

## **Some Thoughts on the Welcome Address of Father Isaac Jacob, O.S.B. to Participants of the First Catholic Institute for Holocaust Studies at the Benedictine Center of Tel Gamaliel, June 13, 1989**

*Written by Sister Gemma Del Duca, S.C. and Carl A. Tori, Ph.D.,  
June 24, 2014, The Feast of John the Baptist*

From reading and reflection on Father Isaac Jacob's address, we came to appreciate some profound concepts and beliefs that he conveyed to his audience that June day in 1989 at the Benedictine Center at Tel Gamaliel, located near Bet Shemesh in Israel. He began, as one would expect, by emphasizing the need for the Church to undertake the challenges of *Nostra Aetate* but with this specificity: recognize the harshness of serious study of the Holocaust, "and how its causes still impact on our post-modern world" (1). Yet, to do so with hope and, "Believe that the Word can come forth under the Spirit during this experience" (4).

His listeners were challenged to bring to this "harsh" study their inheritance "of the Word, and the Meal...to rearrange the Word of God for our time. To take into account the Word of God as it is tied to the Jewish people as it comes forth in our time" (2). This required that if Catholics were going to be creative in this effort then it would be about "liturgy" but with a new dynamic. "At the beginning of the Mass we hear the Word while sitting, it is Shema Israel (Hear, O Israel), it is listening to the Word of God, and God help us if we get the same meaning as the last time we heard it!" (2) The listener is transformed by the Word to "a new level of consciousness about the Word of God," hearing the Word "as Israel" because "we are part of Israel" (2).

This deep listening to the Word prepares one to eat the Meal that "will not be a dead meal because it will be suffused with a new understanding and meaning of where we are standing before God's Word, and therefore, what we are to do with our lives." And this leads to the recognition of the call to relationship: "relationship with Israel, in the sense of the Jewish

people” (3). The Church recognizes and is challenged to remember “that she received the revelation of the Torah, (so-called Old Testament), through the people with whom God in inexpressible mercy deigned to establish the Ancient Covenant” (3-4), and must not “forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that good olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild olive branches of the Gentiles (cf. Rom. 11:17-24)” (4).

But before going further, Father Isaac turned to the word that has become an icon for the mass murder of the Jews, “Holocaust.” Replace this term, he urged, with the Hebrew word, “Shoah” that “defies definition” (3). It can be “translated as heap, rubble. In other words, destroy that city utterly, as sometimes is required by the Lord God in the Scripture” (4). What remains are the ashes of utter destruction and for all time. Attempts to comprehend this devastating reality may lead one to say, “...who needs it? Why are we wasting our time on that? Why should we be bothered with that?” (4). “Only because you cannot, we cannot as a community, understand God’s Word in our time, in our worship, unless we are able to explain how this happened to this people, who are historically identified with God” (4).

So the Jewish reading of the Word and our Catholic point of view, two differing perspectives, have clashed throughout history that prepared the fertile ground for the Shoah (5). There is then a need for Catholics to reconcile their “praise-oriented study” and their obligation to study seriously the Shoah (5). “It is all too easy to say, ‘Alleluia,’ and praise the Lord...but if we are empty-headed about the Shoah, and how the Lord is coming across in history...and at the same time being called to a deeper participation in the Word...we have to come through this, it is a question of our obligation” (5).

Fulfilling this obligation requires analysis of how one reads Scripture: either in a universalist way or a particularist way. Isaac Jacob reminded his audience that “Christians are

accustomed to reading it in a universalistic way” (6). An over-emphasis on the universalist view minimizes or eliminates altogether the particular history of the people through whom Scripture has been transmitted, in this case, the Jews. A particularist understanding of Scripture recognizes that we are reading about Jewish history. “...A Jew would say, we are talking about our history. Lord, our God of Israel, King of the World...we want to know what you can learn about our history” (6). So Christians “...develop your universalism with a Jewish reading that sees the Sinai Covenant as central” (6). This then raises the question: “...what is revelation, what is revealed?” (7).

Is revelation about “the heaviness of God (Kavod Adonai)?” (7). Isaac Jacob responded, “God is heavy on His people because He has identified with His people, which heaviness becomes as a light to the Gentiles, to the world” (7). And so, “Israel is also a light, in that sense, it is Revelation” (7). But first of all “it has to be understood” [as] “a heaviness of God, an identity with God, a Covenant with God, a relationship with the Lord” (7). However, it was precisely these two interpretations, legitimate and not mutually exclusive, that throughout “history have emphasized antagonism, and...helped to prepare the Shoah. Because, when the fulfillment of universal salvation has come in Our Lord Jesus Christ, what can Judaism be?” (7).

Here a problem arises: “The most complimentary thing you can say about Judaism is that there is the Covenant, My people, the Lord God, the Covenant of Sinai, it continues, and that is how I am going to live my life. And yet, you are in an era of the Christ, which says there is salvation for all humankind. Therefore, where do you stand as a Jew, insisting on this special relationship?” (7)...The mystery of Israel was not quite understandable without the parameters of theology and a closeness to God” (8). It was *Nostra Aetate* that “turned around the thinking

about the Jews and therefore [what] the Sinai Covenant implied and therefore the vocation of the Jewish people” (8).

*Nostra Aetate* created a sea change in Catholic-Jewish relations. “What is really revolutionary about it is that we are asked to enter into dialogue, a fraternal dialogue, with the Jewish people, in order to understand, in order to share in the fruit of Biblical and theological study. In other words, it is like saying we can learn: to my mind that is the most revolutionary statement perhaps, of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, up until now. You can look at it in different ways, but that we can learn, and learn in terms of Biblical Studies and in relationship with the Jewish people. It is an opening to recreating a new reading of Sacred Scripture” (9). Now there exists the “possibility of balancing the universalist and the particularist” points of view (9).

For Isaac Jacob, this new reading of the Sacred Scripture “has to come out of the consideration for the Land of Israel. And, if we are going to get into modern times, inexorably that entails the State of Israel...I want to emphasize how it comes from the Tanah, the Biblical concept, the Biblical understanding of the Land” where “The Lord is speaking to Israel, and says this is the Land I promised you, this is the Land of Israel...and that is the sign of the relationship, and you can understand how we are doing together in so far as you are living in peace or not in peace, or you are in, or you are out of Israel!” (12).

Furthermore, “what it means to be a believing Christian you have to do something with all these references to Israel as the Land for the Jewish People, or you have to fall back on a kind of universalist interpretation...I would theologially propose to you that the Shoah is tied to the coming back to the Land of the People” (13). “The Land and the People are important because they give a solid sense of what Revelation is” (15)\*.

Dialogue is the key. The challenge is re-engaging the Word in the shadow of the Shoah and in the light of *Nostra Aetate*. Isaac Jacob placed the challenge clearly before his listeners, especially on the issue of Land as it relates to both Biblical and modern Israel. The “Ancient Covenant” God made with Israel is the instrument through which we received and receive Revelation. And so the focus par excellence for this task of engagement is the “liturgy,” where we come together to celebrate and to be transformed by the Word and the Meal. It thus becomes the source for “fraternal dialogue with the Jewish people” with “an opening to recreating a new reading of Sacred Scripture” (9). Isaac Jacob had no doubt about the power and importance of this dialogue, “In other words, it is like saying we can learn from one another which to my mind is the most revolutionary statement perhaps of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (9). His message of 1989 prepares us to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* and to continue in renewed and creative ways this “fraternal dialogue with the Jewish people” in our time.

---

All page references are to the unpublished address made by Father Isaac Jacob, O.S.B. at the Benedictine Center at Tel Gamaliel on June 13, 1989.

\* Since the writing of the Welcome Address, Isaac Jacob’s thought about the Land of Israel evolved as reflected in his last published document, *The Rule of Benedict: Bridge to Israel* (as found in the *American Benedictine Review* 45:4, Dec. 1994):

The existence of the state of Israel is certainly implied in the ecumenical dialogue between the Church and Judaism. That having been said, that fact does not prejudice judgments on the political level, whether in regard to the rights of the Palestinian people, or to the judgments and policies of the state of Israel. Each party, including the Vatican state, must be judged on its individual merits. And history will judge... With its return theologically to Israel and the Middle East, the Church will sense more keenly its relationship with Judaism and Islam, the other monotheistic communities in the Land where it was born (405-06).