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The Mystery of Israel and the Church

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Themes of St. Paul

Talk #12

St. Paul on the Mystery of Israel and the Church



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Note: *This document contains the unedited text of Dr. Feingold's talk. It will eventually undergo final editing for inclusion in the series of books being published by The Miriam Press under the series title: "The Mystery of Israel and the Church". If you find errors of any type, please send your observations to lfeingold@hebrewcatholic.org*

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12. St. Paul on the Mystery of Israel and the Church

I would like to conclude this series of lectures on St. Paul by reflecting on his understanding of the relationship between Israel and the Church. Like the question of justification, this is a complex and much debated issue, in which passions often run high. Has the Church simply replaced Israel, as a completely new reality?

As in all important questions, the key lies in making distinctions and avoiding an overly simplistic scheme of interpretation. St. Paul presents profound elements both of continuity and discontinuity between Israel and the Church. The principal relation, however, is that of fulfillment. The Church fulfills the promises given to the patriarchs and their descendants. The Church fulfills the destiny of Israel as the butterfly fulfills the destiny of the caterpillar.

Elements of Continuity

Let us begin by looking at the elements of continuity between Israel and the Church. A key text in this regard is Rom 9:1-5. Paul begins this new section of the Letter, encompassing chapters 9-11, by expressing his most profound interior anguish over the fact that much of Israel has not come to faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Lord:

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. To them 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, who is over all, God, blessed for ever.*"

St. Paul here enumerates the great and awesome privileges of the Chosen People: the gift of divine sonship and being made into the People of God, the glory of God's Revelation, the covenants, the gift of the Law, a revealed form of divine worship, the promises of blessing and inheritance, the patriarchs to whom those promises were made, and the fact that Christ, who is God, was made man in the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. All of these gifts obviously culminate in the inconceivable glory of the Incarnation, to which they were ordered and for which they prepared.

People of God Adopted as Children of God

The first gift mentioned is the adoption as children of God. This is of great importance, for it is the beginning of the undoing of the consequences of Adam's Fall. Through the Fall, divine sonship (filiation) was lost to the children of Adam, who are born "children of wrath." To be adopted as sons of God means that one is restored to intimacy with

God, incorporated into His "family," and made heirs of His eternal inheritance, which is eternal life. Israel's adoption as sons was made known to Moses in Ex 4:22-23, when He commanded him to say to Pharaoh: "Thus says the Lord, Israel is my first-born son, and I say to you, 'Let my son go that he may serve me.'"

The adoption as children of God, although this was not made expressly known to ancient Israel, also means that one is made an adopted brother of the Son of God, who was to become incarnate as the Messiah of Israel. The gift of divine sonship was given to Israel in view of the Incarnation of the Son of God. However, the full glory of this sonship was not yet revealed to them. Hence St. Paul in Galatians speaks of the Israelites as being children under a tutor, which was the Law. In Gal 3:24-26 he writes: "So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith."

Although St. Paul does not explain this further in Rm 9:4, the gift of divine sonship must include the gift of justification and the reception of sanctifying grace, by which one is given a share in the divine life (2 Pt 1:4). Although the Son had not become incarnate, the Jewish people would have received the spirit of adoption through grace,¹ as long as they did not lose it through unrepented grave sin.

Revelation

Secondly, the Chosen People received the revelation of God and His glory. All the other peoples who worshiped according to the natural religions of the world were groping in search of God, whereas God Himself went in search of Israel, as it were, revealing to them the secrets of His providence and His will through the witness of the prophets.

This glory of revelation forms a most powerful bond of continuity between Israel and the Church, for the latter is built not only on the Apostles, but also on the prophets (cf. Eph 2:20). The revelatory mission of the prophets, however, centered on Christ.

Covenants

Third, God sealed covenants of promise with the Chosen People. In the covenant sealed with Abraham in Gen 15:18-21, Abraham received the promise of the *land*: "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites

¹ See also Rm 8:14-17; Gal 4:6-8.

and the Jebusites.” Although in the literal sense, the land was the physical territory of Israel, in a spiritual sense, the promise of the land refers to the Kingdom of God of universal dimensions, which will be consummated in heaven.² The land of Israel is a figure of the Kingdom of God: the Church militant and the Church triumphant. We see this in Heb 11:9-10: “By faith he [Abraham] sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”

The covenant of Sinai established Israel as God’s own people, as according to Ex 19:5-6: “Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

St. Peter quotes this in 1 Pt 2:9, applying it to the Church: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.”

The Church stands thus in profound continuity with Israel in the privilege of being chosen by the grace of God to be His own people.

As Israel was gratuitously chosen from all the peoples of the earth to be made God’s people through the covenant with Abraham and that of Sinai, so the Church and all its members are the recipients of a completely gratuitous grace of election into the Body of Christ under the blessings of the New Covenant.

Promises

The Church is bound together with Biblical Israel, not simply by being its continuation as the People of God, but as the fulfillment of the promises given to her. These promises centered on the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom in which all the nations of the world would be blessed.³ God’s fidelity to Israel, therefore, is found precisely in the very existence of the Church which He promised as the Messianic Kingdom in which the Son of David would rule forever.⁴

2 In Mt 5:5, the word “land” clearly refers to the Kingdom of heaven: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the land.”

3 See Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; 49:10; Ps 72:17; etc.

4 See L. Cerfaux, *The Church in the Theology of St. Paul*, trans. Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker (NY: Herder and Herder, 1959), p. 35: “What we call the New Testament is the realization of the promise [to Abraham in Gen 15:18], and the actual taking possession of the inheritance. As soon as Christ arrives on the scene, everything that God has to give belongs to him.”

Sometimes it is forgotten by Christians that the messianic Kingdom was promised to Israel as *her* kingdom. For example, Jeremiah 31:31-33 gives the promise of a “new covenant” precisely to “the house of Israel and the house of Judah”:

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a *new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah*, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Similarly, in Ez 36:24-27, the promise of the Messianic kingdom founded on the sacrament of Baptism is clearly given to the house of Israel:

And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name. . . . For I will take you from among the Gentiles, and will gather you together out of all the countries, and will bring you into your own land.⁵ And I will pour upon you clean water, and you shall be cleansed from all your filthiness, and I will cleanse you from all your idols. And I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit within you, and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in the midst of you, and I will cause you to walk in my commandments, and to keep my judgments, and do them.

For this reason, St. Paul says that the Gospel proclamation is first for the Jews, and then for the Gentiles. It belonged to the Jews by promise, and was thus owed by God’s justice and fidelity. Hence in Rm 15:8-9, St. Paul writes: “For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”

Christ Is Born of the Jewish People

The Church is bound up with Israel, finally, in that the Church is founded on Christ, who was born in the bosom of Israel as the promised offspring of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and David. As St. Paul emphasizes, “of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all blessed for ever.” Indeed Israel was called precisely to be the people who would bear Christ and give Him to the world, so that all nations would be blessed in the offspring of Abraham. Christ was “born under the law” (Gal 4:4), a member of Israel, out of fidelity to Abraham and the patriarchs.

5 The Catholic tradition understands this ingathering in the land as signifying incorporation into the Church, the Kingdom of God.

Israel and the Church as God's Olive Tree

The profound elements of continuity given in Rm 9:4-5 are further developed in Rom 11 through the image of Israel and the Church as an olive tree planted by God. St. Paul's purpose is to show that the Jewish people have not been entirely cast off from God, despite the fact that many have failed to believe in the realization of the promises of God in Christ.

Israel is pictured here as God's sacred olive tree, rooted in the promises given to the Patriarchs, into which the Gentiles have been engrafted through faith in Christ and Baptism, and unbelieving Jews have been cut off. Nevertheless, the branches that have been cut off still retain a unique relation to the tree, in that it is their tree. They are "natural branches," whereas the Gentile Christians are branches of a wild olive tree engrafted into the holy tree of Israel. Thus the natural branches can surely be engrafted back by the power of God:

If the root is holy, so are the branches. And even the others, if they do not persist in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for *God has the power to graft them in again*. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree. Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, *and so all Israel will be saved*; as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob"; "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins." As regards the gospel they are enemies of God, for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. *For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable*. Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all. (Rom 11:11-16; 23-32)

This text of St. Paul contains the great prophecy that the Jewish people will receive the mercy to be grafted back into the Body as natural branches. This will come "after the full number of Gentiles come in," which means when the Gospel is preached to the entire world, as predicted by Christ in Mt 24:14: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come."

The ingrafting of the natural branches is spoken of in Rm 11:15: "For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from

the dead?" It thus seems to be intimately connected with the *parousia* and the consequent general resurrection.

There may be an additional meaning of this mysterious phrase as well. St. Thomas comments on Rm 9:15 as follows:

If the loss of the Jews provided the occasion for the reconciliation of the world, in that through the death of Christ we are reconciled with God, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? That is, that the Jews are received again by God. . . . What will that reception accomplish, if not that the Gentiles be made to rise unto life? For the Gentile faithful will grow cold, according to Mt24:12: "And because wickedness is multiplied, most men's love will grow cold." Or also those who completely fall—deceived by the Antichrist—will be restored into their pristine fervor by the converted Jews. And thus as through the fall of the Jews the Gentiles were reconciled after being enemies, so after the conversion of the Jews, the end of the world being imminent, there will be the general resurrection, through which men will go from death to immortal life.⁶

St. Thomas thus holds that the conversion of the Jews in the last times will be the stimulus for a spiritual rising of the Gentile Christians who have fallen into apostasy, as predicted by St. Paul in 2 Thes 2:3. This will be soon followed by the *parousia* and the general resurrection of the dead.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church treats the theme of the prophesied conversion of the Jewish people in no. 674:

The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by "all Israel", for "a hardening has come upon part of Israel" in their "unbelief" toward Jesus.⁷ St. Peter says to the Jews of Jerusalem after Pentecost: "Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old."⁸ St. Paul echoes him: "For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?"⁹ The "full inclusion" of the Jews in the Messiah's salvation, in the wake of "the full number of the Gentiles",¹⁰ will enable the People of God to achieve "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ", in which "God may be all in all".¹¹

6 Commentary on Rm 11:15 (Marietti, no. 890).

7 Rom 11:20-26; see Mt 23:39.

8 Acts 3:19-21.

9 Rom 11:15

10 Rom 11:12, 25; see Lk 21:24.

11 Eph 4:13; 1 Cor 15:28.

Vatican II on the Continuity between Israel and the Church

The Second Vatican Council took up this theme of the continuity between Israel and the Church as expressed in Rm 9-11 in the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate* 4:

As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock.

Thus the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. She professes that *all who believe in Christ*—Abraham's sons according to faith (see Gal 3:7)—*are included in the same Patriarch's call*, and likewise that the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people's exodus from the land of bondage. The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles (see Rom 11:17-24). Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross Christ, Our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making both one in Himself (see Eph 2:14-16).

The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: "Theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh" (Rom 9:4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary. She also recalls that the Apostles, the Church's mainstay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ's Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.

As Holy Scripture testifies, Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation (see Lk 19:44), nor did the Jews in large number, accept the Gospel; indeed not a few opposed its spreading (see Rom 11:28). Nevertheless, *God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues*—such is the witness of the Apostle (see Rom 11:28-29). In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle, the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and "serve him shoulder to shoulder" (Soph. 3:9).¹²

Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to

foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. *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.*

The text, closely following Rom 9-11, affirms a delicate balance. The Church is the indeed the new People of God, founded on the mystery of Christ and participation in His Body. However, this new People of God finds "the beginnings of her faith and her election" in that of "the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets." The new People of God results from an engrafting into the sacred olive tree rooted in the promises given to the Patriarchs. Many of the branches that have been engrafted are wild ones—Gentiles—but they have been engrafted into a tree whose trunk is natural.

The text of Rom 11:28-29 is recalled and given great importance: "God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues."

We cannot regard the Jewish people as rejected, accursed, or abandoned by God. This view, as we all know, was the cause terrible anti-semitism throughout the centuries.

The Church therefore cannot be regarded as simply replacing Israel as the people of God. The people of Israel according to the flesh is still specially beloved of God on account of the Patriarchs, as were their fathers in Biblical Israel. Even more, they are uniquely beloved as a people on account of Mary, the archetypical "daughter of Zion," and her divine Son, "born under the Law."

The people of Israel, therefore, should be regarded as conserving their mysterious election in God's providential plan. Their role is not finished until they corporately come to receive the fulfillment of God's promises to them, through a great outpouring of His mercy, by which "all Israel will be saved" (Rm 11:26). It follows that Israel's election remains tied to the Messiah in whom all of God's promises are fulfilled.¹³

In the meantime Israel is a continual and impartial witness before the world of God's plan of salvation that culminates in the Messiah and His Church. St. Augustine wrote of the Jews that "by the evidence of their own Scriptures they bear witness for us that we have not fab-

¹² See Is 66:23; Ps 65:4; Rom 11:11-32.

¹³ See 2 Cor 1:20: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him."

ricated the prophecies about Christ.”¹⁴ The existence and continued fidelity of the Jewish people to the covenant of Sinai, through so many centuries without a land, through so much persecution, tragedy and trial, is a clear sign of a special providence of God in their behalf and special role that they continue to play in His plans, until they shall finally come to recognize their Messiah.

Elements of Discontinuity

Christocentrism of the Church

The relationship between Israel and the Church, however, is not only one of continuity, just as the butterfly is not only in a relation of continuity with the caterpillar. There is a profound distinction which comes from God’s providential plan for the unfolding of its destiny. For the Church is the *messianic Kingdom*, and the prophetic witness does not present the messianic kingdom simply as a continuation of Biblical Israel. The promises of the Kingdom would not be worthy of God if their fulfillment did not exceed all expectation.

Discontinuity of the Church with Biblical Israel (as it existed under the Mosaic covenant) comes from the fact that the Church is entirely founded on Christ and the mysteries of His life: born of a woman, born under the Law, who suffered, died, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, from whence He has sent the gift of His Spirit. The existence of the Church, in the full and proper sense of the word, presupposes the historical accomplishment of the entire work of the Paschal mystery, on which she is based and into which she is engrafted made a participant. Christ, died and risen, is her foundation, corner stone, eternal high priest, and head.

In Eph 2:19-21, St. Paul says that the Church is the “household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.” The Church is entirely Christocentric, and thus it immensely exceeds the horizons of ancient Israel.

The Church Is the Body of Christ

St. Paul presents the messianic kingdom precisely as the *Body of Christ* (Body of the Messiah),¹⁵ as we have seen in an earlier talk. Pius XII, in his encyclical on the Church, *Mystici corporis*, says that “if we would define and describe this true Church of Jesus Christ—which is the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church—we shall find nothing more noble, more sublime, or more divine than the expression ‘the Mystical Body of Christ.’”¹⁶

One does not enter into Christ’s Body by physical birth into the people, as in Israel, but by spiritual birth through the sacrament of Baptism, which gives us a participation into the mystery of Christ’s death and Resurrection, so that we die unto sin and rise unto new life in the Spirit.

Ancient Israel under the covenant of Sinai was made into the People of God, but was not yet the Body of Christ. Thus it could not be endowed yet with the fullness of the Spirit of the Son, which is the soul of the Mystical Body. As we have seen, the Messianic Kingdom was foretold by the prophets to be characterized by a fuller outpouring of the Holy Spirit onto all flesh.¹⁷ Since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Son, the Body of Christ, into which we enter by Baptism, must be animated by the same Spirit. In 1 Cor 12:12-13, St. Paul writes: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and *all were made to drink of one Spirit.*”

The Church Has Channels of Supernatural Life: the Sacraments

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the Body of Christ, as we have seen, is realized through the ordinary channels of grace, which are the seven sacraments of the Church. These are the arteries and veins of the Mystical Body, by which “the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:21).

Israel was not yet provided with stable conduits of grace that were efficacious in themselves in imparting spiritual gifts, and the Spirit Himself. The sacred rites of Israel were like the sacramentals of the Church.

The Church is Catholic

The fullness of the Spirit made available in the Church was intended by God to reach all mankind in the Church. God says in Joel 2:28 that “it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh.”

St. Paul was called precisely to be the “chosen instrument” (Acts 9:15) to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles so that they may be engrafted into the Body, according to the Messianic prophecies.¹⁸ The calling of Gentiles is said to be the “mystery hidden for ages in God” (Eph 3:9) St. Paul gives a dramatic description of this engrafting in Eph 2:11-22:

¹⁷ See Joel 2:28-29; Jer 31:31-33; Ez 36:24-27.

¹⁸ See Is 49:6: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a *light to the nations*, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth”; Is 60:3-13: And *nations shall come to your light*, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar; . . . the wealth of the nations shall come to you.” See also Ps 72:8-17; Dn 2:35.

¹⁴ St. Augustine, *The City of <<God,>>* Book 18.46, trans. Henry Bettenson, (NY: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 827.

¹⁵ See Rom 12:5: “so we, though many, are one body in Christ.”

¹⁶ *Mystici Corporis*, no. 13.

Remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, 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, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, *built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone*, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

The New Priesthood of the New Covenant

The Church has a new religious authority, distinct from that given in the Mosaic Law. This authority is constituted by Apostolic succession through the sacrament of Holy Orders in its highest grade: the episcopacy. The bishops are the successors of the Apostles, the foundation of the Church (Eph 2:20). Of the Apostles, Peter was singled out to be the head: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church.” This new religious authority supplants the authority of the High Priests and the Sanhedrin.

In a similar way, the New Covenant has a new priesthood, distinct from that of Aaron and his sons, and which consists in a participation of the priesthood of Christ. The Letter to the Hebrews discusses the distinction between the Aaronic priesthood and that of Christ and the New Covenant in Heb 7:11-8:1:

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. . . . For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once for all when he offered

up himself. . . . Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.

Christ is the eternal high priest of the New Covenant. However, since He is no longer visible to us, the sacrament of Holy Orders enables men who are called to act in the person of Christ to make Him sacramentally present in the power of His priesthood.

As Heb 7:12 mentions, the change in the priesthood in the “new People of God”¹⁹ implies a change in the entire ceremonial Law and the Covenant. Christ’s priesthood mediates a far better covenant, “enacted on better promises.” Heb 8:6-13 therefore speaks of the corresponding change between the Old and New Covenants, citing Jer 31:31-33:

Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second. For he finds fault with them when he says: “The days will come, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; . . . This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. . . .” In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

The Church therefore is the Messianic Kingdom of the New Covenant, founded on the promises of grace, the giving of the Spirit, and eternal life, merited through the sacrifice of Christ, made present continually in the sacrifice of the Mass.

The Ceremonial Law Is Replaced by the Liturgy of the Church

In the New Covenant, the ceremonial and judicial precepts of the Mosaic Law are no longer in force. In earlier talks we have seen that the Catholic theological tradition makes a distinction between three types of precepts in the Law of Moses: (a) moral precepts that contain and formulate the natural moral law, (b) ceremonial precepts that legislate the worship of God and ritual purity, and (c) judicial precepts that served as a kind of civil penal code for ancient Israel.

All three kinds of precepts are fulfilled by Christ, according to His words in the Sermon on the Mount in Mt 5:17-18: “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth

¹⁹ Vatican II, *Nostra aetate*, 4.

pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”

Christ fulfills the Law of Moses, however, in different ways, according to the type of precept we are considering. The moral precepts are fulfilled through Christ in three ways: by giving us the grace through the power of the sacraments to observe them in charity, as God desires. Secondly, He fulfilled them by giving us the perfect example of His own life, and through His teaching. Third, He fulfills them by endowing His Church with the authority to infallibly teach the obligations of the moral law to all nations and in all ages.

The ceremonial law is also completely fulfilled by Christ in His paschal mystery, but in a different and mystical sense. He fulfilled it by accomplishing the reality of salvation that the ceremonial precepts of the Old Law merely prefigured or symbolized. For example, He is the true paschal lamb who takes away the sins of the world, prefigured by the millions of paschal lambs sacrificed under the Law. He embodies the true circumcision of the heart, symbolized in the carnal circumcision He received on the eighth day. He accomplished the true Atonement, symbolized in the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement. He embodies the true spiritual purity signified in the ritual purity commanded in the Law. Etc.

It is fitting therefore that the ceremonial Law of Moses be replaced by a new ceremonial law of the Church that draws its efficacy from and explicitly commemorates the Incarnation and the Paschal mystery already accomplished. This is the liturgy of the New Covenant.

The judicial precepts, finally, are also abrogated, in that civil penal law is left to temporal society (and to canon law), as guided by the Magisterium of the Church. In this way the judicial precepts can be adapted to the exigencies of different historical and cultural circumstances. Christ fulfilled the judicial precepts by founding His Church to be the light of the nations.

The ceremonial and judicial precepts of the Mosaic Law had the practical effect of separating Israel from the nations. This separation is no longer fitting under the New Covenant, precisely because it is destined to include all nations and cultures within its bosom. Thus St. Paul, in Eph 2:14-16, says that “He is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, 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, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end.”

Obviously St. Paul does not mean that Christ has abolished the moral precepts, for He says the contrary in numerous places! Christ has “abolished” in His flesh on the Cross only the ceremonial and judicial precepts.

Because the ceremonial and the judicial precepts are no longer binding on the Church, it can be said that the Old Law has been “abrogated.” Indeed it has been abrogated precisely because it has been perfectly fulfilled by Christ.

Pius XII explains this abrogation in his encyclical on the Church, *Mystici corporis*, 29-30:

And first of all, by the death of our Redeemer, the New Testament took the place of the Old Law which had been abolished; then the Law of Christ together with its mysteries, enactments, institutions, and sacred rites was ratified for the whole world in the blood of Jesus Christ. For, while our Divine Savior was preaching in a restricted area—He was not sent but to the sheep that were lost of the house of Israel—the Law and the Gospel were together in force;²⁰ but on the gibbet of his death Jesus made void the Law with its decrees (Eph 2:15), fastened the handwriting of the Old Testament to the Cross (Col 2:14), establishing the New Testament in His blood shed for the whole human race (Mt 26:28; 1 Cor 11:25). “To such an extent, then,” says St. Leo the Great, speaking of the Cross of our Lord, “was there effected a transfer from the Law to the Gospel, from the Synagogue to the Church, from many sacrifices to one Victim, that, as our Lord expired, that mystical veil which shut off the innermost part of the temple and its sacred secret was rent violently from top to bottom.”²¹ On the Cross then the Old Law died.

The Use of Elements of the Ceremonial Law Under the New Covenant

The fact that the ceremonial precepts of the Law of Moses are no longer binding in the Church, does not mean that it is unlawful for them to be followed in any way. We know that the Apostles and the Jewish Christians of the first century continued to worship in the Temple and observe the ceremonial law in many ways.²²

An interesting document of Benedict XIV in the mid-eighteenth century sheds light on this subject. The document is about the approval of a book of liturgical prayers (Euchologion) used in the Eastern rite by the Greek Uniates. The liturgical prayers contained certain elements of the ceremonial law of Moses that were still customary in Eastern Christianity, although no longer in the West. Some theologians wanted those elements to be eliminated.²³ Pope Benedict XIV decided, however, not to modify the prayer book in that regard, reasoning that elements of the ceremonial law could be observed as long as there was

20 Cf. St. Thomas, *Summa of Theology*, I-II, q. 103, a. 3, ad 2.

21 Leo the Great, Sermon LXVIII, 3: Migne, P.L., LIV, 374.

22 See, for example, Acts 21:20-24.

23 In this they were following the Council of Florence, Decree for the Jacobites, *Cantate Domino*, DS 1348. However, as Benedict XIV implies, this text should be considered to be a particular disciplinary measure binding only in those circumstances, as was the ruling of the Council of Jerusalem.

some utility in their observance. He observes that some elements of the ceremonial law were imposed on the early Christians by the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) for the purpose of establishing peace between Jews and Gentiles in the Church. Those laws were retained longer in the Eastern Church than in the West. Hence the judgment of Benedict XIV is that some elements of the ceremonial law can be retained or observed, subject to the mind of the Church:

Although the ceremonial precepts of the old Law have come to an end with the promulgation of the Gospel, and the new Law does not contain any precept which distinguishes between clean and unclean foods, nevertheless the Church of Christ has the power of renewing the obligation to observe some of the old precepts for just and serious reasons, despite their abrogation by the new Law. However, precepts whose main function was to foreshadow the coming Messiah should not be restored, for example, circumcision and the sacrifice of animals. . . . Precepts regarding external discipline and cleanliness of body, the kind which contain the precepts on clean and unclean foods, may be restored. The Western as well as the Eastern Church assumed this practice; this is documented from the earliest centuries.²⁴

This consideration is significant with regard to the common practice of celebrating the Passover seder and other elements of Jewish prayer, to which many Hebrew Catholics are rightly attracted. This is legitimate as long as one recognizes the primacy of Christ and the Church, and defers to her judgment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship between Biblical Israel and the Church cannot be simply categorized as replacement (supersessionism), nor as separation (two parallel covenants). The New Covenant replaces the ceremonial law of the Old Covenant, by making present the life-giving mystery of Christ's Passion and Resurrection, which the Old could only foreshadow. However, the new People of God of the New Covenant does not simply replace the people of the Old Covenant, as if the latter had been rejected by God! First of all, because Christ, the Apostles, and the entire Church of Pentecost were Jewish. Never was the Church more beautiful than when she was entirely Jewish. Secondly, because God is faithful to His promises and calling. As St. Paul says in Rm 11: 28-29: "As regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable." Finally, they have not been rejected, for they still have a great role to play in the history of salvation, as they are reinserted as natural branches into God's olive tree, causing the Gentiles

who are falling away to revive, and preparing the way for the *parousia*.

²⁴ Encyclical *Ex quo primum*, on the Euchologion, of March 1, 1756, no. 63.