

# Catholic-Jewish Dialogue: A Developing Agenda

With two very important exceptions, the Shoah and the deeper levels of theological discourse, which I will deal with at the end of this paper, the agenda for dialogue between Catholics and Jews has been rather remarkably constant since its early days at the time of the Second Vatican Council. One of the first formal dialogues in the United States, for example, was held at St. Vincent's Archabbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania in January of 1965, almost a year before the issuance of the document, *Nostra Aetate*. The papers, edited by Philip Scharper, were published by Sheed and Ward in 1966 under the title, *Torah and Gospel: Jewish and Catholic Theology in Dialogue*. The table of contents of that classic collection of seminal essays in the field remains even today a suitable frame for considering much of the future agenda of Catholic-Jewish relations, although a wealth of literature in each category has greatly enriched the Church's understanding of the deeper issues involved. In this brief paper, I shall list the six theological and social themes put forward for the Latrobe exchange and attempt a brief status quaestionis of where we are at the present time, standing, as it were, on the shoulders of the giants, the pioneers of the dialogue and looking to our shared future together as Catholics and Jews in a relationship renewed by the Council and the efforts of so many of the greatest thinkers in both of our communities. Then let us consider the two categories, which, though underlying much of the initial agenda, had not yet reached the stage in Jewish or Catholic consciousness where they could be confronted, as it were, head on.

## **1. Evaluating the Past: Lessons for Today from the Pain of the Past**

Leading this discussion at Latrobe were Rabbi Solomon Grayzel of Brandeis

University and Father John Sheerin, CSP, editor of *The Catholic World*. The starting point in the discussion, in both texts, was the thesis set forth by French historian and Holocaust survivor Jules Isaac<sup>1</sup>, whose classic works of the 1940's in the field, *Jesus and Israel* and *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*, which were translated into English only in the early 1960's by Claire Huchet Bishop. These publications helped pave the way for the Council's declaration. The two scholars agreed with Isaac's contention that the ancient Christian "teaching of contempt" against Jews and Judaism went back to the earliest Fathers of the Church and must be uprooted from Christian theology lest the tragedies of history repeat themselves.

But they parted company over two key issues with a distinctly contemporary ring.

1. Whereas Grayzel, following Isaac, sought to place the beginning of the teaching of contempt within the New Testament, Sheerin, following Catholic scholar Gregory Baum, argued that it was rooted not in the New Testament but in "misunderstandings" of the New Testament by Christians beginning in the 2nd century. One can see the nuanced language preferred by Sheerin in 1965 echoed in recent statements by Pope John Paul II and the Holy See's 1998 statement, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*<sup>2</sup>. It is important to note that the "anti-Jewish" polemics in the New Testament originally reflected internal disputes in the decades after Jesus' time between Jews who believed in Jesus and those who did not accept the claims about him. In Jesus' own time, as the statement of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001), makes clear, few Jews aside from the leadership of the Temple priesthood would have opposed Jesus.
2. The second difference between Grayzel and Sheerin is that the former, though taking a nuanced view of history which acknowledged the papal

protectiveness of Jews over the centuries and the many periods of tolerance,  
insisted with Isaac that Nazi anti-Semiti