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From Enemy to Brother: Part II

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Distinctly Catholic

On Friday, I began a review of "From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933-1965," by John Connolly. There, we looked at the problem: Centuries of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism that had left the Catholic Church incapable of finding ways to even talk with or about Jews that did not feed into the kind of attitudes that had perpetrated centuries of persecution. Several factors came together to affect a change in Catholic doctrine towards the Jews, and Connolly's book tells that tale.

The first factor was an event, the Shoah. For centuries, Christians had understood Jewish suffering as the result of God's curse, the price they had to pay for killing Christ. But, what did Christ have to do with the Shoah? This was not God's doing, but Hitler's. As well, after the war, the example of those who had helped Jews to escape or hide, these examples were so clearly closer to any kind of ethical standard, Christian or otherwise, than that demonstrated by the far more numerous Christians who were bystanders or even collaborators. At its deepest level, people in the West, including Catholic theologians, needed to wrestle with the horrific fact of what had happened. This was no tribal war among uneducated peoples. Here, in the heart of Europe, with all the precision and efficiency of modern industry and science, among people of culture and learning, mass murder and genocide had been committed.

Many people led the effort to re-evaluate Christian attitudes and theology towards the Jews both before and after the catastrophe, but two stand out, Johannes Oesterreicher and Karl Thieme. These two men were active before the war in trying to combat racism and they would play key roles in advancing the discussion after the war, all the way up to the Second Vatican Council. Interestingly, they were both converts.

Oesterreicher was born into a Jewish family in 1904 in northern Moravia, the region the world would

come to know in 1938 as the Sudetenland, a German-speaking area that had once been part of the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire and, after World War I, was part of the new state of Czechoslovakia. As a young man, Oesterreicher came across a small book that contained excerpts from the Gospels and was captivated by the figure of Jesus. In 1920, he went to study medicine at Vienna and continued to explore Christianity. He was deeply influenced by Kierkegaard and decisively influenced by Newman's essay on the development of doctrine. He happened upon a sermon by Father Max Josef Metzger, whom Connelly describes as a "great Catholic missionary of ecumenism, pacifism, and temperance." In 1924, Metzger baptized Oesterreicher who immediately entered the seminary and was ordained in 1927. He quickly became active in Catholic publishing, editing a journal on ecumenism, while serving as a parish priest in Austria.

Karl Thieme came from a family of Protestant theologians in Dresden. In 1924, he joined the Social Democratic Party, shocking many of his friends: the Marxist ideology of the party was still deeply anti-religious and conservative Protestants were as hostile to socialism as conservative Catholics. In 1933, when Hitler rose to power, Thieme was arrested but released, and fired from his teaching post. Later that year, Hitler's SA tortured and killed dozens of Social Democratic leaders. Instead of finding support or even sanctuary in the church, the Landeskirche, one after another, fell in line with Nazi rule and Thieme turned to Rome. On January 30, 1934, he was received into the Catholic Church and he, too, became active in Catholic publishing. He edited a journal which had as its specific goal the repudiation of racism. Warned of his impending arrest, he fled to Switzerland in 1935.

One of the things that had deeply revolted both Oesterreicher and Thieme was the denial of equality to baptized Jews. It was this issue that first brought each man to the attention of the other and began their collaboration which would last until 1960 when they had a falling out that was never repaired.

There were many issues to be addressed in the effort to ground a better Catholic theology towards Jews. For one thing, the Church was still very hostile to any whiff of indifferentism, the idea that all religions were equally valid ways of attaining the divine. This suspicion had frustrated the efforts of Catholics to participate in civic events with their Protestant brethren for decades. There were biblical texts that had been understood to sanction anti-Judaism. But, of all the issues to be overcome, two were central: Repudiating the charge of deicide and adopting an ecumenical, rather than missionary, approach to Jewish-Catholic relations.

The heart of the deicide charge was foolish. Almost all the actors in the dramas of the New Testament were Jews, except Pontius Pilate and the centurions. Those who sought the death of Christ and those who mourned Him were equally Jewish. As well, there were Jews spread throughout the Mediterranean world. How were they responsible for the crucifixion? And, how in the world could any putative culpability of first century Jews living in Jerusalem be attributed to 20th century Jews living in Europe?

The charge was foolish but there was nothing foolish about its consequences. Connelly writes:

As Leon Bloy had suggested regarding the phenomenon of anti-semitism, the issue was not whether a Christian subscribed to six or seven or eight stereotypes about Jews, it was about the deep sources of a criminal perspective, the old anti-Judaic vision, which made sense of the world for perpetrators but also for onlookers. That vision remained even when one "absolved" the Jews of deicide, because the idea of Jews living under punishment was untouched. Therefore, Hitler could "claim to be doing a service to Christianity by persecuting Jews, and Christianity did not have a language with which to oppose him". Only after the fact did Christians wonder more deeply about the "service" done for Christianity. Was the Holocaust a punishment sent by God? If not, then they had to break with the belief that Jews lived under a curse. In the postwar period Christian theologians did this, developing the contrary view that Jews were loved by God.

Here is the link between the two most serious obstacles. If refuting the charge of deicide led to the conclusion that Jews were not cursed by God but loved by Him, if God still loved the Jews as Jews, could Christians desire their conversion? In 1950, you could see the changes in motion when a group of ecumenical theologians, including Thieme, met at Bad Schwalbach in Germany to address these concerns. They devised several "theses" for how Christians should relate to Jews. The theses earned the support of Father Augustine Bea, S.J., a biblical scholar who would go on to become the cardinal charged with shepherding the decrees on ecumenism and inter-religious relations through the Second Vatican Council. In the 1950s, Bea was not yet a cardinal, but he was Pope Pius XII's confessor, so he was not without influence. Connelly writes:

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The Schwalbach theses were revolutionary in several regards. They spoke directly about German guilt for the mass murder of Jews, making clear that Jews had been victims while Christians had mostly stood by, failing to offer assistance; they spoke bluntly of "Christian sins against Jewish persons." "The murder of Jews had been carried out not by God but against God. If any people was under God's judgment, it was the German people, and they were failing to heed the signs of the times. Using a metaphor developed by Karl Thieme, Schwalbach portrayed the relation between church and Israel as the fraternal bond of "old and new people of God," thus anticipating the language of the Second Vatican Council. As younger brothers, the Christians had to oppose all slander of the older brother. Thesis four reminded Christians of a fact little known to them: that Christ's first command, to love God and neighbor, had already been "pronounced in the Old Testament."

It is interesting to note that both Thieme and Oesterreicher did not come to their fully formed views in one fell swoop. They, too, wrestled with the issues. Indeed, they finally split over the issue of whether or not Christians had an obligation to seek the conversion of Jews to Christianity, even though their falling out was based on a misunderstanding of each others' position: By the time of Thieme's death in 1963, both men had come to see that the "mission to the Jews" was misguided theologically and pastorally. Critical to their theological case was the ambivalence found within the Pauline canon: Some read Paul's Letter to the Romans as indicating that a mass conversion of Jews would announce the eschaton, while others believed that Paul's vision contained a spiritual, not a historical, vision of the end times. Connelly writes:

As Oesterreicher wrote, it "cannot be the task of a Council to choose between these two exegeses." The bishops could say nothing about the circumstances of Israel's final "ingathering." All that was certain was the "essence of hope" (see Romans 11:q12, 15, 25-26). What may seem a theological quibble "the relation between Christians and Jews at the end of time" in fact touched upon the most controversial question the drafters of the [Vatican II] Decree on the Jews would encounter, almost frustrating the statement completely in the fall of 1964.

Critically, as Connelly demonstrates, at every step of the way, Oesterreicher and Thieme and their associates were keen to seek the approval of the Holy See, as well as to garner support from their local hierarchs. In Augustine Bea, they found a trustworthy ally, one who would engage Jews in conversation and, just so, find how ridiculous certain Christian attitudes were, but even Bea had trouble abandoning the idea that Christians should seek the conversion of Jews.

The overcoming of this final hurdle of the "mission to the Jews" at the Second Vatican Council had both a theological component and "what to call it" "an imperative derived from that most basic of moral yearnings, the desire to avoid indecency. As for the theology, based on an appreciation for the ambivalence of the Pauline texts, the drafters of what became *Nostra Aetate* stripped the language that

foresaw the Jews joining the Church. In its place, they put these words which survived all amendments and are found in the final document: "The Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and "serve Him should to shoulder."?"

This wording did not satisfy several prominent conservative prelates. It still does not satisfy the Society of St. Pius X, the Lefebvrists. Pope Paul VI, who had succeeded to the papal throne in 1963, was constantly trying to keep all the conciliar fathers together, to find ways of reconciling opposing views, but here he hit a wall. The conservatives believed that "the union of the Jewish people with the Church is part of Christian hope." Their efforts to insert precisely those words into the conciliar text came to world attention. And, it provoked Rabbi Abraham Heschel, who had met with Bea many times and had an audience with Pope Paul VI as well, to state forcefully and publicly that he was "ready to go to Auschwitz anytime, if faced with the alternative of conversion or death." Here was a Jew, insisting that he be treated as a Jew, not as some putative Christian whose identity was wrapped up in, or reduced to, Christian eschatology. It was enough to be a Jew to be sent to the crematoria. Now, Jews insisted on being approached as Jews, considered as Jews. And, Christians came to understand that for all those centuries, when they had stipulated that Jews lived under a curse, all of that bias and hatred and violence, all had overlooked a simple fact: God does not revoke His promises, not to the Jews, not to anyone.

Nostra Aetate was solemnly defined and the issues debated seem as if from a different era. For most Catholic Christians, the issues are resolved. The theological conclusions embodied in Nostra Aetate have received repeated endorsement in the teachings and, even more, in the actions, of both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. No one can forget Pope John Paul II's first visit to the Great Synagogue in Rome, once the heart of the Jewish ghetto, with the Jewish choir singing "Alleluia," as he entered, the first pope to do so in modern times. Who can forget his going to Jerusalem and praying at the Western Wall? Is it not amazing, and marvelous, that one Pope who grew up not far from Auschwitz, and another who is German, should be so insistent on meeting Jewish leaders when they travel abroad, so exemplary in referring to Jews as their "elder brothers," and finally overcoming lingering anti-Semitism to establish diplomatic relations with the State of Israel, another instance of treating Jews as Jews.

Indeed, in his efforts to reconcile the SSPX with Rome, Pope Benedict XVI is demonstrating the most arresting, even seismic, change in Catholic thought in the twentieth century. The fact of anti-Semitism did not require a mission to the Jews. It required a mission to Christians.

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