



“God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant”¹

A response by the German Bishops' Conference to the statements from Orthodox Judaism on the relationship between Judaism and the Catholic Church

“A fruitful moment of dialogue” (Pope Francis)

On 31 August 2017, representatives of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER), of the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), and of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, presented Pope Francis with the statement entitled “*Between Jerusalem and Rome (BJR): Reflections on 50 Years of *Nostra aetate**”². It represents the first position of rabbinical associations and bodies of Orthodox rabbis on dialogue with Christianity and the Catholic Church. The document has a unique status for this reason alone, and this is confirmed by its content. As Pope Francis has said, this brings about “a fruitful moment of dialogue”. Earlier, on 3 December 2015, a group of Orthodox rabbis published a statement on Christianity entitled *To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians*³.

From a Christian point of view, one can speak of a favourable moment in relations between Judaism and the Catholic Church. What began for the Catholic Church with the Second Vatican Council now finds recognition among representative bodies of Orthodox Judaism. It takes on theological significance given that, when it comes to shouldering our shared responsibility for the world, it is about fostering “our mutual understanding” (*BJR* 13). This objective was already pursued by the statement entitled *Dabru emet* (“Speak [the] Truth”) from 2000, signed and published by largely liberal and conservative rabbis and Jewish scholars.

The German bishops are highly grateful for this development. In view of the centuries-long history of Christian anti-Judaism, the legacy of which still fills

¹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (24 November 2013), 249: Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference (publisher): *Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls* No. 194 (Bonn 2013), p. 168. Cited in the text as EG.

² A complete word-for-word version is available in German, edited by the Rabbinate of the Jewish Community of Vienna, Vienna 2017. Cited in the text as BJR; the page references refer to the German-language issue.

³ <http://cjcuc.org/2015/12/03/orthodox-rabbinic-statement-on-christianity/>.

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us with pain and shame, we see the friendly relations with Judaism, as they have grown in the past decades, as a breakthrough towards achieving a common future in peace. This development brings our communities closer together in faith in God.

The Catholic Church regards the “combat against our generation’s new barbarism” (*BJR* 13) of religious fanaticism as a sign of the times. Protestation and resistance to violence in the name of God, and an unambiguous commitment to religious freedom, unite Jews and Christians politically, but also religiously. In a world in which social and political conflicts are frequently triggered or intensified by religious motives, dialogue and cooperation between Jews and Christians in Germany and other countries can serve as a model for how peaceful coexistence between people with different religious and ideological experiences, convictions and ways of life can be achieved, based on mutual respect and understanding.

The dialogue with Her Jewish brethren in faith possesses unconditional theological dignity for the Catholic Church. For without this dialogue, She cannot fulfil her mission. “The Church ... looks upon the people of the covenant and their faith as one of the sacred roots of her own Christian identity (see *Rom* 11:16–18).”⁴ This is true not only in retrospect, but in fact “God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant” (*EG* 249). The Catholic Church recognises here a revelation-theological precondition for Her dialogue with Judaism.

“Between Jerusalem and Rome”

We are impressed by the esteem expressed among Jews for the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions *Nostra aetate* (NA), which, 50 years after its adoption, gave rise in an external sense to the drafting of the document entitled Between Jerusalem and Rome. The points which the Orthodox rabbis emphasise in retrospect (see *BJR* 6–8) form the normative basis for relations between Jews and Christians:

- the “process of introspection”, which “increasingly expurgated from Church doctrine any hostility toward Jews”;
- the acknowledgement that responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus “cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today” (*NA* 4);
- the theological affirmation of the lasting election of Israel;
- the recognition of the State of Israel;
- the condemnation of all forms of anti-Semitism.

The highly-differentiated statements on Catholic-Jewish relations in history and the esteem given to developments since the Second Vatican Council, which have been supported and promoted by Popes and bishops, by congregations and by theologians, call especially on the Catholic Church in Germany, with Her particular historical responsibility, to maintain the

⁴ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World (24 November 2013), 247: Secretariat of the German Bishops’ Conference (publisher): Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls No. 194 (Bonn 2013), p. 168.

dialogue with Judaism in a committed way, and in doing so to take up the momentum and positions of Orthodox Judaism.

This applies in particular to the theological perspective with which the BJR statement taps into developments in Catholic-Jewish relations that have taken place since the Council. In the biblical account of creation, the eye turns to “a universal, undifferentiated humanity” (*BJR* 3), which encompasses all human beings. This God-founded bond must be recalled in the face of the challenges of globalisation. The Catholic Church knows that She is united with Judaism in her efforts “together, to improve the world: to go in God’s ways, feed the hungry and dress the naked, give joy to widows and orphans, provide refuge to the persecuted and the oppressed ...” (*BJR* 13 et seq.).

The German bishops gratefully note that, despite the theological differences between Judaism and Christianity, Christians are described as “partners, close allies, friends and brothers in our mutual quest for a better world” (*BJR* 12). This is underlined by recalling the fact that “some of Judaism’s highest authorities have asserted that Christians maintain a special status because they worship the Creator of Heaven and Earth Who liberated the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage and Who exercises providence over all creation” (*BJR* 11) . Likewise, the rabbis stress that Catholics and Jews share “common beliefs in the Divine origin of the Torah” (*BJR* 13) and in the redemption of the world.

Israel lives from the covenant with God and gives room to God by living according to His commandments. This leads Jews to perceive responsibility for all of humanity, even if Jewish life has been persecuted again and again. In Israel’s faithfulness to the covenant, God proves to be the God of life. Thus the Catholic Church recognises Judaism’s “dual mission”: “to found the nation of Israel that would inherit, settle and establish a model society in the holy, promised land of Israel, all while serving as a source of light for all mankind” (*BJR* 3).

The German bishops enthusiastically acknowledge the rabbis’ proclamations in the last part of the BJR statement. We are grateful that the rabbis have drawn attention to the difficult situation faced by Christians in the Middle East and other parts of the world whose religious freedom is severely restricted, who suffer social discrimination and are often openly persecuted. We unreservedly approve of the condemnation of “any and all violence against any person on account of his beliefs or his religion”, as well as of “all acts of vandalism, wanton destruction and/or desecration of the hallowed places of all religions” (*BJR* 13), and wish to assure our Jewish partners that we also will continue to fight against all forms of anti-Semitism and for the promotion of Jewish life – bearing in mind the words of the Prophet Zechariah: “Whoever touches you touches the apple of my eye.” (*Zech* 2:12).

“To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven”

The German bishops also acknowledge and take up the statement by a group of Orthodox rabbis which was published on 3 December 2015 under the title To Do the Will of Our Father

in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians. It came into being as a reaction to the document entitled “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (*Rom 11:29*), presented in the same year by the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.⁵ This statement was drafted by a group of Orthodox rabbis who have been in dialogue with Christian representatives for many years and at various levels. The liveliness, seriousness and productivity of the Jewish-Catholic dialogue proves itself in the chronological constellation of the three documents, 50 years after *Nostra aetate*.

The signatories actively seek “to do the will of our Father in Heaven by accepting the hand offered to us by our Christian brothers and sisters. Jews and Christians must work together as partners to address the moral challenges of our era” (Introduction). The dialogue thus takes on a theological justification: When Jews and Christians speak to one another and work together “as partners in world redemption”, they follow the will of God. The Catholic Church also agrees with the authors that there is a “common covenantal mission to perfect the world under the sovereignty of the Almighty, so that all humanity will call on His name and abominations will be removed from the earth” (No. 4).

We gratefully acknowledge that, in the eyes of the authors, “the emergence of Christianity in human history is neither an accident nor an error, but the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations” (No. 3). Without obscuring the fundamental theological differences, the rabbis emphasise the priority attaching to common ground: “the ethical monotheism of Abraham; the relationship with the One Creator of Heaven and Earth, Who loves and cares for all of us; Jewish Sacred Scriptures; a belief in a binding tradition; and the values of life, family, compassionate righteousness, justice, inalienable freedom, universal love and ultimate world peace” (No. 5).

Further thoughts

The German bishops advocate a comprehensive dialogue with Judaism. From the Catholic point of view, this also includes the question of what “the irreconcilable theological differences” (*BJR 12*) and what the differences in the respective doctrine, referred to as “profound” (*BJR 10*) and “essential” (*BJR 11*) mean for both sides. The “meaning and importance” of the doctrine of faith certainly remain the preserve of the “internal deliberations of the respective faith communities” (*BJR 11*). But the search for a better understanding of one’s counterpart encourages one to create a place for theological reflections in the dialogue process, not least in order to clarify prejudices and misunderstandings, but also to name and understand what unites and divides us. The Catholic Church also regards Herself as called upon to clarify more precisely what She understands by a theological dialogue with Judaism in view of the importance attaching to the person and the mission of Jesus Christ.

⁵ A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50 Anniversary of *Nostra aetate* (10 December 2015): Secretariat of the German Bishops’ Conference (publisher): Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls No. 203 (Bonn 2016).

As a prerequisite for such a dialogue, it must be unambiguously stated that the Church does not carry out any mission to the Jews, and that She also does not pursue any interests of this nature. This corresponds to Her doctrinal practice. Thus the statement of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (*Rom 11:29*) speaks of a “principled rejection of an institutional Jewish mission” (No. 40). The BJR statement expressly acknowledges this. From a Catholic point of view, a more profound theological justification of this change of perspective is all the more required. It is an important aspect of the productive continuation of *Nostra aetate* No. 4, and it forms part of the living development of the church tradition in dialogue with Judaism. The BJR declaration also speaks of a re-evaluation of relations with Christianity.

Christian-Jewish dialogue includes maintaining a culture of remembrance of the persecution and murder of European Jews during the National Socialist era. Christians and Jews have been working together in social, educational and research projects for many years. The common engagement in refugee assistance, participation in Mitzvah Day, various projects in schools, or scholarly cooperation with the involvement of Catholic theologians, are just a few examples. Also worth mentioning is the fruitful work of the Societies for Christian-Jewish Cooperation, and the “Jews and Christians” discussion group hosted by the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK). Thanks to these diverse initiatives, a culture of dialogue between Jews and Christians has developed in Germany which we wish to support in the future as far as we can.

The Catholic Church in Germany understands this dialogue as a mission and as an expression of the will of our Father in Heaven. The mystery of the covenant in which Israel and the Church stand also presupposes, in theological humility, recognising the limits of our understanding and expecting everything from God. The God who reveals Himself remains the God whom we experience at the same time only in His hiddenness, as a permanent mystery. This includes awaiting today, with the prophets of Israel, with the Jew Paul as an apostle of Jesus Christ, that is, in profound solidarity with the tradition of Israel and with the Jewish brethren in faith, the day that is “known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and “serve him shoulder to shoulder” (*Zef 3:9*)” (*NA 4*). This experience sets the scene for a profound spiritual experience. Jews and Christians share it in a world to which God often enough seems foreign, unknown or even non-existent. But it is precisely here that there is a similarity in confidence, as *Ps 40:17* says: “While those who seek you rejoice and be glad in you. May those who long for your salvation always say, “The LORD is great.”

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