

ISRAEL AND THE VATICAN

by *Gerald McDermott* 11 . 11 . 10

“Why in the world is the Vatican attacking Israel and reverting to radical supersessionism?” asked a theologian who knows I am involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue. Supersessionism, at least in its radical form, states that the church has replaced Jewish Israel so that the Jewish covenant no longer has continuing significance. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has rejected this view.

The theologian was referring to oral statements that in the last few weeks have gone around the world, infuriating Jews and cheering those who think Israel is the cause of all the problems in the Middle East” statements made by the head of the commission that drafted the final statement of the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops.

The Archbishop for Greek Melkites in the United States, Cyril Salim Bustros, declared at the end of the synod that the biblical concept of a promised land for the Jews “cannot be used as a basis to justify the return of the Jews to Israel” because the original promise made by God to the children of Israel “was nullified by Christ. There is no longer a chosen people.”

Bustros seemed to be trying to reverse the positive momentum in Jewish-Catholic relations of the last forty years. Though speaking for himself and not the Vatican, he was reverting to the first days of the Vatican’s relations to modern Israel that Rome might rather forget. On May 14, 1948, the semi-official Vatican daily, *L’Osservatore Romano*, declared, “Modern Israel is not the heir to biblical Israel. The Holy Land and its sacred sites belong only to Christianity: the true Israel.”

The attitude to Israel changed over the next fifteen years as the church began to refine its understanding of the Jewish people. In the years following the Holocaust both Catholics and Protestants realized they had failed to recognize the radically Jewish character of Jesus, Paul,

and Christianity itself. Led by theologians and biblical scholars such as Karl and Marcus Barth, C.E.B. Cranfield, Peter Stuhlmacher, W.D. Davies, Krister Stendahl, and E.P. Sanders, they concluded that an impartial reading of Paul's epistle to the Romans demanded a revision of supercessionism.

As Cranfield put it, "These three chapters (Rom. 9-11) emphatically forbid us to speak of the church as having once and for all taken the place of the Jewish people." W.D. Davies added, "Paul never calls the church the New Israel or the Jewish people the Old Israel."

Partly stimulated by this new scholarly discussion of the Jewish covenant Paul calls "irrevocable" (Rom 11.27-29), the Second Vatican Council proclaimed in *Nostra Aetate* that "the Jews still remain most dear to God because of their fathers, for He does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the call He issues." Pope Paul VI famously declared the Jews "our fathers in the faith" in a trip to the Holy Land in 1964. John Paul II spoke of the Jews "as our elder brothers in the faith," and insisted in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* that "this extraordinary people continues to bear signs of its divine election."

Perhaps as a result of this theological development, in 1967 the Vatican stopped calling for "international status" for Jerusalem and began to urge an "international statute" that would protect the rights of two peoples and three religions, and guarantee access to their holy places.

Pope Benedict has also affirmed this continuing Jewish covenant. In *Many Religions One Covenant*, he writes that Jesus' mission was to transform the history of Israel into the history of all, but "without the abolishment of the special mission of Israel." Jews are still "the Chosen People," but now because of Jesus the nations "become People of God with Israel through adherence to the will of God and through acceptance of the Davidic kingdom."

Many Catholics and Jews alike hoped that Benedict would repudiate Bustros' remarks in his homily on the last day of the synod. Instead the pontiff called for peace and religious freedom, and urged Christians to discuss the latter in dialogue with Muslims.

If Benedict's recent silence was puzzling, the Vatican's general reluctance to acknowledge the importance of *land* in the

biblical covenant has frustrated many Jews, who think that a newfound Christian appreciation of the enduring covenant with Israel should include a heightened sensitivity to the importance of the land of Israel for Jews.

They point out that the word “land” is the fourth most frequent noun or substantive in the Hebrew Scriptures”repeated 2504 times”and more dominant statistically than the word “covenant” itself. If, as the church teaches, the covenant remains, the church should also recognize that so does the call to live in the land of the covenant.

Part of the Catholic reluctance no doubt stems from the Vatican’s desire to balance its recognition of the state of Israel with Arab Catholic claims to their own share of the land and their own state. But part also stems from the Catholic belief in the extension of the biblical covenantal promises from one land to a world, when the messiah would have a universal dominion.

Yet if the prophets expanded the promised inheritance of God’s people beyond the definable boundaries of Canaan to include the world, they did not overrule the earlier promises of a particular land for a particular people”even after Israel had gone into exile because of her sins (Jer 12.14-16; 16.14-15; Ez 36.8-15). Expansion of the promise did not abrogate earlier particular promises.

As the Jewish theologian Eliezer Berkovits has put it, “The universal expectation is inseparable from Israel’s homecoming. The very passage that directs man’s hopes to the time when ‘nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more’ also envisages that ‘out of Zion shall go forth Tora [sic], and the word of the Eternal from Jerusalem.’” (He is quoting Isaiah 2.3-4.)

The Vatican need not fear that affirmation of the continuing validity of God’s covenant with his people Israel would deprive Arab Christians of their rights to land and a state. Israel has repeatedly given up land for peace (the Sinai, southern Lebanon, and Gaza), and even Netanyahu has accepted the idea of a Palestinian state. There exist many obstacles to the formation of such a state, not least of which is Hamas’ refusal to recognize Israel’s right to exist. But recognition of God’s ongoing covenant with his Chosen People is not one of those obstacles.

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