The Church as the People of God: A People in Communion

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Abstract: Out of many biblical images of the Church scattered in Scripture, the bible highlights two. One is that of the Body of Christ. The other is that of the People of God. The author places the key statements of Lumen Gentium on the People of God, within the history of God's dealings with his chosen people, as presented in both the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible, and draws significant conclusions.

Key Words: Church – biblical images; body of Christ; people of God; Lumen Gentium; covenant; church as communion

In order to understand and appreciate what the Church is and what the Church is for, it is necessary to study the theme of ‘the People of God,’ particularly as this is presented in Scripture and in the documents of Vatican II. This is to say that one must study how, from the beginning of the human race, the action of God has been focussed on one clearly defined objective – the selection from the human race as a whole, of a particular section of the human race, to be his very own special people and to carry out his mission.

In this presentation, then, I will be reflecting on the Church as the chosen People of God. As such, it is an aspect of the Church as sacrament of Christ. But it is such a central aspect that, following the lead of Lumen Gentium which devotes two particular chapters to it, it deserves separate and special treatment.

It is important to stress, however, how closely connected is this way of viewing the Church with all that may be said about the Church as sacrament, and more specifically, with all that may be said about the Church as the Body of Christ. The People of God and the Body of Christ represent two understandings, two images of the same reality, two ways of describing the very same people. But these ways are neither in competition nor identical. They focus on the same people but from different angles and perspectives.

The image of the People of God, more than that of the Body of Christ, suggests the humanity and the freedom of the persons who make up the church community, and therefore the possibility of the sinfulness of its members. By contrast, an over-emphasis on the Church as the Body of Christ may tend to credit the Body with all the holiness which belongs only to Christ the Head. It may therefore lead to an unhealthy tendency to divinize the Church, as though its every action was directed by Christ and the Holy Spirit, to the exclusion of all error and all sin. Thus the two images are limited in their application and must be regarded as complementary rather than complete in themselves. But taken together, they shed light from different angles on the Church as a communion or community.

1 This article therefore follows on from my earlier article, ‘The Church as Sacrament Revisited: Source and Sign of Encounter with Christ,’ Australian eJournal of Theology 4 (2005): aejt.com.au.
A. VATICAN II’S BASIC TREATMENT OF THE CHURCH

In the first chapter of Lumen Gentium, on the Church as mystery, the Council is concerned to show that the Church originates in the Holy Trinity and in the incarnation of the Son of God. In its second chapter, on the People of God, it sets out to show that this Church of God is made up of human beings and develops within human history. John Thornhill has commented on the emergence of this image of the Church at the Council:

Although it had long been expressed in the prayers of the liturgy – almost always spoken in the name of ‘populus tuus,’ ‘plebs tua’ [= your people] – this notion was practically forgotten in Catholic usage. It came to prominence almost overnight, during the early days of the Council, reflecting an awakening of a new awareness in the Church, as it saw itself, not as the triumphalistic presence of the kingdom in the midst of the world, but as a pilgrim people immersed in the drama of struggling humanity.²

The choice by the Council of this description of the Church underlines the continuity between Israel as the People of God and the Church as the People of God.

Lumen Gentium also sets out to explain what the members of the People of God have in common as Christians, as disciples of Jesus, before it says anything on distinctions which can be made among them on the basis of different roles, functions, and states of life. Thus the document follows this sequence: Mystery of the Church, People of God, Hierarchy (the Church’s social organization).

Lumen Gentium begins its second chapter ‘The People of God’ with these sentences on God’s choice of a particular people for a particular mission:

At all times and in every nation, anyone who fears God and does what is right has been acceptable to him (see Acts 10:35). He has, however, willed to make women and men holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness (no.9).

The Council is speaking of God’s gift of salvation (well-being, more or less)³ to human beings through his calling into existence a particular community as his instrument for their salvation. This community is called the ‘People of God,’ and implies God’s choice, God’s selection of a particular people for a particular task, one which expresses God’s love and mercy towards the whole human race.

A deeper grasp of this way of understanding the Church can lead to a deepening experience of the Church as involving both communion with God and communion with fellow-Christians, who are called in the document ‘a communion of life, love and truth’ (no.9) It will therefore be appropriate now to delve deeper into the biblical background of this image of the Church.


³ William Henn, Church: The People of God (London: Burns & Oates/ New York: Continuum, 2004) puts flesh on the idea of ‘salvation’ when he writes: ‘The Church is that body of disciples who believe in Jesus as their saviour and who have come to know through him the triune God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’ (16); ‘The first disciples gradually came to know how much they needed Jesus. He was the water and bread, the light and life that human beings long for in the depths of their hearts and souls. And he offered eternal life to men and women who, having been made in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen 1:27), bore the stamp of the sublime and the divine but, being finite, bore the tragic destiny of illness, diminution, and, ultimately, death… Jesus offered a truth, a beauty and a goodness that would be complete and everlasting’ (18).
B. THE ‘PEOPLE OF GOD’ OF THE SINAI COVENANT

The term ‘People of God,’ without any qualification, may sound egotistical and monopolistic. After all, the whole of humanity belongs to God our Creator and Redeemer, and therefore all human beings are the people of God in a general sense and are the object of his love. So in using this image to describe and characterize a particular people, the qualification has to be introduced, that the ‘People of God’ of whom the Council speaks, is that particular people who have been favoured with a special covenant relationship.

To speak of the “People of God” of the Sinai Covenant is to speak of the first stage of God’s choice of a particular people. God’s decision is summed up neatly and succinctly in Deuteronomy 7:6: ‘the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.’ God made this choice, not because the people of Israel were great in numbers or achievements but simply, as the text goes on to say, ‘because the Lord loves you’ (Deut 7:8).

Writing of Israel, Lumen Gentium remarks: ‘He therefore chose the people of Israel to be his own people and established a covenant with them’ (no.9). What happened is that God rescued the Hebrew people from slavery and misery in Egypt. In the Sinai desert he assembled this motley mob of runaway slaves, and made a covenant with them. Henceforth this chosen People of the Old Covenant would be known in Hebrew as the ‘Qahal Yahweh’ (Dt 18:16; Jg 20:2; 1 Kg 8:14; Mic 2:5, etc.), translated in English as ‘The Assembly of God.’

The God of Israel is the God of the Covenant. ‘The closest thing to a definition of God in the Bible,’ remarks Daniel Harrington, ‘comes in Exodus 34:6-7 where everything hinges on God’s covenantal relationship with his chosen people: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation”.’

The making of the Covenant at Sinai is described in Exodus 24. Elements of two traditions are blended together. Two ceremonies are described. While they differ widely in details, what they have in common is that ‘both ceremonies feature symbols which speak of shared life,’ one through the sharing of food, the other through the sharing of blood.

The First Version (Ex 24:1-2, 9-11)
According to the first version (vv.1-2, 9-11, probably the Yahwist tradition), the Covenant happens in a sacred meal on top of Mt Sinai. Those taking part are the representatives of Israel – Moses, Aaron and his two eldest sons, as well as seventy elders. In dining together they experience communion with God.

A significant aspect which this ritual banquet has in common with the meal of the Christian Eucharist, the meal of the New Covenant, is the experience of union with God which those taking part experience – ‘they beheld God, and they ate and drank’ (v.11).

The Second Version (Ex 24:3-8)
According to the other tradition (the Elohist, vv.3-8), the whole assembly of Israel takes part in a covenant sacrifice ritual at the foot of the mountain. In contrast with the special

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5 R.J. Burns, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Old Testament Message, no. 3 (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983), 158; cf. Roland de Vaux, The Early History of Israel to the Exodus and Covenant of Sinai (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978), 447: ‘this blood rite and the covenant meal (Ex 24:11) are parallel and both have the same meaning.’
roles of the ‘chief men’ in the previous tradition, this account stresses the direct participation of the entire community, with Moses acting as mediator of the Covenant. Another obvious difference is the stress on the word – through the reading of God’s Law, ‘the book of the Covenant’; through the people’s response in the form of their pledge of obedience (”all that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient”); and through the sprinkling of the blood of the covenant sacrifice, first on the altar (as representing God), and then on the whole assembled people of God.7

What is of concern here is not so much the details of the ceremony of the making of this Covenant, as its meaning for the relationship between the people and their God. This has been stated succinctly in the Prologue to both Exodus stories of how the Covenant was made:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (vv.3-6).8

It is inferred from this passage that the people of Israel have been singled out ‘not for privilege but for a task.’9 ‘They are to live in obedience and fidelity to the ethical demands of the Covenant. They are to praise God and to dedicate themselves to serving God. On behalf of all the nations and peoples of the world they are to declare God’s marvellous deeds and his holy name to the ends of the earth.’10 In short, God’s choice of Israel to be his people is for the sake of their mission to the nations, a mission described by Yves Congar as being "like a sacrament of salvation offered to the world."11

From the stories of the making of the Covenant, one may conclude that in the covenant bond finalized at Mount Sinai Yahweh and Israel came to form a single family, a communion of life.”12 Bonded as they were to the same God, the people also experienced a bond among themselves, the bond of life lived together, the bond of life shared. Together they were the covenant people of God, together they shared in his love and care for them. Henceforward, this theme - Yahweh as the God of Israel and Israel as his people - runs through all the writings of the Old Testament.

Yet time and time again and again Israel fails to respond. Its history is one of repeated failures and betrayals, backslidings and loss of faith - in short, it is a story of broken communion, a story of sin. Its repeated rejection of the covenant relationship leads God in his mercy and fidelity to make a promise to start all over again, to once again

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7 Burns, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, 156-159.
8 Bernhard Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966), 58; cf. Yves Congar, This Church that I Love (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1969): ‘Election, in the Scriptures, is not a privilege; it is always accompanied by a service or a mission: one is chosen and set apart for the realization of a plan of God, which surpasses the elected person’ (17); Joseph Ratzinger, Introduction to Christianity (London: Burns & Oates, 1968): ‘Election is not a privilege of the elected but a call to live for others’ (174); Thornhill, Sign and Promise: ‘The election . . . does not mean being called forth from the rest to have the privilege of being different; it means being called forth from the rest to have the privilege of existing for the rest’ (36); Thornhill again: ‘God did not call Israel to an exclusive “separateness”; he called them to be “a light to the nations” (Is 42:6; cf Lk 2:32) . . . ’ (37).
9 In this context, the universalist themes that recur in the Old Testament take on special significance, the more so when seen against the background of the many particularist statements. Such themes e.g., as the covenant with Adam as a corporate personality, the peopling of the earth, the vocation of Abraham, the figure of Jonah, the cosmic-universalist themes of the Psalms and Wisdom literature, the latter part of Isaiah, and that of the so-called ‘pagan saints’ illustrate the call of God to his people to manifest his name to the nations.
10 Congar, This Church that I Love, 19.
11 Burns, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, 159.
choose Israel as his people, and to renew his Covenant with them. In this way the emphasis shifts from the past to the future, the future of God’s action. Two prophecies state this promise with particular force:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt - a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that 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 on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people ([Jer 31:31-33]).

I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God (Ezek 11:19-20).

The experiences of Israel as the People of God, and the connected themes of election, covenant, witness and promise, continue into the Christian Church.

C. The ‘People of God’ of the New Covenant: Biblical Background

The origin of the Church as the new People of God is summed up in a single sentence in Lumen Gentium: ‘[Christ] called a people together made up of Jews and Gentiles which would be one, not according to the flesh, but in the Spirit, and it would be the new people of God’ (no.9). Jesus Christ, then, has made his followers the new People of God.

The whole ministry of Jesus was to bring into existence a renewed people, in continuity with the Israel of old. St Paul calls this new community ‘the Israel of God’ (Gal 6:16). Jesus symbolized his intention to do this by choosing the Twelve (Mt 10:1-8, par.), as representatives of the twelve tribes of Israel and as foundation members of a renewed and missionary community. Just as the Covenant on Sinai was the centre of Old Testament religion, so Jesus made the new Covenant in his blood the centre of the religion of the new People of God.

The accounts of the making of the New Covenant in the blood of Jesus, as expressed in his action and words with the cup of wine at the Last Supper, are parallel to those which tell of the making of the Sinai Covenant in Exodus 24. There are e.g. almost the same words which Moses and Jesus use with their action with the blood. Just as the blood of the Covenant sacrifice at Sinai symbolized and brought about the union between God and his people, so the blood of Christ, i.e. the sacrifice of his life, joins his disciples to himself, to God the Father, and to one another, in a new relationship. In both accounts of the making of the Covenant there is an emphasis on the Word, i.e. on the proclamation of the deeds of God and of the response to that proclamation which God requires. As in the Exodus narrative, perhaps the most significant common feature is the union which the rite brings about between those taking part and their God. For ‘to share blood is to share life, to become one.’

In Paul’s and Luke’s versions of the action and words of Jesus with the cup of wine at the Last Supper (1 Cor 11:25; Lk 22:20; cf. Mk 14:24; Mt 26:28), Jesus uses the term ‘the

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13 Cited in Lumen Gentium, no.9.
14 Cf. Ex 24:8: ‘See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you...’; Mk 14:24: ‘This is my blood of the covenant...’; Mt 26:28: ‘...this is my blood of the covenant...’
15 Burns, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, 159.
new covenant’ to express the significance of his death. His symbolic and prophetic action with the cup of wine establishes with his disciples ‘the new covenant’ in his blood (i.e. in his life to be poured out the next day for the multitude [i.e. for all]). In sharing the cup he draws them into a communion with himself and his self-giving for the salvation of the world. Accordingly, Vatican II says succinctly:

Christ instituted this new covenant, namely the new covenant in his blood (see 1 Cor 11:25); he called a people together made up of Jews and Gentiles which would be one, not according to the flesh, but in the Spirit, and it would be the new people of God (LG, no.9).

What Vatican II also says in Gaudium et spes, its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (7 December 1965) about the relationship of Christ to people of good will who are outside the visible boundaries of his Church, is relevant to what has been said about the New Covenant brought into existence by Jesus Christ through the shedding of his blood:

All this holds true not only for Christians but also for all people of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for everyone, and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery (no.22). 16

This new People of God is bonded together by the sacrifice of the life of Jesus, and by the fruit of that sacrifice, the gift of his Spirit dwelling in their hearts, and re-creating, directing, activating and motivating them from within. The Letter to Titus speaks powerfully of the influence of the Holy Spirit in and from the water of baptism, the first sacrament of Christian initiation:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Tit 3:5-7).

Thus, the principle of the transformation of human beings into the People of God of the New Covenant is the Spirit of Jesus. It is the Spirit who has raised Jesus Christ from the dead (Rom 8:11), the Spirit who shares the risen life of Christ with his followers (Rom 8:11), the Spirit who has poured God’s love into their hearts (Rom 5:5) and who forms them into the one Body of Christ (cf. Rom 12:4-8; 1 Cor 12:12-27). It is the Spirit who sustains their communion and community in the Body of Christ, the Spirit who works in both the personal and shared faith of Christians and in their celebration of the Eucharist (1 Cor 10:16-17). It is the Spirit who unites them ‘in Christ’ to the Father, and enables them to pray ‘Abba! Father!’ (Gal 4:6).

The clearest expression of the identity of the People of God of the New Covenant is found in the Exodus imagery of the first letter of Peter:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Pet 2:9-10; cf. Ex 19:6). 17

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16 For a fuller reflection on God’s universal saving plan and the role of the Church within it, see Thornhill, Sign and Promise, 45-47.

17 Congar appears to subscribe to the replacement model, viz. that Christians have replaced the Jewish people as the People of God. Cf. Thornhill, Sign and Promise, 45-47.
The impact of this passage will be greater if we remember that its author was writing to a group of predominantly Gentile Christians (see 1:18; 2:10) in northern Asia Minor (see 1:1), probably in the 80s of the first century. They were feeling that they were like ‘aliens and exiles’ (2:11), cut off from the surrounding society, alienated from their pagan neighbours and even despised and ostracized by them. Knowing their feelings of hurt and discouragement, the author offers these isolated Gentile Christians affirmation, assurance and encouragement, and a sense of pride in belonging to God’s people, the Church. He tells them that just as the enslaved tribes of Israel were brought out of Egypt and transformed into God’s people, so have they been changed into God’s people through their conversion to Christ and their incorporation into him by their baptism.

A consequence of being the People of God of the New Covenant is that unlike a crowd of persons waiting together to catch a train, or a crowd in a cinema watching the same movie, who are simply physically juxtaposed, the people of the Church are bonded together. They have all been redeemed by Christ, they share his Spirit, they (sacramentally) eat his Body and drink his Blood, and they share their God-given gifts of faith, hope and love. And so when they hear God’s call and come together to pray, and especially when they assemble for the Eucharist, they give expression to all they have in common as the People of God of the New Covenant and the Body of Christ in the world.

**D. The Pilgrim People of God: ‘Endowed Already with a Sanctity that is Real Though Imperfect’ (LG, no. 48)**

Yves Congar describes the Church as ‘the community of the faithful who march in the way of salvation.’ This is certainly the ideal. But we need to be on our guard against idealizing the Church as a community that is totally faithful, holy and perfect. The reality is that the Church is composed of human beings who are sometimes unfaithful, and who sometimes take paths to evil, paths that lead away from, rather than towards goodness of life and God. The reality is that, in the words of Michael Fahey, the Church is the community that keeps alive the memory of Jesus, but it is also the community that, because of weakness and sin, forgets some dimensions of the message of Christ. The reality is that the People of God are a people in history, a living people, a people on a journey through time, a pilgrim people, liable to be affected by the dust and grime of their journey. They have not yet arrived. They are not yet perfect. While they do exist in the world as a living sign (i.e. sacrament) of the coming of the kingdom of God on earth, that kingdom has not yet fully arrived. The Church which they are is made up of sinners as well as saints, a Church always in need of forgiveness. So John Thornhill remarks:

> The story of a people knows many vicissitudes, its moments of greatness and its moments of failure. Not all members, great or small, will play their part wisely or even honourably. The life of God’s people is enriched by the heroic disciples who are present in our midst; it is weighed down by the sins and foolishness of all of us.

And so the Church is often referred to as ‘ecclesia semper reformanda,’ i.e. the Church always needing to be reformed and purified, always being called by God to repentance and conversion. Accordingly, Lumen Gentium observes:

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18 Congar, *This Church that I Love*, 21.
20 Thornhill, *Sign and Promise*, 197.
[The Church]... endeavours to serve Christ who, "holy, innocent and undefiled" (see Heb 7:26) knew nothing of sin (2 Cor 5:21), but came only to expiate the sins of the people (see Heb 2:17). The Church, however, clasping sinners to its bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal (no. 8).

It will not be until the end of time that the Church will become completely whole and perfect.

E. Conclusion

An overall conclusion from investigating the theme of the Church as the People of God of the New Covenant might be subdivided into three parts, each of which is a significant conclusion in itself.

Based on our reflections on the People of God up till now, it must be emphasized as a first conclusion from the data that the expression 'People of God' distinguishes between those who are, and those who are not, God’s People of the Covenant. But it does not distinguish between groups within the variety of people who make up the Church, which is to say that it does not distinguish between laity, religious and clergy. It is about the People of God as a whole, the whole people in communion.

It is striking that in the New Testament the word ‘laos’ (people) to mean ‘People of God’ means the Christian community. On the other hand, the word ‘laikos’ (lay person) in either the Gentile meaning of ‘uneducated’ or in the Jewish sense of someone who is neither a priest nor a levite, does not occur. In the NT no emphasis is given to any select group, but only to the whole company of what the NT calls ‘the elect,’ ‘the saints,’ ‘the disciples,’ ‘the brothers and sisters.’ If we recognise that all baptised believers make up the Body of Christ and the People of God,21 his laos (people), we won’t make the mistake of identifying the Church with the clergy, or turning ecclesiology (the study of the Church) into what Congar has called ‘hierarchology’ (the study of the clergy). The Church is always the whole People of God, the whole ekklesia, the whole Body of Christ, the whole communion (fellowship, koinonia) of the disciples of Jesus. It includes lay persons, religious and clergy. All baptised believers without exception make up and belong together to the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation.

This implies a second conclusion, viz. that as Christians, all members of the Church are fundamentally equal.22 All equally have been called by God to belong, all equally have been justified by Christ, all equally have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit. All equally have been called to respond to the message, the person and the work of Christ, by their faith, their commitment, their cooperation, their trust and and their love. In principle also, all are equally responsible for the Church’s work in the world, its mission.

The differences that do exist are not based on baptism but on the charisms of the Holy Spirit for ministry. These gifts of the Spirit result in different services, tasks, functions and offices, but they are secondary to the fundamental membership in the Church which is based on baptism, and to the life of discipleship which stems from baptism. What counts more than any ministry or office, however exalted, is whether we live authentically as members of the chosen People of God. Do we live in faith, hope and love our covenant

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21 See my earlier article, ‘The Church as Sacrament Revisited: Sign and Source of Encounter with Christ,’ for how I have highlighted and developed the complementary image of the Church as the Body of Christ.

22 See the challenge arising from this truth in Denis Edwards, ‘A Second Theological Basis for Renewal: Australian Local Church as Sacrament of God’s Saving Action in this Land,’ Called to Be Church in Australia (Homebush NSW: St Pauls, 1987), ch.4.
relationship with God and with our fellow disciples of Jesus? For, more than anything, the Church is the community of the disciples of Jesus. Everything else is secondary and subordinate to that. The shared call to baptism and discipleship has meant that from the beginning all kinds of people, sometimes persons naturally opposed, have joined the Church and belonged to the Church. Jews and Gentiles, free citizens and slaves, rich and poor, men and women, have shared with one another in the life of the Church as fellow-disciples of Jesus Christ, their Lord.

A third important conclusion from the data investigated is that it is through Jesus the Jew that the Church has become the People of God of the New Covenant. Lumen Gentium calls it explicitly 'the new People of God' (no.9) and 'the new Israel' (no.9). This has happened 'in Christ,' to use Paul’s recurring and central expression.

This development raises two questions, vital questions in Christian-Jewish dialogue and reconciliation today: 1. Has God rejected his people Israel and been unfaithful to his promises? 2. Have the Jews ceased to be the People of God?

These questions are so important that should Christians fail to face and answer them appropriately and justly, they run the risk of continuing the anti-Semitism that has too often soured and destroyed relationships between Christians and Jews, and has even led to the persecution and murder of many Jewish people.

These are difficult questions, which have been debated by scripture scholars and theologians for many years. To both of these questions the Apostle Paul has given a decisive No!' Daniel Harrington sums up Paul’s thinking on the matter:

The inclusion of non-Jews in God’s people is a miracle of God’s grace. The root of God’s people, however, remains Israel as the historic people of God. The acceptance of the gospel by Jews like Paul means that Israel’s obduracy is not total. And Paul fully accepts that in the end "all Israel will be saved."23

Michael Fahey offers this answer to the same questions:

The Church regards itself as the "new People of God" but in a way that does not annul the first covenant given to Israel (Luke 1:72; Acts 3:25; Gal 3:17). Israel remains God’s people (Rom 9:6). God has not cast off Israel (Rom 11:1). The vocation of the Jewish people of God is continuous, irrevocable, indestructible: the Jews are and remain God’s chosen and beloved people. The new situation of the Church does not destroy the old (Rom 9:3). The Jews remain the people God addressed first.24

The theological positions of both Harrington and Fahey on the questions are conclusions which reflect their interpretation of Paul in his Letter to the Romans. They both appear to have taken the stance of Vatican II in a more generous and affirmative direction. In this they are in harmony with the personal stance of Pope John Paul II. The prayer which he placed in the Western Wall in Jerusalem reads in part: 'we wish to commit ourselves in genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.'25 Edward Kessler says of him: 'He made it clear that replacement theology – the view that Christianity has simply replaced

23 Harrington, The Church According to the New Testament, 79. Cf. Harrington’s extensive discussion of the matter in his ‘Why is the Church the People of God?’, Vatican II: The Unfinished Agenda, ed. L. Richard et al (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), 49-51. He suggests that the different answers that Christians have given to those questions, starting with the New Testament, ‘can be divided into three categories: the organic model, the replacement model, and the conflict model’(49), and gives illustrations of all three. He claims that even though Vatican II, in its Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, Nostra Aetate, rejects the idea that all Jews indiscriminately in Jesus’ time or Jews today can be charged with the crimes committed during Jesus’ passion’ (53), it nevertheless asserts overall that the Church has replaced Israel as the People of God (52) and taken over Israel’s prerogatives (54).
24 Fahey, ‘Church’, 37.
Judaism and that Jews had lost their covenantal relationship with God – no longer had a place in Catholic teaching. Kessler notes also that John Paul's positive approach was demonstrated by his dramatic visit in 1986 to the Great Synagogue in Rome. After warmly embracing Rome's chief rabbi, he spoke of the 'irrevocable covenant' between God and the Jews.

I personally resonate with such a positive stance, and so I offer my personal response to the questions as follows: whatever about the details of how Jews and Christians are related to one another, it is of supreme importance that when Christians think of themselves as the People of God, they regard themselves as both connected with and in continuity with, God's original chosen people, the Jewish people.

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26 Ibid, 10-11.
27 Ibid.