

Worship: The Amen Corner

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Good Friday is the customary flashpoint for liturgical evidence of the view that Latin Rite Catholics take toward the Jewish people. However, the catechumenal liturgies at either end of Lent supply another source. These come to mind in light of the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra ætate*), for which the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued a theological reflection focused on the *Nostra ætate*'s fourth section, which established a framework for dialoguing with the Jews in particular.

Good Friday

Historically, Good Friday's solemn intercessions have stirred dramatic commentary. On that day, after hearing the proclamation of the Passion according to St. John, the gathered community offers prayers for various groups. The intentions have shifted over the centuries, but the list generally walks a sequence that proceeds from faithful Christians to catechumens, heretics, schismatics - and then Jews.

The Gelasian Sacramentary ignited the difficulty in the seventh century by placing this invitation on the lips of the priest: *Oremus et pro perfidis iudaëis, ut deus et dominus noster auferat uelamen de cordibus eorum, ut et ipsi cognoscant Christum Iesum dominum nostrum*. The deacon invited all to kneel, then to stand, as was customary for each petition in the sequence. Then the priest continued with this prayer: *Omnipotens sempiterne deus, qui etiam iudaicam perfidiam a tua misericordia non repellis, exaudi preces nostras, quas tibi pro illius populi obcaecationem deferimus, ut agnita ueritatis tue luce, quae Christus est, a suis tenebris eruantur; per dominum*.

Twice the priest called the Jewish people "faithless". Three phrases developed the metaphor of their blindness. Twice the priest expressed the gathered community's hope that the Jews would come to follow Christ.

Antipathy for such praying fueled subsequent recoil. Shortly after the appearance of the Gelasian, *Ordo Romanus XXXI* forbade the community to kneel while praying specifically for Jews. Still later the prayer's final "Amen" was struck.

The invitation and prayer remained unchanged until the twentieth century. By 1966 the references to the "veil" and "blindness" had been removed. A completely new prayer entered the postconciliar missal. The invitation has changed to this: *Oremus et pro iudæis, ut, ad quos prius locutus est Dominus Deus noster, eis tribuat in sui nominis amore et in sui fœderis fidelitate proficere*. This prayer follows: *Omnipotens sempiterne Deus, qui promissiones tuas Abrahamæ eiusque semini contulisti, Ecclesiæ tuæ preces clementer exaudi, ut populus acquisitionis prioris ad redemptionis mereatur plenitudinem pervenire. Per Christum Dominum nostrum*. Instead of calling the Jewish people faithless,

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the prayer confesses their faithfulness to the covenant and yearns for them to arrive at the fullness of redemption.

This prayer benefited from the attitudinal shift evidenced in *Nostra aetate*, which “remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham’s stock” (4). The same paragraph also stated, “Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures.” It challenged those who catechize and preach to be faithful to the spirit of the gospel.

That should have been the end of the Good Friday drama between Catholics and Jews, but no. Pope Benedict XVI permitted broader usage of the preconciliar rites, including its Good Friday prayer. Objections arose from Jews and Christians alike. Benedict then composed his own prayer to replace the preconciliar one, even though the postconciliar missal had already done so. Benedict’s introduction derives from its predecessor: *Oremus et pro Iudæis: Ut Deus et Dominus noster illuminet corda eorum, ut agnoscant Iesum Christum salvatorem omnium hominum*. The deacon invites all to kneel and stand, and then the priest offers this prayer: *Omnipotens sempiterne Deus, qui vis ut omnes homines salvi fiant et ad agnitionem veritatis veniant, concede propitius, ut plenitudine gentium in Ecclesiam tuam intrante omnis Israel salvus fiat. Per Christum Dominum nostrum. Amen*.

Pope Benedict thus reintroduced the custom of praying for the conversion of Jews. Without directly mentioning blindness, his words still prayed for Jewish hearts to be enlightened. Many objections remained.

The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews has now stated directly that “the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews” (40). As Christians, Catholics will bear witness to their faith, “but they do not themselves have to implement the salvation of humankind” (42). That is God’s work. Still, Benedict’s prayer remains in force for those who celebrate the preconciliar liturgy. The postconciliar missal’s Good Friday prayer remains steadfast in affirming God’s covenant with Abraham, while praying that the Jewish people may attain the fullness of redemption.

In addition to Good Friday, this delicate balance between Catholic identity and Jewish roots surfaces at the beginning and end of Lent, specifically in the Rite of Election and the Easter Vigil.

The Rite of Election

The Rite of Election is also called the Enrollment of Names, and both expressions have antecedents in the history of the catechumenate. Ambrose of Milan (+397) in *Elijah and Fasting*, and his contemporary Pope Siricius (+399) in a letter to Himerius of Tarragon both called those preparing for baptism the “elect”. The term also survives in a sixth-century letter of John the Deacon and in the Gelasian Sacramentary.

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Cyril of Jerusalem (+387) and his witness Egeria both detailed the custom of enrolling names for baptism at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Theodore of Mopsuestia (+428) asked those who desired baptism to give their names to the bishop, who in turn wrote them down if the sponsors' testimony bore sufficient witness to the readiness of the candidates. Theodore says that the bishop also wrote down the names of the sponsors. Augustine (+430) begged those asking to be baptized to submit their names "at passover" - probably a reference to Good Friday. Cæsarius of Arles (+543) similarly requested names for baptism a few days before Easter.

The post-Vatican II Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults combined these threads of tradition into a single ceremony, literally called "Election or the Enrollment of One's Name." The expressions are complementary. Enrollment is the action of the catechumen, whereas election is the action of the church. More precisely, the church's election is founded on God's election (RCIA 119), and here is where the Catholic liturgy squares up again with Jewish tradition.

Both Christians and Jews lay claim to the title "chosen people." The Vatican's Commission has written, "the separation between Synagogue and Church may be viewed as the first and most far-reaching breach among the chosen people" (3). *Nostra ætate* affirmed the divine call of Israel through the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets, and it professed that all who believe in Christ are included in Abraham's call. The Catholic Church rejects the notion of supersessionism; that is, that Christians have replaced Israel as God's chosen people. Rather, it affirms that both entities share the title. Hence, the Catholic Church's interreligious dialogue with Jews is closer than the church's dialogue with other faiths that do not profess that Jesus is the Son of God.

The Rite of Election boldly hearkens to the call of Abraham. In his encounter with God, Abraham learned that his people were God's chosen people. At the Rite of Election (*Ritus electionis*), catechumens learn that they too are among God's chosen people (*electi*) - not the replacement, but the fruition of the children of Abraham.

The liturgy gingerly walks this line, and many Catholics seem unaware of its connection to the mystery of the chosen people, possibly in part because of unfortunate connotations with the word "election". Especially to ears in a democracy, the title of this ceremony sounds as though it results from a hard-fought, media-driven, political campaign. The word "election" sounds so removed from "the chosen people" that the Jewish roots of the designation "elect" are lost.

The English translation of the missal uses both expressions: "election" and "chosen ones." It includes among ritual masses a section on Christian initiation. These include the expected presidential prayers for a mass that includes baptism or confirmation. They also include catechumenal rites. Those familiar with the RCIA would expect the first of these to be the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, which is celebrated at mass in many parishes. However, the Missal includes no prayers for that occasion. It presumes that the

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Rite of Acceptance takes place apart from mass. The missal does include presidential prayers for the Rite of Election in the circumstances when it is celebrated apart from the First Sunday of Lent. In practice, the Rite of Election is customarily a word service, not a mass, but the missal thinks it occurs during mass. Nonetheless, the title of the mass matches the title of the ceremony in the RCIA, which includes the word “Election”, but the collect refers to “the chosen ones.” The Jewish roots of the ceremony can be heard there.

Lent then travels its way developing these themes in various ways. On weekdays the revised calendar moved some of the saints’ days frequently observed during Lent to other times of the year, such as those honoring Matthias, Thomas Aquinas, Gregory the Great, Benedict and Gabriel. This helped sustain a penitential spirit during Lent. Readings for the Sundays of weeks three, four and five of Year A accompany the celebration of the scrutinies, ceremonies in which the RCIA unwaveringly refers to the candidates for baptism as “the elect.” The collects for the first and third scrutinies have translated the Latin word for the “elect” as the “chosen ones.”

The first readings of the Sundays of Lent each year form a mini-series of salvation history. The first Sunday draws passages from Genesis or Deuteronomy. The second Sunday always tells some story about Abraham, the father of the chosen people. The Third Sunday reports from the Book of Exodus. The fourth reports a later event: the entrance to the promised land, the monarchy, or the exile. The fifth Sunday always introduces one of the prophets. The first readings on the first five Sundays of Lent have more to do with each other than with the other readings of the day. They also form a backdrop against which Christians view the silhouette of their Jewish roots. The season that unfolds after the Rite of Election recounts the story of the chosen people.

The Easter Vigil

The symbols and prayers of the Easter Vigil rely heavily upon the paradigmatic event of the Jewish Passover and Exodus. Of the seven Old Testament readings that the Latin Rite proposes for the Vigil, only one is obligatory: the Exodus, the story of Israel crossing the Red Sea. The impact of the reading comes from the belief that certain catechumens recently designated as “chosen people” will soon cross the waters of baptism into the promised land of life in Christ. The blessing of water at the Vigil explicitly calls the children of Abraham the chosen people who prefigure the baptized. Their baptism is a participation in the resurrection, their adoption as children of God, their incorporation into the only-begotten Son of God.

The theme radiates throughout the night’s euchology. The first option for the prayer that follows the Exodus reading requests “that the whole world may become children of Abraham and inherit the dignity of Israel’s birthright.” That prayer has followed this reading ever since the Gelasian Sacramentary; it remains in the missal perhaps because it finds a place for Christians within Jewish imagery, not in isolated possession of it. The alternate prayer, newly composed for the postconciliar missal, makes a similar plea, “that all nations, obtaining the

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privilege of Israel by merit of faith, may be reborn by partaking of your Spirit.” Both petitions build on the evangelical imperative of Christianity, use explicit imagery of Judaism, yet avoid supersessionism.

The prayer that follows the reading about Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac proclaims that Abraham became the father of nations through the paschal mystery. After the fourth reading, the proposed prayer asks God to surpass and fulfill the pledge made to the Patriarchs. The prayer after the sixth reading proclaims God’s call to the nations (the Gentiles), which increases the Church. The introduction to the baptismal liturgy asks that those reborn in the font “may be numbered among the children of adoption.”

The rubrics of the missal refer to those about to be baptized as “catechumens” instead of “elect”. This may have been either an oversight or the result of a different historical thread. An anointing preceding baptism may still be made with the oil “of catechumens,” for example. But the missal lets slip this opportunity to build on the imagery of the chosen people.

During the Easter Vigil, the Passover/Exodus motif reigns over that of the chosen people. The proposed introduction to the entire Vigil calls it the night that Jesus “passed over” from death to life. The ceremony continues with the lighting of the paschal candle, a pillar of fire leading the community from outside into the embrace of the church. A deacon (or priest) who sings the exsultet calls himself a member of the Levites, who assisted priests throughout the Old Testament. The self-designation puts the two Testaments in relief. The rest of the exsultet makes numerous connections between the passover and the resurrection. The proposed introduction to the Liturgy of the Word invites people to hear the story of how God saved people in times past and now has sent his Son. The first option for the prayer following the first reading alludes to 1 Corinthians 2:7-8 when it calls Christ our Passover. The waters of baptism recall the crossing of the Red Sea, and the first sharing of the eucharistic bread of life recalls not only the manna in the desert but also the feast that awaited Israel in its fertile promised land. In languages such as French the similarity between the words for “passover” (*Pâque*) and “Easter” (*Pâques*) is plain. The missal’s references to the “paschal mystery” all imply a Christian fulfillment of the mystery of Israel’s passover.

Praxis

Although Good Friday typically draws the focus on the liturgical application of principles of interreligious dialogue, other ceremonies of Lent deserve scrutiny. Perhaps one reason the Good Friday intercession has received so much attention is that it occurs on the day that commemorates the crucifixion. Some Christians historically justified their anti-Jewish bigotry on the irresponsible accusation that Jews killed Christ. As *Nostra aetate* states, what happened in the Passion of Christ “cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.” The prejudices of the past may have contributed to the formation of a prayer that alleged the

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universal faithlessness of the Jews, to be offered on day commemorating Jesus' crucifixion.

Far from the attempt to distance Jews from Christians, today's Rite of Election and the Easter Vigil sustain their relationship. Those who plan these celebrations in cathedrals and parish churches can respect the Jewish roots of Christianity, while fulfilling the command to evangelize.

In practice, the Rite of Election struggles to explore its own theme. The symbols of visiting the cathedral and meeting the bishop often overpower it. When the ceremony is combined with the Call to Continuing Conversion for previously baptized candidates, the imagery of the chosen people is much harder to discern. The baptized candidates do not and cannot participate in the rite "of election," for they are already numbered among the chosen. Sadly, sometimes the homily addresses the entire group as if all have already been baptized, and the central theme of election - with its Jewish roots - is overlooked.

At the Easter Vigil, the rubrics call for the lights of the church to be left off for the beginning of the service, and turned on just before the exsultet. However, many communities leave the lights off throughout the exsultet, and some proclaim all the Old Testament readings in relative darkness, turning on electrical lights for the Gloria and the New Testament readings. The rubrics call for full light when the paschal candle enters the sanctuary, which magnifies its power and repels the assumption that Jewish scriptures represent the darkness of unbelief.

At the Vigil many communities not only baptize the elect but also receive baptized members into the full communion of the church. As with the Rite of Election, this disturbs the integrity of the Christian view that baptism fulfills the promise of the Exodus. Adding baptized candidates lengthens the service, so many parishes compensate by reducing the number of Old Testament readings. This diminishes the survey of salvation history that the Vigil aims to embrace.

Interfaith dialogue between Christians and Jews has progressed in the last generation, and so have the opportunities for its liturgical expression.

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