STUMBLING BLOCKS AND STEPPING-STONES

Stumbling Blocks

1. Catholics and Jews—like people of different faiths in general—frequently attempt to understand themselves and each other:

   - without sufficient attention to or understanding of their originating experiences and historical development;
   - as if “the other” were monolithic, without the richness of its very diverse experiences and expressions;
   - according to their own personal understandings, preferences, and biases.

2. For many centuries Christian interpretations of Jesus as Christ (Messiah) were used to denigrate and virtually invalidate the meaning and at times the physical existence of Jews and Judaism. Until the close of Vatican Council II in 1965 nearly the entire history of Christianity’s relationship with Judaism was marked by a theological approach that engendered what has been aptly called a teaching of contempt. The basis of this teaching was the supersessionist belief that God’s new covenant with Christianity replaced God’s covenant with the Jewish people. Church teachings about Jews centered on the charge of deicide, the rescinding of the Covenant, the deprivation of the Jewish homeland, and the sentence to perpetual wandering which fueled the centuries-long Christian effort to proselytize and convert the Jews.

3. Still today the Jewish community, and most Christians, are shocked and puzzled by the silence of the Church during the years immediately preceding and during the years of the Shoah. Because of this history it is imperative that Christian teaching about the Shoah include a component that acknowledges, addresses, and repents of this sad reality.

4. Many North American Christians do not have an accurate understanding of the State of Israel, its origin, purpose, people, problems, and hopes. The information they receive about the Middle East and Israel is frequently inaccurate, influenced by media and/or authors who do not accept the legitimacy of the Jewish state or who make exclusive apocalyptic theological claims for Israel. Christians often have little knowledge and understanding of the
twentieth-century history of Israel. There are many gaps and/or misinformation regarding the three decades of British rule (1917-48), developments between 1948 and 1967, and developments—particularly regarding Jerusalem—since 1967. This lack of knowledge is further complicated by complex relationships and many centuries in which religious and political issues and passions have been consistently intertwined.

5. Though rescinded by the UN Security Council in 1991, the 1975 UN General Assembly resolution equating Zionism with racism still influences much of the general American Christian population. Enormous damage was done by this resolution; negative understandings of Zionism still linger and continue to influence. Many Christians have an inaccurate, simplistic, or monolithic understanding of Zionism, generally equating it with extreme nationalism. There is little knowledge or understanding of its purpose, the history of its development, and its relationship to the self-understanding and security of the Jewish people.

6. There is often a lack of awareness that Christians and Jews relate to Israel and Jerusalem in profoundly different ways. Having little understanding of how central the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem are to Jewish self-understanding, Christians frequently interpret this strong Jewish attachment as extreme nationalism. Christian attachment to this land and city—holy because of the events that took place there—is very different. Yet Christians tend to interpret the Jewish experience in this Christian framework. Classical Catholic teaching on Judaism and Israel, including Catholicism's spiritualized understanding of the Holy Land and Jerusalem, has been a significant component of Christian supersessionist theology regarding Judaism.

7. Both Christians and Jews are still influenced by Pope Pius X's negative response to Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, in 1904: "We are unable to favor the [Zionist] movement. We cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem, but we could never sanction it. The ground of Jerusalem ... has been sanctified by the life of Christ. As head of the Church I cannot answer you otherwise. The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people." This has been exacerbated—in spite of Pope John Paul II's positive relationship with the Jewish community—by the Vatican's forty-five-year delay in establishing diplomatic relations with the State of Israel, which occurred only in 1993. This served to renew Jewish mistrust and gave rise to misunderstandings among Catholics as well.

8. Roman Catholics and other Christians generally assume that because Christianity is a monotheistic faith rooted in Judaism, Christians believe in the same God as Jews do. Many do not realize how difficult it is for Jews to comprehend how Christians reconcile belief in the Trinity with monotheism.

9. Because Christianity is rooted in Judaism, Christians frequently assume that the Christian and Jewish understandings of Son of God, Messiah, and Kingdom of God are more similar than they actually are. Facile, simplistic
comparisons and inaccurate understandings often result. The Christian teaching about God (Trinity, Incarnation, Jesus) is not integral to the self-definition of Judaism in the same way Judaism’s teaching about God is integral to the self-definition of Christianity.

10. Christian interpretation of Scripture has been a major contributor to the Christian teaching of contempt. The Church used Scripture to demean Jews while shifting the spiritual legitimacy of the Jewish tradition onto the Church. This tradition of supersessionist understanding has marked Christianity’s use of its sacred writings for centuries.

11. The Christian use and juxtaposition of the terms Old Testament and New Testament has contributed to a pejorative understanding of the Hebrew Bible among Christians. Historically, Christians have tended to limit their knowledge of Judaism to what they learn about it in the Bible, to the extent of referring to Judaism in the past tense. Many Christians have limited or no knowledge of the writing and use of the Talmud, which represents developments in the living Judaism after the first century CE.

12. Christianity’s supersessionist interpretation of Scripture often found its expressions in liturgy, creating problematic elements in prayers, hymns, symbols, and illustrations that are difficult to remove. This is particularly true of private devotions and liturgical prayers and hymns associated with Holy Week and Advent. For centuries the holiest season of the Christian liturgical year, Holy Week and Easter, was the time when the Jewish people suffered the greatest insults and persecution at the hands of Christians.

13. Well-intentioned Christians, while discovering the richness of Christianity’s Jewish liturgical roots, easily tend to adopt or adapt Jewish customs and prayer forms. The result is often an unintentional but insensitive blurring of identity boundaries between Judaism and Christianity, such as when the seder meal is “Christianized,” the Hanukkah lights are displayed with the Advent wreath, or a mezuzah is fastened on the doorway of a Christian home.

14. Unfortunately, supersessionist understandings about law and love still persist in Christianity, resulting in an inaccurate juxtaposition of Christianity’s new love and Judaism’s old legalism. This identifies the God of Christianity with love, mercy, and compassion and limits the God of Judaism to a God of justice.

Stepping-Stones

1. There are some important similarities between Judaism and Catholic Christianity. These similarities provide us with interesting areas to explore. Like Judaism,

- Catholic Christianity has a long history of development.
Christianity and Catholic Christianity are not monolithic; they are richly diverse.

Catholic Christians claim a distinct faith identity, though this identity cannot be easily contained or described.

2. Though there were few efforts made by the Church on behalf of the Jewish community during the Nazi era, resistance and rescue efforts by righteous gentiles during World War II were admirable and inspiring.

3. Since the Shoah, committed Christians have made serious and consistent efforts to remove all expressions of supersessionism and contempt from Christian attitudes and teaching. For Catholic Christians this was formally articulated at Vatican II in Nostra Aetate. The Church’s new teaching negated the charge of deicide, affirmed the continuity of God’s covenant with Judaism, and drew new attention to the great spiritual patrimony Christianity shares with the Jewish people. The Church recalled to itself that it received God’s revelation through Judaism and that it continues to draw “sustenance from the root of that good olive tree.” Since then, formal dialogue with the Jewish community is helping Christianity develop a new self-understanding vis-à-vis Judaism. (Many other Christian denominations have developed similar documents and guidelines.) Additional Church teachings since 1965 have further developed these new understandings and attitudes.

4. Motivated by personal experiences with Jews preceding and during the Nazi era, Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II have provided admirable leadership and witness in the Church’s efforts at understanding and repentance with the Jewish people. Other such courageous and influential Catholic leaders include Cardinals Augustin Bea and Johannes Willebrands in Rome, and William Keeler in Baltimore, Roger Mahony in Los Angeles, John O’Connor in New York, and the late Joseph Bernardin of Chicago.

5. Christians today are studying and teaching about the Shoah to remember the depth of evil humanity is capable of, to understand the sociological/religious/political dynamics that can perpetrate such a systematic genocide, and to ensure that such a genocide never happen again.

6. Both Jews and Catholic Christians relate profoundly to Israel and Jerusalem, though in very different ways. For centuries and still today Catholic Christians regard the holy sites of Israel and Jerusalem as places of pilgrimage. For Jews and Judaism, the Land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem remain central to their self-definition, the heart of Jewish belief and liturgy.

7. With the rebirth of Israel in 1948 Jews, Christians, and Muslims have moved into new and uncharted relationships. Persistent commitment to the current peace process, in spite of difficulties and setbacks, speaks of the desire and possibility of giving new expression to the prophetic call to justice, righteousness, and love.

8. The process of reconciliation and growth in understanding and
friendship between Catholics and Jews since Vatican II was given concrete expression and confirmation on December 30, 1993 and on June 15, 1994, when the Vatican-Israeli Accord established full diplomatic relationship between the Holy See and Israel. Through this action of recognizing and affirming a sovereign Jewish homeland, the Catholic Church gave concrete expression to its new theological understandings regarding Jews and Judaism.

9. At Vatican Council II, Catholic Christianity recalled to itself that the church "received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy deigned to establish the ancient covenant." Catholic Christianity reminded itself that the Church "draws sustenance from the root of that good olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild olive branches of the gentiles." Catholic belief in and understanding of God is rooted in Jewish monotheism, and the Church continues to be informed, nourished, and sustained by this relationship between Judaism and its God.

10. Since Vatican II, Christian teaching about Christ is being reexamined to ensure a sound and positive theology of Judaism in the Church. Today Christianity is receiving considerable help from Jewish historians and Scripture scholars in its efforts to attain an accurate understanding of Judaism at the time of Jesus, an understanding that is throwing new light on Jesus' personal faith, self-understanding, and public teaching.

11. The sacred writings of Christianity are rooted in and informed and enriched by the ancient tradition and spirituality of the Hebrew Scriptures. Vatican Council II and subsequent Church teachings have strongly affirmed the importance and value of these roots for Catholic Christianity.

12. Christian prayer and worship is intimately related to and enriched by the Jewish traditions of prayer and worship. Catholic Christians have been called to be attentive to this reality and to value it. Catholic liturgists have taken this injunction most seriously and, with the assistance of Jewish liturgists and scholars, are discovering the depth and details of this relationship with deep appreciation. Increasingly, the entire Church is being enriched by their new insights and understandings. Some critical questions are currently being approached with a new depth in the Catholic-Jewish dialogue to ensure that, as they share certain elements common to their worship and prayer traditions, Catholics and Jews both maintain an integrity in their liturgical practices. This requires that they not prematurely adopt or simplistically adapt each other's rituals and prayers.

13. Jews and Christians, sharing a common religious foundation, have a joint responsibility for the world of today and tomorrow. Jewish and Christian leaders, in calling their communities to contribute to the building of a better world, say we must together draw the practical consequences from those teachings of the Torah which are our common basis.

The Torah, as the expression of the covenant of Sinai, remains valid for
Jews as a gift to them that was never revoked (Rom. 9:4; 11:29). Nor has the Torah been abolished for Christians, but remains part of God's revelation, albeit with a new interpretation through the person of Christ (Matt. 5:17; John 10:35). The two main commandments Jesus described as the greatest (Mark 28:28-31) are commandments of the Torah (Deut. 6:4-5; Lev. 19:18), and the Ten Commandments given to the people of Israel at Sinai (Exod. 20; Deut. 6) are central to Christian ethics. (International Council of Christians and Jews, 1993-94)

14. Leaders of most major religions today are acknowledging the past (and some present) abuses of religion in which traditions and systems of beliefs and values are used to justify bloodshed, violence, and oppression. We are all being called upon to

... search [our] own traditions in order to give adequate responses to the challenging problems of the modern world, while at the same time recognizing and respecting insights which come from other faith traditions and value systems. (International Council of Christians and Jews, 1993-1994)