

The Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Netherlands

### **Living with One and the Same Hope**

*On the Meaning of the Meeting with Judaism for Catholics*

*We stand on the eve of the third millennium, a proper moment to reflect on the past. It is not possible to renew the present without rendering account for the past.*

In our 1995 Episcopal message entitled 'Levend uit één en dezelfde wortel' [Living from One and the Same Root], we focused on what has taken place between Judaism and Christianity. To learn from the past, we wanted to examine the wrongs against Judaism done on the Catholic part. We noted then and repeat now, that "a tradition of theological and ecclesiastical anti-Judaism contributed to the rise of a climate in which the *shoah* could take place." We condemned anti-Judaism and issued a call to get to know Judaism as it sees itself. We are aware that much still needs to be done before ignorance and prejudice are eliminated completely.

For Christians, however, Judaism means more than only guilt and a painful past. Our generation is experiencing a new, profound meeting between Jews and Christians. That Jews, after years of diaspora and after the *shoah* can again live in their own state, has greatly facilitated this meeting on the Jewish side. Moreover, pilgrimages and study trips to Israel provide a special introduction to the many-faceted Jewish and Christian life there, including the complex political and social questions. The meeting with Judaism can inspire Christians to renew their faith. In 1995 we emphasized that "we Christians may never forget that Jesus of Nazareth is a son of the Jewish people, rooted in the tradition of Moses and the prophets. Through the meeting with Judaism we come to understand Jesus better. We remain vitally linked with the Jewish religion not only in the Scriptures but also in our theology and liturgy." In this spirit, the present letter wishes to be a sequel to that of 1995. We wish to see in what areas familiarity with Judaism can be especially fruitful for Christian life.

It is evident that there can be no question of a thoughtless adoption or even annexation of Jewish traditions by Christian practice. This would display a lack of respect for both the Jewish and the Christian traditions. True meeting illuminates one's own identity and respects the other in his or her own religious convictions. Nor do we wish to idealize Judaism, or to suggest that Judaism has tailor-made answers for problems that arise within the transition of Christian faith. Each faith tradition bears its own responsibility in this area. Yet this does not deny that the basic structures of the Jewish faith have much

to teach us. It involves a re-appraisal of our own foundation that ultimately will bring us closer to Jesus Christ and the Jewish life in which He was rooted.

The Vatican *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate nr. 4* (1975) distinguish three areas in which conversation with Judaism can be fruitful for the faith of the Church:

1. the use of Scripture, 2. liturgy and 3. Ethical and Social Questions. Looking forward to the approaching third millennium, we add to this: 4. the future as Messianic hope.

#### *The Use of Scripture*

The Synagogue can teach us much about the use of the Word of God. Every Sabbath the Torah of Moses resounds in synagogue worship. It is the unchanging Word of God, of which no dot or iota is altered. On the other hand, the Torah speaks in many languages and in many ways to each person. Jewish wisdom tells us that the Torah is revealed in seventy languages, so that each one can hear it in his or her own way. Thus experiences of many generations resound in the explanation of the Hebrew Bible and belong to this explanation. We recognize the simultaneous presence of faithfulness to God's Word and respect for each one's personal questions and experiences as an authentic way of transition of faith and as mark of Jewish biblical spirituality. This is the spirituality in which Jesus is rooted.

In addition, the texts are explained and questioned in the house of study. In studying Scripture together, the participants' questions even precede over the answers. For it is only thanks to the questions that we can understand and appreciate the answers tradition offers. Reflecting this centuries-old Jewish learning model, Christian houses of study have arisen here and there over the past decades. In them the Old and New Testament are studied with great love and dedication. This is a gratifying development. A spirituality that is anchored in the gospel continually seeks to nourish itself in 'Moses and the prophets' (Cf. Lk 16:29-31 and 24:27,44-45).

It is befitting here to express a word of appreciation for our Reformed co-believers who have often been at the forefront of such efforts. Houses of study are ideally suited for an ecumenical approach. It is enriching when there are also Jewish participants in such a house of study. But even when this is not the case, a house of study has much to offer as a model for transition of faith.

Beside the synagogue and the house of study there is another place where Judaism passes on its tradition intensely: the home. Within the structure offered by the commandments of the Torah, the family circle provides the most primary introduction to the faith. For Catholics, the home situation is

also the foundation for experiencing and passing on the faith. Now, we must admit that the role Scripture plays here is sometimes minimal. Although there are families - and we should not forget here the communities and individuals - which give Scripture a place in their daily lives, practice is often different. It seems as if many Catholics do not experience the Bible as their book. Perhaps part of the fault lies with a too patronizing attitude within the Church in the past.

Luckily many deanery and diocesan workers encourage daily use of Scriptures in our community. Connecting faith and life may not be limited only to the Sunday liturgy, but applies to seven days a week! Reading schedules can be a good guide for daily reading. Although the faithful can initially feel lost in a maze - the Bible is not simple - gradually paths take shape, not only in the texts but also in daily life: on the way with God's Word.

### *Liturgy*

Coupled with daily, studious use of the Torah is the fulfilment of God's commandments. What inspiration can Christians derive from the Jewish sanctification of life through the mitzvot, the commandments? A first element to note is that the Jewish liturgical tradition lies at the origin of the Christian liturgy. The Jewish background of the Christian festivals Easter and Pentecost as well as the sanctification of time by devoting one day a week to 'rest', are essential for Christian experience. But what is particularly striking in the Jewish liturgical experience is the permanent concern to connect liturgy and life. The Jewish Passover Feast, Pesach, commemorates liberation from oppression and slavery, in the past and the present.

Pesach is a model for actively experiencing hope in the future. The family is responsible for this celebration of the Seder, which is an excellent example of home liturgy. Imitation of this impressive Jewish celebration by Christians seems to us, despite all good intentions, an undesirable annexation of Jewish ideas. Rather, Christians can seek inspiration by becoming familiar with the Jewish rites and symbols on how to experience and develop ways and moments of sanctification, especially at home. The sanctification of life is not limited to Church buildings! We think in this regard of prayers and blessings through which numerous moments - such as awakening, meals, births and separations - can be dedicated in gratitude to God.

### *Ethical and Social Questions*

Learning must ultimately serve action. The biblical book Exodus tells how the people of Israel answers God: "All what the LORD has said we will do and hear." (24:7). Doing even precedes hearing! Put differently: in doing you learn to understand. Only when the word is acted upon, it is kept alive. In it unfolds, in addition to the religious meaning of the sanctification of life, also an ethical and politico-social dimension.

In modern society, the influence of religion is on the wane. For this very reason it is extremely important that religious voices in ethical and social questions not become silent. The sanctity of human life - from its earliest beginning to its last moment - is for Jews and Christians a common concern. The fundamental approach manifest in Jewish ethical reflection is very meaningful for us. Medical expertise must, of course, be fully respected and used. But it is the conviction of Judaism and Christianity that medical-ethical questions ultimately touch the heart of human existence and cannot be answered only from the point of view of medical science and technology. We believe that here the voice of religion is indispensable for society. A joint ethical reflection, preferably in cooperation with medical experts, seems very meaningful to us.

We also think of calling attention for spiritual values where economic motives threaten the human. In the recent past, Christian and Jewish denominations argued side by side in favour of the rhythm of a fixed day of rest in the week. This day of rest is a gift from the Bible to modern society; a gift that, in our opinion, is often treated shabbily. Despite different views on this - Judaism keeps the biblical seventh day, the Sabbath, Christianity has chosen the first day, the Lord's day, as day of rest - we have been quite successful in having our joint voice heard.

From the prophetic call for justice and righteousness, we seek to give shape and meaning to our concern for the widening gap between those who can and those who cannot participate in social life. Among these are the many refugees who come to our country. They are a special appeal to both Jews and Christians. The biblical charge to "love the foreigner" (Lv 19:34) may not be spoken in vain. It is obvious that the painful experiences undergone by Jewish refugees before and after the Second World War only strengthen this appeal.

#### *The Future as Messianic Hope*

Judaism and Christianity differ in the expression of the messianic hope. Judaism sees the arrival of messianic time as future. For Christians, looking forward to God's dominion has become an immediate reality in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ. The joyful cry on Christmas Eve: "Today a Saviour is born to you, Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:11), is the starting point of Christian identity.

These differences need not be disguised. They are one reason why early Christianity was seen as a separate sect and they lay at the basis of the schism between Judaism and Christendom. Rather, it is important to recognize that these differences in the past were for many Christians a reason to see Judaism only as negative and superseded. Thanks to dialogue, we Catholics have come increasingly to realize that we share a common messianic mission to

make the earth inhabitable; that we live in an incomplete reality. In this we are linked to Judaism; Judaism keeps us mindful of this. Tanakh, the Jewish Bible, ends with the call to set out for Jerusalem: "Whoever is among you of all his people - the LORD his GOD be with him and let him go up!" (2 Chr 36:23). The New Testament ends with the desire for the ultimate completion: "Maranatha, come, Lord!" (Rv 22:20). Both Jews and Christians bear a messianic perspective, witness to God's Kingship, to His Shalom. That not slavery and death have the last word but liberation and life in God's presence, is our common conviction. Here more than anywhere else we meet the only element that really convinces, acts of humanity and loving-kindness.

Jews and Christians live from one and the same hope. With this hope as a solid basis, modern man does not necessarily have to experience the future as an ominous void. Rather, at every moment the loving invitation of the living God to do full justice to all his creatures resounds. Judaism and Christianity each answer this invitation in their own unique way. In this way they each help shape His Kingdom on earth, looking forward to the day of which it is said: "And the LORD shall be king over all the earth: on that day the LORD shall be one, and his name One" (Zech 14:9).

*The Roman Catholic Bishops of the Netherlands,  
1 November 1999, All Saints' Day*