

Conversion of the Jews

How should the Christian church relate to the Jewish people? Should we evangelize the Israelites that they too might come into the church, so that "there shall be one fold, and one shepherd"? Do the Jews, apart from faith in Christ, already dwell in a saving covenant with God? Should we seek their conversion to Christianity?

The answer of a committee of US Catholic bishops is surprising:

'However, this evangelizing task no longer includes the wish to absorb the Jewish faith into Christianity and so end the distinctive witness of Jews to God in human history.

Thus, while the Catholic Church regards the saving act of Christ as central to the process of human salvation for all, it also acknowledges that *Jews already dwell in a saving covenant with God*. The Catholic Church must always evangelize and will always witness to its faith in the presence of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ to Jews and to all other people. In so doing, the Catholic Church respects fully the principles of religious freedom and freedom of conscience, so that sincere individual converts from any tradition or people, including the Jewish people, will be welcomed and accepted.

However, it now recognizes that Jews are also called by God to prepare the world for God's kingdom. Their witness to the kingdom, which did not originate with the Church's experience of Christ crucified and raised, *must not be curtailed by seeking the conversion of the Jewish people to Christianity.*'

(Reflections on Covenant and Mission. Consultation of The National Council of Synagogues and The Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs, USCCB. August 12, 2002. Emphasis mine.)

Thus according to these bishops, Catholics no longer wish to absorb the Jewish faith into Christianity; the Jews already dwell in a saving covenant with God; and we should not seek the conversion of Jewish people to Christianity.

That is altogether different from the teaching of the New Testament (and indeed from the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church).

The Jews are indeed a special people. The apostle Paul asks: 'What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision?' He answers: 'Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God.' Later on he adds that to the Israelites 'pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen' (Romans 3: 1, 2; 9:4, 5).

The Jews are greatly privileged: they possess the Scriptures, and they are the natural heirs of the promises of God to the Patriarchs. But does that mean that the Jews are automatically in a saving covenant with God? No, for John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah, cried out to them: 'Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones' (Luke 3:8).

The apostle Paul further states that there is *no distinction* between Jews and the rest of us, the Gentiles, on two accounts. He says:

1. 'What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin' (Romans 3:9).

2. 'For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved' (Romans 10:12).

Jews and Gentiles have the same problem: sin. Jews and Gentiles have only one solution: Jesus. We all must call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation.

The apostle Paul did not believe that the Jews were in a saving covenant simply because they are Jews. He had great anguish and sorrow because on the whole the Jews had rejected Jesus Christ, and he prayed earnestly for their salvation. He preached the gospel to everyone – if anything he gave priority to the Jews:

'For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for *the Jew first* and also for the Greek' (Romans 1:16).

Should we seek 'the conversion of the Jewish people to Christianity'? The Catholic bishops say No! The Bible says, 'To the Jew first'!

We owe a great debt to the Israelites. Our faith is a continuation and fulfillment of their religion. Our Bible was written by Jews. We are partakers of the blessings promised to their forefathers. We have a Jewish Messiah! The least we can do is pray earnestly for them and share the good news of Jesus Christ with the hope that the Jews too may be saved.