that there were extenuating circumstances does not exonerate the Church from its obligation of being profoundly sorry for the failings of so many of her children which blemished her appearance and prevented her from fully reflecting the image of her crucified Lord, the incontrovertible witness of patient love and humble gentleness" (35). And when the Church speaks of her

"children," we know she means her "Fathers," too!

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When I speak of the wrongs committed against the Jewish people, I have in mind not only the faults of others who belonged to generations before me, but of my own as well. I will always remember the beginnings of my own conversion in this regard. I was on a plane, returning from my first pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I was reading the Bible, and my eye fell on a phrase in the Letter to the Ephesians: "No one ever hates his own flesh" (Eph 5:29). I realized that this applies also to the relationship of Jesus with his own people. And all my prejudices, if not hostility, towards the Jewish people that I had unconsciously absorbed in my theological training, appeared to me to be an offense against Jesus himself.

He became like us in all things, with the sole exception of sin. Since love of one's country and the bonds that bind us to our own people are not a sin, but rather a virtue, it follows that by the very fact of his incarnation, Jesus - let us call him by his Hebrew name, Yeshua- loved the People of Israel with a love stronger and purer than that with which any patriot in all the world has ever cherished his homeland. And so every sin against the Jews is also a sin against the humanity of Christ.

I understood that I needed to be converted to Israel, "the Israel of God", as the apostle calls it, a reality not entirely identical with the "political Israel", but neither to be separated from it. I realized that this love need not threaten any other people, nor result in allegiances which exclude others, because Jesus taught us that our Christian heart must open itself to the entire universe and help Israel to do likewise. "Is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also?" (Rom 3:29).

This has endeared Edith Stein to me very much, this new Rebecca who carried in her womb two conflicting peoples, the Church and the Synagogue, and was able to reconcile them, shedding her own blood for both. Edith Stein is a model of that new Christian love for Israel which finds in Jesus of Nazareth not an obstacle but its greatest incentive. "You cannot imagine," she wrote to her priest friend, "how much it means to me to be daughter of the Chosen People, belonging to Christ not only in the spirit but by blood as well." To feel the very blood of Christ flowing through her veins moved her deeply and filled her with pride.

When it first became clear that the Nazi persecution of the Jews would be unleashed, she wrote words that have become a clarion call: "There, beneath the cross, I understood the destiny of the People of God. I thought: those who know that this is the cross of Christ are obliged to take it on themselves, in the name of all the others." When she and her sister Rosa exited through the cloister door between two guards, to be deported to Auschwitz, one of the bystanders saw Edith holding her sister's hand tightly and heard her whisper, "Come, we are setting off to die for our People."

We have an even greater model than Edith Stein: Mary, the mother of Jesus - let us also call her by her beautiful Hebrew name, Miriam. In this, as well, she stands as the prototype of the Church, a Church as yet unblemished by any sin against Israel, unspoiled by any hostility. Mary's feelings toward her People are expressed in her Magnificat:

"Mindful of his mercy,
God has come to the help of Israel, his
servant,
in keeping with the promise made to our
ancestors,
to show mercy to Abraham and to his
descendants for ever."

"Israel - Abraham - our ancestors", the same depth of feeling for belonging to the People of the Covenant. "To his descendants for ever", the same unwavering certainty, shared by Paul as well, in the irrevocable promise made to Israel.

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We are not now trying to put the past on trial. “A correct view of history,” the Pope writes in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, “cannot neglect to take proper account of the influence of the cultural circumstances of the time.” In past centuries people used to think that the rights of truth take precedence over the rights of the individual person. There is no question of bringing a case against the past. Nonetheless, the Pope’s letter continues, “the fact that there were extenuating circumstances does not exonerate the Church from its obligation of being profoundly sorry for the failings of so many of her children which blemished her appearance and prevented her from fully reflecting the image of her crucified Lord, the incontrovertible witness of patient love and humble gentleness” (35). And when the Church speaks of her “children,” we know she means her “Fathers,” too!

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When I speak of the wrongs committed against the Jewish people, I have in mind not only the faults of others who belonged to generations before me, but of my own as well. I will always remember the beginnings of my own conversion in this regard. I was on a plane, returning from my first pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I was reading the Bible, and my eye fell on a phrase in the Letter to the Ephesians: “No one ever hates his own flesh” (Eph 5:29). I realized that this applies also to the relationship of Jesus with his own people. And all my prejudices, if not hostility, towards the Jewish people that I had unconsciously absorbed in my theological training, appeared to me to be an offense against Jesus himself.

He became like us in all things, with the sole exception of sin. Since love of one’s country and the bonds that bind us to our own people are not a sin, but rather a virtue, it follows that by the very fact of his incarnation, Jesus - let us call him by his

Hebrew name, Yeshua- loved the People of Israel with a love stronger and purer than that with which any patriot in all the world has ever cherished his homeland. And so every sin against the Jews is also a sin against the humanity of Christ.

I understood that I needed to be converted to Israel, “the Israel of God”, as the apostle calls it, a reality not entirely identical with the “political Israel”, but neither to be separated from it. I realized that this love need not threaten any other people, nor result in allegiances which exclude others, because Jesus taught us that our Christian heart must open itself to the entire universe and help Israel to do likewise. “Is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also?” (Rom 3:29).

This has endeared Edith Stein to me very much, this new Rebecca who carried in her womb two conflicting peoples, the Church and the Synagogue, and was able to reconcile them, shedding her own blood for both. Edith Stein is a model of that new Christian love for Israel which finds in Jesus of Nazareth not an obstacle but its greatest incentive. “You cannot imagine,” she wrote to her priest friend, “how much it means to me to be daughter of the Chosen People, belonging to Christ not only in the spirit but by blood as well.” To feel the very blood of Christ flowing through her veins moved her deeply and filled her with pride.

When it first became clear that the Nazi persecution of the Jews would be unleashed, she wrote words that have become a clarion call: “There, beneath the cross, I understood the destiny of the People of God. I thought: those who know that this is the cross of Christ are obliged to take it on themselves, in the name of all the others.” When she and her sister Rosa exited through the cloister door between two guards, to be deported to Auschwitz, one of the bystanders saw Edith holding her sister’s hand tightly and heard her

whisper, “Come, we are setting off to die for our People.”

We have an even greater model than Edith Stein: Mary, the mother of Jesus - let us also call her by her beautiful Hebrew name, Miriam. In this, as well, she stands as the prototype of the Church, a Church as yet unblemished by any sin against Israel, unspoiled by any hostility. Mary’s feelings toward her People are expressed in her Magnificat:

“Mindful of his mercy,
God has come to the help of Israel, his
servant,
in keeping with the promise made to our
ancestors,
to show mercy to Abraham and to his
descendants for ever.”

“Israel - Abraham - our ancestors”, the same depth of feeling for belonging to the People of the Covenant. “To his descendants for ever”, the same unwavering certainty, shared by Paul as well, in the irrevocable promise made to Israel.

* * *

In closing, let us return to the passage from Ephesians. The dividing wall, broken down by the cross, over the centuries has been rebuilt and made even thicker. We must tear it down again, by our repentance and by asking for the forgiveness of God and of our Jewish brothers and sisters. The actions and words of reconciliation expressed by the leadership of the Church must not remain simply in documents, but must reach the hearts of all the baptized. For this reason, alone, have I dared to speak here as I have. In times past, at the conclusion of every great mission, people would make a bonfire of the vanities; this Good Friday, let us make a bonfire of all our hostilities. “Let us put an end to the hostility in ourselves”: in ourselves, not in anyone else!

When will Jesus' desire be fulfilled to gather his people together, like a hen gathering her brood beneath her wings (Lk 13:34)? We Christians can either hasten or delay the day when, in the streets of Jerusalem, as on the day when they waved palm branches, crowds will shout again, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Lk 13: 34-35; 19:38). The day when Jesus of Nazareth will be acknowledged by his own people, if not as the Messiah and Son of God, as we acknowledge him, then at least as one of their greatest prophets.

By rare coincidence this year, the Jewish Passover and ours fall on the same day. Let us celebrate together, this day, the memorial of salvation, for the Passover is the visible and institutional sign of the continuity between Israel and the Church.

There is a text that Jews used to recite during the paschal meal. Melito of Sardis made it his own and introduced it into the

Christian liturgy. We find it in the passage from the homily that we read in yesterday's Office of Readings, a sign that, even in those days, despite the sometimes offensive rhetoric, there was still a remarkable acquaintance and osmosis between the two communities. United in a spirit of praise and thanks to God, let us and them recite it together today:

"He has made us pass:
from slavery to freedom,
from sadness to joy,
from mourning to celebration,
from darkness to light,
from slavery to redemption."
(Pesachim X, 5; see Melito of Sardis, On Pascha, 68)

And let us add: "He has made us pass from hostility to friendship. He has broken down the wall that divided us." We can prepare to cross, reconciled, the threshold of the new millennium.

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