

Response to Fr. John Donahue

Re: The Old Covenant and the USCCB Catechism

By Robert Sungenis

Commonweal

March 13, 2009 / Volume CXXXVI, Number 5

ARTICLE

Trouble Ahead?

The Future of Jewish-Catholic Relations

John R. Donahue

By any standard, the almost forty-five years since the Second Vatican Council issued the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra aetate*) have witnessed unparalleled growth among Catholics in understanding Judaism. The church has acknowledged the sins of the past, and various conversations and dialogues between Catholics and Jews have addressed not only theological issues, but common social concerns, while cementing bonds of friendship. Jews and Christians pray together and share common hopes for healing a broken world.

Actions, of course, speak louder than words. And more than any official document, the dramatic actions of Pope John Paul II bequeathed to Catholics new possibilities for understanding and reconciliation: embracing his lifelong Jewish friend, Jerzy Kluger; addressing Jewish groups in Germany, proclaiming that God's covenant with the Jews was never revoked; praying the psalms with rabbis in a Roman synagogue; an aging John Paul, head bowed, visiting Yad Vashem (the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem); and leaning on a cane while placing the following prayer in the Western Wall ("Wailing Wall") of the Temple of Jerusalem:

God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants

to bring Your name to the nations:

we are deeply saddened by the behavior of those

who in the course of history have caused these children of Yours to suffer

and asking Your forgiveness

we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood

with the people of the Covenant.

Yet, despite the continued stated commitment of Pope Benedict XVI to follow the course of John Paul II, clouds have emerged on the horizon that appear to threaten the continuing growth of mutual understanding.

One extraordinary event was the lifting in January of the excommunications of four bishops of the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX). The traditionalist views of the society, which was founded by Archbishop Marcel-François Lefebvre in 1970 in opposition to the decrees and reforms of Vatican II, are well known, and anti-Semitism is in its DNA. The Vatican announcement brought particular shock because one of the bishops, Richard Williamson, is a notorious Holocaust denier. Bishop Bernard Fellay, superior general of the SSPX, quickly dissociated himself from Williamson's remarks, forbidding him to make any statements on "political and social issues." At the same time, Fellay reiterated the mission of the society as "the propagation and restoration of authentic Catholic doctrine, set forth in the dogmas of the faith," affirming his acceptance of the ecumenical councils up to Vatican II. In other words, the SSPX welcomes the lifting of the excommunications as a new opportunity to put the church in order.

The results of this imbroglio continue to unfold, with outrage being expressed by Jewish groups and major Catholic leaders and commentators. In a well-received February address to Jewish leaders, Pope Benedict responded by stating forcefully that "it is beyond question that any denial or minimization of this terrible crime [the Shoah or Holocaust] is intolerable and altogether unacceptable," and that "the church is profoundly and irrevocably committed to reject all anti-Semitism and to continue to build good and lasting relations between our two communities." Questions about the direction in which Benedict is steering the church continue to arise around the SSPX controversy, however. In Rome, as people often note, symbolism and timing are of paramount importance. The excommunications were lifted one day before the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, which is also the traditional conclusion of the Week of Prayer for the Promotion of Christian Unity. More startling, the next day was the fiftieth anniversary of Pope John XXIII's announcement (to a shocked audience of cardinals) that he intended to call an ecumenical council. The Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*) and *Nostra aetate* were to be landmark contributions of Vatican II, the latter the initial step in reversing centuries of virulent anti-Semitism. Archbishop Lefebvre vehemently opposed these declarations during the council, as his followers have since.

The outreach to the SSPX had significant precedents in two earlier papal actions. The first occurred on July 7, 2007, when Pope Benedict XVI issued an apostolic letter (*Summorum pontificum*) on "Use of the Preconciliar Liturgical Form." Contrary to popular opinion, the pope did not restore the "Latin Mass," since celebration in Latin of the Mass of Pope Paul VI has always been possible. Restored was the Tridentine rite for the Mass and for all the other sacraments. In effect, the Tridentine worldview embodied in the language of those rites, one with a problematic attitude toward Judaism, has been welcomed back into the church. The second precedent, which will

be discussed below, has been the toning down of John Paul's powerful statement that the covenant with the Jewish people was never revoked. But first the liturgy.

R. Sungenis: As we will see, the statement of John Paul II about the covenant not being revoked was not "toned down." The problem is that Fr. Donahue misunderstands what John Paul II meant. In fact, Fr. Donahue's entire article is marred due to his misunderstanding of the covenant.

Shadows over the Liturgy

In 1960 Pope John XXIII had already removed the word perfidis ("perfidious" or "faithless") from the post-Tridentine Good Friday liturgy, yet the pre-Vatican II liturgy, when restored by Benedict in 2007, still contained a petition "for the Jews, that the Lord our God may take the veil from their hearts and that they also may acknowledge Our Lord Jesus Christ," followed by a prayer that God not "refuse your mercy even to the Jews; hear the prayers which we offer for the blindness of that people so that they may acknowledge the light of your truth, which is Christ, and be delivered from their darkness." Jewish groups and Catholic leaders objected to the use of terms such as "veil" and "blindness," seeing in them a return to a theology of naive supersessionism that the council had decisively moved the church beyond. (It should also be noted that historically, Good Friday services, with their dramatic recitation of Christ's crucifixion, often prompted violent attacks on Jews.) In response to these concerns, Benedict decided to amend the Good Friday prayer. The following prayer was to be substituted.

R. Sungenis: Vatican II said nothing about doing away with the doctrine of supersessionism. Supersessionism is the teaching that the Old Covenant, the Mosaic covenant, has been revoked and replaced by the New Covenant. This has been the consistent teaching of the Church from the unanimity of the Fathers and the magisterial teaching of both the Councils of Florence and Trent. There has been no statement issued by the Catholic Church that says the doctrine of supersessionism has been set aside.

Let us pray for the Jews. May the Lord Our God enlighten their hearts so that they may acknowledge Jesus Christ, the savior of all men. Almighty and everlasting God, you who want all men to be saved and to reach the awareness of the truth, graciously grant that, with the fullness of peoples entering into your church, all Israel may be saved.

While removal of the language of blindness and immersion in darkness is an improvement over the original Tridentine language, this formulation continued to be met with serious reservations. No reason was given as to why the prayer from the Reformed Rite of Paul VI was not used:

Let us pray for the Jewish people, the first to hear the word of God, that they may continue to grow in the love of his name and in faithfulness to his covenant. Almighty and eternal God, long ago you gave your promise to Abraham and his posterity. Listen to your church as we pray that the people you first made your own may arrive at the fullness of redemption.

The significant difference in the prayers is the petition that the Jews “may acknowledge Jesus Christ, the savior of all men.” Evident here is an enduring concern of Pope Benedict’s (since his time as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) to articulate the centrality of Christ for the salvation of all humanity. That concern is most forcefully presented in the CDF’s 2000 declaration “Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.” Though not dealing directly with the relationship of Judaism and Christianity, and while affirming that unique relationship, certain statements from the document raise serious issues in any Jewish-Christian dialogue: “Jesus Christ has a significance and value for the human race and its history, which are unique and singular, proper to him alone, exclusive, universal, and absolute”; though “the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the church, have the fullness of the means of salvation.”

Jewish leaders in interreligious dialogue, such as the late Rabbi Leon Klenicki and Edward Kessler, characterized the declaration as “a step backwards,” arguing that it portrayed non-Catholics as “inferior and unworthy.”

Catholic theology holds three things in tension: “the unique significance of Jesus,” the unique relationship of Christianity and Judaism, and the possibility of salvation for people who have no explicit knowledge of, or belief in, Christ. While reconciling this tension goes beyond the scope of this essay, a brief comment may help. Shortly before his death, Cardinal Avery Dulles addressed these issues with his customary theological insight (“Who Can Be Saved,” *First Things*, February 2008). He noted that “Vatican II left open the question whether non-Christian religions contain revelation and are means that can lead their adherents to salvation. It did say, however, that other religions contain elements of truth and goodness, that they reflect rays of the truth that enlighten all men.”

Dulles’s conclusion is perhaps the best summary of contemporary church teaching:

The universal evidences of the divine, under the leading of grace, can give rise to a rudimentary faith that leans forward in hope and expectation to further manifestations of God’s merciful love and of his guidance for our lives. By welcoming the signs already given and placing their hope in God’s redeeming love, persons who have not heard the tidings of the gospel may nevertheless be on the road to salvation. If they are faithful to the grace given them, they may have good hope of receiving the truth and blessedness for which they yearn.

Christianity's relationship to Judaism is even more complex, both historically and theologically, and especially regarding any formal effort by the church to proselytize Jews. Cardinal Walter Kasper, head of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, has put it this way: "Because we have all this in common [the sacred Scriptures and divine promises] and because as Christians we know that God's covenant with Israel by God's faithfulness is not broken (Rom 11:29; 3:4), mission understood as call to conversion from idolatry to the living and true God [1Thess 1:9] does not apply and cannot be applied to Jews."

R. Sungenis: Neither Romans 11:29 nor Romans 3:4 say anything about a "covenant with Israel" that "is not broken." The former passage merely says that God still loves the Jews, but not because the covenant is unbroken; rather, it is because of His commitment to the Fathers, namely, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The covenant that God made with Abraham was not exclusively with the Jews. As the New Testament teaches, Abraham's covenant was meant for the whole world, Jews and Gentiles, for it is now the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. That is the only covenant that is "unbroken," but it is not a "covenant with Israel" but a covenant with Gentiles and Jews who believe in Jesus Christ.

While the wording of Pope Benedict's Good Friday prayer is an understandably neuralgic issue, the most important defect of the restored Tridentine Mass, especially in light of what Kasper notes Jews and Christians have in common, is the old rite's almost total neglect of readings from the Old Testament. Since for most Catholics exposure to Scripture still mainly occurs at liturgical celebrations, those regularly celebrating or attending the Tridentine Mass will not routinely be exposed to the riches of the Old Testament. The preconciliar missal contained only 1 percent of the readings from the Old Testament. These were limited to the ritual beginning of the Mass by reciting part of Psalm 42 (NAB, Ps 43), snippets from the psalms in the Introit and Graduale and some longer selections from the Old Testament during Holy Week. During the four Sundays of Advent, devotees of the restored Tridentine liturgy will never hear proclaimed the beautiful words of Isaiah that so inform Christian hymns and imagination. Instead, they will hear selections from the Pauline letters that are not correlated with the themes of the liturgical season.

Yet Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy states clearly, "The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word. In this way a more representative portion of the Holy Scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years." The postconciliar General Instruction on the Roman Missal implemented this directive by prescribing three readings, one from the Old Testament, followed by a responsorial psalm, a reading from Paul or other apostolic writings, and a Gospel reading—all arranged in a three-year cycle. This cycle of readings has been followed by many other Christian groups and has been hailed as a significant ecumenical achievement. Groups

such as the SSPX, which claim to be guardians of “Tradition,” might be surprised to know that prior to the Council of Trent various rites such as the Ambrosian, the Gallican, and the Mozarabic, contained three readings, including one from “prophecy,” that is, the Old Testament, as did the older Roman rite for special feasts. Any widespread restoration of the Tridentine liturgy means that the great narratives of Exodus, the struggles for the land, the outcries of the prophets against injustice, along with the joyous praise of God and pleas for help in the Psalms, will no longer be “opened up” for parishioners in many Catholic churches. The specter of Marcion, the second-century heretic who wanted to excise the Old Testament from Christian faith, seems to hover over the restored Tridentine rite. With the granting of widespread permission to use the Tridentine rite and the possible reinstatement of over five hundred SSPX priests celebrating public liturgies, an increasing number of Catholics will be deprived of the rich treasury of the inspired texts that Jews and Christians together cherish as God’s Word. That shared biblical language is indispensable for any serious dialogue with our Jewish brothers and sisters.

A Covenant Never Revoked?

Addressing representatives of the Jewish Community at Mainz, Germany, in November 1989, Pope John Paul II spoke of “the people of God of the Old Covenant, which has never been revoked,” and of “our faith in the One God, who chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and made with them a covenant of eternal love, which was never revoked (see Gen 27, 12; Rom 11:29). It was rather confirmed by the gift of the Torah to Moses, opened by the prophets to the hope of eternal redemption and to the universal commitment for justice and peace.” In a general audience on April 28, 1999, John Paul II elaborated on his remarks about the covenant: “Today dialogue means that Christians should be more aware of these elements which bring us closer together. Just as we take note of the ‘covenant never revoked by God’ so we should consider the intrinsic value of the Old Testament, even if this only acquires its full meaning in the light of the New Testament and contains promises that are fulfilled in Jesus.”

R. Sungenis: Notice above that John Paul II defined the irrevocable covenant as “the one God, who chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and made with them a covenant of eternal love, which was never revoked.” But Fr. Donahue fails to take notice of this important distinction, even though it is the crux of the confusion today. Fr. Donahue shows us his misunderstanding a few pages later when he begins to complain that US bishops voted to remove the sentence from page 131 of the 2006 USCCB catechism, the sentence that stated: “Thus the covenant the God made with the Jewish people through Moses remains eternally valid for them.” Apparently, Fr. Donahue does not realize that the covenant with Abraham and the covenant with Moses are two entirely different covenants. The former is irrevocable (cf. Gn 17:7; Hb 6:13-18); the latter is revocable, and was indeed revoked (cf. 2Cor 3:6-14; Col 2:14-15; Eph 2:15; Heb 7:18; 8:1-13; 10:9).

John Paul's powerful affirmations are a virtual paraphrase of the conclusion of St. Paul's plaintive reflection on the lack of response from his Jewish brothers and sisters to his proclamation of the saving work of Jesus (Rom 9-11). "I have great sorrow and constant anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and separated from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kin according to the flesh" (Rom 11:2-3), Paul wrote in a startling confession from someone who considered everything in his previous life as "loss" and "rubbish," compared to the "supreme good of knowing Christ, my Lord" (Phil 3:7-8). Reflecting on why God's chosen people failed to accept God's chosen Messiah, and on the continuing relation of Jews to the baptized, Paul asserts that ultimately "all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:25-26). "In respect to election, they [the Jewish people] are beloved because of the patriarchs," he writes. "For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (11:28-29). Paul stands in awe before the mystery of God's saving action: "For God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!" (11:32-33).

These words become our own every time we recall Pope John Paul's praise for "the covenant never revoked." Writing about the implications of this new Catholic understanding in *Commonweal* ("Christians and Jews: Starting Over," January 31, 2003), the Scripture scholar Luke Timothy Johnson put it this way. "Christians are obliged to learn now not about Jews but from Jews, not out of a fear of Jews, but out of the need to discover and appreciate the shape of Christianity's own heritage through a deeper knowledge and appreciation of the gift that God has given-and keeps giving-to the Jews."

R. Sungenis: The only gift that "God has given and keeps giving to the Jews" is the gift of Jesus Christ, but the Jews have consistently rejected that gift. In rejecting the Logos, the Jews have nothing to teach us; rather, they serve as a warning as to what happens when one hardens his heart against God. As St. Paul put it in the face of the constant rejection of Christ among the Jews, they "are not pleasing to God, and hostile to the whole world" (1 Thess 2:15).

Obviously, Pope John Paul II did not solve the many exegetical and theological problems presented by the covenant texts in the New Testament. Instead, he shaped the discussion in new and unexpected ways. It is of course true that the New Testament often speaks of the relationship between the "new covenant" and "the old," perhaps most emphatically in the Letter to the Hebrews, which is often cited in support of traditional Christian ideas about supersessionism. In Hebrews, Jesus is described as the high priest of a new covenant, who "by calling this covenant 'new,' has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (Heb 8:13). But the seemingly familiar "covenant texts," which express the different perspectives of authors addressing different situations and different communities, are in fact much more complex than they appear. It is important to understand, for instance, that Hebrews is not a treatise on the relation of Judaism and Christianity. Rather, it is an exhortation for Christians to "persevere in running the race, while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the

leader and perfecter of faith” (12:2). Quoting it out of context distorts its meaning. Continued systematic Jewish-Christian dialogue on the theme of covenant cannot begin and end with any one New Testament text.

R. Sungenis: But it is not from “one New Testament text” that this teaching is derived, but a plethora of passages and official commentary on those passages. Allow me to elaborate:

- Hebrews 7:18: “On the one hand, a former commandment is annulled because of its weakness and uselessness...”
- Hebrews 10:9: “Then he says, ‘Behold, I come to do your will.’ He takes away the first [covenant] to establish the second [covenant]...”
- 2 Corinthians 3:14: “For to this day when they [the Jews] read the Old Covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away”
- Hebrews 8:7: “For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another”
- Colossians 2:14: “Having canceled the written code, with its decrees, that was against us and stood opposed to us; He took it away nailing it to the cross”
- Ephesians 2:15: by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.
- Romans 7:6: But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.
- The Catechism of the Council of Trent: “...the people, aware of the abrogation of the Mosaic Law...”
- Council of Florence: “that the matter pertaining to the law of the Old Testament, of the Mosaic law...although they were suited to the divine worship at that time, after our Lord’s coming had been signified by them, ceased, and the sacraments of the New Testament began”
- Council of Trent: “but not even the Jews by the very letter of the law of Moses were able to be liberated or to rise therefrom”
- Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, para. 29: “...the New Testament took the place of the Old Law which had been abolished...but on the gibbet of His death Jesus made void the Law with its decrees fastened the handwriting of the Old Testament to the Cross”
- Cardinal Ratzinger: “Thus the Sinai [Mosaic] Covenant is indeed superseded” (*Many Religions – One Covenant*, p. 70).
- St. John Chrysostom: “Yet surely Paul’s object everywhere is to annul this Law....And with much reason; for it was through a fear and a horror of this that the Jews obstinately opposed grace” (*Homily on Romans*, 6:12); “And so while no one annuls a man’s covenant, the covenant of God after four hundred and thirty years is annulled; for if not that covenant but another instead of it bestows

what is promised, then is it set aside, which is most unreasonable” (Homily on Galatians, Ch 3).

- St. Augustine: “Instead of the grace of the law which has passed away, we have received the grace of the gospel which is abiding; and instead of the shadows and types of the old dispensation, the truth has come by Jesus Christ. Jeremiah also prophesied thus in God’s name: ‘Behold, the days come, says the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah...’ Observe what the prophet says, not to Gentiles, who had not been partakers in any former covenant, but to the Jewish nation. He who has given them the law by Moses, promises in place of it the New Covenant of the gospel, that they might no longer live in the oldness of the letter, but in the newness of the spirit” (Letters, 74, 4).
- Justin Martyr: Now, law placed against law has abrogated that which is before it, and a covenant which comes after in like manner has put an end to the previous one; and an eternal and final law – namely, Christ – has been given to us, and the covenant is trustworthy...Have you not read...by Jeremiah, concerning this same new covenant, He thus speaks: ‘Behold, the days come,’ says the Lord, ‘that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...’” (Dialogue with Trypho, Ch 11).

The danger of moving in that direction is evident in the way Pope John Paul II’s citation of “the covenant never revoked” has recently been challenged. Last August, Catholic News Service reported that the U.S. bishops had asked the Vatican for a change in the United States Catholic Catechism for Adults. The bishops sought to clarify church teaching on God’s covenant with the Jewish people. Though CNS described the change as “small,” it is really quite significant. The bishops want to replace the sentence “Thus the covenant that God made with the Jewish people through Moses remains eternally valid for them” with “To the Jewish people, whom God first chose to hear his word, ‘belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ’” (Rom 9:4-5; see Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 839).

R. Sungenis: No, the removal of the erroneous sentence from page 131 of the 2006 USCCB catechism is not a “challenge” to John Paul II’s statement: “the covenant never revoked.” Rather, Fr. Donahue’s comparison between the US Bishops’ removal of the guilty sentence from the USCCB catechism and John Paul II’s statement about the irrevocable nature of the Abrahamic covenant demonstrates his total misunderstanding of the elements of this controversy. Fr. Donahue insists upon coalescing the covenant of Abraham and the covenant to Moses. But as anyone who has been in theology for a long time will tell you, it’s all about making the proper distinctions, or more colloquially, ‘the devil is in the details.’ What the USCCB said about the Mosaic covenant was heretical, and thus it had to be removed. What John Paul II said about the Abrahamic covenant was correct, and therefore should be applauded. I’m sorry to have to say this, but I wish Commonweal would give us a Catholic scholar who realizes this distinction

and can write cogently about it. Until then, Commonweal is only making common confusion.

This proposed substitution replaces John Paul's startling "covenant never revoked" language with an uncontextualized and easily misconstrued statement of St. Paul. The problem is compounded by the "talking points" distributed to the bishops along with a letter from Msgr. David Malloy, USCCB general secretary. "Catholics understand that all previous covenants that God made with the Jewish people have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ through the new covenant established through his sacrificial death on the Cross," Malloy writes. "The prior version of the text might be understood to imply that one of the former covenants imparts salvation without the mediation of Christ, whom Christians believe to be the universal savior of all people." In a subsequent interview, Fr. James Massa, executive director of the USCCB Secretariat of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, told CNS that he did not "anticipate any tensions in the relationship" between Catholics and Jews as long as the proposed change is properly understood as arising from a need to "remove ambiguity" in the catechism. Massa went on to state that church teaching affirms that the Jewish people are "in a real relationship with God based on a covenant that has never been revoked," and that "all covenants with Israel find fulfillment in Christ, who is the savior of all."

Massa added that the current wording in the catechism "was not flat-out wrong" but "was ambiguous and needed to be qualified." The qualification is a subtle and perhaps problematic one: while the covenant is not revoked, it is fulfilled only in Christ, which seems to suggest that what Jews and Christians have in common are not only the Old Testament and its promises, but Christ. Moreover, as Cardinal Kasper reminds us, in any thorough discussion of the question, the radical eschatological thrust of Paul's thought throughout the letter to the Romans must be taken into account. The covenanting action of God in history will reach its completion only when "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:22). Neither the original covenants nor the new covenant has brought about the fullness of the messianic age of justice and peace promised throughout Scripture. Jewish people look to the time when all people will worship the God of Israel (Is 66:18-23), and Christians hope for the time when Christ "hands over the kingdom to his God and Father" (1 Cor 15:24). Or, as Kasper writes, "For both of us this sacred text is an open text pointing out to a future which will be determined by God alone at the end of time." Jews do not have to become Christians in order to be saved, Kasper notes: "If they follow their own conscience and believe in God's promises as they understand them in their religious tradition they are in line with God's plan."

R. Sungenis: Not quite. Kasper is guilty here of making the exception into the rule. That is, the Catholic Church has what we may call an "exception clause" in its insistence from the teaching of Boniface VIII and Eugene IV that one must become a member of the Catholic Church in order to be saved. That exception was delineated by Pius IX in an 1863 encyclical, *Quanto conficiamur moerere*, and is commonly referred to as "invincible ignorance." It is applicable to any individual, from whatever nation or

background, who is not privileged to hear the Gospel of salvation directly. But God is the only one who can judge whether an individual is really “invincibly ignorant” or, as the case may be, stubbornly and deliberately resistant to accepting the Christian Gospel. The Christian Gospel says that only through belief in Jesus Christ can one be saved. But the Jews, at large, have not only heard this truth, they have, as a whole people, consciously rejected it. Whether this stance could possibly qualify as “invincible ignorance” is something only God can judge, not Cardinal Kasper. Hence, it is quite wrong to make the definitive statement, as Fr. Donahue has done, that claims “Jews do not have to become Christians in order to be saved.” If not, then St. Paul’s efforts to preach the Gospel to the Jews for their salvation, and the whole New Testament, become meaningless. Fr. Donahue, and Cardinal Kasper, need to make it clear that belief in Christ is the rule, and that disbelief in Christ, in rare cases of invincible ignorance that can only be judged by God, are the exception. As an exception, it applies to individuals, not whole ethnic groups who have heard the Christian Gospel for most of their lives and have rejected it.

In removing the original wording of the Catholic Catechism for Adults, are the ambiguity and stimulus to reflection evoked by the phrase “covenant never revoked” qualified or are they nullified? Unless cited elsewhere, Pope John Paul II’s strong statement will never be read in the revised catechism. The revision was approved by the U.S. bishops, and is being reviewed by the Holy See. Since Pope Benedict referred to Jews as “people of the covenant” during his February meeting with Jewish leaders, the ultimate fate of the revision is still uncertain.

R. Sungenis: No, it is certain, because the Vatican has issued no stay on the US Bishop’s decision. According to the USCCB, the sentence on page 131 will be removed in the next edition of the USCCB catechism.

These clouds on the horizon will never overshadow the incredible progress made in Jewish-Christian understanding over the past four decades, yet they presage disturbing developments that may make future dialogue less fruitful. Whatever form the restoration of the SSPX will take, it is difficult to believe that the group will abandon its desire for a return to a pre-Vatican II church, or its traditional Christian anti-Judaism. Catholics who may be attracted to the restored Tridentine liturgy will attend Mass without hearing the Old Testament, which they share as the revealed Word of God with Jewish people today. The toning-down of the strong statements of John Paul II on “the covenant never revoked” may herald a return to a discredited supersessionism, one that ultimately disregards the past and continuing action of God among the Jewish people.

R. Sungenis: Supersessionism has not been “discredited.” Unfortunately, the only one who has been discredited here is Fr. Donahue, simply because he either misunderstands the distinction between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, or he is deliberately “toning down” the distinction for his own agenda.

As these issues unfold we can do little better than hear again the words of a prophetic rabbi, the late Hershel Jonah Matt, written more than three decades ago (see Daniel Matt, *The Life and Writings of Rabbi Hershel Matt*):

Jews and Christians-our situations are somewhat different; our roles and tasks are somewhat different; our styles and modes are somewhat different. But we are covenanted to and by the same God of Israel; our essential teachings are markedly similar; our goals, identical. And the one whose second coming Christians await and whose (first) coming we Jews await-when he comes-will surely turn out to have the same face for all of us.

R. Sungenis: The fact is, Rabbi Hershel Matt is not waiting for the same God that Christians are waiting for, for our God has been identified as Jesus Christ, and no other. The Jews are not waiting for Jesus Christ to come back. They are waiting for another Messiah; someone other than Jesus Christ. As such, their messiah is different than our Messiah. Their messiah is a fictional person, because the real Messiah is not coming back for the Jews, *per se*, but for all those, Jew and Gentile, who believe Christ is the Son of God and our Lord and Savior.

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