THE SISTERS OF SION: 
FROM A CONVERSIONIST STANCE 
TO A DIALOGICAL WAY OF LIFE
Mary C. Boys

This essay traces the dynamics of the dramatic changes in the Sisters of Sion, a Roman Catholic religious congregation originally founded for the conversion of Jews that now exists for the promotion of understanding between Christians and Jews. Sion’s foundational years reflect significant aspects of the longstanding tradition Adversus Judaeos. However, beginning in the late 1950’s, the rethinking of their mission anticipated and then implemented to a remarkable degree the work of Vatican II. The sorts of attitudes and questions evident among the Sisters of Sion today serve as a model for Christians who consider a faithful portrait of Judaism and the Jewish people to be essential to Christian identity.

Without question, the promulgation of Nostra Aetate on October 28, 1965, at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) marked a decisive change in the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church toward Jews and Judaism. The section of the declaration dealing with Judaism, only fifteen modest sentences in Latin, reversed the Church’s longstanding hostility toward the Jewish people and inaugurated a series of subsequent documents. The movement from disputation to dialogue has continued through the work of numerous commissions, consultations, colloquia, and scholarly publications.

The story of Nostra Aetate is well known, extensively documented, and thoroughly analyzed. Like all ecclesiastical stories, it has a cast of characters, both heroic (for


example, Cardinal Augustin Bea and Pope John XXIII) and sinister (for example, the anonymous author and publisher of a malicious antisemitic tract distributed to all the bishops at the Council’s first session). Its plot reflects the political tensions and compromises endemic to an episcopacy composed of differing theological visions and geopolitical origins.

However dramatic the genesis of Nostra Aetate, another, lesser known story also offers compelling testimony to the Church’s changing relationship with the Jews. It is the story of the Sisters of Sion, a Roman Catholic congregation of religious women founded in France in the 1840’s that spread throughout the world and now numbers about 950 members. This study chronicles and interprets their change through analysis of relevant documentation, including statements from the sisters themselves.3

To date, Sion’s story has largely gone unnoticed. Yet, like leaven mixed into an immense amount of flour (see Lk. 13:20 and par., Mt. 13:33), Sion’s experience may serve as a catalyst for new levels of reflection on Christian identity in a pluralistic world. As a biblical symbol, however, yeast also connotes corruption.4 Sion’s early story mirrors some aspects of the Church’s corrupt tradition of contempt for the Jews (Adversus Judaeos), its supersessionist theology, and its complicity in antisemitism.5 To trace this narrative is

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3 This study is based in part on a survey of over 100 Sisters of Sion in eighteen countries and on fifteen follow-up interviews. The names of the sisters have been changed in order to preserve confidentiality. I am grateful to Sion’s General Council, which has supported my inquiry, to their archivist in Rome, and to Relation & Encounter in Toronto for documents, as well as to members of the Province of Canada-USA for many fascinating conversations. For the historical materials, I am indebted to six works in the Origins of Sion series, which are of crucial importance in understanding the legacy of Theodore Ratisbonne. See Sr. Marie Alice Genthial, ed., Memoirs, tr. Sr. Marian Dolan (French original, 1966). The other five, all edited by Sr. Marie Carmelle and translated by Sr. Marian Dolan, and all published by Tipografia Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Roma, are Early Writings, 1925-1840 (1977); Correspondence and Documents, 1840-1853 (1979); Sermons and Talks, 1840-1853 (1980); Religious Life at Sion, 1854-1884 (1980); Foundations and Last Years, 1854-1884 (1983). Also of importance for my interpretation of Sion’s history is Charlotte Klein, “From Conversion to Dialogue – The Sisters of Sion and the Jews: A Paradigm of Catholic-Jewish Relations?” J.E.S. 18 (Summer, 1981): 388-400.

4 See Ex. 12:15, 19-20; Mk. 8:15 and parallels, Mt. 16:6 and Lk. 12:1; 1 Cor. 5:6; and Gal. 5:9. Nahum M. Sarna has speculated that the process of fermentation was associated with decomposition and putrefaction and, therefore, became associated with corruption (in his Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel [New York: Schocken Books, 1986], pp. 90-91).

to uncover some shameful moments in ecclesiastical history. As the Sisters of Sion know better than any group in the Church, facing this history is a necessary foundation for conversion. Facing history permits the symbol of leaven to be transmuted from corruption to catalyst.

In short, Sion’s story offers an interpretative frame for Nostra Aetate by illustrating (1) how deeply internalized the Adversus Judaeos tradition had become, (2) the struggle involved in repudiating this tradition, and (3) the impact of interreligious dialogue on Christian identity. This triad is organized chronologically in three sections: the founding vision, reassessment and disequilibrium, and renewal. The first section covers roughly the first hundred years; the second corresponds approximately to the period immediately after World War I to Vatican II; the third covers from Vatican II to the present. Each section will incorporate the larger narrative of the changing relationship between Jews and gentiles, particularly between Jews and Catholics; the second and third sections also include the sentiments of some of the 100 Sisters of Sion surveyed or interviewed. Thus, we might discover in their own voices the costly grace of the movement from a conversionist stance to a dialogical way of life.

I. The Founding Vision (1843-1949)

The congregation’s mission of conversion of Jews originated in the zeal of founder Theodore Ratisbonne (1802-84) and his brother Alphonse (1814-84). The Ratisbonne brothers, from one of the wealthiest Jewish families in Strasbourg in the province of Alsace, knew virtually nothing about their religious heritage, although they were active in Jewish affairs. Like many upper-class Jews after the Revolution (1789) and

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6 Approximately three percent of the population in Alsace was Jewish, but the Alsatian Jews — 19,624 in 183 localities according to a census in 1784 — constituted about fifty percent of French Jewry. Although most Jews lived in villages, Strasbourg, with its 1,476 Jewish residents, became the center of Alsatian Judaism after Emancipation. See Paula Hyman, *The Emancipation of the Jews of Alsace: Acculturation and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale university Pres, 1991), pp. 12, 31.
emancipation (1791), their education and contacts enabled them to assimilate more easily into French society than Jews in the villages could.\(^7\)

However, assimilation meant spiritual emptiness for the Ratisbonne brothers. In search of God, each came to the baptismal font, Theodore in 1827, after a period of intense searching with spiritual director Louise Humann and fellow searcher Louis Bautain, and Alphonse in 1842, after a dramatic vision of Mary in a church in Rome. Despite significant differences in their journey to Christianity,\(^8\) Theodore and Alphonse were of one mind in looking upon Judaism as lifeless. “As for Judaism,” said Theodore, “I was disgusted with it, ashamed of it, and regarded the Synagogue as a barrier between God and me.”\(^9\) Baptized by Mlle. Humann, Theodore then entered the seminary; he was ordained to the priesthood in 1830, as was his brother in 1848 in the Society of Jesus (Jesuits).\(^10\)


\(^8\) See Natalie Isser and Lita Linzer Schwartz, “Sudden Conversion: The Case of Alphonse Ratisbonne,” *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1 (1983), pp. 17-30; idem, *The History of Conversion and Contemporary Cults*, *American University Studies* 7 (New York: Peter Lang, 1988). Isser and Schwartz stress the difference in the two brothers’ conversions: “Theodore’s conversion was an intellectual one, based on study and thought, but its roots lay in his desire to escape his fate and to ascertain his own identity.” Alphonse’s vision, however, “was a product of the interaction of proselytization of a suggestible individual and his emotional instability…” (Isser and Schwartz, *History of Conversion*, pp. 98-99, 102). Jacob Katz, concerned less with the differences between Theodore and Alphonse, offered instead a sociohistorical explanation (Jacob Katz, “Religion as a Uniting and Dividing Force in Modern Jewish History,” in Jacob Katz, ed., *The Role of Religion in Modern Jewish History* [Cambridge: Association of Jewish Studies, 1975], pp. 1-17). In contrast to German Jews who converted to Christianity primarily on pragmatic rather than spiritual grounds, French Jewish converts often devoted themselves to the service of the church. Katz hypothesized that Emancipation in France did not change the fact that Jews who came into contact with any facet of intellectual life were constantly faced with a derogatory evaluation of their religion: “If they aspired to social integration, they must have felt repelled, finding no group with which to identify so long as they retained their Judaism. The fact of formal emancipation was only apt to aggravate their social and spiritual isolation and even ostracization” (Katz, “Religion as a Uniting and Dividing Force,” p. 8).


Their entry into Christianity meant that they interpreted Judaism entirely through the lens of the theology of their day, that is, that Christianity superseded Judaism. Believing that “the ancient faith of the Jewish people was dead and the only possible means of reawakening it is in Christianity,” Theodore initiated a catechumenate “for young Jewish children and girls” in 1843.11 Deeply involved in the work were two women for whom he had served as spiritual director, Sophie Stouhlen and Louise Weywada. Joined by two others, Anastasia Viala and Flore Doutrelepont, the women formed a community for the children. “Our father [Theodore Ratisbonne] recommended that we practice great charity and deep union among ourselves. Since we are called to such a great Work as the regeneration of the ancient chosen people of God, we must be penetrated with the same charity that God has for all men [women].”12 Their “Work” consisted primarily of “making the Word of God known to the Jews, the first called to the grace of the Redemption from which they turned away.”13

Prayer was necessary to carry on the catechumenate, and Theodore offered frequent instructions to the women. He exhorted them to pray to Mary, as was typical of the day,14 but the prayer he recommended had a distinctive thrust: “Holy Virgin, help us to save the children of your nation and to bring them to the love of the religion of your Son Jesus Christ, who offered Himself for our salvation.” Following recommendations made earlier by his brother, he urged them to observe two practices: (1) reciting three times after the elevation of the host, “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing”; and (2) offering their Mass and Communion every Friday for the regeneration of the Jews and performing some small act of mortification for that intention.15

As the work progressed, their community life became more intentional, and the women asked to be established as a religious order and to wear a distinctive sign of their consecration. Stouhlen wrote in her diary in 1846 about wearing a cross:

11 Carmelle, Correspondence and Documents, p. 71.
12 From the diary of Sophie Stouhlen, in ibid., p. 296.
13 Ibid., p. 299.
15 Carmelle, Correspondence and Documents, p. 300.
The cross reminds us of the sufferings and death of Our Lord Jesus Christ who was the first to offer Himself for the salvation of Israel... The chain on which the cross hangs represents the bonds which attach us to the Work of Our Lady of Sion. We are no longer our own, we are completely consecrated to the salvation of Israel, to bring back to the Catholic Church as many wandering sheep as possible ...\textsuperscript{16}

In that same entry Stouhlen wrote of their consecration to the work. “It went something like this: my emotion prevented me from remembering it exactly”:

I consecrate myself entirely to the service of Jesus Christ and His Holy Mother, Our Lady of Sion; I promise Him to work as zealously as possible for the conversion of the Jewish people, to vow my time, my care, my suffering, my prayers, my whole life to procuring their salvation by knowledge of the Gospel, so as to have no other thought, no other aim than the love and glory of God.\textsuperscript{17}

Early in 1847 Pope Pius IX issued an apostolic brief granting plenary indulgences to the Ladies of Sion, and by the end of that year they had a Rule approved by the Archbishop of Paris.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, the community began to take on the structures of religious life. The members pronounced vows in 1848, established a novitiate in 1849, and sent sisters to new missions. By 1853 they had sixty sisters in three houses, thirty-three professed and twenty-seven novices. Only a few years later, they established houses in Jerusalem and Constantinople [Istanbul] in 1856, London in 1860, and Romania in 1866. Their first North American foundation was in 1892 in Lewiston, Maine.


Although five members of the early congregation were drawn from the catechumenate, the congregation’s focus shifted, albeit unintentionally it seems, as a consequence of the decision in 1847 to begin opening boarding schools. Conducting boarding schools enabled the sisters both to instruct neophytes and to assure themselves of a livelihood, particularly since few girls’ schools existed at the time. As time went on, the catechumenate lagged — 373 Jews were baptized from 1843 to 1882 — and their expansion into boarding schools absorbed more and more of the sisters’ energies. The schools accepted students of diverse religious backgrounds, with a preponderance of Catholic girls, except in countries where the vast majority were Muslim or Orthodox.

\textsuperscript{16} From the diary of Sophie Stouhlen, p. 304.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 305
\textsuperscript{18} A “plenary indulgence” is a remission or removal of all temporal punishment for sins whose guilt has already been forgiven. For contemporary thinking on indulgences, see Carl J. Peter, s.v.” Indulgences,” in Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane, eds., The New Dictionary of Theology (Wilmington, DE: Michael glazier, 1987).
Nevertheless, the Congregation kept the founder’s vision — “to work for the conversion of the Jews and to bring back the lost sheep of the ancient people of God to the fold of the Catholic Church” — very much alive through their prayer.¹⁹ Their Constitutions of 1874 specify their distinctive curriculum:

Its [the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion] particular aim is the sanctification of the Children of Israel. It is especially for this work of charity that the religious of Sion offer their prayers, works and sacrifices, consecrating themselves with unswerving fidelity to Jesus and Mary. (#5).

They treasure within their hearts these words of the Gospel, “Ite potius ad oves quae perierunt domus Israel” [Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, Mt. 10:6]. With the Daughters of Jerusalem they follow Jesus and Mary on the Way of the Cross, repeating the prayer of our crucified Saviour, “Pater, dimittte illis, non enim sciunt quid faciant” [Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing, Lk. 24:34]. (#6)

The practices Theodore had earlier recommended at the urging of his brother were institutionalized into the Rule. This included the threefold recitation of the “Pater, dimittte illis” (#29), which the sisters came to chant in a mournful dirge.

In addition, the Rule of 1874 mandated that the sisters were to recite “special invocations for the salvation of Israel every day”; at night they were to say the prayer, “God of goodness”: ²⁰

God of goodness and Father of mercies, we implore you by the Sacred Heart of Jesus and by the Immaculate Heart of Mary to cast a look of compassion on the children of Israel, so that they may come to the knowledge of our only Savior Jesus Christ, and that they may partake of the fruits of the Redemption. Father, forgive (them), they know not what they do.

The Rule also specified that the sisters were to make the Way of the Cross every Friday, “applying to themselves Our Lord’s words: ‘Filiae Jerusalem, nolite flere super me, sed super vos ipsas flete et super filios vestros’” [Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me,
but weep for yourselves and for your children, Lk. 23:28]. At the end of the Stations,\textsuperscript{21} they were to recite the following Act of Reparation:

\begin{quote}
Lord Jesus, eternal Son of God and son of David, light of the nations and the glory of the people of Israel, we humbly prostrate ourselves at your feet and beg your forgiveness for the indignities that you suffered in Jerusalem.

The children of Israel did not know you. They denied the Holy and Just One. They immolated the author of life. They blasphemed your name without which there is no salvation.

And yet you loved them, O Jesus, and you continue to love them because of their fathers. You never ceased calling them to your protection, to your divine tenderness, and you wept over Jerusalem.

But they did not understand your tears, they did not understand your love, they did not understand the light of your Word; and blinded by pride as much as by ignorance, they distanced themselves from you who are the source of life, and they wander like straying sheep for more than two thousand years, in the shadow of death, without fatherland, without priests or prophets or altar or sacrifices.

How long, O Lord, will this just punishment last?

Rise up, O God of goodness, remember your mercy of old; save the remainder of Israel, so that contrite and humble, they may adore Him whom they pierced with wounds.

Save them, O Saviour of the world! Hasten the days, fulfill your promises, take from their eyes the veil which hides the light from them and lead them back into the way of truth. Remember your first covenant since their forefathers were holy. They are the children of the patriarchs and from their race came the prophets of Israel and the Apostles who bore your Gospel to the ends of the earth, and Mary, your immaculate Mother, and you yourself, O divine Emmanuel who are our God blessed throughout the ages. That is whom, from early morning to late at night, Israel hopes in the Lord; because the Lord is full of mercy, and his redemption is abundant, and he will redeem Israel from all her iniquities.

O, all Powerful Father, look with kindness on the children of Israel and convert them according to the promise made to Abraham and his posterity. Have pity on them because of Mary; hear the prayers of the daughters of Sion who repeat with humble confidence the last prayer of the crucified Jesus: \textit{“Pater, dimitte illis, non enim sciunt quod faciunt.”}\end{quote}

B. Sion and Proselytizing

Despite such prayers, the Sisters of Sion never actively proselytized — that is, they neither coerced nor infringed on the consciences of the Jews for whom they so ardently prayed. This

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{21} The so-called “Stations of the Cross,” traditionally fourteen in number, depict the incidents of Jesus’ passion; one visited each station to meditate and pray. This devotion originated in the High Middle Ages and remained popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See s.v. “Stations of the Cross” in F. L. Cross, ed., with E. A. Livingstone, \textit{The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 1307.
attitude went back to Theodore Ratisbonne himself. In a letter remarkable for its day — Ratisbonne wrote to a Jewish woman, Hélène:

There is no question of bringing you up in such or such a doctrine, since your education is completed and your mind ripe enough not to fear seduction. The human will is an impregnable fortress which protects the conscience... you will only follow the dictates of your conscience. And even if you thought me capable of attacking these dictates, you would certainly know how to resist the attack and maintain your convictions. I profess a great respect of conscience. And, since according to your declaration, you wish to remain a good Jewess, I leave you every liberty to follow the law of Moses, as practiced by our fathers in the Holy Land. Moreover, I will take you to the synagogue each Saturday. ... I could even remind you of all the old traditions, so much forgotten in our family; and thanks to these souvenirs, you could become an excellent Jewess. I repeat that could become... because up to now you have not excelled in the Practice of Judaism...you will only be an excellent Jewess when your works correspond with your faith..., when your faith has embraced with love and respect all the dogmas, precepts and sacred prophecies of the Bible. And then, my dear Hélène, we shall not be far from one another and we shall find ourselves more in agreement than you think, for the Christian is nothing else than an excellent Jew, and the Gospel calls them true Israelites.22

Nevertheless, Theodore Ratisbonne’s legacy in this regard was complex. In Sion’s formative period, he stressed God’s love for the Jews, yet later in his life he manifested less a foreshadowing of Vatican II’s “Document on Religious Liberty” than the increasing rigidity of nineteenth century Catholicism.23 Although retaining his opposition to forced conversions,24 he assumed a harsher stance toward Jews later in his life. Having imbibed the anti-Judaism of nineteenth-century Catholicism, he wrote of his meeting in 1863 with Pope Pius IX:

24 Ratisbonne consistently championed the rights of conscience, even as he revealed his moorage in the triumphalist theology of his day. In Romania, where the Sister community lived amidst both Jews and Orthodox, Ratisbonne issued a series of instructions in 1882, which included the following advice: “In my opinion it is wrong to disturb the consciences of the young who are not yet in a position to profess their faith. ... It would be better to leave them in ignorant good faith than to cause open opposition between them and their parents and their religious duties. Obviously if you tell them that they are committing a sacrilege by going to confession and Communion, you place them in a false position, and though you may say as often as you like that you have left them free, you have chained their consciences. ... Certainly you must put no obstacle to the fulfillment of their duties demanded by their parents; but the students hear discussions which make them believe that they are committing a sin when they address their own priests. The result is that they abandon Communion and remain suspended between their own Church and the Catholic Church before they have reached an age which makes it possible for them to use their liberty. It is this that seems to me dangerous for them, especially during the years which they must spend in the world before reaching their majority. When they have consulted me on the question of the Sacraments and their worship, I refused to decide anything and left them in their good faith. ... You must limit yourselves to telling them that they are free, they will act according to their convictions” (Carmelle, Foundations and Last Years, pp. 168-169).
I told the Pope that, according to my opinion, the Jews of our time, with their power and immense fortune, were preparing the reign of Antichrist; and that their general conversion, announced by Holy Scripture, would only be accomplished after final prevarication; they will crucify the Church just as they crucified the Master. God in his mercy will purify this unfaithful people, and detach from it upright hearts, and from them the numerous conversions, of which we are the first fruits.25

C. Sion’s Perspectives on Conversion

Such sentiments, however sobering, did not exemplify the general tenor of the Sionian vocation, which typically stressed charity and was tempered with a restraint and respect for the conscience of the other. Nor was it indicative of Sion’s work, which centered on education. Like a number of other religious orders founded in the mid-nineteenth century, the Sisters of Sion were principally engaged in conducting schools, many of them for boarders. The distinctiveness of their founding vision was evident primarily in the prayers they offered for the conversion of Jews, rather than in their apostolic work or community life.

Something of Sion’s founding character, however, was evident in the leadership some of its members gave to the “Archconfraternity of Prayer for Israel” (A.P.I.), an organization founded in 1905 and led largely by Sisters of Sion. Its aim was “to obtain for the souls of the Jews the full and perfect light of truth, that by it they may be led to the knowledge of Jesus, the divine Messiah.”

In the United States the A.P.I. operated out of Sion’s principal U.S. foundation in Kansas City, Missouri, under the charismatic and indefatigable leadership of Turkish-born Sr. Marie Noemi (1887-1958). The masthead from its first publication in January, 1936, reads:

Notre Dame De Sion
And
The Archconfraternity of Prayer for the Conversion of Israel

Among the features of this quarterly publication was a column — by a lawyer and convert to Catholicism, David Goldstein. Following in the tradition of apologetics common in his era, Goldstein recounted various perceived lacks in the rabbinate, inveighed against Zionism, and asserted the superiority of Catholicism. For example, typical is his column in May, 1952, with this “Letter to a Convert from Judaism”:

You will no doubt realize, as did I by the grace of God, that Old Testament Judaism exists no more, as it was displaced by Christianity. The only division of synagogue

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Jews that still holds to some of the things of basic import set forth in the Old Testament is the Orthodox division. ... You will no doubt realize more fully, as did I, that passing from the Synagogue to the Church is an affirmation, and not a denial of belief in the faith of our fathers of old in Israel. Catholicism is Judaism full-blossomed. It contains the principles that existed potentially, and others that were prophetically set forth in the Old Testament.

Sentiments such as Goldstein's, however, rapidly became problematic for the Sisters of Sion. A momentous change in their attitude toward the Jews had begun.

II. Reassessment and Disequilibrium: Sion Rethinks Its Mission (1949-62)

The Shoah (Holocaust), especially as the European communities had witnessed it, opened the floodgates of questioning Sion’s relationship with the Jews. Sion communities in Europe felt the divisions of the war in tangible ways. Tracking the precise chronology of the enormous shifts Sion experienced is difficult, but one gets at least a sense of the stimulus for change in listening to the voices of those who lived through World War II.

One sister, the principal of a boarding school in Paris during the war and now in her nineties, spoke of her efforts to hide and save children. Apparently a formidable woman, she refused to give the Jewish children in her care to the Gestapo, saying, “Give me a week; I will make them disappear, and then you can take me. That ‘type’ [of Gestapo agent] never came back.” Yet, she admits now that during the war she did not feel support from all the sisters, many of whom she believes did not understand what the Nazis were doing to the Jews. While she came from a family of resisters, and her family had helped her to hide Jewish children and adults, some of her sisters in Sion were afraid such actions might endanger the Congregation, causing them to lose their house and school.

Others also testify to the impact of the Shoah. Sr. Sophie reports: “As a teaching missionary in Belgium for 10 years, I had to teach a fifteen-year-old Jewish child the rudiments of the Catechism because her mother wanted her to be baptized on account of the Germans, who were occupying Belgium. Unthinkable today.” Sr. Germaine writes, “I lived in England for twenty-five years, including World War II. We had Jewish children who were refugees from Germany and Czechoslovakia. These children’s families had suffered from persecution. Conversion was no longer the primary thing; love and understanding were what mattered.” One sisters offers the opinion today: “I think the Holocaust has had a major impact on Sion’s mission. I believe that our work for justice is motivated by the conviction that we must never let another Holocaust happen. Our work for justice often focuses on racial injustice.”
Another factor that influenced Sion to change was the opportunity to know Jews on a personal basis, such as at their convent at Ein Karem in the newly-formed (1948) State of Israel. Jews were now neighbors, no longer either an abstraction or a minority.

Moreover, theological reconsiderations within Catholicism, particularly in Europe in the years prior to Vatican II — the same currents that spawned Nostra Aetate — led to a reassessment of their mission.\textsuperscript{26} Sr. Patricia tells of the disequilibrium this engendered for her:

My first big almost “loss of faith” came at a provincials’ meeting in Paris when [French theologian and later Cardinal Jean] Daniélou clearly showed how much of the missionary effort of the church was a form of colonization and that it robbed people of their own beliefs. I don’t say it [the missionary effort] was all wrong, but a great deal of it was arrogant and ignorant. My whole image of God was undermined, and my identity as a Catholic believer was shaken. Slowly and mostly through reading the Hebrew Scriptures, new images of God slowly evolved. A God who loved all people and who saves them in God’s way not mine. Israel’s place in God’s revelation slowly fell into place.

The \textit{Shoah}, Israel, and developments in Catholic theology all contributed to a shaking of Sion’s foundations, particularly among European communities. A new mandate would soon reverberate within the entire Congregation.

\section*{A. A New Mandate: Give Up Work and Prayer for Conversion}

The initial rumblings of a major shift for the entire Congregation came in the late 1950’s under the leadership of Sr. Felix, a French superior general. In September, 1962, the General Council\textsuperscript{27} wrote a letter to the Congregation, suggesting that work and prayer for the conversion of the Jews should be given up, instead requesting that the sisters work to counter Antisemitism, and recommending a serious study of Judaism.

The impact of the letter was both immediate and long-term. Many welcomed the letter, yet others saw deeply internalized beliefs beginning to crumble. One sister recalls: “I was very happy, but my joy was dampened by the pain it caused many sisters. It was the first time I saw

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\item \textsuperscript{26} Especially influential was the work of Paul Démann, a French theologian and member of the Fathers of Sion, who was acutely conscious of Christian complicity in the \textit{Shoah}. Démann wrote in the March, 1953, issue of the periodical he had founded in 1948, \textit{Cahiers Sioniens}: “The aim of the \textit{Cahiers Sioniens} is to strengthen the links between the Church and Israel, to explain their common patrimony, to define and promote a truly Christian attitude to Jews and Judaism, ... and to work thus for an authentic rapprochement, having in mind the fullness of the People of God [both Christians and Jews]” (cited in Klein, “From Conversion to Dialogue,” p. 393). Although a direct influence cannot be established, “The Ten Points of Seelisberg,” published by the International Council of Christians and Jews in 1947, was the first document to signal a changing relationship between the church and the Jewish people (in Croner, \textit{More Stepping Stones}, pp. 32-33).
\item \textsuperscript{27} Religious congregations are typically headed by a “superior general” and a general council.
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leadership in the Congregation being questioned. No doubt it was not the first time it happened, but this was open!” Another adds: “For some it was like a bombshell: some could not let go of the idea of conversion. Others were excited and challenged by the new approach. For myself, I was a bit reluctant to stop praying for conversion — but consoled because we could still pray for the Jews.” One sister said simply: “My whole world caved in.”

An Irish sisters tells this story on herself:

... something happened to me personally that was a turning point. I was teaching sixteen-year-olds, and one Monday morning one of the Anglicans announced she had been to Mass on Sunday. My ears pricked — a potential convert. However, on questioning her, I discovered she was talking of her Anglican Church, and at that time it even irked me to hear her call her service Mass! However, I began questioning her on the goings on in her Church, and kept getting the answers, “It’s just like yours, only it’s in English.” My final query was to know if they offered Mass for special intentions. “Yes, they did.” “Well, what was yesterday’s intention?” “The conversion of Ireland.” From that time on, she reports, her mission as a member of Sion began to take on a different complexion. In experiencing the desire of another to convert her from her precious legacy of faith, she began to question her right to desire the conversion of others.

It may be difficult for many in the 1990’s to understand just how much cognitive dissonance many of the Sisters of Sion experienced during this period. They had not only internalized the Church’s tradition of *Adversus Judaeos* but had also wedded it to a theology of reparation, thereby providing a structure of meaning for all their work.

The responsibility to make expiation and reparation for Israel’s infidelity had been deeply instilled in many. One influential novice mistress in Paris, Mother Marie Alphonse (1904-31), had taught that the Sion vocation consisted in a “boundless desire to console the heart (of Jesus) and to repair the greatest crime ever, the deicide. ... The supreme intelligence of the vocation of Sion consisted in giving one’s whole life to expiate Israel’s crime.”

Sr. Helen, who entered in 1944, expresses what it meant to her:

At the end of primary schooling I went to a school taught by the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion. I first learned that Jesus was a Jew, and was greatly attracted to praying for the conversion of the Jews. My novice mistress inspired me with the understanding of that time, that is to say, that it was a great privilege to be called into a Congregation whose aim was to pray and make reparation for the greatest crime ever committed — the crime of deicide — and that this called for the greatest possible love for Our Lord and that such a vocation was very, very dear to the heart of Our Lord. [What gave meaning was] the three-fold prayer, during Mass, midday prayer, and night prayer, and offering of oneself and all that one would do for the conversion of this people so

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dear to God. I never questioned the correctness of this attitude. It was my greatest inspiration.

Similarly, Sr. Lorraine writes: “I was happy to work and offer my prayers for the Jews. Somebody had to pray and help those poor people.” “I was thrilled, happy, and felt quite special to be called to pray for them, God’s people, live and sacrifice for them as they were God’s own family,” said Sr. Julia. Another testified to her ambivalence:

I didn’t question it [the congregation’s original mandate] really — there was something about it that was a mystery in the deepest sense. I remember for prayer we would line up in the Salle St. Jean. There were two photos on the wall, stone carvings from the front portals of the Cathedral in Strasbourg. The Church looking up to the light, the other Israel blindfolded and looking down — Israel’s refusal to believe. … Yet, God was faithful. Somehow this would all come together in God’s plan for us, Jew and Christian, a mystery Sion was called to pray for in the meantime. … Here was this tiny little group praying over this enormous question [emphasis added].

Another of the respondents to the survey included her notes from the novitiate, copied by hand from a master set. The entry for March 26, 1957, reads:

As a Daughter of Sion: On the Cross Our Lord had a sorrow that was not understood. That was the part His people had in the Crucifixion. It is our duty to console Our Lord and make reparation for this crime. We must not only wish to make reparation but draw the souls of Israel to love Him whom they crucified. Often kiss your crucifix lovingly in a spirit of reparation.

For those formed by such sentiments, the General Council’s letter demanded revolutionary changes. Despite the cognitive dissonance the changes evoked, a new point of view became evident.

B. A Graphic Demonstration of Change

The A.P.I. Bulletin reflected Sion’s changing self-understanding. Comparison of the mastheads offers immediate evidence. From 1936 through 1945 it read:

Notre Dame De Sion

and

The Arch-Confraternity of Prayer for the Conversion of Israel

However, the first issue of 1946 (vol. 11, no. 1, January) was headed:

The A.P.I. Bulletin

To Promote Interest in the Apostolate to Israel

More radical was the transfiguration in the January, 1959, issue (vol. 24, no. 1):

The A.P.I. Bulletin

To Promote Better Understanding between Christians and Jews

Finally, the last issues (Winter, 1961, through Winter-Spring, 1966) appeared with this masthead:

At the Crossroads
Gone were Goldstein’s columns. In their place were articles written explaining Jewish feasts and Vatican II’s teaching on the Jews. Hinting at the radical shift was an article on dialogue by a professor of history at Georgetown, John J. O’Connor, in the September, 1959, issue (vol. 24, no. 23). O’Connor proposed that five or six Catholic leaders might gather together in a home with an equal number of their Jewish counterparts:

It should be made perfectly clear that the purpose of the meeting should not be to discuss religious differences, or seek conversions, but simply to have an exchange of views on social and civic matters of mutual interest. It would be a leisurely, informed, instructional, of-the-record meeting, with no resolutions, pledges or commitments of any kind.

One looks in vain, however, for a rationale for the changes in masthead and content.29

### III. Renewal:
**Preparation for and Involvement in a Dialogical Way of Life (1962-92)**

The complexity of Sion’s renewal lay not only in the cognitive dissonance experienced by those formed in a theology of reparation but also in the preoccupation of those for whom conversion of the Jews was unimportant. Despite the Congregation’s founding mission and its curriculum of prayer, many sisters were totally absorbed in their work as educators. Generally, Sion prayed with fervor for the conversion of Jews, even as the sisters poured out their energies into schools and other works with little or no connection to the Jewish people. Ironically, in view of their history, many sisters reported that they knew no Jews until recently: “It used to bother me,” says Sr. Constance, “that I had never even as much as met a Jew, and I really couldn’t get excited about our mandate. I was young and more enthusiastic about teaching my grade one children, and then I volunteered to go to South America and work with the poor.”

In fact, as my 1991-92 survey revealed, relatively few present members seem to have entered Sion because of the Congregation’s link with the Jewish people. Rather, the majority of those surveyed testified that the family spirit of the sisters whom they had come to know while attending Sion schools attracted them. Sr. Eva’s statement is representative:

I was attracted by the sisters, their simplicity, joyfulness and charity and the mystery of the life they lived together. I spent my last two years of high school with them and felt this was my home. I was comfortable with them. I cannot remember this [the connection with Judaism] being an influence on me at the time. In fact, I knew very little of Judaism before I came to Sion and never knew a Jew personally or otherwise.

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29 But, see ibid., citing a circular letter from the superior general in March, 1964: “The Church is becoming conscious of the religious values existing among all believers, non-Catholics and even non-Christians; she particularly recognizes and respects the faith of the Jews; this faith can lead them to salvation. ... Consequently, we shall no longer recite any prayers for the ‘conversion’ of the Jews.” All leaflets about the A.P.I. were also to be suppressed.
Most sisters found that their immersion in the demanding work of conducting schools, particularly the boarding schools, entirely subsumed the intensity of longing for and working toward the conversion of the Jews. Some found even the emphasis on praying for the conversion of Jews problematic. As eighty-four-year-old Sr. Mariette said, “I thought that conversion was God’s business — a miracle that he alone could perform if and when he wanted.” Added another, “Temperamentally, I had no desire to convert anyone.” Sr. Janice, who entered in 1933, wrote, “I accepted it [the mandate to pray for conversion] but I did feel that it was unfair that contemporary Jews should have the crime of deicide laid on them. I could not reconcile ‘they know not what they do’ applied to the Jews of Jesus’ time with our attitude (for example, Good Friday prayer of intercession) toward them.”

Others longed to have contact with Jews, but not to convert them. Sr. Mariette, a music teacher, tells of her deep desire:

I was silently eager to get a Jewish pupil. When, around 1940, the first one arrived, I was so moved that I could not see her: my glasses were covered with steam for joy! Her cousin soon followed, became a good pianist and still writes and phones me from the States. “You were more than a mother to me,” she said. Yet I just taught her music.

A. The Project of Renewal: Recommendations from the General Chapters

Thus, the post-Vatican II period found the Sisters of Sion in an awkward position. Their founding mission had been repudiated both in its theology and in the practical order. Indubitably, many sisters were involved in good works — but what relationship did those works have to do with Sion’s distinctive mission? As testimony to this, a sociological study in 1970 by two French priests, Frs. Luchini and Loubet, documented the fact that fewer than two percent of the activities of Sion were in the field of Jewish-Christian relations.

Sion’s leadership did not turn a deaf ear to this problem. With European sisters leading the way, General Chapters in 1969 and 1970 affirmed the importance of pluralism and established the work of Jewish-Christian relations as a priority for the Congregation. They offered specific recommendations, including the suggestion that ten percent of the sisters under fifty years of age be educated in order to specialize in Jewish-Christian relations.30 Further recommendations included the establishment of a community to collaborate with the Fathers and Brothers of Sion at their Ratisbonne Center in Jerusalem in order to study Judaism, the development of a documentation center in Rome (SIDIC, Service International de Documentation Judéo

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30 The General Chapter of a religious congregation meets periodically to establish policy (e.g., approving fundamental documents, such as a congregation’s constitutions) and to make decisions pertinent to the congregation as a whole. Delegates are typically elected from various provinces.
Chrétienne), and the formation of teams of sisters to work in “Jewish-Christian encounter and research” in such key cities as Montreal, London, Paris, and Buenos Aires.31

These recommendations, however, did not make an immediate impact on the majority of sisters who still had their obligations in the schools. Sr. Jeanne says, “So many were being sent to study the Bible or Judaism or to live in Israel that I found myself shunted around teaching for Sr. X off to Israel, Sr. Y off for courses.” But, finally, Sr. Jeanne’s time came: “Then I left for Israel!”

The opportunity to spend time in Israel (now mandated for all sisters before their perpetual vows) opened new horizons. Sr. Rose writes, “Living in Israel brought with it a certain share of hardship, cultural isolation, and some loneliness at times, but, at the same time an incredible enrichment. I learned to speak Hebrew, studied Jewish sources, picked up a few languages, a great love of icons, internationality, a great love for contemplative prayer, and a living feel for the Bible.” Sr. Mary Frances, who had originally ignored the changes, seeing herself as an “overworked principal,” found new life in the opportunity to study and live in Israel: “‘Come and see.’ All the preaching to change did not change me, but studying did. I came to Israel. I had my eyes opened. My passion and my life have become the Word of God.”

The current Constitutions, published in 1984, express Sion’s self-understanding in a fashion radically different from the Constitution of 1874:

We are called to witness by our life to God’s faithful love for the Jewish people and to His fidelity to the promises He revealed to the patriarchs and prophets of Israel for all humanity. In Christ, the pledge of their fulfillment is given us. This call implies that our apostolic life is characterized by a threefold commitment: to the Church, to the Jewish people, and to a world of justice, peace and love. Whatever task we are engaged in, we are called to integrate in some way, these three dimensions of our apostolic commitment.

Our vocation gives us a particular responsibility to promote understanding and justice for the Jewish community, and to keep alive in the Church the consciousness that in some mysterious way, Christianity is linked to Judaism from its origin to its final destiny. In each province we will take the means to ensure that this priority becomes effective.

B. Scripture and Spirituality in the Sisters of Sion

A General Chapter in 1964 had decisively altered Sion’s mission along the trajectory begun with the letter from the General Council in 1962. Among other consequences of the rethinking was the suppression of the prayers and documents reflecting a conversionist stance. Understandably, the Sisters of Sion are reluctant to give casual access to their history, lest the

31 See the SIDIC Review, which is published three times yearly in English and French.
convictions and aspirations of an earlier era be wrenched from their historical context and cause division today. The legacy of supersessionism to which the prayers bear witness remains a source of pain for many sisters today. One wrote, upon reading an earlier draft of this study, “I really squirmed reading it [the prayer “God of Goodness” above, section I-A], thinking others, perhaps even Jews would hear these words —  ugh.” She herself had entered (1959) when such prayers were no longer said. Nonetheless, the legacy is painful.

Having jettisoned their supersessionist prayers, Sion turned to scripture. Indeed, scripture study seems to have been at the heart of Sion’s renewal. Sr. Patricia writes:

In our circular of renewal in 1966, asking among other questions, what each sister’s personal needs were regarding her education, apostolates and community relations, I noticed that “to study the Bible” came up in every case, though perhaps expressed differently. Later, in 1976 at a Biblical Study Conference at Strasbourg for Sisters of Sion, we were divided up into groups according to our capacity, but every group was led by a sister —  not a male professor or theologian, as was often the case. The beginners’ group was led by someone who had only just begun to study herself, and was teaching the group the books and genres of the Bible. This was joy indeed, and biblical education had begun in earnest by everyone.

Likewise, Sr. Juliana testifies to the practical effect in the Congregation of studying scripture: “[A] central element [in Sion spirituality] is what the French among us call ‘biblical spirituality.’ I’m never quite sure what they mean by that or by the phrase ‘biblical values,’ but I do know that we Sisters of Sion live with our Bibles —  and the Hebrew Bible is as important to us as the New Testament.”

Of similar importance is Sion’s attempt to pray in solidarity with the Jewish liturgical cycle as well as with the Church’s liturgical year. Again, Sr. Juliana: “I think our spirituality is deeply marked by an awareness of the Jewish liturgical cycle. And our common prayer is often marked by solidarity with Jewish concerns.”

C. From a Conversionist Stance to a Dialogical Way of Life

Of course, the mandates of the Chapters did not assure that change would be easy. Religious life as a whole was in crisis, and Sion’s rethinking of its identity added a particular complexity to the general turbulence. The Congregation literally had to pray in a new way. Gone were the old prayers; new ones not only had to be fashioned but to penetrate the hearts of those who prayed them.

Moreover, there was the matter of Sion schools. In order to free sisters for study and for involvement in the work of Jewish-Christian relations, sisters had to be released from their schools. Said one:
Changing our own attitudes left us with the problem of “backtracking” after all we had
done to encourage our pupils and others, especially priests, to pray for the conversion
of Jews. This was also a time of much heart-and-head-searching regarding Sion for
the future involving the future of our schools and releasing sisters to specialize in
Scripture and Judaism.

Furthermore, what about sisters who continued in traditional Sion works? “Who are we?” seemed
to be the big struggle, and if you were just teaching, what did it mean? Were you less a Sister of
Sion than someone studying Judaism or working directly with the Jews?” asked another.

The testimony of the sisters is clear: what happened in the 1960’s and 1970’s, although
often exciting, was immensely difficult. Virtually all express a deep approval of their present
direction, but they also write of the complexities renewal has brought. Sr. Juliana summarizes the
sentiments of many:

In some ways our renewal has been and is more difficult, more unsettling than it is
for other Congregations I know. I’m not sure if I can put my perceptions into words,
but it seems to me that it is because our renewal is intimately involved not only with
issues of religious life and the life of the Church, but also with the life of another people
and tradition. **Renewal has called us from a conversionist stance, with clear
boundaries and certitudes, to a dialogical way of life where the boundaries are far
less distinct. Renewal requires us to live side-by-side with a people different from
ourselves, a community which describes the experience of God’s own self in ways
similar and related, yet distinct and quite different, a people which is yet intimately
related to our identity as Church** [emphasis added].

And Jewish experience, marked as it is by suffering, “rubs off” on us in ways that go
beyond our conscious awareness, I think. To be sure, our identity as a Congregation
is incarnated in the things we do, but it lies more deeply, I think, in a relationship,
that with the Jewish people, which undergirds and goes beyond our individual and/or
collective accomplishments. **I think all of that presents stimulation and challenge,
but I think it also leaves us profoundly restless** [emphasis added].

D. Profoundly Restless

“Profoundly restless” — perhaps this phrase serves as an apt summary of the consequences
of dialogue. The experience of the Sisters of Sion in dialogue with the Jews has given rise to many
questions that lie at the heart of Christian self-identity. Here are the major questions that emerged
in the course of the survey:

1. How do we theologize in light of the Holocaust? What are the implications of the
Shoah for the ways in which we understand ecclesiology, Christology, and
sacramental theology? In particular, how can we formulate a more honest
Christology and Christian witness in light of the Holocaust and what we know about
the Church’s teaching of contempt for the Jewish people?
2. How do we honor our own tradition, which makes absolute and universal claims regarding the significance of Jesus the Christ, and at the same time honor Judaism — and other religions — as ways to God?
3. How can we speak of Christianity in a way that is not supersessionist?
4. How is the relationship between Judaism and the church theologically (as distinct from historically) different from the relationships of other world religions to the church?
5. What theological language can we use to speak about Christ that is not offensive to Jews and Muslims and is at the same time respectful of their approach to God?

As one respondent said poignantly: “It is not just a matter of creating theological space for Judaism. Together we have to be prepared to become quite different, as yet unimagined. We need a radical reexamination of sources, of traditions in order to relate creatively with our Jewish partner in dialogue.”

These questions are for Sion not simply a summons to rigorous and imaginative theological thinking. The questions are inextricably linked to their self-understanding — how they envision their belonging to this congregation, how they pray, how they work. As Sr. Patricia expresses it, “I think the Sisters of Sion have lived out in their flesh this enormous shift that has taken place in the broader scene of all religions, but more specifically vis-à-vis God’s plan for Christians and Jews.” Another sister, now retired, says: “I think our vocation takes a long time to understand and to live. I am only just beginning to learn in my later days.” Sr. Jeanne suggests translation as an apt metaphor for her life as a Sister of Sion: “It means having a felt sense of the other’s language while using another language. It also entails being able to read the heart in order to offer the truest sense of the other’s thoughts. Sion is such a ‘translator’ of Jews to Christians and Christians to Jews. This translating is in all aspects of our charism.”

E. Sion in the Middle East

Sion’s recognition of the centrality of Land to Jewish life and their commitment to be, as their 1970 Chapter said, “healers and reconcilers” means that the Congregation feels keenly the tensions in that troubled area of the world. Says one sister who lived in Israel for years: “Sion exists in Jewish areas and in Arab areas. So some individuals have in their own lives been ‘pulled apart’ by the reality of each side in the conflicts.”

I glimpsed something of Sion’s profound commitment to Israel during their international theological reflection week in England in January 1991, on the brink of the outbreak of the Persian Gulf War. As the conference proceeded, the delegates became increasingly preoccupied with the steady movement toward war. People listened to papers with one ear and to the BBC with another. One evening the members of the General Council invited all the Sisters of Sion at the conference
and in the local community at Ammerdown, site of the meeting, to gather together in order to
discern what should be done in order to insure both Sion’s commitment to Israel and the safety
of the sisters there. They graciously extended an invitation to me to join them.

I have no notes from that evening, but certain comments and the overall tone of the session
are indelibly embedded in my memory. The first to respond, one of the two delegates from the
Mediterranean Province who lived in Jerusalem, said with great simplicity, “I have made Israel
my home for many years. I have no right to be among the people I love if I am not willing to suffer
with them. Now, above all, Sion must be a presence.” Shortly thereafter, a delegate from Germany
spoke: “I know it’s not practical. But I wish I could go to Israel now, simply to be there.” Everyone
who spoke — perhaps twenty or so — voiced the conviction that Sion should not leave in this
moment of crisis, although individual sisters who wished to leave should certainly be free to do
so.

So Sion remained during the Persian Gulf War, and their desire to be reconcilers can in
part be seen in how they offered hospitality during this crisis. Their convent and hostel in the
Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem, “Ecce Homo,” served as a refuge for Palestinians. Not many miles
away in the western suburb of Ein Karem, their convent housed Jews fleeing Scud missiles
exploding on Tel Aviv.

Their commitment to Israel is evident as well in the most recent congregational document
from the July, 1992, General Chapter. The chapter delegates wrote:

In Israel our charism is “at home” in a special way. In this land, Israelis and
Palestinians live a conflict situation which calls us to struggle with both for justice,
peace and reconciliation.

We remembered that Israel is important to the Jewish people, to almost all Jews
whether they settle there or not. The Land of Israel is one of the three fundamentals
of Judaism. It is the place of Promise, a sign of God’s Covenant which endures, and
the land where Torah may be lived fully. As a State, Israel is a “haven,” a land where
Jews have a right to live and to be. It is also a land with “rights”: the people are to
water it, make it fruitful, care for it.

Israel is important for the Church as well. The land of Israel is the place of God’s
revelation to a people, the land of Jesus and the birth of the early Christian
community. Jerusalem is the place of the death and Resurrection of Jesus and a
symbol of the Eschaton. Since 1965, the Church has continued to re-discover her
relationship with the Jewish people and the dynamism of post-biblical Judaism. The
awareness of Christian anti-Judaism leads the Church to “tshuvah”; the horror of the
Shoah challenges her theology.

While we seek to do this wherever we are in Israel, we have three privileged
“spaces”: Ecce Homo, Ein Karem and Ratisbonne. From its earliest history, these
three houses have been centres of Sion’s life and work. They enable us to be present
to both peoples of the land, Israeli and Palestinian, to local Christians and to pilgrims from countless countries. Still today, these privileged “spaces” offer unique opportunities and important challenges for ministries, present and future.

F. Sion as Parable

However, Israel is not the only “space” significant to Sion. So, too, is Strasbourg, where delegates convened in July, 1992, for their General Chapter. By returning to Strasbourg, they walked again the paths pioneered by the Ratisbonne brothers. Now Sion has turned in another direction. The community that had its origins in conversion is experiencing precisely that. By so doing, they have become a model for the entire Christian community.

The questions the Sisters of Sion are pursuing are not ones most people in the church are asking, perhaps because interreligious dialogue has been relegated largely to the periphery of the Church, that is, to the sphere of specialists. Yet, because the Church has had “this tiny little group praying over this enormous question,” it now has a vision of what it might mean to take seriously its own radically altered understanding of Judaism.32

When we look to Sion, we get a glimpse of what it entails to move from a conversionist stance, with its clear boundaries and certitudes, to the more uncertain dance of dialogue. Sion offers Christians a parable in process.

Mary C. Boys, S.N.J.M., a sister of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, is Skinner and McAlpin Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York.