**Developing Dialogue:**

**The Congregation of** **Our Lady**

**of Sion and *Nostra Aetate*,**

**1945-1969**

*By Emma Green*

**T**he Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion was founded in France in 1843 by Theodore Ratisbonne, a Jewish convert to Catholicism. Started as a small teaching community of women in Paris, the Congregation had established a community of women in Jerusalem within a decade and a corresponding men’s congregation in France. The heart of the Jerusalem community still lies in the Ecce Homo convent and Basilica, purposefully built on the Via Dolorosa, along which Jesus is believed to have walked to his crucifixion. At Ecce Homo and all over the world, the sisters fulfill their unique vocation: fostering dialogue between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church.

From the beginning, the main work of the sisters was educating young Muslim, Christian, and Jewish girls, while much of their prayer focused on the conversion of the Jewish people and reparation for their refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah. However, their approach toward the Jewish people was one of sympathy and understanding, a less common trait in the Church in the nineteenth century. After the Holocaust, internal shifts moved the Order toward their present focus on dialogue. Many of the Sisters were involved in rescue work during the Holocaust, and in the two decades following this heroic effort, the Sisters re-articulated their mission based on their experiences in the rapidly changing 20th century.

Sion’s shift is remarkable, because it pre-dated the Church’s own document on Jewish relations and dialogue, *Nostra Aetate*, by at least a decade.1 Indeed, in his speech to the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion in January 1964, Cardinal Augustin Bea spoke of the first drafts of *Nostra Aetate* and the “particular vocation” of Sion that was “more urgently needed than ever.”2 The Congregation of Our Lady of Sion held a distinctive vocation in the Church during a time of significant doctrinal change, and their work for and with the Jewish people is an an excellent illustration of efforts at Catholic-Jewish dialogue in the years leading up to the Second Vatican Council.

This small French Congregation, mostly comprised of women, set an example for the Church far ahead of its time, helping to shape one of the most controversial acts of the Second Vatican Council. The clearest aspect of the Sister’s influence on *Nostra Aetate* is direct communication between several members of the Congregation and major participants at Vatican 11, shown in personal letters and even informational dossiers prepared for Council Fathers. They also had strong relationships with local Jewish leaders, proving a link between the Church and Jewish communities.

However, the indirect contributions of the Congregation are equally remarkable. The decade-long shift in the understanding of their mission, years before Vatican II’s Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, whose section 4 gives pride of place to Judaism, shows Sion’s uniquenesswithin the Church, paving the way for later shifts in the broader Church community. Sion set an example for the public world outside of the Church – their scholarly work, published before and after Vatican II by Sisters like Louise-Marie Niesz and Charlotte Klein, was influential in circles dedicated to interreligious dialogue. Moreover, the relationships they built within these circles of dialogue and with Jewish communities were crucial for providing feedback to Council participants on the progress of *Nostra Aetate*. Sion’s support for the Jewish people also provides an interesting look into the political challenges churning behind *Nostra Aetate* – the Congregation’s unique mission catapulted the Sisters to the heart of the conflict over the State of Israel, a challenge to interreligious dialogue which has continued to develop and persists to this day.

**Developing Dialogue: The Early Years and Work of the**

**Congregation Notre-Dame de Sion**

Theodore and Alphonse Ratisbonne, two brothers from a prominent Jewish banking family in Strasbourg, were at the heart of Sion’s creation and early work. Theodore, the founder of the Congregation, converted to Catholicism after a long process of reflection and internal conflict, while Alphonse converted after experiencing a vision of the Virgin Mary which helped him understand the condition of the Jews in Society.3 In his *Memoirs*, Theodore Ratisbonne writes of his hesitation to create a new Catholic religious Congregation. But by 1842, when his brother Alphonse made his conversion, he had decided to create a community to do the work of “raising poor young Jewish girls and making Christians of them.”4

However, understanding the goal of the Ratisbonne brothers as mere conversion is not entirely accurate. As former Jews, both Theodore and Alphonse felt that they had a unique understanding of the historical oppression of the Jewish people. While conversion was certainly part of their overall mission in the Church, in their schools and orphanages, they sought to create a safe spiritual home for all children and a place of welcome for Jewish women. The actual work of Our Lady of Sion was largely one of education, and the Ratisbonne brothers were intensely respectful of the religious wishes of the parents of their students.5 While hope for Jewish conversion was a strong element of their spiritual life and work, Sion’s larger focus was creating a place where Jewish children could be accepted.

Moreover, we must consider the times they lived in before looking harshly at the Ratisbonne brothers. The common Christian conviction of the time held that Christianity superseded Judaism, thus making conversion an integral part of the Christian attitude toward the Jewish people. As Mary C. Boys points out in her book, *Has God Only One Blessing?:*  “*Christians were too* *often tone deaf to the hostility toward Judaism that their convictions* *carried.”*6 The Ratisbonne brothers approached their mission toward the Jewish people as an opportunity for reconciliation and salvation rather than simple conversion.

Early on, this connection to the Jewish people led the Congregation to the Holy Land. The Sisters of Sion had been in what was then Palestine since 1856, when Father Mary Alphonse purchased the ruins of a building on the Via Dolorosa. This convent, called Ecce Homo, was established at the place where it was believed that Pontius Pilate presented Jesus to a crowd before his crucifixion. After Father Mary Alphonse purchased the land and constructed a convent and Basilica, the site served as an orphanage and school for very poor children of Muslim, Christian and Jewish backgrounds.7 Later, in1861, Father Mary established another home for Sion in the Arab village of Ein Karem, which also served as a school.

Sion continued in its vocation of teaching children throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but their connection to the Jewish people took on a new dimension after the end of World War II. During the Holocaust, the Sisters were heavily involved in rescue efforts, forging documents for Jewish children and hiding them in schools throughout Europe.8 This experience sparked a process of self-reflection and re-evaluation within the Congregation, leading to a dynamic decade of internal shifts and carefully re-articulated support for the Jewish people. To understand this process, we must begin by examining the interfaith work of leading figures in the Congregation.

In 1947, immediately after the war, an influential Brother of Sion named Paul Démann attended the “EmergencyInternational Conference on Anti-Semitism” held in Seelisberg,Switzerland**.**9 Also in attendance was Jules Isaac, a Jewish Holocaust survivor who would later be credited with inspiring Pope John XXIII to include a statement on the Jews in the work of the Vatican II Council. The “Ten Points of Seelisberg,” establishing guidelines for religious tolerance, were a forerunner for the drafts of *Nostra Aetate* created a decade later.10

After this conference, Démann and Isaac established a well documented correspondence that lasted until Isaac’s death in1963.11 In the years leading up to Isaac’s crucial meeting with Pope John XXIII in 1960, Paul Démann worked with a fellow brother in Sion, Geza Vermés, and a scholar of Jewish-Christian relations, Renée Bloch, to publish *Cahiers Sioniens*, an influential, nine-part journal series that tackled conundrums in Catholic-Jewish studies. The strong arguments for building bridges between Catholicism and Judaism presented in *Cahiers* were remarkablefor their time, and the correspondence between Démann and Isaac suggests that they frequently discussed topics in *Cahiers* before and after publication.

But the mindset of the broader Church was not yet focused on broad dialogue with the Jewish people. The Catholic Church had yet to take a firm stance on their relationship with the Jewish people. One controversial example is found in Pope Pius XII’s failure to condemn officially the Nazis during World War II, a decision that has been criticized as a “failure in moral leadership.”12 Of course, the political consequences of openly defending the Jewish people were complicated and difficult. Private correspondences show that the Pope was concerned about potential Nazi backlash against Catholic soldiers and civilians, as well as increased cruelty toward the Jewish people 13 Moreover, private conversations seem to demonstrate that Pius XII was not anti-Jewish; he simply led a Church that “had promoted anti-Semitism down through the ages.”

And although Catholic liturgy certainly was not anti-Semitic, it was not geared toward dialogue, either. Prayers for conversion were matched with an effort to make “reparation” for the sins of the Jewish people, specifically their involvement in the death of Jesus. Throughout the Catholic Church, this took the form of prayer for the “perfidious Jews,” a phrase that was only taken out of the Good Friday mass in 1959.14 Even the Sisters of Sion themselves were closely affiliated with an organization called the Archconfraternity of Prayer for the Conversion of Israel (API), which was established by Pope Pius X in 1909.15 The mission of this organization was affording to “every Catholic the means of offering his prayer for the conversion of Israel in union with the two Congregations of Priests and Nuns of Our Lady of Sion.” The Sisters were very involved with this group from the time of its inception all the way through the 1950s, circulating documents about how to spread and improve the work of the group.16

However, in the early 1950s, leaders within Sion like Paul Démann began emphasizing the importance of a continued connection between the Church and the Jewish people. He traced the connection between the Church and “the children of Israel” back to the Bible, arguing that Christian anti-Jewish sentiment was an intolerable problem within the Church.17 Throughout his work, Démann uses “Israel” to refer to the Jewish people, suggesting the important historical connection between the Jews and the land of Israel while avoiding direct discussion of political support for the State of Israel. Interestingly, both Démann and Geza Vermés, a fellow brother of Sion who worked with Démann on scholarly publications, had Jewish backgrounds. Both men eventually left the Order and converted back to Judaism.18

The Sisters of Sion were soon to follow Démann’s example, although theirs was a long path. According to Sr. Charlotte Klein, a leading Sister at the London Study Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations, the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion took more than one hundred years to shift from “conversion to dialogue.”19 The 1950s and ‘60s were a time of great change within the Congregation, but not without challenges.

The Sisters’ experiences during the Holocaust, along with the intense shifts in society after World War II, led the Superior General of the Chapter, Sr. Marie Felix, to initiate a re-evaluation of Sion’s identity. Throughout the 1950s, questionnaires were sent out to provincial chapters of the Congregation, asking for thoughtful preparation for the next General Chapter meeting in 1957.20 During this Chapter meeting, fundamental changes were made to the Constitution and documents of the Congregation, dimming the emphasis on “conversion of the children of Israel”21 and exploring the best way of being a “friend” to the Jewish people based on the goal of Sion.22

Following this General Chapter meeting, changes in attitude toward conversion continued to take place. Documents from the early 1960s show reluctance from the Congregation’s leadership to continue their relationship with Archconfraternity of Prayer for the Conversion of Israel (API), at least while API continued to encourage prayer for the conversion of the Jews. A questionnaire circulated in 1963 posed questions about the best way to maintain a relationship with API in Sion schools,23 and a 1964 letter from the Superior General of Sion to the leaders of API gently argues that the purpose of API was incompatible with developments in the Church.24

The changes of the 1964 General Chapter meeting confirm this trend away from an attitude of conversion. From this Chapter meeting came the document “Israël: Notre Mission D’Eglise [Israel: Our Mission in the Church],” which outlines Sion’s specific mission within the Church.25 The conversations of this General Chapter meeting, at least as recorded in their official Chapter documents, show flickers of what Sion would become in the second half of the 20th century: liaisons between the Church and the Jewish community. As Sr. Marie Felix described in a summary of the evolution of the Congregation, by 1964, the Sisters hoped to increase their knowledge and contact with the Jewish people for the benefit of the whole Church.26 In 1964 and 1965, as public drafts of *Nostra Aetate* began circulating in Catholic circles, the Sisters continued their condemnation of conversion-based approaches that were incompatible with modern trends in the Church. This included calling for a full halt in API’s activities until the full results of *Nostra Aetate* were known.27

This transition toward dialogue, however, was not without its difficulties and disagreements. For example, one branch of the Congregation, called “the Ancelles,” posed mounting objections to the Sisters’ methodology in the 1950s. Previously, this branch had received permission to experiment with a different method of relating to their local Jewish community, donning regular clothes and becoming an integrated part of Jewish life. They argued that their approach to working with the Jewish people was the most effective way of living out Sion’s mission, and by 1957, they wanted to split from the Congregation.28 After they became an independent group and began to create new communities, the Sisters of Sion maintained a strong relationship with their group; but this split shows that several fundamentally different perspectives toward Sion’s mission existed within the Congregation.

**At** the opposite end of the spectrum, some of the older women of Sion had difficulty letting go of a conversion-based approach. Traditional views held in the Catholic Church regarding baptized children led to the Finaly Affair in 1952 and 1953, a painfully public situation in which a Catholic woman, Mlle. Antoinette Brun, was accused and convicted of kidnapping two Jewish boys who were entrusted to her care during theHolocaust. After the conclusion of the war, it became clear that the boys’ parents had been murdered ,and their relatives wanted to claim the boys and bring them to Israel. However, Mlle. Antoinette Brun, the director of a children’s shelter in Grenoble, refused to return the boys to theirfamilies. She enlisted the help of a Sister of Sion named Antoinette Jannot to help her hide the boys; eventually,they were removed to the protection of an order of priests in the Basque area of Spain to circumvent legal rulings in favour of the Finaly family. Her actions were ostensibly based on concern for the future Catholic identity of the boys, who had by this time spent several formative years in a Catholic school. However, the affair and Sion’s involvement sparked a public controversy with ardent defenders of the actions taken on both sides.29

While this affair is certainly dramatic and adds some excitement to this narrative, it was not unlike other situations that had occurred in the Church in the past.30 Further, the way the affair was handled within the Sion community offers interesting insight into the contentious state of Jewish-Christian relations at the time. Paul Démann, mentioned earlier for his connection with Jules Isaac, wrote a detailed article about the affair in *Cahiers Sioniens*, recording the events and various reactions from the media.31 In his article, he argues that the divisive attitudes of commentators on both sides of the affair were harmful to Catholic-Jewish relations.32 Démann’s article on the Finaly Affair was an attempt to mediate and re-orient the dramatic controversy toward a positive outlook on Catholic-Jewish relations, despite the involvement of one of Sion’s own Sisters.

**The Council Years**

The Second Vatican Council, announced in 1959 and opened in 1962 by Pope John XXIII, was a remarkable opportunity for the Church to position itself in the twentieth century. After a Jewish Holocaust survivor named Jules Isaac visited the Pope in 1960, John XXIII met with Cardinal Augustin Bea to discuss the possibility of including a statement on the Jews in the work of the Council. A preparatory committee called the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity was created in 1960, and the road toward *Nostra Aetate* had begun.33

Earlier, we examined the scholarly work of Paul Démann. Works like his little book, *Judaism*, influenced the development of the Congregation and discussions about dialogue within the larger Catholic community.34 But much of Sion’s influence on Jewish-Christian relations during the years directly preceding Vatican II came from the Sisters. With their unique vocation of fostering good relations with the Jewish people, the Sisters of Sion were able to provide insight on issues of Jewish-Christian relations in a way that no other Congregation could offer. Many Sisters and communities were involved with the work of the Council, both in direct and indirect ways.

In Paris, Sr. Marie Bénédicte Salmon continually sent articles and information to leading Catholic scholars, including several at the Council. From 1963-1966, she received correspondence from leaders like Archbishop Martin of Rouen and Archbishop Villot of Lyon, discussing articles written by the Sisters like “Israël et Nous [Israel and Us].”35 Notably, Sr. Bénédicte Salmon received several handwritten notes from Fr. Yves Congar, one of the periti, or experts, at Vatican II who worked closely on drafting *Nostra Aetate.* Sr. Bénédicte Salmon’s impact was also felt after the Council, as she wrote several authoritative histories on the “battle for *Nostra Aetate*” that were published in scholarly journals.36

Also in Paris was Sr. Magda (Madeline) Manipoud, who played a remarkable role in her contact with several Council officials. Early in the Council, she and another French sister named Dominique Gros were in contact with leading French Council bishops, including the Archbishops of Lyon, Rouen, Paris, Lille, Reims, Cambrai and Toulouse.37 While the Sisters’ enthusiastic encouragement of the document on the Jews was often received less than enthusiastically, they remained in contact with these officials from 1963-1965.

In addition, they were encouraged by the Council theologian Fr. Yves Congar to contribute to developing schema on the Jews . In the spirit of his suggestion, they worked with Fr. Kurt Hruby, a priest who lived at the Sisters’ House in Paris at the time, and the Protestant Pastor Richard-Mollard to draft their own four points on relations with the Jews. The theological ideas they developed are similar to the final version of the schema on the Jews, albeit with slightly stronger wording. The Sisters held that supporting the Jewish community was crucial, despite the challenges posed by the modern state of Israel; that the Jewish people are the root of the Church and should not be regarded as irrelevant because of the existence of the Church; that the Jewish people should not be falsely punished for the crime of deicide, or the murder of Christ; and that the Covenant between the Jews and God was not rendered irrelevant by their rejection of Jesus as the messiah. However, these ideas were submitted before the second Council session, and the schema would go through many phases and changes before its final passage during the fourth Council session.

Perhaps most remarkable about Sr. Magda’s work in the later years of the Council was her meeting with Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro, a member of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. The influential Archbishop from Bologna was a “force to be reckoned with” at the Council,38 and in 1964 he made a remarkable “intervention” in the Council on behalf of *Nostra Aetate.*39 Before this “intervention,” his team of theologians asked the Sisters of Sion to prepare a dossier of information on Catholic-Jewish relations. This information was presented to the Cardinal in 1965. In April of that year, Sr. Magda was chosen to accompany Sr. Dominique Gros and the Superior General of the Congregation, Sr. Marie Laurice, on a visit to Bologna to meet with Cardinal Lercaro and his team of theologians.40

In a biography of Sr. Magda, her meeting with the Cardinal in Italy is described as one of her “greatest memories.” The Sisters met with Cardinal Lercaro in order to speak about possible liturgical reforms which would encourage a more meaningful and just Christian attitude toward the Jews people They chose Bologna because they felt that this diocese had vigorously taken up the mission of the renewal of the Church.41 The Sisters had further interaction with Council Fathers and experts in Rome. Sr. Magda recounted efforts to re-create the hospitality of “Martha and Mary in the Gospel” and bring the Council Fathers to the Sisters’community to discuss their work and reflect upon the events of theCouncil.42 Strong efforts by the Sisters to connect with Council leaderssuggest a self-awareness of the importance of their unique vocation and its potential to impact the unprecedented work of Vatican II.

In other communities, Sisters were instrumental in communicating feedback from local Jewish communities to those working on drafts of *Nostra Aetate* in Rome. After a weakened version of a draft of *Nostra Aetate* was leaked to the public in 1964, the Provincial leadership of the Sisters in London wrote a letter to Archbishop Heenan, who was a representative at Vatican II.43 The Sisters in London had recently established the London Study Centre for Christian-Jewish Relations, and their letter told of strong “reactions aroused in Jewish circles” in the London community.44 The Sisters expressed disappointment in the new declaration, pointing out language that the Jewish community interpreted as a call to conversion. They also pointed out the absence of the term “deicide,” writing that this was “taken to imply that Jews at the time of Christ were collectively responsible” for the death of Christ. Archbishop Heenan wrote back, encouraging the Sisters to make a habit of communicating any useful information they might encounter.45 His letter, dated September 23, 1964, states his intention of making an “intervention” in the Council based on the Sisters’ concerns about proselytism. The term “deicide” was also added back into the next draft of *Nostra Aetate*; this draft was already in progress at the time of the leak, explaining why Archbishop Heenan did not address the Sisters’ concern about “deicide” in his letter.46

The London Sisters were also kept up to date on the progress of *Nostra Aetate* by those at the Council. Fr. Gregory Baum, a theological expert at the Council, stayed at the Sisters’ house on his way to and from Rome, providing the Sisters with first-hand information about the difficulties of getting the document passed. In addition, Cardinal Bea, the President of the Church’s Secretariat for Christian Unity, made a visit to England in 1964 between Council sessions to explain his efforts on *Nostra Aetate.* His visit included an interview with the newspaper the Jewish Chronicle.47

Cardinal Bea also formally addressed the Congregation during the Council. In his first speech to the Congregation in January of 1964, he speaks of Sion’s particular vocation, which gave the Sisters a “special right” to speak of the Church’s spiritual relationship with the Jews. 48 He encourages Sion to continue and increase their various forms of apostolic work toward the Jews people, especially as a way to “make up for the ingratitude, unkindness , and injustice of Christians to these people – faults which the Church has committed throughout the ages.” But interestingly, the talk still has strong themes of reparation and conversion, encouraging the Sisters to pray for the sins and infidelities of the Jews, as well as their eventual salvation.

This speech is significant in two ways. Most directly, it shows that Cardinal Bea, who was the foremost leader in the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate,* was in direct communication with the Congregation during the latter years of the Council. His words recognize the uniqueness of Sion’s strong relationship with Jewish communities, lauding them as leaders in their efforts to establish strong Jewish-Christian relations. But the speech is also important in light of what followed the Council. While the language of the final text of *Nostra Aetate* was not as strong as the original drafts, it did radically shift the public stance of the Church toward the Jewish people. This momentous declaration necessitated further work within the Church to turn doctrine into reality. For this job, Cardinal Bea came to the Sisters, and they took on the task of leading the way into a more harmonious future between Christians and Jews.

**After Vatican II: Living the words of *Nostra Aetate***

It is not surprising that the Sisters were approached to lead the way into a new era of understanding between the two faiths. Fr. Cornelis Rijk, who was the first person to work full time on the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity under Cardinal Bea after the Council, gave a speech to the Sisters at the 1969 General Chapter meeting of the Congregation in Rome entitled “Raison D’Etre de Sion [Sion’s Reason for Being].”49 In his speech, he reflects on the history of the Congregation and their long-standing involvement with the Jewish community. But he frames the evolution of the Congregation as progress toward their important new mission within the Church: to take charge of Catholic-Jewish relations in the years after *Nostra* *Aetate.*

To understand this evolution, we must look back at the public and scholarly work of the Congregation outside the Catholic community. Over the two and a half decades preceding Vatican II, the Sisters had established themselves as leaders in the field of Jewish-Christian relations. The public work of leaders in the Congregation, from outreach to Jewish communities to scholarly publications to the archival work done after Vatican II, created an excellent intellectual base for putting *Nostra Aetate* into action. Especially in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, Sisters of Sion in several parts of the world set an example for the Church’s work in Catholic-Jewish relations by creating a public space for dialogue. The Sisters founded studycentres and contributed to scholarly publications not only in Londonand Paris, but also in Montreal, Melbourne, Kansas City, andSao Paulo.

Sion’s role as the Church’s public liaison to the Jewish communitytook nearly two decades to emerge. We have already examinedsome evidence of the strong connection between the Sisters ofSion and their local Jewish communities. In communication withleading figures at the Second Vatican Council, provincial leadership in London spoke with authority on the perspective of the Jewish community, acting as an ambassador to the Church from local communities.50 But this sort of connection between the Sisters and the Jewish community was not an isolated instance – it was a habitual part of Sion communities by the beginning of the 1960s. Sisters Charlotte Klein and Mary Kelly of the London Study Centre for Dialogue and Encounter often wrote for the editorial section of newspapers, defending the need for dialogue between Catholic and Jewish communities.51 -Not only were Sisters of Sion getting out into Jewish communities – they were being recognized in journals and newspapers as leaders in Catholic-Jewish understanding.

In terms of scholarly writing about Catholic-Jewish relations published during the years directly preceding Vatican II, there is no better example than *Cahiers Sioniens*, which was published by Paul Démann and the male Religious of Sion community. The articles in *Cahiers* treat Jews and Judaism not as a subject for condemnation or conversion, but rather as a potential source for increased understanding of the Catholic faith. Contributions to *Cahiers* ranged from historical studies to commentaries on modern Catholic-Jewish relations. When looked at collectively, “*Cahiers* must be reckoned, directly or indirectly, as the sources of the great reform of the attitude of Rome to Judaism and the Jews.”.

Paul Démann also assisted a Sister of Sion by the name of Marie Pierre (née Marguerite-Marie Larbaud) on a publication called *Israël et* *Nous*,54 which was published from 1950 until1963.55 Throughout the publication of I*sraël et Nous,* Sr. Marie Pierre had contact with Jules Isaac, who sent feedback on articles about proselytism and conversion.

However, perhaps even more notable than the impact of pieces published before the Council is the abundance of scholarly work published by and about Sisters of Sion after the conclusion of Vatican II. After the battle for *Nostra Aetate* was won, the Church’s newly-created Secretariat for Christian Unity needed a method of putting the declaration into action. Three Sisters of Sion, Sr. Magda Manipoud, Sr. Marie-Dominique Gros, and Sr. Marie-Edward Berkeley, were asked to create a centre for study and information in Rome.56 With the help of Fr. Cornelis Rijk, who worked with Cardinal Bea on the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, and Father Bruno Hussar, a Dominican priest, the Sisters established SIDIC in Rome (Service International de Documentation Judéo- Chrétienne). SIDIC was used to collect articles and documents about Jewish-Christian relations, including summaries of the work on Jewish-Christian relations that took place at Vatican II; they also published a journal in English and French entitled *SIDIC*.57

In 1969, an affiliated centre with a similar mission was established in Paris, taking the acronym of “S.I.D.I.C.” but with a slightly different title (Service Information-Documentation Juifs et Chrétiens). In particular, Sr. Marie Bénédicte Salmon of Paris was instrumental in establishing SIDIC in Paris, and in the last twenty years, her work has been the subject of several articles in scholarly journals.58 Sr. Louise-Marie Niesz of Paris also played a pivotal role in the development of SIDIC, and even today, she is a regular contributor to scholarly journals like *Sens*59 and conferences on topics in Catholic-Jewish relations.

Within the first few years after SIDIC’s establishment, the Sisters of Sion had established collections of journals and books on Jewish- Christian relations in Rome, Paris, London, Montreal, Kansas City and other cities. Sisters Charlotte Klein and Mary Kelly of London, as well as Sisters Louise-Marie Niesz and Bénédicte Salmon of Paris, made frequent appearances in journals like *Sens*, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, and the organization’s self-titled publication, *SIDIC.* After the long and uncertain battle for *Nostra Aetate*, the Sisters adopted their newly re-articulated mission and the charge from Council leadership to lead the way into the future of Catholic- Jewish relations.

The most important aspect of the Sisters’ public work is its penetration into the world outside of Catholicism. Their work appeared in journals and newspapers that were not explicitly Catholic, or even explicitly *religious*, acting as an example of Catholic work toward religious understanding that contrasted with some of the typical, insular attitudes of the Catholic Church.60 Especially in light of the fierce political battle that lit the winding path toward *Nostra Aetate*, the public face of the Sisters of Sion provided the world with an example of the dedication to religious pluralism that existed within the Catholic Church.

**Symbols Beyond Words: Politics and Sion’s Work in the** **Holy Land**

Although the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion is not politically motivated in any way, their work on religious dialogue cannot be fully understood outside the context of the politics of Israel. The Catholic attitude of common heritage with and acceptance of the Jewish people is commonly held today but *Nostra Aetate* went through heated debate before it was finally passed in the final session of the Second Vatican Council.61 Much of this controversy was linked to the political conflict in the Middle East, which brings us to another interesting element of Sion’s unique vocation within the Church: their presence and work in the Holy Land.

While the Catholic Church has had varying levels of presence in the Holy Land since the Crusades of the 11th century, control of religious sites has always been somewhat tenuous due to changing political struggles in the region. Announced only a decade after the establishment of the State of Israel, the Council did its work during a particularly challenging time in Middle Eastern affairs. In light of the instability in Israel, an overt gesture of peace toward the Jewish people was interpreted by Arab clergy and their allies in the Middle East as “support of their enemy, the intrusive ‘Zionist entity.’”62

Further, these clergy feared for the safety of Christians in communities that held hostile attitudes toward Israeli Jews. Judaism could not be examined from a purely theological perspective because it had become inextricably tied to the national and political identity of the State of Israel. As a result, the Church’s new statement on the Jews was inextricably tied to the politics surrounding the State of Israel, creating challenges for support of the document

This political situation complicated the Sisters’ vocation of fostering good relations with the Jewish people, as well as their long-standing presence in Jerusalem. As stated in the 1957 Constitution, “the zeal of the Sisters of Sion [is] mainly directed towards [the people of] Israel.”63 The most current version of the Sisters’ Constitution, updated in 1984, goes on to say that the Congregation is “called to witness by our life…God’s faithful love for the Jewish people and… his fidelity to the promises he revealed to the patriarchs and prophets of Israel.”64 This is not a political tie with the State of Israel, but rather a spiritual tie to the historical people of the Land of Israel. As one Sister eloquently told me, the formation of Sion is not about advancing certain political ideas, but to “be with the people – to love the people.”65 The Sisters’ work in Israel was and is about building bridges, not about taking sides in a very public political conflict.

Despite the non-political nature of the Congregation, they still faced challenges as a result of the political situation in Israel. Before Israel captured the Old City of Jerusalem in the Six Day War in 1967, the Ecce Homo convent was located on the Jordanian side of the city. During the two decades under Jordanian control, the Sisters at Ecce Homo were rarely in contact with Jews. Yet, while Sion’s “zeal” is specifically directed toward the Jewish people, the Sisters’ work in Jerusalem has always encompassed the full scope of the most prominent religious communities in Israel – namely, Jews, Christians, *and* Muslims.

This sort of bridge-building was rare during this time period. Until the Second Vatican Council, the Church did not have an official policy about relations between Catholics and Muslims or Catholics and Jews. The Congregation settled in the geographic heart of its religion to find a connection to its biblical roots, and their unique vocation allowed them to lead the way in ecumenical efforts in the Holy Land.

Sion’s firm dedication to the Jewish community in the years leading up to Vatican II was an important symbol for the Church. The self-transformation in the mission of the Sisters of Sion re-affirmed and strengthened their alliance with all of the communities in Israel in a time of extreme political instability, suggesting that they viewed the question of Israel as more than just a growing political concern. Sion’s connection to the land of Israel lies in its identity as the Holy Land, and this connection extends to the entire Catholic community. But Sion also sees this connection to land as primarily a connection to a people, and they seek to share their concern to foster good relations with the Jewish people and with the whole Church. In the decade and a half between the Holocaust and Vatican II, their support for Jewish people and condemnation of anti-Semitism sent the important message that the Church could no longer afford to ignore its historical struggle with the Jewish people. The “mystery of Israel”66 is theologically connected to the Church at its roots, they argued, which should outweigh political difficulties

**Conclusion**

The introductory paragraph of *Nostra Aetate* states that “in her task of fostering unity and love among individuals, indeed among peoples, [the Church] considers above all in this Declaration what human beings have in common and what draws them to live together…”67 This declared intention is a perfect tribute to the work of the Congregation. They were and remain a relatively small Congregation within the Church, working in tight-knit communities all over the world to further their vocation of fostering good relations with the Jewish people.

Sion’s first members, women educators with a special zeal for the Jewish people, were remarkable for their time for the love and respect they afforded all of their students, regardless of their faith. A hundred years later, a dedicated handful of young women and a select few men helped to shape the Church’s first gesture of goodwill toward the Jewish people, a huge step in a two thousand year history of violence and disagreement. Despite of the Congregations small size, political obstacles and internal disagreements, Our Lady of Sion contributed indirectly and directly to one of the most important Church documents in history, through their leadership in local communities, significant scholarship, and direct advocacy for the schema on the Jews. Moreover, they helped transform doctrine into practice through the work of SIDIC in Rome and SIDIC in Paris, ecumenical efforts at interreligious dialogue, and continued scholarly contributions to journals and newspapers. Truly, the work of the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion is a living reminder of words from the Gospel of St. John, cited in the conclusion of *Nostra Aetate*

“Whoever does not love , does not know God” 68

**notes:**

1. *Nostra Aetate,* or the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non- Christian Religions, was promulgated on October 28, 1965 at the Second Vatican Council. This paper is particularly concerned with section four, which addresses the relationship between the Church and the Jews. Although this was the first major declaration on Catholic-Jewish relations created by the Church after World War II, it should be noted that Catholics had joined with other Christians from 1946 onwards in efforts at recon- ciliation. A great example is the Eichmann Trial, which took place in Jerusalem in 1961. See John Borelli, “The Origins and Early Development of Interreligious Relations during the Century of the Church (1910-2010)”, *U.S. Catholic Historian* 28.2 (Spring 2010), 91-92.

2. Cardinal Augustin Bea, “Conference to the General Chapter of the Sisters of Sion” (speech presented at the NDS General Chapter meeting, Paris, France, January 15, 1964), from Cardinal Bea Center online database http://www.ingre.it/Judaicastudies/dialogue­­-docsView-en.php?id=

374&categoria=cattolici>.

3. Theodore Ratisbonne, “Memoirs”, trans. Sr. Marian Dolan, NDS, from

NDS archives in New York (Rome: Generalate of the Sisters of Sion,

1966), 86-87.

4. *Ibid.,* 106.

5. Klein, *From Conversion to Dialogue,* 390-391.

6. Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing* (New Jersey: Paulist Press,

2000), 19.

7. Idan Yaron, “Socio-Cultural Pluralism within Apostolic Congregations of Religious Women: Case Study of the Jerusalem Communities of the

‘Congregation of Our Lady of Sion’”, from NDS personal archives, New

York (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1986), 11.

8. Madeline Comte, “De la conversion à la rencontre: les religieuses de

Notre-Dame de Sion (1843-1996,”, *Archives Juives* 35 (2002/1): 102-119.

9. It should be noted that the Seelisberg meeting was called for at an initial meeting of the British Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ) at Oxford in 1946. See Marcus Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 182-183.

10. “De Seelisberg a Vatican II”,from SIDIC Archives in Paris*, L’Arche* (1966): 29-33. The Ten Points of Seelisberg are as follows: *Remember that One God speaks to us all through the Old and New Testament. Remember that Jesus was born of a Jewish mother of the seed of David and the people of Israel, and that His everlasting love and forgiveness embraces His own people and the whole world. Remember that the first disciples, the apostles and the first martyrs were Jews. Remember that the fundamental commandment of Christianity, to love God and one’s neigh- bour, proclaimed already in the Old Testament and confirmed by Jesus, is binding upon both Christians and Jews in all human relationships, with- out any exception. Avoid distorting or misrepresenting biblical or post- biblical Judaism with the object of extolling Christianity. Avoid using the words Jews in the exclusive sense of the enemies of Jesus, and the words “the enemies of Jesus” to designate the whole Jewish people. Avoid presenting the Passion in such a way as to bring the odium of the killing of Jesus upon all Jews or upon Jews alone. It was only a section of the Jews in Jerusalem who demanded the death of Jesus, and the Christian message has always been that it was the sins of mankind which were ex- emplified by those Jews and the sins in which all men share that brought Christ to the Cross. Avoid referring to the scriptural curses, or the cry of a raging mob: ‘His blood be upon us and our children,’ without remem- bering that this cry should not count against the infinitely more weighty words of our Lord: ‘Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ Avoid promoting the superstitious notion that the Jewish people are repro- bate, accursed, reserved for a destiny of suffering. Avoid speaking of the Jews as if the first members of the Church had not been Jews.*

See Braybrooke, 184.

11. Marie Bénédicte Salmon, NDS, “Choix de Vingt-Quatre Lettres de Jules Isaac à Paul Démann”, from SIDIC archives in Paris*, Sens* 280 (July- August 2003): 338-369.

12. Gunter Lewy, as cited in Robert F. Drinan, S.J., “The Christian Re- sponse to the Holocaust”, *Annals of the American Academic of Political and Social Science* 450 (July 1980), 182-183 (http://www.jstor.org).

13. José M. Sanchéz, *Pius XII and the Holocaust: Understanding the Con- troversy* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 173.

14. Boys, 19.

15. *Archconfraternity of Prayer for Israel*, pamphlet, from Sion Centre for Dialogue and Encounter, London (London: printed privately, 1964).

16. “Suggestions for ways and means to give a new life to the API”, from Sion Centre for Dialogue and Encounter , London (Bayswater: printed privately, undated).

17. Olivier Rota, “Jules Isaac, Paul Démann, Charles de Provenchères: Le redressment de l’enseignement catéchétique concernant Israël dans les années cinquante”, *Sens* 333 (2008): 673-682.

18. Paul Démann, “Note Confidentielle”, from Religious of Sion Archives in Paris (Printed privately for internal use: 1962). Also see Geza Vermes, *Providential Accidents* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.,

1998) for further details about his life after leaving the Order.

19. Charlotte Klein, NDS, “From Conversion to Dialogue – The Sisters of Sion and the Jews: A Paradigm of Catholic-Jewish Relations?”, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 18 (1981): 388-397.

20. Preparation for the 1957 General Chapter meeting by the French

Province”, from NDS archives in Paris (Printed privately, 1957).

21. Klein, *From Conversion to Dialogue,* 388-391.

22. M.M. Fidelis, NDS, “Israël,” taken from “Compte-Rendu of the 1957 Gen- eral Chapter meeting”, from NDS archives in Paris (Printed privately: 1957).

23. “Questionnaire in Preparation for an API Discussion”, from Sion Centre for Dialogue and Encounter, London (London: Sion Centre for Dialogue and Encounter, 1963).

24. Marie-Laurice, NDS, *Aux Responsibles de l’API, 21 March 1964*, Letter, from Sion Centre for Dialogue and Encounter, London.

25. “Israël: Notre Mission D’Eglise [suite],” taken from “Compte-Rendu of the 1964 General Chapter meeting”, from NDS archives in Paris (Printed privately for internal use: 1964).

26. M.M. Felix, NDS, “Evolution de 1951 a 1964”, from NDS archives in

Paris (printed privately for internal use, 1964).

27. Marie Laurice, NDS, *Circular addressed to Sr. M. Louis Gabriel*, *21*

*December 1964*, Letter, from Sion Centre for Dialogue and Encounter,

London.

28. “Preparation for the 1957 General Chapter meeting by the French

Province”, from NDS archives in Paris (Printed privately, 1957).

29. Paul Démann, NDS, “L’Affaire Finaly”, *Cahiers Sioniens* 7:1 (March

1953): 77-105.

30. An example is found in the so-called Mortara Affair in 1858, during which a six year old Jewish boy was taken from his family in Bologna after it was discovered that he had been baptized secretly during a bout of illness as an infant. See John O’Malley, “The Beatification of Pope Pius IX”, *America Magazine* (July 2000).

31. Démann, “L’Affaire Finaly”, 77-105.

32. *Ibid.,* 105.

33. Thomas Stransky, C.S.P., “The Genesis of Nostra Aetate”, *America*

*Magazine* 193 (2005).

34. Paul Démann, *Judaism* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1961).

35. Marie Bénédicte Salmon, NDS, *Correspondence de Sr. Bénédicte pendant et après le Concile*, *1963-1966*, Letter, from NDS Secretariat Archives, Paris.

36. Marie Bénédicte Salmon, NDS, “La Congrégation Notre-Dame de Sion en France, pendant le Concile Vatican II”, from Tantur Ecumenical Center in Jerusalem, *Sens* 271 (2002): 472-487.

37. *Ibid.,* 475-477.

38. John O’Malley, S.J., *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge: the

Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 121.

39. “Intervention de S.E. Cardinal Lercaro au Concile le 28 September

1964”, from NDS personal archives in Lyon, *Le Lien* 11 (June 1965), 1-15.

40. Brigitte Martin Chave, NDS, “Magda: Une Vie”, from NDS personal archives in Lyon (Printed privately: 2005).

41. *Ibid.,* 44.

42. Magda Manipoud, NDS, *Lettre, Décembre 1965*, letter, from NDS per- sonal archives in Lyon (Published privately: 1965).

43. Provincial chapter and Bishop Heenan, *Correspondence, 21-23 Septem- ber 1964,* Letter, from Sion Centre for Dialogue and Encounter, London.

44. Mary Kelly, NDS, “The London Study Centre for Christian-Jewish Relations”, from Sion Centre for Dialogue and Encounter in London, *Christian Jewish Relations* 16 (1983): 47-49.

45. Provincial chapter and Bishop Heenan, *Correspondence, 21-23 Septem- ber 1964,* Letter, from Sion Centre for Dialogue and Encounter, London.

46. Note, however, that “deicide” was dropped from the final version of the text during the final Council session in 1965. Pope Pius VI wanted