

Teresa Pirola

Response to “Walking Together: Catholics With Jews in the Australian Context” (ACBC, 2023), launched 21 March 2023, Mary Mackillop Place, North Sydney.

Good morning, colleagues and friends.

I begin by acknowledging the Cammeraygal people, their sacred connections to the land on which we gather, their elders, and their voices, past, present and emerging.

It is a joy to be invited to respond to *Walking Together* (WT) on the occasion of its launch, and I am grateful for the opportunity.

Opening observation

For a short document, WT covers a lot of ground. It touches on nearly every major theme to be found in the official documents of the Catholic Church pertaining to the Catholic-Jewish theological dialogue since Vatican II. Let's name some of those:

It addresses

The Jewishness of Jesus, the Jewish roots of Christianity, God's covenant with Israel – never revoked and enduring, the Hebrew Scriptures that we share and which present opportunities for dialogue.

It talks about

the holocaust, antisemitism, and the need to address anti-Jewish bias in our present-day preaching and teaching.

It mentions

our collaborative works for the common good, our shared eschatological hope; and the fraught subject of “mission”.

From this sweep of themes, I'd like to highlight, ever so briefly, four points: one theological, one biblical, one pastoral and one strategic.

1. A strength: Theological

These themes unfold in the document in a certain pattern that reflects what might be described as the “twofold” perspective of *Nostra Aetate* (i.e., the Declaration as a whole, not only paragraph 4, but paragraphs 1-3 and 5 as well). In WT statements about the *uniqueness* of the Christian-Jewish relationship are interwoven with statements that situate that relationship in the wider canvass of interreligious and human relating. It's a delicate dance, between the particular and the universal, threading its way through the document. WT enters that dance admirably.

2. A strength: Biblical

A second strength lies in WT's claim that:

Our bonds are radically biblical, grounded in the Torah.

It goes on to speak of:

.... “a new respect for the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament” and that “Christians can learn a great deal from a Jewish exegesis practised for more than 2000 years.”

Here, of course, the Bishops are quoting from a substantial document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (specifically, a point that Cardinal Ratzinger – later Pope Benedict XVI - chose to highlight in his Preface to that same document) issued in 2001.

So, in one sense, these words are not new. The important thing, however, is that it is *our* Catholic Bishops saying them. *Our* leaders are calling Australian Catholics to pay attention, show respect and learn from Judaism’s time-honoured deep well of biblical insight and interpretative approaches to the sacred text.

There is certainly a lot to be unpacked there in terms of scripture formation for Catholics.

3. A strength: Pastoral

A third strength relates to the Pharisees. Here, WT urges us to approach Jesus in his Jewish context. Its choice of concrete example is absolutely the right one in terms of pastoral impact. What Catholic parishioner is not aware of the Pharisees? What priest has not preached on the Pharisees, usually by invoking the familiar negative stereotype? To quote from the document:

“At the time of Jesus, there was no doubt that Pharisees taught an ethic worthy of approval.” (PBC, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures*, 67)

That statement - of no surprise to us here - will be quite shocking for many readers. It will raise eyebrows, invite questions, and that’s a good thing. It will have pastoral impact, precisely where it is most needed.

A strength and a hope: Strategic

It might be said that a document like this is only as good as the difference it makes on the ground. Here, the brevity of WT is its strength, along with its reader-friendly style. It contains many one-line gems that we would all love to hear from every pulpit, home and classroom. To quote just three:

What we call the OT [the Scriptures of Israel] was the only sacred scripture Jesus knew.

God’s covenant with the Jews has never been revoked.

Catholics avoid any approach towards Jews that suggest they are bereft of a saving relationship with God.

I suspect many Catholics will have never heard assertions like these, despite their being anchored in nearly 60 years of post-conciliar Catholic teaching. And our people may need

some assistance in unpacking these powerful statements; some of which are connected to complex, nuanced theological questions that continue to be studied.

So, a *discussion guide*, and an *action guide*, for grassroots networks would be an excellent accompanying 'next step' for exploring the cutting-edge issues raised in WT, which represent what is surely one of the most exciting and far-reaching developments in the Catholic Church today: a reawakening to the Jewish foundations of Christian faith and the Church's ongoing path of reconciliation with the Jewish people.

More to be said

Of course, no ecclesial document is ever the last word.

In many ways WT speaks boldly, yet there are also places where one detects a hesitancy to speak which no doubt reflects certain sensitivities in the wider dialogue. I would name those sensitivities as: Land; Mission; Antisemitism.

Let's recall here an oft-quoted 1974 document of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews which stated:

"Christians must...strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience." (CRRJ, "Guidelines", Preamble).

How then, does the Catholic Church respond to Jewish self-definition in relation to the Land? This subject made it into the 1992 Guidelines. Yet, in 2023, the absence of any mention of Jewish links to the land of their ancestors, *a theological factor that is intrinsic to Jewish identity and covenant*, is a concern. How is it that, in 2023, we Catholics can readily affirm the belonging that First Nations Australians experience for Land, yet ignore the Jewish sense of belonging to Land which is every bit as spiritual and historical, and millennia-long?

Another big question: If, in concrete terms, "...the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews" (CRRJ, "Gifts & Calling", 40), when will we start to see this conviction being clearly articulated and incorporated into the everyday work of Mission Conferences and Evangelisation training courses on the ground, and in our everyday discourse?

And, antisemitism. No devout Catholic can turn a blind eye to the searing history of Christian anti-Judaism, its links to the Holocaust and the ongoing mutation and mobilisation of certain tropes by present-day extremists. How do we call our people to face this terrifying darkness in our Christian story, without crushing them with guilt? How do we approach the task "sensitively" for our people without courting insensitivity towards our Jewish friends, leaving them to fight their battles against antisemitism alone which, in light of our history, amounts to yet another form of betrayal?

These are pressing questions, which we need to lean into, not step back from. Even where clear-cut answers elude us, that needn't stop us, here in Australia, from *asking* the questions, much less "*living* the questions", with honesty and courage.

In closing: Gratitude

None of these concerns, however, diminish the enormous contribution WT makes to Catholic-Jewish relations in Australia. It represents a significant step forward, and a timely one, coming as it does on the heels of the Plenary Council.

I'd like to conclude on a note of sincere gratitude to Bishop Michael McKenna and members of the Commission for Christianity Unity and Interreligious Dialogue of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and all who were involved in bringing this document to light.

In particular, I'd like to acknowledge the essential partnership and goodwill of the ECAJ (Executive Council of Australian Jewry) and Jewish community, without which we could not be here today (walking together as friends, exchanging some robust comments) and launching this document.

It's a great partnership. A solid partnership. May we never take it for granted.

This is the full text of a response by Teresa Pirola; a slightly abbreviated version was delivered on the day due to time considerations.