“NOTHING SUBSTANTIVELY NEW”? 
The latest Vatican document 
“The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” and the future of Jewish-Catholic relations’. 

Public Lecture by Rev. Prof. Philipp Gabriel Renczes, SJ 
Director of the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies, Rome 

With a response from Rabbi Fred Morgan, AM 
Professorial Fellow, 
Australian Catholic University, Melbourne 

Sunday 30 October, 2016 
Simonds Hall, Catholic Leadership Centre 
East Melbourne, Victoria, Australia 

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I am very grateful to the organizers of this event; I am particularly delighted to be able to meet with members of the Jewish Community here in Melbourne and I thank Rabbi Fred Morgan to have accepted to be the respondent to this lecture.

“Nothing substantively new”? The latest Vatican document “The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” and the future of Jewish-Catholic relations.

Recent Jewish-Catholic relations are indeed one of the most amazing gifts of our time, they have been called “without parallel in the human history” and I am very happy to be able to participate in this wonderful, on-going gift as director of a Centre of Judaic Studies and Jewish-Christian Relations, the Cardinal Bea Centre, which is part of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome where students from around 120 nations are trained to become priests, teachers, judges or administrators in the Catholic Church in the entire world.

Nevertheless, the choice of this conference’s title “Nothing substantively new?” is also - at least indirectly - reflective of a certain concern that the Catholic Jewish rapprochement which began with Vatican II’s declaration “Nostra Aetate” is currently going through a phase of a certain fatigue, quite different from the vague of interest and invigoration that accompanied and followed the promulgation of the Council’s Declaration 50 years ago. Certainly, I do not think we can speak of weariness at the sight of regular and even frequent encounters between top level representatives of both traditions, continuously working in partnership to intensify and promote quantity and quality of the mutual exchange and to give more and more strength to the ties of this still young friendship. Nor
can we speak of tiredness in the entirely uncompromising expressions of commitment to this dialogue, pronounced, on numerous occasions, by Pope Francis.

But I believe we can admit to the sensation of fatigue concerning the Jewish-Christian dialogue when referring to a new generation of Christians and Jews in schools and universities, parishes and congregations who would very often not understand the special place that the Jewish-Christian relations signify in Catholic theology and Catholic life, but also in the Western Culture as a whole, nor marvel at the sheer sight of its very existence after almost 2000 years of contempt and marginalization, rejection, violence, and persecution.

In fact, as this phenomena of fatigue can be linked to a variety of causes which deserve a much more detailed and complex analysis than I will be able to present here, it seems to me that one of the major causes would simply be that what was once perceived as “ground-breaking”, capable to generate a radical move in the Catholic Church, has acquired today, in our time, the taste of the ordinary, a kind of “déjà vu” that makes it hard to see the possibility of setting free renewed genuine energy and enthusiasm.

Thus, to ask the question is there something “new” in this document, is at the same time expressing the hope that we may find good reasons in there to rekindle the spirit of joyful hope that we are moving forward and not standing still.

Whilst there is certainly a number of statements in the document “The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” which was released on December 10th 2015 that had not been made ever before in an official release from the Holy See (we will get to some of them, in a short while) and in this sense there are without doubt elements of novelty to be attested, it strikes me, however, as even more important to realize that we are confronted in there with two “tendencies”, tendencies which permeate the whole document throughout, and it is those tendencies which in my view set indeed a “new” tone and introduce a new flavour to the Jewish-Christian dialogue, compared to previous statements. As I see it, these two tendencies furthermore open a path to develop yet something even “newer” for the future, which may not be here yet, but is prepared in it.

It is these two tendencies plus a sketch of the future path that I would like to expose here.

1st Tendency: Jewish-Catholic Dialogue is associated with the basics features of Christianity.
The subtitle of “The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” states that this is “A Reflection on Theological Questions.” While the word “reflection” certainly surprises in an official Vatican text, reflection seems to hint at a progressive nature of its content and thereby admitting to a somewhat provisional character of the doctrine - I will get back to this in a short while - it is without any doubt the ‘theological aspect’ which right from the beginning is taking centre stage. Thus, “theological” will be repeated time and again: “it is on current theological questions that have developed since the Second Vatican Council” (Preface), its intention is “to be a starting point for further theological thought with a view to enriching and intensifying the theological dimension of Jewish- Catholic dialogue.” (Preface).

As the same Preface explicitly acknowledges that “Nostra Aetate” of 50 years back already presented “the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people in a new theological framework,” one wonders if here we are indirectly told that much of the dialogue after Nostra Aetate has been not sufficiently theological. Anyway, “Theological” here is not the result of a theological exchange between Catholics and Jews, we are dealing with “Catholic reflections” (Preface), yet in a way that “their significance may be deepened for members of both faith traditions.” (Preface).

Had the text been redacted in a Jewish-Christian dialogue and explicitly addressed also to the Jewish community, it could be presumed that certain issues would have been framed differently.

At any event, what I find remarkable and indeed to be listed as a first tendency that deserves the qualification “novelty” is that “theological” will not translate into “high-strung theology-formulas” - not at all. It will not result in a “scholarly” or academic language, “intended rather for subject matter experts”, nor resort to metaphorical “biblical-allegorical” imagery, but very much in the likes of a class in catechism, it will cut through to the issues which interest indeed every Catholic or rather every Christian, insofar those issues form the very core tenets of the Christian being and of the Christian self-understanding. In this way, we arrive at three main affirmations of this document which I would like to briefly summarize in three points:

A) the two separate Covenants, the one with Abraham and his descendants in the Hebrew Bible (Torah) and the one through Christ in the New Testament (the “Old” and the “New”) are both eternally valid (especially n. 33 and 34)

B) Catholic mission work dissociates from activities directed towards Jews (especially n. 40 and 41)
C) lack of Jewish belief in the divinity of Jesus no longer bars Jews from salvation (especially n. 36)

Now let me illustrate to you what I mean by this fresh, new way of speaking with a short comparison of excerpts referring to those chief statements contained in this latest document with extracts of the Council Declaration “Nostra Aetate”, referring to those issues, as well : The fourth chapter of Nostra Aetate reads

“The Church professes that all who believe in Christ - Abraham’s sons according to faith - are included in the same Patriarch’s call (...) that the Church draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles” (N.A. 4),

now our document reads:

“The Church does not replace the people of God of Israel, since as the community founded on Christ, it represents in Christ the fulfilment of the promises. This does not mean that Israel can no longer be considered to be the people of God.” (The gifts and the calling, n. 23)

and later it concludes from this:

“In concrete terms this means that the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work erected toward Jews. While there is a principled rejection of an institutional Jewish mission, Christian are nonetheless called to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews, although they should do so in a humble and sensitive manner, acknowledging that Jews are bearers of God’s Word, and particularly in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah.” (The gifts and the calling, n. 40).

Back to Nostra Aetate: “Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross Christ, Our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making both one in Himself” (N.A. 4), our document now reads as follows:

“From the Christian confession that there can be only one path to salvation, however, it does not in any way follow that the Jews are excluded from God’s salvation... such a
claim would find no support in the understanding of Saint Paul...” (The gifts and the calling, n. 36).

It seems to me that the claim of “originality” as such of the main affirmations of our document can indeed be debated and at any rate would necessarily have to be negotiated within the context of the whole Tradition of the Church. We are all aware that the Church’s faith, built on the faith received from the Apostles, can never theologically argue in favour of something entirely disjointed from the Tradition. My contention is, however, that those main affirmations of this document are now clothed in an immediacy that provides a new potential of relevancy, capable of sending out a wake-up call for all drowsy Catholics who are still settling down in the lazy illusory world of substitution theology.

2nd Tendency: The Paradoxical

This leads me to the second tendency in the document which on the surface may come across as quite ostentatious, but is, in fact, a carrier of quite a subtle message. I am referring to the presence of paradoxical language, referring ultimately to what is classically termed “Apophatic Theology”. “Mystery”, mentioned 4 times in a key position in this document is Apophatic Theology’s “open sesame” call.

Thus, for instance, on the one hand, the text says that the Torah is sufficient for “a successful life in right relationship with God” (n. 24); on the other, that Christ is “the universal and therefore also exclusive mediation of salvation” (n. 35). While the text concedes that the theological work of reconciling these paradoxical views, requires further theological reflection, it nevertheless supports them already now precisely in their polarities, and concludes that that how these two positions can be reconciled “remains an unfathomable divine mystery.” (no. 36).

With the reference to “Mystery”, the Commission picks up and develops a theological insight which proved paramount at Vatican II leading to a renovated, more integral understanding of the Church. In fact, in the aftermath of the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, it had been of chief importance for Catholic Theology to emphasize the visibility, meaning the concrete realness of the church as God’s covenantal partner. In 19th and 20th century, Catholic Theology passed on to point out that this partnership is ultimately rooted in God’s Eternity, in God’s love and God’s freedom. But God’s freedom and love, God’s justice and mercy, in their co-presence, are mysterious for humans to grasp and if the toilsome history of the Jewish and Christian striving for understanding God’s freedom and love proves anything, it surely proves this: the attempt to reduce God to the
scope of our own comprehension leads to false conclusions. This is certainly true in the absolute sense when referring to God: if we were to deny God’s transcendence, we would create an idol.

However, Catholic Theology has been realizing more and more– and this document is a proof of it - that this ultimate mysteriousness regards God also insofar as he has drawn near to us, insofar as God has revealed Himself to us. In fact, how are we to understand God’s actions? How are we to understand the ultimate reason, for instance, that God first creates all humankind, becomes the father of all and only subsequently, calls one special person, Abraham? Why, from the Christian perspective, did Jesus come only at a later stage, when so many things had already been established, which indeed made a split within the people of the Covenant so highly likely? What does this all mean?

Both Jews and Christians believe that God is Eternal Truth and Eternal Love who has drawn near to us, authentically, which is equivalent to saying that God does not show himself to us in such a way that he himself is not. On this assertion certainly rests the Jewish and the Christian Tradition. Yet the “authenticity of God’s love” towards us does not fully coincide with its transparency for us. In this context, it is often noted that “metaphysical coincidences of opposites” are a Christian specialty. After all, Christianity’s essentials bring about new syntheses, a synthesis of Unity and Plurality in the Trinitarian God, a synthesis of absoluteness and relativity in Jesus Christ. We may notice that the Talmud seems to be following a different path, keeping distinct records of various, not coinciding solutions to questions that arise from the Bible and the Rabbinical Tradition. Thus, the rabbinical Tradition appears more inclined to promote the idea that tensions are to be maintained and to be left open, contrapositions are invitations to look further, to keep human research going and to refrain from definitive answers. At this point, I am tempted to detect in this document which places paradoxical claims side by side, a certain endorsement of a Talmudic approach - obviously, without making this approach explicit.

3rd Tendency: A New hermeneutic

With this, I have come to my last point I mentioned above, a new path for which this text in my view is laying the ground. In Jewish-Christian Dialogue – just as in the Commission of this text – it is customary to compare notes between the two traditions on specific topics, often painful or difficult topics that may constitute an obstacle for one towards the other. Like the topics of “covenant” and the topic of “salvation”. (Interestingly enough, the document has been subsequently criticized for not having tackled with yet other difficult topics, as, for example the meaning of the “land”.) Proceeding in this fashion, we, in fact,
receive a very streamlined, monochord and static idea of what the Jewish and the Christian Tradition mean and stand for.

I believe that the time has come (and with it a very inspiring challenge) to start asking where each tradition (Christianity, on the one hand, and Judaism on the other) have been consistently “developing” through time, negotiating data of its Tradition with knowledges which came along in the historical progress. New balances have been reached within each tradition, and there has been a complex combination of continuity and discontinuity, Tradition and Reform within each. Exchanging on those hermeneutical developments, maybe even shaping a new hermeneutic which grows out of a common hermeneutical exchange to give answers together to a growingly secular world, would in fact mean to shift the Jewish-Christian dialogue from “Face to Face” to a dialogue “Side by Side”. In this approach, it would not be the differences between Judaism and Christianity that constitute the main source of reflection and dialogue, but rather it would be the development that has taken place within each tradition would become an inspirational source for the other.

Thus, I am certain that we would see how much the Christian and the Jewish tradition, in fact, have been able to realize changes through time in such a way that it continues to faithfully witnessing God’s presence in this world. Possibly, we might be able to find elements, how each tradition has integrated in its own insights which it received from the other. Topics which would be particularly apt to be looked at insofar as their “development” within their own tradition is concerned are in my opinion those which deal with the intersection of the Divine Action and the Human Realm: in other words, the areas of grace and human freedom, justice and mercy. The understanding of the Ten Commandments would be a suggestion, the development of social and financial ethics another. But all that indeed would constitute material for a whole different conference.