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Sister Rose Thering's Battle against Antisemitism

Who Was Sister Rose?

Who was this woman often called a “feisty nun?”¹ Sister Rose Thering (1920 – 2006) was a member of the order of Dominican Sisters, who devoted the majority of her long life to the fight against injustice and discrimination, and in particular, antisemitism in the Roman Catholic Church. Her graduate school research on the treatment of minorities, especially the Jews, in Catholic textbooks directly impacted *Nostra Aetate*. This document was the *Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1965, which removed the pariah label from the Jewish religion in Roman Catholic teaching.

For the next forty years, she worked hard, and effectively, to ensure that church teaching matched the new framework. Working from her base at Seton Hall University, a Roman Catholic school in New Jersey, she brought Jews and Christians to study together. She became a chief proponent of Holocaust education, a battler for Jewish causes, and a proponent for Israel. Perhaps her most lasting contribution was to promote a state education mandate requiring that the lessons of the Holocaust be taught at every grade level in her home state; a requirement which has since been emulated in several of the most populous American states.

Sister Rose was raised in the early twentieth century, in a large, religiously observant German-American Roman Catholic family in Plain, Wisconsin, a small rural town in the Midwest. At a young age, she decided to become a nun, like three of her aunts; and also, a teacher. She selected the Dominicans rather than her aunts' Franciscan order, because this would assure her the opportunity to become a teacher.²

Rose Thering entered religious life at age eighteen, in 1938, and took her vows two years later. For the next seventeen years, she worked as a teacher and administrator in Catholic schools in the Midwest. She also earned her mas-

¹ More correctly, she was a “religious sister,” as her order was non-cloistered.

² Cf. Sr. R. Thering, “Oral History Interview,” interview by Sr. I. Schmidt O.P., August 5, 1993 (Archives of the Sienna Center, Racine).

ter's degree in education, at the College of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, though her thesis topic gave no hint of her passion for fighting discrimination. Her thesis related to preparing adolescent girls for entering the religious life.

As far as Sister Rose knew, in her youth, she had never met a Jew. She said later that, as a child, she was troubled by what she learned in school about Jews and by the antisemitism she perceived in her own family. And, as a teacher, she was disturbed by the way the approved textbooks described the Jews, both in Jesus' time and in her day.

Non-Jews who resisted the antisemitism of their peers tend to fall into two camps: The first are people whose childhood friendships with Jews made it unthinkable for them to accept antisemitic values. A good example of this is Pope John Paul II, whose childhood and lifelong friendship with Jerzy Kluger contributed to the pope's fierce opposition to antisemitism and his becoming the first pope to visit a synagogue. Another example is Winston Churchill, criticized for being "too fond of the Jews," an attitude attributed by his biographer³ to childhood friendships with Jews.

The second are Jewish converts to Christianity, who cannot reconcile antisemitic attitudes with their own continued racial identification as Jews. Examples include Msgr. John M. Oesterreicher and Fr. Paul Demann, both of whom became major figures in the life and work of Sister Rose Thering. They were devout Catholics who, for a long time, were devoted to converting other Jews. But, they also deplored the contempt with which Jews were held, arguing that love, not hate, would more likely win them over as converts.

However, Sister Rose does not fit either pattern. In my search to explain Sister Rose's commitment to fighting antisemitism, I can find no motivation stronger than her innate hatred of injustice. She felt that antisemitism was immoral and also illogical. She developed a series of arguments that took complete form in her PhD thesis.

Her order urged her to complete her PhD in education so she could take a leadership role at the Dominican College. In 1957, at age 37, she began her PhD studies at Saint Louis University, one of the oldest Catholic universities in the US, located in St. Louis, Missouri, under Jesuit Father Trafford P. Maher of the Education Department. This university was already involved in projects to promote interreligious understanding. Father Maher was the leader of their Workshops in Human Relations. For Sister Rose's dissertation topic, he recruited her to study how Catholic religious teaching materials present other faith, racial, and national groups. This put her in the right place at the right time to make a

³ Author's private discussion with Martin Gilbert, London, August 2006.

major intellectual contribution to a most historic revision, eight years later, in the Catholic Church's views on Jews. Her thesis research was used by the representatives of the American Jewish Committee to convince the Ecumenical Council that the stand of the Catholic Church on the Jews needed to change. Judith Hershcopf Banki of the American Jewish Committee called this timing "providential."⁴ She may have been thinking of the Yiddish word, "bashert."

The American Jewish Committee Textbook Studies

How did the idea of such a textbook study come about? It was proposed by the American Jewish Committee. The AJC was first organized in 1906 to advocate for the defense of Jews in response to pogroms in Kishinev, in the Russian Empire. Their objective was "the protection, the preservation and the extension of the civil and religious rights and privileges of Jews."⁵ The AJC and other Jewish groups thought that what was being taught in religious schools was contributing to tension among American citizens. In fact, the first such studies were self-critical reviews of textbooks used in Jewish Schools. In 1935, the Synagogue Council of America reviewed more than 300 Jewish textbooks and recommended that a quarter of them be discontinued. It also called for the inclusion of positive Jewish teaching on Jewish-Gentile relationships in Jewish textbooks.

In 1958, Rabbi Morris N. Kertzer, AJC's Director of Interreligious Affairs, decided to initiate a series of textbook "self-studies" by Jews, Protestants, and Catholics to determine how each group taught their students in America to understand members of other religions. These were to be conducted by scholars, each from their own faith's perspective. While these projects were funded by the AJC, they were meant to be "independent studies, carried out and supervised by faithful adherents of the religion studied."⁶ The study of Jewish textbooks was conducted by Dr. Bernard D. Weinryb of Dropsie College, now part of the University of Pennsylvania. It concluded that while the Jewish material tended to make very little mention of non-Jewish groups, almost no negative views were expressed.⁷ The Protestant study was supervised by Dr. Bernhard Olson of Yale

⁴ Author's oral interview with Judith Banki, December 21, 2017, Sydney.

⁵ "Jews to Help Race. Form Big Organization," *New York Daily Tribune*, November 12, 1906.

⁶ J. Banki, "Pivotal Figure: The Woman Behind 'Nostra Aetate,'" *Commonweal Magazine*, June 16, 2006, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/pivotal-figure>.

⁷ E. Fisher, "Perspectives: Christian Teaching and Judaism," *SIDIC Periodical* 9, no. 3 (1976): 19.

University and completed in 1960. It found significant anti-Jewish sentiment expressed in the textbooks used by the major denominations of Protestantism to teach their youth.

For the Catholic study, the AJC approached Fr. Maher of Saint Louis University. Father Maher recruited three doctoral candidates to each conduct part of the study. Sister Mary Linus Gleason was assigned an analysis of English literature textbooks used in Catholic parochial schools. Sister Mary Rita Mudd was assigned an analysis of social studies textbooks. And, in 1959, Sister Rose Thering began her study of religion textbooks. Later in life, she told a friend that she knew from her days as a teacher that that was where all the controversial material was to be found.⁸

The Catholic Religion Textbook Study

Sister Rose entitled her dissertation, “The Potential in Religion Textbooks for Developing a Realistic Self Concept: A Content Analysis.” She argued that

it is in their curriculum materials that religious schools nurture students in the particular faith which such schools are designed to foster. This almost inevitably involves reference to and comparison with other faith and ethnic groups.

The question she wanted to answer is:

Does it necessarily follow that the portrait of such groups—religious, racial, ethnic—will be unfavorable and prejudicial in comparison with the self-portrait?⁹

For inspiration as to the methodology of her study, as well as for the implications, she drew heavily on prior work of a similar nature, completed in 1952 in France by Fr. Demann, whose own book was called *The Teaching of Contempt*, and on the Protestant study being completed at Yale by Bernhard Olson. To ensure that her conclusions would be representative, she identified the most frequently used books in Catholic schools and selected sixty-five volumes (texts and teaching guides) from eight publishers. Some of these books dated back to the 1930s, but many were revised or published in the late 1950s.

⁸ Cf. Author’s oral interview with Sister Michelle Ollie, Racine, January 4, 2018.

⁹ Sr. R. M. A. Thering, O.P., “The Potential in Religion Textbooks for Developing a Realistic Self Concept: A Content Analysis” (PhD diss., Saint Louis University, 1961).

She then proceeded to identify every single reference in these books to a religious or racial group, evaluated the references to determine whether they reflected prejudice, and of what kind. Jews were but one of nine categories:

1. Catholic Non-Roman
2. Protestant
3. Jewish
4. Other Non-Christian
5. Non-Catholic in General
6. Negro
7. Other Ethnic
8. International
9. General

She evaluated each reference according to whether it reflected prejudice and the type of portrait painted. And she evaluated whether the portrait, as compared with Roman Catholics, was negative, positive, neutral, or undifferentiated. She encoded these findings into arithmetic scores and compiled the data by publisher. Most importantly, she also provided quotations from the texts and teaching guides to exemplify her classifications. The example quotations of the disparaging comments may have been more compelling than the fairly anodyne statistical scores.

She gave examples of disparaging comments regarding Protestants and others, and of respectful comments regarding Jews. However, she found a preoccupation with Jews and disparaging views dominant.

Based on her analyses and her belief that the disparagement was unwarranted, she made these recommendations to the publishers in her dissertation:

1. Show the continuity of Old and New Testaments.
2. Show Jesus as a Jew with a Jewish mother and, his Apostles and disciples as his Jewish friends.
3. Give a true picture of Judaism in the days of Jesus and stop denigrating present-day Jews.
4. State clearly that the conflict was between Jesus and only some of the Jewish leaders.
5. Avoid identifying "all the Jewish people," then or now, with some of the leaders of the Jews who plotted against Jesus.
6. Refrain from making negative value judgements of the Jewish people.
7. Explain that in the crucifixion, Jesus suffered and died for the salvation of all.
8. Emphasize that nothing in the New Testament authorizes anyone to think that the Jewish people alone are under reprobation or a curse.

She pointed out that all these recommendations fit well within then existing church dogma. She was imploring textbook publishers to be kinder, or as she would put it, more accurate, in their presentation of the Jews.

How the Jews Got a Place at Vatican II

Were it not for Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, these textbook studies might have been destined for the library and not for the pivotal role they played in history. However, the year that the AJC commissioned these textbook studies, 1958, was the very same year that Pope John XXIII was elected. Because of his age, 76, he was expected by many observers to be a “caretaker.” But he surprised them by announcing his plan to call an ecumenical council to discuss and settle matters of church doctrine and practice.

By “ecumenical,” the pope meant embracing all branches of Christianity, not the panoply of world religions later included. When the new pope “was fielding ideas for the Council, almost none of the bishops and theologians canvassed suggested that the church speak out on the Jews.”¹⁰ However, this new pope did have a history of empathy for Jews. As Bishop Roncalli, while serving as a Vatican diplomat in Turkey and Greece during World War II, he was credited with saving tens of thousands of Jews by issuing baptismal certificates and by interfering with deportations.¹¹ Pope John also made an important gesture early in his reign by altering the Good Friday prayers to remove a reference to “perfidious (deceitful and untrustworthy) Jews.”¹²

From the beginning of his papacy, Pope John entered into a series of discussions with a French Jewish historian, and former Superintendent of Public Instruction in France, Jules Isaac, who had lost his wife and daughter in the Holocaust. Isaac spoke with the pope at length about both the Holocaust and the harmful consequences of some church teachings. And, reportedly, Isaac was encouraged to make this point by his friend Fr. Demann, who had completed his own textbook study. It is to these discussions that scholars attribute the pope’s decision to expand the scope of the ecumenical council to include the Jews.

¹⁰ J. Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933–1965* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 240.

¹¹ Cf. T. L. McDonald, “John XXIII and the Jews,” *The Catholic World Report*, April 3, 2014, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2014/04/03/john-xxiii-and-the-jews/>.

¹² Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother*, 240.

During the two years before the formal opening of Vatican II, preparation involved the appointment of ten commissions, one of which, the *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*, would take up the Jewish question. In June, 1960, the pope appointed Cardinal Augustin Bea to head this commission. Cardinal Bea was a German priest and a biblical scholar with some experience in Christian-Jewish dialogue. He reached out to Catholic scholars, to Jewish representatives and also, to American Bishops, whom he knew to be advocates for improving relations with the Jews.

American Jewish Committee at Vatican II

The AJC, as well as other Jewish organizations, took the announcements in Rome as an opportunity to launch a broad diplomatic approach, with a team of representatives from the US and Europe opening communications with various officials. Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, recently appointed to succeed Kertzer as Director of Interreligious Affairs at the AJC, was among the most active representatives of the Jewish community working to support Cardinal Bea's work. In assembling his team, 36-year-old Rabbi Tanenbaum recognized that his former teacher at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the 54-year-old theologian and philosopher, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, might be an effective liaison with the 80-year-old Cardinal Bea, as both were biblical scholars educated in Germany.¹³ Heschel and Bea hit it off and met several times in Rome, Boston, and New York.¹⁴ While Cardinal Bea was sympathetic to what he was being told about the injuries caused by Catholic teaching, he asked for academic papers to support the Jewish position.

For the first paper, Rabbi Tanenbaum turned to Judith Hershcopf Banki who had met with all the textbook scholars. When the request came to prepare a paper for Cardinal Bea, she prepared her own summary of Sister Rose's findings, which the AJC submitted in 1961.¹⁵

¹³ Cf. G. Spruch, *Wide Horizons: Abraham Joshua Heschel, AJC, and the Spirit of Nostra Aetate* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2008), 4.

¹⁴ Cf. D. H. Strober and G. S. Strober, *Confronting Hate: The Untold Story of the Rabbi who Stood up for Human Rights, Racial Justice, and Religious Reconciliation* (New York: Skyhorse, 2019).

¹⁵ It is noteworthy, as pointed out to the author by Fr. John T. Pawlikowski, OSM in an interview on December 27, 2017, that neither woman's name—Rose or Judith—was identified anywhere in this or subsequent submissions to the Vatican. Father Pawlikowski is the author of *Catechetics and Prejudice: How Catholic Teaching Materials View Jews, Protestants and Racial Minorities* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), which was based on Sister Rose's thesis research.

Banki's paper, "The Image of Jews in Catholic Teaching," made the case that such teaching, "particularly in the United States—is fostering prejudice and hostility."¹⁶ The AJC paper called on the pope to improve

Catholic teaching about Jews and Judaism, by cleansing all Catholic educational and liturgical publications of inaccurate, distorted, slanderous or prejudiced statements about Jews as a group.¹⁷

Herein, Banki drew heavily on Sister Rose's not-yet-completed dissertation for pedagogical arguments and conclusions about what was being said in religious textbooks. Like Sister Rose's dissertation, Banki's paper appealed to a higher purpose than just sympathy or even justice for the Jews. Where Sister Rose spoke of the importance of mutual respect among the citizens of the American democracy, Banki said that

prejudice against any religious group today inevitably weakens the entire fabric of society, degrades both the haters and the victims, and saps the spiritual strength of all mankind... [and] ... serves only to advance the cause of anti-religious forces.¹⁸

She acknowledged that antisemitism was not the policy of the church but pointed out that "Catholic religious teaching today contains defamatory misstatements and omissions which may encourage hostility and contempt for Jews."¹⁹ She pointed out many ways in which typical descriptions of Jews in teaching, and preaching, violated church dogma.

She pointed out typical textbook practices:

- Blaming the Jews—all those alive in Jesus' day, as well as in present times, for the crime of deicide: "When they (the Jews) would not heed the Prophets, He sent His only-begotten Son to call them to repentance. Him also they put to death. Because of this fact, they were finally rejected by God and their rights to His Kingdom were given to others."²⁰
- Using the term "Jews" pejoratively to present them as "hate ridden, cruel and materialistic"; while in positive statements about the Jews of the Old Testament, the term "Hebrews" or "Israelites" was preferred: "Jesus ... was reject-

¹⁶ J. H. Banki, "The Image of the Jews in Catholic Teaching: A Memorandum to the Secretariat for Christian Unity," submitted by the American Jewish Committee, issued June 22, 1961, http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/6_A3.PDF, 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

ed by the leaders of the Jewish people ... because of their material and carnal minds.”²¹

- Unjust or inaccurate comparisons of the Jewish religion with Christianity: “The Jews believed that one should hate an enemy; but Christ taught the opposite.”²²
- Omissions such as failing to acknowledge the Jewish roots of Christianity or the continuity between the Old and New Testaments: “There can be no doubt that the world must thank the Catholic Church for the Bible.”²³

The use of extensive quotations from textbooks provided irrefutable proof. These examples were quite powerful. When Cardinal Bea was presented with these examples, he is said to have replied, “through our negative teaching we have promulgated the hatred against Jews, culminating in the Holocaust; and these must go.”²⁴

Additional AJC memoranda were submitted in November of that same year: “Anti-Jewish Elements in Catholic Liturgy,”²⁵ and “On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations”²⁶ prepared by Rabbi Heschel.

Vatican Council II's Four Sessions 1962 – 1965

What happened next is a tale of leadership, diplomacy, and intrigue that cannot be covered here adequately. The Vatican Council met over a four-year period. Formal meetings occurred several weeks each fall. However, important deliberations and negotiations occurred in the interim periods. Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council in October 1962 but died only six months later. His successor, Pope Paul VI, maintained the momentum, opening three more sessions. At the final session in 1965, the council voted to approve four “constitutions” and three “declarations,” one of which was *Nostra Aetate (In Our Time): The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*.

²¹ Ibid., 15.

²² Ibid., 18.

²³ Ibid., 20.

²⁴ Thering, “Oral History Interview.”

²⁵ Cf. A. J. Heschel, “Anti-Jewish Elements in Catholic Liturgy,” submitted by the American Jewish Committee, issued November 17, 1961, http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/6 A2.PDF.

²⁶ A. J. Heschel, “On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations,” issued May 22, 1962, http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/6 A4.PDF.

It is important to realize that the issuance of a statement on the Jews was *not* preordained. In fact, “this statement was the most *contested* matter the bishops faced over four years of deliberations.”²⁷

The proposal to issue a resolution on relations with the Jews was introduced in the first session, then subsequently withdrawn. Strong drafts were circulated, then watered down. During the intervening periods, additional papers were submitted. During the three years before the final adjournment in 1965, there was extensive lobbying by Jewish groups, including the AJC, in Rome and with influential bishops in the United States. On the other side, there was pressure from conservative Christian leaders who objected to changing the church’s teaching about the Jews, by Arab leaders who objected politically, and by Christian leaders from Arab countries who feared the repercussions to their own people. Overhanging these deliberations was the moral weight of the Holocaust cast by such events as the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann and, in 1963, the controversial play, *The Deputy*, which portrayed Pope Pius XII as having failed to speak out against the Holocaust. Finally, as the closing session approached, the declaration was reintroduced and expanded to include favorable references to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other religions.

Writing with the perspective of the passage of fifty years, Rabbi Noam Marans, one of Rabbi Tanenbaum’s successors at the AJC, assessed the impact thus:

Nostra Aetate was a sea change, a Copernican revolution, a Catholic self-reflection in the wake of the Shoah, that launched a new era of Catholic-Jewish relations. It rejected the charge that Jews are collectively guilty of killing Jesus, a charge that facilitated violence directed at Jews for centuries. *Nostra Aetate* prohibited Catholic teachings portraying Jews as accursed. It condemned antisemitism, affirmed Christianity’s Jewish roots and opened a conversation that ultimately led to a Catholic embrace of the eternity of God’s covenant with the Jewish people.²⁸

Sister Rose said simply, “In fifteen Latin lines that document ... changed our negative relationship with Jews to a positive one.”²⁹

²⁷ Connolly, *From Enemy to Brother*, 240; emphasis added.

²⁸ N. Marans, “The Vatican Document of December 10, 2015 ‘God’s Gift and Calling’ Builds on *Nostra Aetate*,” John Oesterreicher Memorial Lecture, Seton Hall University, November 3, 2016.

²⁹ Thering, “Oral History Interview.”

Turning Policy into Action

With the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, and a call for “fraternal encounter,” the Catholic Church and the Jewish community established formal liaison committees and other bodies, which continue to this day to serve as forums for interreligious dialogue. In the United States, the Conference of Catholic Bishops, the very same group that issues the imprimatur for the Catholic textbooks, summoned educators and book publishers to a meeting in Washington. They told the publishers that their textbooks had to change and directed them to hire Jewish scholars to review their texts in light of *Nostra Aetate*.³⁰

In 1967, the conference issued guidelines,³¹ calling for changes to traditional teaching, in a litany, which mirrors quite well the recommendations of Sister Rose and Banki. These guidelines, and subsequent guidelines issued in 1975 and 1985 called for dialogue, avoidance of proselytizing, educational programs at Catholic schools and universities, and joint scholarly enterprises. And, that

School texts, prayer books, and other media should, under competent auspices, be examined in order to remove not only those materials which do not accord with the content and spirit of the Statement (*Nostra Aetate*), but also those which fail to show Judaism's role in salvation history in any positive light.³²

The conference also established a Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations, to which Sister Rose was invited to serve as an advisor. She continued to serve for twenty years.

Over the decades since Sister Rose conducted her textbook study, there have been several more textbook studies, and these have demonstrated continued progress. One researcher, Philip A. Cunningham said that in 1994, he was

30 Cf. Author's oral interview with Fr. John T. Pawlikowski, OSM, December 27, 2017, Chicago, Illinois.

31 Cf. “Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations,” Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, issued March 1967, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/jewish/upload/Guidelines-for-Catholic-Jewish-Dialogue-1967.pdf>.

32 “Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations—1985 Revision,” Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, issued 1985, <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year/lent/guidelines-for-catholic-jewish-relations.cfm>.

able to chart the dramatic reversals in Catholic teaching about Jews that resulted from *Nostra Aetate* and to which Rose Thering had made such an important contribution. The transformation from the materials ... were truly startling.³³

Sister Rose after *Nostra Aetate*

In 1961, what did a newly minted PhD, interested in Christian-Jewish relations find to do in a world that had not yet heard of *Nostra Aetate*? To understand the turns in Sister Rose's life, it is necessary to go back to 1959, to take note of a watershed event that occurred while she was still at Saint Louis University. The university scheduled an "Education Day" to which were invited Catholic school superintendents and book publishers from around the US. The textbook scholars from the three universities, including Sister Rose, presented their methods and their findings.

As Sister Rose began presenting *her* conclusions, an animated discussion began, and she was severely criticized by some of the leaders. One bishop said

Rose Thering said Pope John XXIII inspired her because he took the word "perfidious" out of the prayer we used to pray on Good Friday. But I want Rose Thering to know that he hasn't changed the Gospel, and he never will.³⁴

Another called the local bishop to say that a nun was bad-mouthing the church. She was summoned and asked about her research. While he permitted her to continue, he urged her not to publicize her findings: "Don't hang out our dirty laundry in public." "Well," she said later, "I hung it out."³⁵ The experience was a searing one. Rather than becoming submissive, she became radicalized. She authorized her professor to publish her work under *his* name because "it had to get out."³⁶ She completed her thesis and received her degree. She determined that Jewish-Christian relations would become her calling, and she expected that it would make her a better Christian.

33 "In Memory of Sister Rose," Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, issued 2006, accessed May 19, 2020, https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/news/thering_tribute.htm.

34 C. G. Rogers, *Habits of Change: An Oral History of American Nuns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 159.

35 O. Jacoby, dir., *Sister Rose's Passion*, Documentary Film, 2004.

36 Thering, "Oral History Interview."

She returned to Racine to head the Dominican College's Department of Education, as requested by her community. Two years later, in 1963, while serving in this capacity, Sister Rose traveled to Chicago to attend the National Conference on Religion and Race with representatives of Catholic, Jewish and Protestant organizations. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., who spoke, called it "the most significant and historic [convention] ever held for attacking racial injustice."³⁷ There, Sister Rose, Rev. King, and Rabbi Heschel all met each other for the first time. This experience inspired her to find more impactful work. In 1965, she relocated to Chicago to become an activist on the staff of the Catholic Adult Education Center, which was already deeply involved in interracial justice. She added Jewish studies to their agenda, inviting as speakers, scholars who were engaged in cutting edge interreligious work.

Seton Hall

In 1968, Sister Rose was recruited to New Jersey to join the staff of Seton Hall University's Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies, the first such academic institution in the world. It was founded by Msgr. Oesterreicher, one of the pioneers of inter-religious dialogue. Monsignor Oesterreicher had been a theology advisor to Cardinal Bea during Vatican II and wrote part of *Nostra Aetate*.

Born a Jew in Moravia, then part of Austria, in 1904, he converted to Roman Catholicism and became a priest in 1927. He considered himself simultaneously a Catholic and still a member of the Jewish people. Throughout his life, he was an advocate of Jewish-Catholic reconciliation and fought "antisemitism from a Catholic point of view."³⁸ He argued that since the roots of Christianity were in Judaism, Christian antisemitism was illogical. Also, he argued that his fellow Jews could more easily be won over to Christianity with kindness than with contempt. He fought and fled the Nazis, first in Austria, then in France; and he finally fled to the United States in 1940. His parents were killed in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz. He was ministering to a congregation in New York City, when in 1953, with the encouragement of a wealthy congregant, he created the institute dedicated to Catholic-Jewish relations in partnership with Seton Hall. At the inaugural lecture, he explained the need:

³⁷ S. Pieza, "Rev. King Urges Boycott by Churches to Fight Bias," *Chicago's American*, January 16, 1963.

³⁸ Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother*, 11.

Today in the United States, and particularly here in the East, such millions as never before of Christians and Jews are living side by side. Should they not know more of one another than what the newspapers provide?³⁹

Because of his academic reputation, Cardinal Bea engaged him in the work of the ecumenical council.

At Seton Hall, Sister Rose organized what she and Msgr. Oesterreicher called the “Menorah Studies” program, which brought Catholic School teachers to workshops with Jewish scholars. She befriended Holocaust survivors and made Holocaust education a central theme of the institute. She also began to organize study tours of Israel.

Israel

To understand Sister Rose’s special relationship with Israel, it is necessary to revisit what was being taught to Catholic school children about Jews and their homeland, as late as 1960, that their just punishment for killing Jesus was to become and remain stateless. “The Jews as a nation refused to accept Christ, and since His time they have been wanderers on the earth without a temple.”⁴⁰ Israel was portrayed as illegitimate. When the Declaration on the Jews was being considered at Vatican II, a statement was issued asserting that it was a religious statement and not political. The Vatican did not establish formal diplomatic relations with the State of Israel until 1994.

In 1970, Sister Rose made her first visit to Israel, an event that changed her life. Visiting Yad Vashem, she said, told her, “the story of the results of antisemitism ... brought about by our ‘contempt teaching’ about Jews.”⁴¹ She subsequently led fifty-three more missions of Jews and Christians to Israel. Each was an opportunity to educate Americans of different religions about each other, as well as to build empathy and support for the young country.

When Jewish groups demonstrated on behalf of Israel, she took to the streets with them, as she wished her people had done in the 1930s. Sister Rose was one of the first non-Jewish officers of the influential American Israel Friendship League. And, together with leaders of other Christian sects, she helped to organize

³⁹ J. M. Oesterreicher, “Why Judaeo-Christian Studies,” inaugural lecture, The Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies, Seton Hall University, 1954, <https://scholarship.shu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=oesterreicher>.

⁴⁰ Thering, “The Potential in Religion Textbooks,” 177

⁴¹ Thering, “Oral History Interview.”

the National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel. Subsequently, she served as its executive director for several years. Sister Rose spoke countless times to Jewish and Christian groups, on the topic, "A Christian Speaks on Israel." Reading through her speeches reveals that she was as passionate a Zionist as any Jew. She said in 1993:

in the process of loving for, and caring for, and rebuilding the ancient wasteland, the Jewish People itself was reborn and eventually, the Nation of Israel emerged! It is now a rightful member of the Family of Nations. It is this State of Israel, legally and morally founded, that is the Homeland of the Jewish People. No U.N. resolution of the General Assembly will ever change this!⁴²

Whenever Israel was threatened, Sister Rose used her voice and ever-increasing influence to be heard—in Washington, in the Vatican, and at the UN. Interestingly, one of her targets was Kurt Waldheim when he was Secretary General of the UN. She wrote letters questioning his criticism of Israel in the face of Palestinian terrorism.

Later, in 1986, she took on Waldheim more dramatically. She came to Vienna to protest his inauguration as president of Austria. She and Father David Bossman, then provost of Seton Hall, joined her friend, activist Rabbi Avi Weiss, on a trip to Vienna to protest the inauguration of Waldheim's inauguration as president of Austria. Waldheim was accused of suppressing the record of his German army service as a Wehrmacht officer. Also, he was implicated in the roundup and deportation of Greek Jews to Auschwitz.

Sister Rose said she went "to lend a Christian voice to this protest, because I feel that Christians did not speak out enough during World War II."⁴³ They joined other peaceful protesters at various locations. While their demonstrations attracted both critics and supporters of Waldheim, she was particularly disheartened by the virulent antisemitic reactions of the local population.

Most shocking to her, however, was her experience at the Vienna airport prior to returning home. She was subjected to a humiliating strip-search by local police, an experience she compared, "in a tiny way," with the humiliation of Jews during the Holocaust: "before I knew it, I was totally nude. For the first time, I know what my Jewish sisters had gone through before they were thrown

⁴² Sr. R. Thering, "Reflections: A Christian Educator's Thoughts for Post Holocaust Education," issued 1992, 19.

⁴³ Sr. R. Thering and R. A. Weiss, "Dark Memories of Vienna," special interview by S. Birnbaum, *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, July 21, 1986, <https://www.jta.org/1986/07/21/archive/special-interview-dark-memories-of-vienna>.

into the gas chambers.”⁴⁴ When she was invited to the Austrian consulate in New York to receive an apology, one of the younger consular officers commented that the Holocaust was never taught in school.

Commission on Holocaust Education

Sister Rose believed in teaching the lessons of the Holocaust. The State of New Jersey has one of the largest populations of Jews and Holocaust survivors and their descendants in the United States. In 1982, Thomas Kean, then governor of the state, having learned that individual school districts had been developing curricula about the Holocaust, called together a group of survivors, legislators, and educators. His intent was to develop generations of young people sensitized to the baseness and the consequences of bigotry carried out to its logical extremes.

Governor Kean appointed Sister Rose to a new advisory council on Holocaust education to develop curricular material and promote its use statewide. She thought it should be mandatory. For the next twelve years, she worked tirelessly with successive governors and Members of the State Legislature to pass a law, in 1994, mandating that lessons of the Holocaust and genocide be taught in every public school at every grade level. A permanent commission was named to support compliance with the requirement.

The passage of the legislation was helped by Steven Spielberg’s comments in October 1994, when he accepted the Academy Award for his film *Schindler’s List*. These were distributed to every legislator in New Jersey:

There are 350 thousand survivors of the Holocaust alive today. I implore all the educators who are watching this program to, please, do not allow the Holocaust to remain a footnote in history. Please teach this in your schools. There are 350 thousand experts who just want to be useful with the remainder of their lives. Please listen to the words and the echoes and the ghosts. And, please teach this in your schools.⁴⁵

Today, the commission coordinates with thirty-two university centers to ensure that school teachers are well equipped to teach about the Holocaust, in an age-appropriate fashion, as well as about the evils of prejudice and discrimination. Studies have confirmed their deterrent effect on antisemitism, prejudice,

⁴⁴ Interview in the *National Catholic Reporter*, December 1986.

⁴⁵ “‘Schindler’s List’ Winning Best Picture,” YouTube video, 4:24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HKTYX50hQ>.

and hate crimes.⁴⁶ Inspired by New Jersey, eighteen more states have passed legal mandates, and others are considering them.

Sister Rose Thering Fund for Education in Jewish-Christian Studies

In 1975 Seton Hall University created a degree granting program in Jewish-Christian studies. With the passage of the Holocaust Education law, teachers working in public schools and in religious schools of all faiths were encouraged to enroll. Sister Rose asked supporters to raise scholarship funds for these teachers. To date, hundreds of teachers have studied there, taking courses such as “Christian-Jewish Encounter” and “Lessons of the Holocaust.” The fund stands as a living memorial to Sister Rose.

Legacy and Lessons

Sister Rose never stopped teaching or speaking out. Despite her interest in Jews, she never became a less devout Catholic. In 2001, Sister Rose Thering

finally received long overdue acknowledgement for the role her research had played at the Second Vatican Council, an award from the International Liaison Committee of the Holy See's Commission on Relations with the Jews and the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations.⁴⁷

Six months before her death from illness in May 2006, she returned to the community where she had entered religious life seventy years earlier.

What are the lessons one can draw from this unique individual who devoted her life to leaving us a better world than the one she found? What can be done to continue the battle against antisemitism?

- First, to encourage dialogue—formal platforms and programs enable professionals and laypeople to work together on common problems. Not every problem can be solved—especially theological ones. But, working together breeds mutual understanding and respect, allows friendship and trust to de-

⁴⁶ Including B. L. Hadzima, “Prejudice Elimination: An Analysis Of The Effectiveness Of The New Jersey State Mandate To Teach The Holocaust And Genocide” (PhD diss., Seton Hall University, 1999).

⁴⁷ Banki, “Pivotal Figure.”

velop, and reduces the gaps between positions. Friends give each other the benefit of the doubt. Formal mechanisms for dialogue created the friendships and trust that enabled Cardinal Bea's project to progress well beyond anyone's wildest expectation. Formal mechanisms that bring religious leaders together today, continue the progress.

- Second, academic rigor. The textbook studies, arduous as they were, provided incontrovertible proof that generations were being taught to hate. They pointed out exactly which concepts, and which descriptions of the other, were at the root of antisemitism. Presented with the facts of what was being taught, and the implications of that teaching on society, church leaders changed dogma as well as how it was communicated.
- Third, use the classroom. People learn to hate in many ways, not all in school. But school is a good place to reverse the process. On occasion, Sister Rose liked to quote the lyrics from Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein's *South Pacific*:

You've got to be taught to hate and fear
 You've got to be taught from year to year
 It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear
 You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught to be afraid
 Of people whose eyes are oddly made
 And people whose skin is a diff'rent shade
 You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught before it's too late
 Before you are six or seven or eight
 To hate all the people your relatives hate
 You've got to be carefully taught.⁴⁸

- Fourth, commit strategically. *Nostra Aetate* would never have come to fruition if organized Judaism had not begun, many years earlier, to work for the rights of Jews by building bridges to religious and government institutions. The pursuit of textbook studies was a brilliant strategy. When those studies began, no one could guess where they would lead. Holocaust education would not be embedded in educational curricula in the United States and elsewhere, if leaders like Sister Rose had not labored for decades to build the institutions to support that objective.
- Finally, *to have courage*—Sister Rose never lost hers!

⁴⁸ R. Rogers and O. Hammerstein, "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," track 17 on *South Pacific* (Original Broadway Cast Recording), 1958.

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