

# An Interview with Père Marcel Dubois OP Superior of the Maison St Isaie, Jerusalem, and Professor Emeritus at the Hebrew University

Anna Rist

**A.R.** Father Marcel, as a Dominican priest and a Professor of Philosophy and an Israeli citizen, how do you see your role here in Jewish Jerusalem?

**M.D.** You know I did not come here by choice; it was a combination of three things. As a Christian child born in a very Catholic area of northern France, in the city and parish of Archbishop Lefèvre—It is a good criterion of Catholic identity!—I can say that I have always considered Jews as elected by God, and Jewishness as a special condition. I never thought of Jews in a pejorative way as sinners or killers of Christ or anything like that. I heard these expressions but for me they did not have any significance. I had a positive instinct, I would say a spontaneous preference for the Jewish people, so that when I met Jews it was always with a respect in the face of their mysterious condition, which created between us a kind of sympathy. Secondly, when Isaiah House was founded, Father Bruno Hussar was a good friend of mine, as was Father Paul Dreyfus and because they were Jews I had this special sympathy with them and also because they had a contemplative inclination: Bruno dreamed of being a Carthusian and Paul Dreyfus was very attracted by the contemplative dimension of the Dominican Order. When he founded Isaiah House he did not at first think of bringing me to Jerusalem; I was like a representative in France. But then he discovered the need for an academic in his little team and after some discussion with my Provincial and the Master General of the Order he gained permission to bring me to Isaiah House. That was in '61-'62. Thus it was a need of the community here: they wanted someone who could get in touch with the (Hebrew) University. Thirdly there was the authority and also the cleverness of my superiors who saw this affinity between Bruno and myself and also my spontaneous love for the Jews and so sent me to Jerusalem. A Dominican does not do what he wants but gives himself to whatever is his personal call. Here in Jerusalem we were witnesses to a kind of fellowship in (our) approach to Judaism.

How do we see ourselves here? From the beginning we were founded to do two things, and the best illustration is what we say of the old French houses or Institutes, that they have a garden side and a court side: outside

and inside. If you consider the garden side, the interior life of the community, we were founded as a centre for Jewish studies and reflection on the link between the Old and New Testaments, between Israel and the Church, Judaism and Christianity. And that would be enough; we could live in Jerusalem with closed doors and windows and do that. In some ways we did not do that enough, because there is the court side, the facade of the house, and perhaps it is a consequence of Dominican grace that this new foundation was very broadly welcomed on the Jewish side, so that a second purpose was from the beginning to be a Christian presence among the Jews, and for this reason the inclination of our vocation led us to request Israeli citizenship. So there were two dimensions, and in some ways they are contradictory.

When we came here, our Superior said to Bruno and me 'Our dream is that your house could become a focus of silence and *accueil* (welcome)' Yes, but either you keep silence and close the door, or you open the door and there is no silence! Here in Israel that is the tension: to keep silent, to be faithful, guarding in one's thoughts the most important thing, or—at the risk of offending—to answer questions, to bear witness. I can say that personally I have suffered from this tension.

**A.R.** Can I clarify something? Your early attitude to Jews is unusual in northern France or more generally. Was it in any way influenced by the Nazi occupation?

**M.D.** No. I have to say that we did not know what was happening in Germany to the Jews. We had some Jews in the University, but we were very ignorant.

**A.R.** You knew nothing about it?

**M.D.** We knew, but very vaguely and we did not ask questions. I think it was a sin of omission: ignorance in omission. We did not see the link between the Jewish identity, the Jewish vocation and election, and the hatred of the Nazis. To return to your (first) question: at this time in this country the convents, men and women, were all missionary—not missions to the Jews but as in the Congo or in Zimbabwe, or anywhere in the world, missionary services in Palestine among the Arab population. There were many communities here, but with a more or less missionary purpose, and moreover ignorant of the Jewish presence and vocation in Israel. So a small monastery with the declared intention of paying attention specifically to the Jewish identity and of being a presence in Israel was a new idea, and certainly with the local authorities, and even in the Vatican, there was a kind of reluctance: Either you are here to be a missionary or—Be careful, because the Jews will convert you! That was their reaction.

**A.R.** The Jews would convert *you*?

**M.D.** Yes.

**A.R.** I was going to ask you about the presumably small number of Jews who have converted to Christianity...

**M.D.** That was not part of our purpose. The Lord did not call me to baptize but to preach. To give an account of my faith, yes, but I am not a pastor, and also in the situation of the Church in Israel, with all this *méfiance* (mistrust)... For instance, I remember in '62, I was in the white (Dominican) habit and some children from a Jewish religious school saw me and started shouting 'Missionaries out!'—using an obscene term!—because they assumed that if a Christian comes to Israel he is here to buy souls, to convert poor Jews—You know they were missionized in their history—and so we had to distance ourselves from this prejudice. So I think as regards Jews in general, all over the world, and especially the Jews in Jerusalem, there is no question of mission: we are not to proclaim; we are to be witnesses and always accountable for what is in our hearts. I am absolutely convinced of this. I think that for the moment a contemplative presence of monks and nuns who pray silently, paying attention to the Bible and to the vocation of Israel and the destiny of the Jews, is more important than an established Church.

So I wanted to be a citizen of this country, living among the Jews, paying attention to their identity, respecting the mysterious Christic dimension of their faith. My conviction that Christ has risen gives a light at the centre of the dynamism of the Old Testament. I can consider every element of Jewish life as already mysteriously attracted by Christ; they are going to God through Christ but they are not conscious of that. And there was also an intention to be through our presence witnesses to the necessary love of Jews in a Christian soul. If we are Christians we must love Jews—they are the top of a list of beloved people—and so act as to show to the Jews through our presence a loving face of the Church.

**A.R.** As a result of this witness—this silent witness so far as possible—presumably the idea is that in time to come there will at least be some kind of convergence between Judaism and Christianity?

**M.D.** I don't know when or how. I think from what I see it is very far off. What I can say is, there is a great polarization, an ocean of ignorance we can't imagine, but when I discover authentic Christian witnessing... For instance, yesterday I was deeply moved: Yossi Bamber, the best singer and actor of Israel—we became friends and he telephoned me to say, 'My son would be glad to see a Monastery', and so I said 'As it happens I am saying Mass there. Come!' So he came with his wife and two little kids. And there were two girls from the University of Tel Aviv; they were sent a week ago by their professor. I was amazed by the personality of these girls, aged 28, 29... Charming, intelligent... They

wanted to make a film on the contemplative life. It is very important to speak about silence and to reflect from outside on the interior life and we spoke of such questions and I invited them into the Monastery. I was amazed by the kind of affinity—a sacred longing for what they discovered there: it was a sign of something which they could understand in the name of the Jewish identity. I quote that because it was recent, but I can give you many, many examples of that.

**A.R.** Would you say that the Carmelite vocation, with its Old Testament reference, has significance in this context?

**M.D.** If I had to give a definition of the vocation of the Jewish people of Israel on the one side and on the other of the call of a contemplative as an example of a sacrament of Christian life in the Church, I would use the same formula: a community of people called by God who listen to His voice, who meditate on His message day and night, to apply it to daily life, to gather it into a song of thanksgiving, in a common witnessing to the hope of the coming of the Kingdom—that is the vocation of Israel as it appears in the Bible; that is essentially the vocation of the contemplative in the Church... You are right, the Carmelites, the Carthusians are a continuation of the vocation of Israel in the Church.

**A.R.** But the Carmelites actually see themselves as exercising continuity from the early monks on Mount Carmel and from Elijah.

**M.D.** Some of them, yes. But it was a little bit forgotten.

**A.R.** Perhaps it can be a little bit more remembered! Blessed Edith Stein too became a Carmelite, and I believe the Superior now on Mount Carmel is a Jew.

**M.D.** Sure. When a Jew converts, there is a kind of inside necessity that we can predict, to go to the ends of the dynamism of the vocation.

**A.R.** I know you don't want to emphasize Jews who convert, but nonetheless, as a result partly of your witness and sometimes for other reasons, you do get some and we are surprised to find them at Isaiah House, perhaps rather more numerous than we had anticipated. Can you tell me what role you see for them in Israel and in the Church?

**M.D.** It is a very difficult question, because first of all every conversion is a new situation, and second, existentially, here, at the University, at the moment I appear as a Christian; everybody knows I am a Christian, which is in some ways very remarkable—a Son of the Inquisition living in full accordance with Christian and even Catholic doctrine and behaviour—it is fantastic! And it calls forth great sympathy. Now if some people openly convert, I would be viewed as a dangerous

190

missionary. So for the moment it is a very delicate situation. I cannot not desire that my pupils, my friends, discover Who is for me the centre of my faith, the centre of everything, but before all we have to respect the Jewish identity and discover what is at the moment the Christic dynamism of their faith.

Now, having said that, it seems to me that a Jewish convert to Christianity has something to say to his brethren in the Church, and here is another problem. First of all because the personal adventure of every Jewish convert is a very delicate odyssey and sometimes there are some psychological wounds—and we can confuse psychological impact with mystical impact. Statistical analysis of the psychology of the converts in Israel would bring out some well-known and very sad facts.

**A.R.** Are you saying there is a tendency for converts to experience breakdown?

**M.D.** No, but a kind of dizziness. Where is their home? What is their true identity? How to combine, within a unique faith, Jewish identity and the discovery of Christ? I don't wish to impute blame, but nevertheless there is a tendency within the Community which is not healthy. They claim to have a special expression of their faith and a special identity in the Church. We spoke of the *Ecclesia ex Judaeis*, but we have to respect the whole Church. That is a very important point, because the local Jerusalem Church is not ready to accept a Jewish identity within Christianity, and they (the converts) don't much like the requirement of expressions which are familiar to Western Christians.

**A.R.** Do they also wish to retain Jewish customs, such as refraining from eating pork and circumcision?

**M.D.** It is very difficult to make a generalization, just as it is difficult to generalize about (the observance of) Jewish Law. But let us suppose that I come home and find at my door fifty Jews who say, 'Father Marcel, we have discovered that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is the Son of God, and we want to enter the Church, and to do that seriously, we want to be baptized by the Pope in St. Peter's Church in Rome, and we want to take you with us because we need you.' 'Why?' 'Because, you see, we are Jews; our fathers were Jews and we received from the Lord the *Torah* and the *Mishnah* and everything that was right, and so what shall we do with all these blessings, these prayers, these observances? For us now sanctity, intimacy with God, comes from the signs given by Christ through sacraments. But can we keep what we have done for three thousand years?' 'Yes', I shall answer, 'Let us go'. Because in the Church, the big Church in Rome, the place of great saints—those of Carmel and the Rule of St. Benedict and the Trappists and so on—why can we not conceive of a Jewish community believing in Christ, gathering in Eucharist that very

life according to the rule of the Jewish people—a big Jewish order in the Church? There is no contradiction. What about the *kiddush* of Friday night? Why not? It is a beautiful custom—the sacralization of family life, the Blessing every week... Reading the Old Testament... Circumcision—why not? Not eating pork—why not? Not mixing milk and meat—that is important not only as a sign of life but, for instance, if the daughter of a Jewish family becomes a Christian, to keep the the social life of the family: if she wants to invite her parents, she has to cook in a *kosher* way. We can suppose there is no official objection to that—a Jewish traditional way of being a Christian in the Church—there is no contradiction, provided we put the Eucharist in the centre and the sacraments are (recognized as) the signs of mysteries. The problem is not there, but (rather it is) How does the Christian respect the presence, the message, the identity, the tradition of these people coming from the Jews? Have you been to Santa Sabina? (the Dominican church in Rome) Ah—fantastic! Above the *portaille* (main door) there is a mosaic with two figures: *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione* and *Ecclesia Gentilica*. But now there is a lack of balance: the *Ecclesia e Gentilitate* has become the Church. Here we are in the presence of the *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione*, and I think that on both sides, the side of the traditional Church and the side of Jews who have converted, there is not enough attention to this very important truth.

**A.R.** I would like to ask you about Christians who, as was noted before, sometimes convert to Judaism—because they think it is ‘more monotheistic’ or more challenging, or out of sympathy with Jews. Sometimes they have serious criticisms of contemporary Christianity; sometimes they are influenced by Jewish misunderstandings. What do you think is the proper perspective in which Judaism should be presented to Christians?

**M.D.** People come here either as volunteers to the mission or to the University who are moved by seeing the health and good balance of Jewish life. Perhaps they don’t pay much attention to the complications. There is a kind of harmony in Jewish self-understanding which when it is successful is very striking. There is an answer to everything, a kind of inner coherence. So I shall not answer for anybody coming here who has not a strong faith in Jesus Christ—I don’t mean belonging to the Christian establishment, but a personal faith in Christ—because they risk becoming lost, being seduced by this beauty and also the equilibrium between faith and human identity. I know some people who have converted, but they were not inner Christians. They did not get in touch with Jesus in a personal way, or they were social Christians, belonging to the Establishment, and they were disappointed—absolutely with good reasons—by the Catholic establishment. I say Mass every morning, but when I receive Communion I don’t pay attention to the taste of the Bread. It is the same with the Church, which is made of men like every society. I

don't pay attention to the taste of the human value of this instrument (the Church) because I could be awfully *déçu* (disappointed) by the mediocrity of the establishment. The reality of the sacrament is beyond the sign, and so people who have not understood that have been attracted to a monotheistic faith supported by a people, a tradition and a text which is also basic to the Christian Church. It is not that Christians are seduced, but people of no faith or who have lost their faith.

So how to present Judaism? It involves the same paradox we spoke of before: to respect we have to know, to acknowledge the inner beauty of the relationship of the Jewish people and its God, the verticality of that relationship, (mediated by) the Bible, the *Torah*, the daily *mitzvot* (religious works), and also (appreciate) the divine identity, the theological dimension of the identity of the Jews.

**A.R.** You have been talking about the necessity for mutual respect between Jews and Christians and the ways in which Judaism may be misunderstood by Christians. The obverse of this is the often seemingly strange views Jews have about Christianity. Jesus himself poses the question, 'What think ye of Christ?' Matt. 22:42. At the moment in Israel we find that Jews are being taught something like this about their most famous fellow Israelite: that He was a Jew, a good man, unjustly condemned by the Romans—only the Romans, in some cases—whose followers, through gullibility or intent to deceive, made up all sorts of stories and claims about Him. Now not a few Christians and ex-Christians are also being led into this kind of assumption.

**M.D.** Yes. First of all I have to affirm clearly and without calumniating anybody, that everything depends on faith in Christ, which is a gift—the gift given to Paul—on the way to Damascus. I believe that God has sent His Son, born from the Jewish people, born of a Jewish mother, to save the whole world. For me Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah of Israel and so I see everything in this perspective, and in speaking to Jews I must clearly own that there is a stumbling-block between us. We have to be in good faith and speak openly about what divides us. That does not give me any right of judging the Jewish attitude as a sin or as efficient. On the contrary, I must explain to my Jewish friend—and this is a problem—that as a Christian I take account of the Christic dynamism of the Jewish identity, the Jewish faithfulness. For instance, when I attend a ceremony in a synagogue or am invited to *kiddush* on Friday, I have to consider the Jewish faithfulness as the Lord Jesus considers this, Who was a Jew. There is a very important dynamism of which the top end is God Himself and which passes through Christ to His people on earth, even though they are not aware of that—not objectively aware, but there is a subjective Christic dimension that I do not speak of, or I say to my Jewish friend, 'I think of it but I cannot explain it to you.' Because I don't want to appear somebody who is

superior and wants to colonize, but I can say this: I think that the Law,?? the practice, the *mitzvot*, play between God and the heart the whole of the mediation expressed in Christ. I don't think the Law is Christ and Christ is the Law, but it is the same mysterious converging verticality. It is not the same thing; it has a radical difference: I am open to God through Christ but I respect the mysterious Christic dimension of the Jewish experience.

**A.R.** Could I ask you a rather more historical question in relation to that? Someone might say, 'If the first Christians had adopted the attitude you adopt, Christianity would hardly have been preached—certainly not to Jews. What would you say to that? Why is their situation different from yours?'

**M.D.** That was a problem at the time of Peter and Paul, in the first century. As a matter of fact it was preached to the Gentiles. In other words, the vocation of Christ was (to be) understood by the Jewish people in (the light of) their normal particularism; (in Him) the revelation to the Jews would be extended to all nations. I remember twenty years ago there was a meeting at the Van Leer Institute, a fantastic meeting—Only in Jerusalem could such a thing happen. It was to honour the Italian writer Vittorio Messori, and the Franciscan Fathers were there, of whom the majority are Italian, and the Patriarch was then an Italian. I never saw such a variety of attendance as at this meeting: people from the Patriarchate, people of the Palestinian Church, of the Ecole Biblique (The Dominican House of Studies), of the (Hebrew) University, of the different Churches in Jerusalem: Jews, Christians of all denominations, and they agreed to recognize in some way the continuity between Jewish identity, Jewish faithfulness and the message of Christ. At the end the chairman said, Were there any questions, and I remember, with fear and trembling, that Father Benoît—the great Benoît of the École Biblique, specialist in the New Testament—stood up and said, 'I would like to recognize that Jesus is the Messiah in order to extend the Jewish vocation and the special gifts of God to the Jewish people, to the whole world, to all nations.' And strangely Messori agreed and added 'Yes, Jesus was sent like Jonah, as a Jew to preach conversion to the Gentiles; when He refers in the Gospel to the Sign of Jonah Matt. 16:4, it means conversion'. From this point of view, the stumbling-block for the Christians of the first period was not so much the content of the message, because they did not speak explicitly about Incarnation and the Trinity and so on; it was a question of identity: the Jews were told for thousands of years, 'You are the people of God, and as a sign of this election I offer you the *Torah*. If you accept (your vocation), you will receive the *Torah* and practise the *mitzvot*. (With) the Apostles—Paul in particular—(it was also) Election, but now everyone was elected. *Torah* was for the Jews, but now (we have) grace for all. So I think one of the elements of the *déchirure*, the schism between Jews and the Church, was that they did not respect the combination of religion and



nation which was the Jewish identity. One can speculate as to what would have happened if Peter had prevailed at Antioch Gal 2. 11–21 and it had been accepted that Christians of Jewish origin kept the *mitzvot* and those of pagan origin were free. You could imagine a Church in which Jewish observance is like Christians from China eating rice twice a day.

And the stumbling-block that is this identity between religion and nation has persisted through history; when a Jew becomes a Christian, on the Jewish side it is looked on as apostasy: they leave their people; they are not able to lay claim to the national identity, because the Jewish nation and people received the vocation of the people of God. We feel this nowadays, and from this point of view the State of Israel could be a solution. Let us suppose that some of our Jewish friends here want to become Christians, but as Israeli citizens; remaining an Israeli citizen, paradoxically, could be the bridge between Christian and Jewish identity.

**A.R.** I know of one Jew who converted and became a priest, and when it came to renewing his Israeli passport, he was told, 'We will renew it this time, but we can't guarantee it will always be so.'

**M.D.** To me, you know—I am not suspected of anti-semitism, but it is an awful black point for the Jewish state...

**A.R.** We are getting deflected onto a political topic.

**M.D.** But this point is very important. I said to (Cardinal) Lustiger that his conversion is seen as more destructive of the Jewish people than the Nazi persecution... Because for them to become Christian is to lose Jewish identity. Recently I said to someone in the University—who does not agree at all—that as Christians we are convinced (though this is difficult to express) that a Jew who becomes a Christian accomplishes the vocation of Jewry, and so is more Jewish than his brothers. And on the Christian side we have to accept that he is naturally more Christian than his Christian brothers. Why? Because in the presence of the grace of God he has done something that was prepared for the Jews. So on both sides it is a question of attitude. However convinced of that I am, I cannot express it. My positive approach to the Jewish people entails this understanding. But that is not enough to convert a stumbling-block between us into fellowship.

I don't like all this chatter about 'dialogue'. What is needed is a mutual presence, a mutual respect, (and in) silence. Words are not able to express this mystery. But if we go to the conclusion of this intuition, we must be ready, as people who try to be good Christians, to look at Jews according to a Christian light and so to discover the Christic dynamism of the Jewish identity.

**A.R.** Here I would like to distinguish between different sorts of Christianity, because I, at least, would very much see the Catholic Church

and a Catholic understanding of Christianity as having a greater affinity with Judaism than Protestantism or Anglicanism.

**M.D.** I think you are absolutely right. Many people say Protestantism is clearly closer to Judaism because they (Protestants) know the Bible better than we (Catholics) do. But if we consider the relationship between the soul, the being of the believer and God, there is in the Catholic attitude something which is closer, more intimate, more existential, getting in touch with the presence of God and the actuality of the mystery. The word that expresses that is 'sacramentality'. Every Mass I am present to the Last Supper as a sacrament of the Cross; every absolution I am present to the moment when Christ died for me and has absolved my sin now. There is a presence in every sacrament which is a condition of intimacy with God—which is the gift given to the Jewish people. From this point of view, the best example in the Jewish tradition of Christian sacramentality is *seder pessach* (the Passover meal). There they are present to an historical event, they remember the forefather who left Egypt, but also, through this memorial of the past, there is a presence to the eternity of the event: God's love for His people. So you are absolutely right: there is a continuity between the Jewish relationship with God and the Catholic relationship with God through sacraments. The same intuition can lead us to perceive that the vocation of the people of Israel as such, the vocation of Mary the Virgin Mother of God, and the vocation of a monk or nun is structurally the same. This is very mysterious, but it is the same verticality, the same relationship between God and His people as the Bridegroom and the Bride, as God and His creature.

**A.R.** The last question is slightly off the main topic, but is a thing which worries many people: How far would a *rapprochement* between Jews and Christians in Israel—Protestant groups as well as the Hebrew Church—be at the cost of the marginalization of the Arab Christians, and also of increased hostility with Islam?

**M.D.** I would say that any pejorative approach to Islam on the Christian side occurs in Western countries. Here the nationalism of the Palestinian Church is linked to a positive approach to Islam: from a nationalist viewpoint theirs is the same cause, and it is not by chance that the theologians of Palestinian liberation—who were later used by Muslims—were Christians. But clearly in Western countries, if there is to be mutual support between Jews and Christians, this could be unfavourable to open-mindedness towards Islam. The Latin Patriarch (Most Reverend Michael Sabbah, an Arab) has said to me, 'I am joyful to see the changed attitude of the Western Church towards Jews, and especially over the Holocaust, but that is the business of the Western Churches. They have asked forgiveness of the Jews, but here the problem is quite different and it is the Jews who have to ask forgiveness of the

Palestinians.' You see the confusion of levels of approach. So Palestinians do not take part in ecumenical meetings here in Jerusalem; they are not interested in the encounter between Jews and Christians because of the nationalist dimension.

A.R. 'Confusion of levels'?

M.D. I mean, it is normal that a Christian considering his own identity as a Christian and the historical responsibility of the Churches for all those centuries of anti-semitism, should feel guilty: the doctrine of his Church about the vocation of the Jewish people has involved a tragic misunderstanding. I think we can sum up anti-semitism by saying it is *either* ignorance of or lack of gratitude for the Jewish election, which gave to the Jewish people the responsibility of giving the Messiah, the Saviour, to the world, *or* it is jealousy: Why is it they who are chosen and not we? These facts are ignored by Palestinian Christians because they don't come face to face with the mystery of Israel but with the contemporary Israeli reality, which is not the whole Judaism, just as Palestinians are not the whole Christianity.

I can see the (Palestinian) argument; it invites us to say to our Jewish friends: 'Be careful; your behaviour in the Territories is not in keeping with your identity.' That is clear, but it is not on the level of theology. And many Jews are against it (annexation of the Territories); they are very divided about it and it is a topic full of possible confusions.

For instance, I am a participant with some members of the Department (of Philosophy) in a movement of the political Left whose purpose is to ask the Israeli government to respect the unity of Jerusalem as a Muslim city, a Christian city, a Jewish city, and in particular not to act against the Arab presence, Arab properties, Muslim or Christian. At our last meeting I was told 'We don't want Christians being involved in that; it is a question between Arabs and Jews, and as most of the Arabs' are Muslims, the Palestinian identity is a Muslim identity.' The Arab Christians are afraid of the pressure of Islam, but they shelter behind the mass of the Islamic presence to find support for their requirements as Christians. Clearly we have to pay attention to the human rights of Palestinians born in Jerusalem and linked in their whole being with this land—but as Palestinians, not as Christians.

In sum the fact is that we can have what we call dialogue—we have to speak about these things—but either you see it or you don't. If you receive the grace to believe in Jesus Christ Who is risen and Son of God, you must be ready to swallow everything in the local behaviour or expression of faith. If you accept the Incarnation, the Mediation, the centrality of the Eucharist, other things are very relative. If there are discussions, formulations of faith, that is relative. To signify requires faith, which is presence to a mystery, presence to a Person.