



Seders in Catholic Parishes

Eugene J. Fisher

Since the Second Vatican Council in 1965 radically subverted the “teaching of contempt” against Jews and Judaism that had permeated Christian thought on all levels for so many centuries, the practice of annual seders has become widespread in Catholic parishes throughout this country. Because the seder, when properly done, communicates so effectively the essential narrative “framing” of Jewish history and Jewish self-identity as a people, this can have a very positive impact on Catholic understanding of and respect for Judaism. Likewise, as the Council reminded Catholics, Jesus lived and died as a pious Jew of his time. So the seder can give Catholics a very necessary sense of the religious context within which Jesus taught.

For these educational and spiritual reasons, parish seders have been and should be encouraged. But experience has also given us reasons for caution. In the early seders that were published shortly after the Council, there was a tendency to “baptize” Passover. It was seen on the one hand as “foreshadowing” the great events of Jesus’ last days, so that the commentary on the seder in the books became a running string of typological fulfillments. And mistakes, some of them quite humorous, were made. Lamb, for example, was nearly always the main course — the one meat that Jews do not eat on Pesach since there is no Temple in which to sacrifice it as there was in Jesus’ time. Some were, from a Catholic liturgical point of view, even more serious, such as the tendency to slide seamlessly from the Passover readings into the celebration of the Eucharist, a blending of two quite distinct, albeit historically deeply interrelated liturgical rituals.

One of the most popular of the Catholic seder books put out in the 1960’s was written by the Grail sisters. At the time it doubtlessly had a positive impact, if for no other reason than its emphasis on the Jewishness of

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Jesus, a central fact of the incarnation that had in effect been virtually forgotten in Western Christianity for centuries. The practice had been to position Jesus against “the Jews,” as Christianity was seen to be in fundamental opposition to Judaism (Justice vs. Mercy, Legalism vs. Love, etc.). But by the late 1970’s, after a decade and a half of active dialogue between Jews and Catholics on all levels, many Catholics had come

to see the typology and supersessionism of these early efforts at “Christian seders,” despite their good intentions, to be theologically problematic and historically inaccurate in the implicit portrayal of Judaism as mere *preparatio Christi* (preparation for Christianity) that they conveyed.

At the suggestion of the Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, the Grail Seder was quietly pulled from circulation by

its publisher. It has been replaced with a text developed by Rabbi Leon Klenicki of the Anti-Defamation League. Published in 1980 by Liturgy Training Publications of the Archdiocese of Chicago, *The Passover Celebration: A Haggadah for the Seder*, which also includes an Introduction by Catholic scholar Gabe Huck, is now in its tenth printing, coming complete with a tape or compact disc of Jewish seder songs.

What is at stake here is the creation of a form of the haggadah that is at once authentically Jewish yet educational for Christians who participate in it. Ideally, this can be best achieved by organizing and/or attending a seder in a Jewish home or synagogue, where the authenticity and integrity of Jewish tradition is assured. An alternative would be to invite a rabbi, a cantor, or another Jewish leader to the parish to lead the seder. Details on commentary and discussion could be worked out in advance by the priest and Jewish leader working together. In September of 1988, the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a

document, called "God's Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching." Intended to implement locally the implication of the 1985 Vatican Notes, the U.S. document deals largely with problems presented for Catholic preachers by difficult passages in the New Testament. It does, however, offer two "pastoral activities" of note. The first was that the victims of the *Shoah* should be remembered in prayer and penitence "on the Sunday closest to *Yom haShoah*" each year, giving sample intercessions for use in Sunday Mass. The second related to Passover. It is short enough to repeat here in full:

"It is becoming familiar in many parishes and Catholic homes to participate in a Passover Seder during Holy Week. This practice can have educational and spiritual value. It is wrong, however, to "baptize" the seder by ending it with New Testament readings about the Last Supper or, worse, turn it into a prologue to the Eucharist. Such mergings distort both traditions.

"When Christians celebrate this sacred feast among themselves, the rites of the haggadah should be respected in all their integrity. The seder should be celebrated in a dignified manner and with sensitivity to those to whom the seder truly belongs. The primary reason why Christians may celebrate the festival of Pass-

over should be to acknowledge common roots in the history of salvation. Any sense of 'restaging' the Last Supper of the Lord Jesus should be avoided. The rites of the Triduum (Holy Week) are the Church's annual memorial of the events of Jesus' dying and rising. Seders arranged at or in cooperation with local synagogues are encouraged" (No. 28).

We live in a unique time in the long history of Jewish-Christian relations, a time of renewed hope and understanding. Christian liturgical tradition began as an offshoot of Jewish worship. Indeed, the earliest Christians, who were primarily Jews, looked to their own Jewish liturgical traditions to celebrate what they believed happened in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Christians acknowledge this (long suppressed) Jewish heritage of their faith when they participate in a Passover seder with faith and respect for God's People, the Jews, and turn toward them, not in the disputations of the past, but the dialogue of reconciliation of the future.

Dr. Eugene Fisher is Associate Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. His book, The Jewish Roots of Christian Liturgy, was published by the Paulist Press in 1990.

Is Every Seder Kosher for Passover?

A. James Rudin

The Reverend Robert Somerville has almost got it right, but not quite. He clearly understands and appreciates the profound Jewish roots of his Christian faith, and his genuine sincerity in conducting his version of a Passover seder is evident. So far so good.

But Somerville's call for Christians, qua Christians, to celebrate the seder as an occasion "to rise above ethnicity and religiosity" leads him into an ambiguous, even dangerous theological wilderness. As Somerville himself correctly notes, the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt and the sacred institutionalization of the Passover holiday resulted in "the initial formulation and establishment of a 'National' Israel."

Passover is an ethnic festival filled with extraordinary Jewish religiosity. That is, in fact, the central meaning of the holiday. That Jesus, whom Dr. Eugene Fisher calls "a pious Jew of his time," celebrated Pesach as a pilgrim in Jerusalem is, as scholars love to say, unexceptionable. That a seder was most likely the "Last Supper" is also not surprising, nor is it remarkable that the *matzah* and wine became the basis for the Eucharist.

But none of this means that the distinctive message and unique Jewish meaning attached to Passover somehow came to an end with the rise of Christianity. On the contrary, the Jews who celebrate Pesach, are the rightful heirs of that festival, even as