

Can A Jew Be A Christian?

By Rev. John M. Oesterreicher

Australian Catholic Truth Society No.1217 (1955)

THERE are few events in the future as certain as the final recognition of Christ Jesus by Israel. It may be far or near, but come it will. Though not many reckon with it, it is surer than all our worldly expectations. Israel's return to Christ, that cardinal theme of history, sounds again and again in the Old Testament. Like a great melody, it moves through the Holy Books. The prophet Zechariah (Zacharias) speaks in the Name of Christ.

I will pour out upon the House of David, And upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, The spirit of grace, (the spirit) of prayer, And they shall look unto Me Whom they have pierced.

Indeed:

They shall mourn for Him, As one mourns for an only son. They shall lament over Him, As one laments for the firstborn. (Zech. 12: 10)

But grief will become joy at having found Him Who is the Firstborn of all creation, the Firstborn of Israel, the One Who is before and above all creatures, and at the same time, the Man of men, the Jew of Jews.

When Israel endured the Babylonian Captivity, Jeremiah predicted:

Behold, the days come, says the Lord, When I shall turn the captivity of My people . . . and I will cause them to return . . . (Jer. 30:3) And with great passion he continued:

I have loved you with an everlasting love . . . And I will build you again, And you shall be built, O virgin, Israel. (Jer. 31: 3, 4)

But it is not enough for the prophet to comfort his own people; he announces the good news to all the world:

Hear the word of the Lord, O all you nations, And declare it in the isles afar off, and say: He that scattered Israel gathers him, And keeps him as a shepherd does his flock. (Jer. 31:10)

The Babylonian Exile was a foreshadow of the present exile of the Jewish people, an exile most dire and sad in which Israel goes from suffering to suffering, an exile drenched with tears, an exile not only from the Land of Promise, but from tranquillity of heart. [Clearly, at this point Fr Oesterreicher is in agreement with the Orthodox Jewish rabbis who do not accept that the secularist Zionist political return to the land of Israel is NOT the return promised by the Lord by the hands of His Messiah.] But as this exile is more bitter than the former, so will its end be sweeter. When the people were led back to Jerusalem by Zerubbabel (Zerobabel) and Joshua,

Their mouth was filled with laughter, And their tongue with rejoicing. (Ps. 126 [125]:2)

But how much greater the joy, when Israel returns to the new Jerusalem.

All Israel Will Be Saved

This joy is not only foretold by the prophets of the Old Dispensation; it is announced by the Apostles of the New. St. Peter predicts that Israel's turning to Christ will bring about the "times of refreshment," "the day when all will be restored" (Acts 3: 20, 21). The heart of Saint Paul cries out: "All Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11: 26). And he calls the final union of Israel with Christ a "mystery," that is, part of Divine Revelation, a matter of faith, an important truth. Ignorance of this great mystery the Apostle considers a danger to our souls, a detriment to our spiritual life, for its knowledge must fill our minds with wonder, with astonishment at God's plan, with awe at His mercies. It must fill our hearts with love for Israel, the beloved of the Lord. How could it be otherwise? Who fully values, who appreciates this mystery, cannot but be drawn to them whom God will draw to Himself. No true Christian can refuse his particular affection to those with whom Christ does not wish to part, to those whom He will recall, who are the object of His Divine predilection.

The Apostle calls the turning of Israel to Christ a "revelation," because his hope is based not on fancy, but on the word of Christ, on His solemn prediction that Israel would in the end seek His Presence. In the speech which was to be His last to Jerusalem, Jesus denounced her for having killed the prophets and messengers of God; He predicted Israel's loneliness and despair because she had refused His protection. "As a hen gathers her young under her wings" (Luke 13: 34, 35), so had He offered to the children of Israel His care, His more-than-motherly affection. But they would have none of it; they would not hear the cry of His Heart. Having separated themselves from It, they were bound to be desolate. And yet their suffering would not last forever: "You shall not see Me henceforth till you say, Blessed be He that comes in the Name of the Lord." (Matt. 23: 39)

The People Born to Praise

There will be a time when Israel will see, and bear her heart to Christ, when the Light will pierce the cloud and show her the world and her part in it in the blessed vision of faith. There will be a day when the people of Israel, born to praise, the people to whom, as to no other nation, God gave the power to sing the songs of benediction - there will be an hour when Israel, who was made to be God's chanter, the psalmist of the Lord, will fill the earth with her shout: "Blessed be He!" That, one holy morn, Israel will rejoice in her Messiah, the Church believes with that utter certainty only His word can give. She prays because she loves; she prays to hasten that day.

That day is here, if only on a small scale, and it is anticipated, when even one Jew accepts Christ. Little wonder that the Church rejoices on that day! Her joy, the joy of the true Christian, is expressed in a letter written by Pope Gregory IX on the 5th day of May, 1236: "To all who come to the Christian faith," he wrote, "we open the bowels of paternal affection, desiring as we do the salvation of everyone. Yet converts from Judaism we embrace with even greater affection. For," he continued, using St. Paul's image, "this is our hope: If a branch of the wild olive, against its nature grafted unto the good, brings forth delightful fruit, all the more will those branches which had been broken off the sacred root (bring forth sweet fruit) when, in harmony with their nature, they are grafted onto the good olive."

The holy and consecrated root of which the Pope speaks is the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Gentiles, against their nature - that is, contrary to their habit of idolatry - became the spiritual children of the Fathers of Israel. The children of Israel, however, are like branches broken off the parent-root; but their nature - that means, their holy lineage, their glorious past, and the promises given them - as well as the sufferings they endure and the need of their hearts: all these

urge them, ought to urge them, to share the full life of the parent-tree, to accept Christ, His teaching and His grace. [See Romans chapter 11.]

The Jewish Homeland

The true Jewish homeland is the Kingdom of Christ; this can be heard in the words of Gregory IX. Only in and with Christ can the Jewish soul fully blossom. There is a realm whose gates are wide open, which no Government may bar, a realm which the descendant of Abraham may enter by Divine right, to which he belongs by a heavenly privilege and calling: the Catholic Church. How strongly this contrasts with the opinion expressed by many Jews: that a Jew can have no home in the Catholic Church because he cannot sincerely accept the Virgin Birth, the Incarnation, the Crucifixion as an Atonement, the Resurrection of Christ, and other dogmas of the Catholic faith. It is true, the Jew, being human, has difficulty, like other men, in submitting to truths which surpass man's own concepts, man's little experience, his narrow outlook.

However, it has always been Jewish belief that God the Creator is omnipotent, the Master of His laws; it has always been Jewish belief that the Word of God came to Moses out of a bush burning but not burnt, aflame but unconsumed. Why then should a Jew be unable to believe that Christ was born of a Virgin? Jewish tradition speaks of the Shekinah, God's Presence abiding with men, dwelling in exile, suffering and weeping with Israel. Why then should a Jew find it impossible to believe that God became Man? The Ceremonial Law of the Old Testament ordained the sacrifice of animals, whose blood, offered with contrite heart, helped to atone for sins. Why then should a Jew find alien the belief in the expiatory sacrifice of the One Who gave His life in love? Every believing Jew hopes for the resurrection of the flesh. Hence, there can be nothing foreign in the message that Christ rose from the dead. Anyone, Jew or Christian, who maintains that a Jew cannot truly accept Christianity, sets man against man, makes truth a matter of geography, an accident of birth, and the spirit the offspring of blood. He makes religion depend on race, and not on our one human nature and the Divine grace given to all. He aligns himself with the murderous and suicidal ideology of Hitler.

There are others who say that only people unbalanced, unhappy, and restless, turn to the Church. What a tribute to her healing powers! There is truth in what they think an accusation, for the complacent do not look beyond themselves. Only those who are unsatisfied with human insufficiency, aware of the evil in the heart of man, conscious that they are not what they ought to be, will look above themselves and seek the Light. There are only two kinds of people in this world: those who flee from God and those who flee to God. Those who pretend to be settled are really escaping reality, but those who seek will find peace. "Our hearts are restless," says Saint Augustine, "till they rest in God."

A Philosopher and A Rabbi

Henri Bergson, probably the greatest philosopher of our day, gave half a lifetime to a patient and tenacious inquiry into the origin of morality and religion. In the course of his investigations, he studied the writings of the great mystics, the men and women who open their souls to the stream of Divine Love, those who live in the Lord, the helpers of God, as he calls them with Saint Paul. He trusted their experience, and his study convinced him of the uniqueness of Christianity. He himself stated once that in his research, he had set himself no definite goal. And, "It is not my fault," he added, "if all the good roads lead to the Gospel." In his last will and testament, he declared: "My reflections have led me nearer and nearer to Catholicism, in which I see the complete fulfilment of

Judaism." And he expressed this wish: "I hope that a Catholic priest, if the Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris permit it, will say the prayers (of the Church) at my burial." [He would have rejoiced in anticipation were he to know that one day a pope, John Paul II, would appoint a Jewish convert AS Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris! -Cardinal Lustiger, who converted as a teenager. Note, because of the Nazi-inspired Vichy persecution of Jews at the time of Bergson's death, Bergson did not wish to give any appearance of abandoning his fellow Jews by openly embracing the full Catholic faith. His funeral requests were granted.]

Who seeks will find. Another instance of this truth is the story of the former Rabbi of Rome, Eugenio Zolli. Decades of study of the New Testament made him realize that Jesus is the Great Teacher. He began his book on Christ with the words of the Gospel: "Never did man speak like this Man" (John 7.45). He came to realize that Jesus was the Teacher of teachers, the Great Sufferer, "the Flame which, after having consumed itself in this world, is resplendent with imperishable life in another." Finally he accepted Him as the Messiah, the Son of God, and could say: "O Jesus, what joy when I shall be no longer mine, but shall be all Yours!" Once an American journalist asked him whether it had not been the Jesuits who converted him. His answer was a Talmudic legend: A harp was hanging over the bed of King David. Before dawn, a soft wind passed through the strings, and of itself it intoned a hymn. And the King arose and began a song to the Lord. The former Rabbi added: "My poor and humble soul was like a harp, suspended over my head. Under the sweet touch of Christ's hand, it sang a wonderful song." Zolli thinks of his conversion not as a radical change, but as the gentle conclusion of his searching for the Kingdom of God. In a letter to me, he said that for many, many years he had been drawn, led on to Christ; in fact, that his conversion had begun in his childhood, when he helped his mother in her works of charity.

Like Henri Bergson, Eugenio Zolli recognized the New Testament as the completion of the Old, as the unfolding of its hidden treasures. And he recognized that on the Church rests the dignity of Israel, exalted, enhanced, enriched by the Messiah Who has come. Both Bergson and Zolli were drawn to Christ and His Church by the all-embracing, the Universal love of the Gospel.

Hate Destroys

Many more Jews would be drawn in the same way were it not for half-Christians who obscure the light of the Gospels; were it not for anti-Semites who impede (as far as is in their power) the flow of Christ's love. The antagonism towards Jews found among Christians is often hardly more than thoughtlessness, for no Christian could give way to it did he realize the gravity and danger of anti-Semitism, the danger that lies in submitting to reactions of the world and the flesh, to reactions unregenerated and unbaptized. Like all hatred, anti-Semitism makes a man who practises it, a foe of Christ, a brother of Caiphas, a follower of Barabbas. The anti-Semite, had he been in the council that condemned Our Lord, would also have cried: "He is guilty of death," and had he had been among the crowd in front of the governor's palace, he, too, would have clamoured for Barabbas. Akin to the Roman governor, cousin to Pilate, however, is the spiritual coward, the man who condones hatred, anti-Semitism or any other. Had he been in Pilate's chair, he likewise would have consented to the crucifixion of Christ.

Hate is a destroyer. The hatred of races or nations, groups or persons, profanes the Name of God in Whose image man is created; profanes the Name of Christ, Who shed His blood for all. Hate is death, and so is indifference.

Love Conquers

Love, however, is life, At the time of the occupation of France and the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis, there was no monastery, whether it followed the rule of Saint Benedict, of Saint Bruno, or of Saint Francis, which did not conceal a Jew, often hiding him under the brown or white habit of a professed monk or lay brother. One of these, having left the monastery which had sheltered him, likes now to talk about the emotion he felt in the plain and solemn chapel of the Trappists, filled with the Presence of the Lord, where he heard His praise sung day and night, hour by hour, in the beautiful words of David, the Holy King. "The Temple of Jerusalem," he said, "seemed to have come back to life." Another lived for three years, also in the Trappist Abbey. He was entrusted with an office, the charge of the table of the community, and did his work with great zeal. Gradually he came to love monastic life, "brethren dwelling together in unity," singing the new canticle of love. There he found men who had dedicated their lives to the one thing necessary, the thing most splendid and yet ignored by the world. He became a monk himself, devoting his life to silence and prayer, to meditation on divine things, to the Work of God, to the glorification of His Name.

Whenever a Jew turns to Christ, grace enriches the world. Whenever in his heart he annuls the rejection of the Messiah by his forefathers, overturns their decision, love is master. Whenever he rejoices: "Blessed be He that comes in the Name of the Lord!" life conquers death.

For further information: Convent of Our Lady of Sion, at MELBOURNE 1065 Whitehorse Road, Box Hill, 3128 Vic. or P.O. Box 254 Kerrimuir 3129 Vic. 29 Dorking Road, Box Hill, 3128 Vic. Our Lady of Sion, Kensington 3031 Vic. Our Lady of Sion SALE, VICTORIA. 3850 Our Lady of Sion WARRAGUL, VICTORIA. 3820 74 Roseberry Street, Ascot Vale, Victoria.

Published by the A.C.T.S. with thanks to Fr. Bonaventure Fitzgerald, O.F.M.Cap., Director of the Catholic Information Society, 214 West 31 Street, New York.

Nihil Obstat: W. M. COLLINS, Diocesan Censor. Imprimatur: + D. MANNIX, Archiepiscopus Melbournensis. 18th April, 1955