



THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

Preserving American Jewish History

MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series C: Interreligious Activities. 1952-1992

Box 20, Folder 9, Good Friday Catholic liturgy, 1978-1979.

March 10, 1978

Mr. Benjamin Friedman
3407 Montrose
Houston, Texas 77006

Dear Mr. Friedman:

You question why the Catholic Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy has not abolished the singing of the "Improperia" or "Reproaches" during the Good Friday liturgy of the Roman Catholic church, and you ask whether I think it would be appropriate for leaders of Jewish communal organizations to present some sort of "ultimatum" to Roman Catholic authorities, threatening a withdrawal from all interfaith activities unless the hymn is removed or re-written.

As I understand it, the singing of the "Reproaches" is not mandatory, but optional. There are apparently several reasons why these verses have not been officially abandoned. One is that there is a great deal of traditional attachment to the Gregorian music, and I have been informed that the liturgy staff is seeking a way to preserve the music, while removing any possibility of anti-Jewish interpretation from the text. Another is that many Catholics insist that the prayer is not anti-Jewish in intention and that the words attributed to Jesus rebuking "my people" apply to themselves, not to the Jews. Last year the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy recommended that the hymn be omitted from the Good Friday ritual. I am not sure whether this recommendation has been reissued this year, but I would hope that while there is an ongoing effort to revise the text, it will not be used in the churches.

(I should point out that the "Reproaches" are not confined to Roman Catholic tradition; the prayer is also a part of the liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox churches, who have not even gone as far as the Roman Catholic community in acknowledging that it may present a problem.)

My perspective on these questions encompasses both the 1900-year history of Catholic-Jewish relations on the one hand, and the last twenty years of Catholic-Jewish relations on the other. The concept of the Jews as a defile

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people, living under a curse and doomed to punishment in each succeeding generation, was used to justify religious persecution and oppression for many centuries. The repudiation of that charge by Vatican Council II, and subsequent guidelines issued by the Vatican and by the American bishops have, in my opinion, created a vastly new climate in Catholic-Jewish relations. Over the past decade, there has been a sincere effort on the part of Catholic educators to remove the negative and distorted portrayal of Jews and Judaism from Catholic textbooks, and to incorporate positive and accurate information, not only about the Jewish background of Christianity, but about contemporary Jewish religious life and practices. There remain certain problems, but there is evident good will in the attempt to deal with them.

The question of how the public worship of the church bears on the portrayal of Jews and Judaism is somewhat different. Like Jewish public worship, it incorporates readings from the Holy Scriptures throughout the year. (In textbooks these passages may be set into context and properly explained to impressionable students, but read without comment in the churches, they may have a damaging effect.) The Good Friday service, recounting the Crucifixion and Passion of Jesus, includes passages from the Gospel of St. John which are particularly negative toward Jews. These passages, in my view, reinforce the anti-Jewish impact of the "Reproaches" for the verses themselves do not mention Jews or the Jewish people.

Christian scholars are addressing themselves to these problems. Some have suggested that particularly troublesome passages in the Gospel texts used for readings be deleted or be replaced by other texts. (I enclose such a suggestion made by Father John Pawlikowski in his book, Catechetics & Prejudice.) Other Catholic leaders have faced up to the problem in another way, by circulating suggested Lenten comments to be read in the churches to counteract the possible anti-Jewish impact of the Holy Week service. I have enclosed a copy of such a document which has been sent to all priests, religious and educators in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

I would hope that the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy would either eliminate the "Reproaches" or revise the text so as to make absolutely clear to Christians that they are the people being rebuked by Jesus. But I do not believe that an "ultimatum" is the way to heighten sensitivity of Christians toward the possible anti-Jewish impact of their educational materials or public worship. Indeed, I believe such an approach would be profoundly counterproductive.

Sincerely,

Judith Banki
Assistant Director
Interreligious Affairs

JB/es

Enclosures

bcc: Dr. Eugene Fisher

JEWISH-ANGLICAN CONSULTATION
AMPORT HOUSE, ANDOVER, HANTS
WEDNESDAY 26 - FRIDAY 28
NOVEMBER 1980
LAW AND RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY
SOCIETY

O God

We thank thee that in faith
We are Children of Abraham
And share in the promise of
Universal blessing.

Open our eyes and hearts to his
Other Children, Jews and Muslims,
And inspire us to work with them
to bring thy promised blessing
to all generations.

We offer this prayer in the memory of
the love shown on the cross,
and in the faith that in Jesus thou
thyself hast provided a lamb to take
away the sins of the world.
(Bishop George Appleton, Nov. 1980)

MEMO FROM

FATHER OESTERREICHER

Dear Mark:

This will interest you,
I am sure. Please, share it with
fellow workers. Thanks.



February 1979

Dear Brotherpriests:

Lent is near. Soon the daily Eucharist, homilies, sermons, and devotions will call us and the people entrusted to our pastoral care to live more fully in the sight of God. This is our great chance: intensive prayer, abstinence, even fasting, and most of all, love of all God's children are to carry us to Easter, that radiant day of the Lord's resurrection, and beyond. The Archdiocesan Commission for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, together with its standing Committee for Catholic-Jewish Concerns, has therefore asked that we turn to you with a special request.

The Lenten and Easter liturgies abound with references to the Jews. This is as it ought to be. Jesus was born a Jew; His earthly life was lived among His kinsmen; the great events of His sojourn among Men -- "the work of our redemption" -- were enacted on Jewish soil; indeed, the whole history of our salvation is tied to the Jewish people. Lent, then, and the Easter season, in fact, the whole liturgical year are never-ending opportunities to praise the mystery of election -- the strategy of divine love.

Yet, such are the vagaries of our lives, the "exposure" of human existence, that this great opportunity of the spirit can also become a spiritual pitfall. "The Jews," who ought to remind us of God's merciful involvement in human affairs, His predilection and thus His covenant, can become a screen behind which we hide from the grip of grace. In the past, Christians often uttered and understood "the Jews" as an invective, an evil incantation, a kind of magic formula by which one could project one's own sins on those "others": "the Jews."

Victim of a Murderous Plot by the Jews?

The old charge: "The Jews killed Christ!" not only ignores the historical setting of Jesus' Passion but also negates the existential significance of His death. Anyone unfamiliar with the forces

that shaped the life of the inhabitants of that little Roman province of Judea may be easily misled into assuming that the "high priest," "chief priests" and their "scribes" so frequently mentioned were the legitimate civil and religious authority of the land. In reality, the high priest and his clique were puppets, creatures of the Imperial Court. For almost two centuries, first under Syrian, then under Roman domination, the high-priestly office was given to the highest bidder. Being in power, the high priests and their families wielded considerable influence. Yet, having acquired their dignity through bribery, they were links in the chain of Roman corruption but hardly the true representatives of the Jewish people.

Though no love was lost between pagan and Jew, particularly the Roman procurator and the High Priest, the latter seemed to have worked with the former whenever it seemed necessary to protect his position. The death sentence, Ibis ad crucem, was pronounced by Pilate, and could have been pronounced only by him. Still, the Passion narratives suggest that Caiaphas and Pilate made common cause in ending Christ's ministry. Both appear to have cooperated in Jesus' arrest. To both, He seemed a dangerous man, a disturber of the status quo. All who wielded power thought of Him as a rival, though He had no political ambition. Loved by the people, He could easily have become the leader of a popular uprising, a seditionist. And it was as such that He was crucified; hence the "inscription" on the cross, the alleged cause of His conviction: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

We have used words like "suggest," "seem," "appear," for the narratives on Our Lord's Passion are proclamations of our redemption, not transcripts of a court-reporter. At the various stages of Jesus' trial, there was no one present to take the minutes, no one charged with recording the proceedings. After all, the details pale before the overwhelming message that Jesus died for our sins, that He gave His life so that we might live in God's everlasting presence. If He died for our sins, then our sins -- then we the sinners -- brought Him to the cross. Let me recall for a moment the historical perspective: a politician and his counselors; a high priest and his entourage; "theologians," called scribes; soldiers, and a crowd; Romans, Jews, Syrians, were among the actors in the drama of salvation. (We speak of "Syrians" because it was Roman custom to take their mercenary troops, particularly the occupation forces, from the native population. The soldiers in Pilate's service who mocked Jesus and crowned Him with thorns were thus, no doubt, Syrians. Their sneer "Hail, king of the Jews" was an attempt to ridicule the messianic hope of the

Jews.) This historical vista renders concrete the theological truth that all humanity is responsible for the death that raised all humanity to new heights, that opened God's heart to each and everyone, Jew and Gentile, the refined and the rough, those who know Him and those who do not yet know Him.

Bearer of Salvation for All Humanity

Why do we emphasize so much that Jesus is the victim of all sinners, as He is their Pardoner and Restorer?

First, Vatican II has warned us anew, not to put the blame for the Lord's sufferings on the Jews -- the Jews of Jesus' time, even less, the Jews of all times. To do so would be a grave injustice; it would also turn the Good News upside down. This is what the Council said:

Christ underwent His Passion and Death freely and out of infinite love because of the sins of all people so that all may obtain salvation. This the Church has always held and holds now. Sent to preach, the Church is, therefore, bound to proclaim the Acts of Christ as the sign of God's all embracing love and the fountain from which all grace flows.

(Nostra Aetate IV, conclusion)

Second, in our age, the message of the universality of sin and of the infinitely deeper universality of grace, has to be preached again and again. The awareness of sin, its wholesome fear, is rare today. Without the admission of sin, however, there is no hope; and without hope, life is shallow. May we, then, beg you to be alert so that the misleading cliché: "The Jews killed Christ" will not slip into one of your homilies, sermons, or devotions. It has the questionable honor of having been around for a long time, and of sneaking into our speech when we least expect it. It is always easy to let generalizations take the place of exact thought and careful preparation.

The Man of Pain Present in All Sufferers

To present the Lord's Passion in such a way that it begets gratitude, love, and joy in God, and never anger, self-righteousness, or hostility is our priestly task. Whenever the Passion story is read or chanted publicly -- on Passion (Palm) Sunday and Good Friday -- we might introduce its recitation by a few prefatory remarks, or have the priest who presides over the liturgy do so. The following thoughts may prove helpful in making the proclamation of Jesus' loving death a moment to remember, indeed a call lovingly to embrace all of God's children, particularly Jesus' kin.

In his "Epistle to Hebrews," a disciple of the Apostle Paul hails Jesus' sacrifice of His body for our sins as having been offered "once and for all" (10:10). As a historical event, it cannot be repeated. Its weight is infinite; hence nothing could be added by its repetition. Yet, for our benefit, it can and ought to be represented, sacramentally. When the mystery of Christ's Passion is thus proclaimed, we become witnesses of His saving love, indeed His contemporaries.

Though a repetition on the historical plane is impossible, the Lord's suffering is mysteriously continued -- re-enacted, if you wish -- in all those who are persecuted for His sake. As Saul, who had been harassing the Church (see Acts 8:3), approached Damascus, a flash of light threw him to the ground and a Voice asked him: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" When Saul questioned: "Who are you, Sir?" the Voice answered: "I am Jesus, the One you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5). Similarly, when the Reformation tore the Church apart, threatening her very existence, Theresa of Avila (16th cent.) exclaimed: "The world is in flames. Christ is being crucified anew. They want the Church to perish from the earth."

In these sayings, Christ identifies Himself, or is identified, with those who believe in Him and follow Him. Yet, this is not the whole truth; He is also one with the poor, the neglected, the abused, and the persecuted everywhere. The French writer Léon Bloy (1846-1917) called the modern contempt for Jews because of race "the most horrible slap Our Lord suffers in His ever-continuing Passion, the bloodiest and most unforgivable, because He receives it in the face of His Mother." At the thought of Jewish suffering at the hands of the Nazis, the American-French writer Julian Green cried out:

Jesus' torment goes on in this world, day and night. Having once been nailed to a Roman cross, He has been persecuted with inexorable cruelty in the person of His own people. One cannot strike a Jew without having the same blow fall on Him who is the Man par excellence and, at the same time, the Flower of Israel. It is Jesus who was struck in the concentration camp. It is always He; His suffering is never ended.

Avenging the Blood of Christ ?

There have been times and countries when worshippers left the Church after the reading of the Passion to throw stones at Jewish houses and call for vengeance on the Jews as "the murderers of Christ." What a travesty! How can a Christian think, even for a moment, that Jesus' redemptive death needs to be avenged or punished? It is our salvation; were we to respond to it by blaming others instead of our sins, we would deprive ourselves of this very salvation.

"Collective guilt," a dark, indeed deadly notion, does not form part of Jesus' message. It is far from being an article of the Church's creed. But it is a temptation that assails Christians as much as non-Christians, perhaps even more so. To the preacher or teacher the temptation may come in the form of the phrase "the Jews" as it frequently appears in the Gospel according to John. Now, the temptation is that it be always taken collectively, as if it always meant "all the Jews," the whole community of Israel, then, now, and always.

"The Jews" -- Who Are They?

Strange though it may seem, the meaning of the designation "the Jews" is neither obvious nor is it always the same; it may vary from pericope to pericope. When Jesus says to the Samaritan woman: "It is from the Jews that salvation comes" (Jn 4:22), "the Jews" are clearly the Jewish people, chosen to be God's witnesses, the vehicles of His favor. (In the present cycle B this pericope is not read; it is part of the readings of the Third Sunday in Lent of cycle A.) Similarly, in the title on the Cross -- Pilate's final verdict -- "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," "Jews" means the people, the body of Jews in its entirety.

The Gospel reading of the coming Third Sunday in Lent is a remarkable example of a shift in meaning, not from pericope to pericope, but within the same pericope. It begins: "The Passover of the Jews was at hand," often rendered: "The Jewish Passover was near." There can be no doubt that "the Jews" here means those of whom St. Paul says: "my kinsmen. They are Israelites. Theirs is the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the worship, and the promises . . ." (Rm 9:4). Later in the Gospel reading of the Third Sunday in Lent, we are told that, after Jesus had cleansed the Temple, "the Jews challenged Him" to show them a sign that would prove His authority for His action (Jn 2:18). When He points to His resurrection, under the image of "this Temple" destroyed and rebuilt anew, "the Jews" again take Him to task (2:20).

No special scholarship, only common sense is needed to realize that those inquiring into Jesus' credentials are not the whole Jewish people. It would have been physically impossible for the entire people to conduct such an investigation. In both verses, "the Jews" means the officialdom in Jerusalem and its emissaries, in today's jargon, "the establishment." Thus the "Good News New Testament" reads: "the Jewish authorities" while other translations retain "the Jews" (see Jn 18:28; 19:31, 38; 20:19). Many think that "the Jews" is the only rendering faithful, true to the original, though it is rather naive, simplistic, and lacking in discernment.

A Flawless Proclamation

How can we do away with readings that tend to turn the Gospel of Christ, our peace who made Jews and Gentiles one (see Eph 2:14), into an instrument of Gentile contempt for Jews?

Comments by the celebrant, deacon, or preacher of the day, in short by the one chosen to proclaim the Gospel, ought to suffice to avoid harmful misunderstandings. Whenever called for, the reader ought to preface his readings with words like these: "The designation 'the Jews' in this morning's (evening's) pericope does not refer to the totality of the Jewish people -- the Jews of yesterday, today, and tomorrow -- it does not even point to the Jews of Jesus' time; it is a term that here and in many Gospel passages stands for the officials of Jerusalem, those leaders Jesus, according to St. John's Gospel, brands as 'hirelings, not true shepherds'".

A comment of this kind may accomplish more than comments gen-

erally do. It may make most listeners realize that they must not transform the recital of the Gospel into a hide-and-seek game; turn "the Jews" into a screen behind which they find refuge against the "Hound of Heaven," or make scapegoats out of them. A brief comment may make the listeners aware that it is always they who are addressed, castigated, wooed, and urged to turn from their own selves to God.

That in a number of pericopes "the Jews" does not mean what we at first sight think, is not a unique phenomenon. There are many instances where a literal translation is misleading, and a more meaningful one must take its place. To give but one example. In the Beatitudes, Jesus hails "those who hunger and thirst after righteousness" (Mt 5:6). The Vulgate translated the Greek dikaioσynē, a rendering of the Hebrew tzedakah, with iustitia. Some vernacular versions followed suit and wrote: "those who hunger and thirst after justice." Yet, this rendering is wide of the mark.

Justice is that virtue which gives everyone his or her due, which accords to all what is rightfully their own. Yet, tzedakah, righteousness, is quite different; it bespeaks God's gracious, loving attitude toward those with whom He concluded a covenant, the faithfulness of the covenanters toward His Will and Law, and toward one another. Hence NAB renders: "those who hunger and thirst after holiness." NEB offers this translation: "those who hunger and thirst to do what is right." The Good News NT reads: "those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires." This is not the time or place to decide which of these translations is to be preferred. All we wish to do is to prove, with the help of one example, that our suggestion, far from being revolutionary, makes good sense.

An ever-increasing number of writers today propose that in all those instances where the Gospel pericopes tell of tension, alienation, distrust or hostility between Jesus and His audience we say "Judaean" rather than "Jew." We cannot give all the reasons for reading Ioudaioi as Judaean but it may be worth pointing out that these twin words correspond somewhat to the twofold meaning of "Yankee." For a Southerner or Westerner a Yankee is a New Englander, for a Mexican "Yankee" is a contemptuous way of referring to any U.S. citizen.

It would be an ideal solution could we say "Judaean" in every instance where Ioudaioi seems to have a pejorative meaning, but present-day rules forbid us to make such a change. The time will come when

most translations will use "Judaean" wherever appropriate. There is a German translation that employs "Judaean" in all instances described. It is by the late Otto Karer, one of the foremost pioneers of the Ecumenical Movement. The editors of one English version are said to be contemplating such a move.

In this letter we have asked that you preface all passages that might be understood as abusive with a comment as to the proper meaning of "the Jews." We have asked you, for we have no authority to enjoin you, nor would we wish to do so. The proclamation of the Gospel without the least animosity against Jews and with the utmost care for the integrity of the Christian message must be a concern that is not imposed on us from without, but springs from the heart.

When the late Cardinal Bea introduced the first draft of the conciliar statement on the Church and the Jewish people to the assembly of bishops at St. Peter's, he stressed that to bring light to this relationship is to help in the Church's renewal. He emphatically declared that it would contribute to the purpose of the Council, as Pope John XXIII saw it, the rediscovery of the Church's youthful fervor. May we, therefore, ask you to enter ever more into this great ministry of reconciliation?

Thanking you for having lent us your ear,
we remain,
fraternally yours in Christ,

John H. Koenig

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