

The Vatican Is Wrong: Jews Do Need Jesus

An important new statement from the Vatican on the relationship between the Catholic Church, the Jewish people and Jesus Christ makes many praiseworthy points. At the same time, it misunderstands Jesus' own mission to His Jewish people, thereby undermining fundamental tenets of the New Testament along with the very nature of the apostolic witness.

Issued on the 50th anniversary of the groundbreaking document "Nostra Aetate" ("In Our Time"), the new document, titled "The Gifts and Calling of God Are Irrevocable," rightly reiterates the Catholic Church's repudiation of replacement theology, also known as supersessionism, the teaching that the church has replaced (or superseded) Israel in God's plan of salvation. It also reiterates the Church's repudiation of anti-Semitism, quoting the dictum of Pope Francis that one cannot be both a Christian and an anti-Semite.

In addition, the new statement urges deep respect for Judaism and for the historic connection between the Jewish people and the God of Israel—the God whom Christians worship—also calling on Catholic Christians to learn from Judaism's interpretation of the Scriptures and to join with the Jewish people in standing for justice and caring for the poor.

All this is tremendously positive, as the Church continues to distance itself from the plagues of anti-Semitism and supersessionism, plagues that infected both Catholic and Protestant branches of the faith, in some circles until this day. And so it is right to recall the reality of the Holocaust, as this document does, since the Holocaust could hardly have taken place if not for more than a millennium of European, Church-based anti-Semitism.

Most importantly, the new statement states plainly that the Jewish people do not need to put their faith in Jesus Christ to be forgiven, since their faith culminates in the Torah, in contrast with the Christian faith, which culminates in Jesus. Therefore, we are told, there is no need for the Catholic Church to have a specific mission to convert Jews to Christianity, looking forward to the day when, in the mysteries of God, Jews and Christians will serve God together, shoulder to shoulder.

Not surprisingly, this statement has been hailed by Jewish leaders, in particular for its explicit call for the Church not to engage in an intentional, specific outreach to the Jewish people.

From my perspective as a Jewish believer in Jesus who is deeply indebted to my Christian friends who reached out to me as a rebellious, heroin-shooting, LSD-using, 16-year-old, hippie rock drummer, it would have been tragic had they thought not to share the Good News with me because I was Jewish.

To be sure, the new statement does allow for respectful interaction between the faiths and does not prohibit all Christian witness, but the overall sentiment of the statement, as reflected in numerous headlines, is that "Jews do not need Jesus to be saved," as if they can somehow be included in His salvific act while explicitly rejecting Him as Messiah.

Certainly, I agree that the Church's goal should not be to convert Jews to Christianity. Rather, the goal should be to help them embrace Jesus-Yeshua as their Messiah, discovering Him to be the one who fulfilled what was written in Moses and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17-20) rather than the one who came to start a new, somewhat foreign religion.

Yet the very fact that Jesus did come as the Jewish Messiah fundamentally contradicts the new Catholic statement. The

reasons are both fundamental and significant.

1. Jesus was recognized by His followers as the one spoken of by Moses and the prophets, not as the founder of a new religion (John 1:45) but as the one who was born King of the Jews and died King of the Jews (Matt. 2:1-6; 27:35-37).

Jesus showed His disciples that the Hebrew Scriptures—the Jewish Bible—predicted His death and resurrection (Luke 24:25-27; 24:44-48) and He rebuked the Jewish leadership for not recognizing Him as the Messiah, saying that if they truly believed Moses, they would believe Him (John 5:45-47).

2. If Jesus is not the Messiah of Israel, then He cannot be the Savior of the world. Instead, He should be repudiated as a false prophet, false teacher and false messiah.

Many Jewish leaders today have great respect for the Christian faith, saying that while Jesus is not the Jewish Messiah, He is the Christian Savior, but this cannot be true. If He is not Israel's Messiah, He cannot be the Savior of the world.

If Judaism, then, is right in rejecting Yeshua as Messiah, there should be no such thing as Christianity, since the essential witness of the New Testament would be false. If the witness of the New Testament is true, then Jews need Jesus as much as Gentiles do.

3. The Jewish rejection of Jesus in the Gospels and Acts is seen as the culmination of Israel's rejection of Moses and the prophets.

Jesus warned the Jewish crowds that in the future, Gentiles would be sitting at Abraham's table while many of them—"the sons of the kingdom"—would be cast out (Matt. 8:10-12), and Peter, Stephen, and Paul all stated explicitly that their people's refusal to recognize Jesus as Messiah was in keeping with their history as recorded in the Old Testament (Acts 3:13-23; 7:51-52; 13:16-41).

4. Jesus warned His followers—all of them Jews—that they would be put out of the synagogue (John 16:3), and so it was incipient Judaism that first rejected “Jewish Christians” more than the reverse.

This pattern begins to unfold in the book of Acts, as the apostles—again, all of them Jewish—were persecuted and threatened by the Jewish leadership (e.g., Acts 4-7), and in each new city where Paul traveled, it was only after his message was rejected by the synagogue that he began to preach to the Gentiles (e.g., Acts 13:41-48).

5. According to Paul, the gospel is to the Jew first (Rom. 1:16; this echoes Jesus’ words in Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8) and judgment is also for the Jew first (Rom. 2:6-11).

It is significant that the new Catholic statement relies primarily on Paul’s teaching in Romans 9-11, choosing overtly not to emphasize the teaching of Hebrews (addressed to Jewish followers of Jesus), which stated that the old covenant system, which was even then “becoming obsolete and growing old” was “ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8:13). This, Hebrews tells us, is because the new and better covenant, prophesied by Jeremiah (31:31-34) and inaugurated by Jesus (Luke 22:17-20), was now in effect (8:7-12; 10:14-18).

Yet it is in Romans 9-11 that Paul spoke of his deep agony because His Jewish people were separated from the Messiah (9:1-3; he did this while affirming God’s ongoing covenant with Israel in 9:4-5); he explained that both in past times and to this moment, it was only the remnant within Israel that was saved (9:6; 11:1-7); he prayed for the salvation of his people (10:1; why do that if the new Catholic statement is true?); he taught that Israel, on a national level, had been hardened but that in the end that hardness would be removed and his people would recognize their Messiah (11:7-27); thus, he explained, at present, the Jewish people are enemies of the gospel, even while still loved by God, “for the gifts and the

calling of God are irrevocable" (11:28-29).

Significantly, it is this very verse, Romans 11:29, that inspires the title of the new document, yet it fails to understand what Paul meant when he wrote it. Jews are still loved by God and remain heirs of the divine promises, but outside of Jesus, they are alienated from God. That is why, to the end of his life, Paul engaged in an intentional mission to reach his people with the Good News that the Messiah of Israel had come (Acts 28:16-31).

If we truly love the Jewish people, we should follow his example, both with our tears and with our compassionate and sensitive outreach, recognizing that no other people on earth are so near and yet so far.