



Pioneers of Jewish-Christian Dialogue #3

Sister Rose Thering, O.P. (1920–2006)

A native of rural Wisconsin, Rose Elizabeth Thering was born on August 9, 1920, and was one of 11 children in her large German-American family. From an early age, she felt a calling to Catholic religious life and, after being taught by the Dominican Sisters of Racine (Wisconsin), she decided to join that congregation, making her perpetual vows in 1946. An educator throughout her long religious life, Sister Rose earned a Bachelor's degree from Dominican College in Racine, before going on to graduate studies—a Masters degree from the College of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN, and a Ph.D. from St. Louis University in 1961. Her doctoral study focused on the presentation of Jews and Judaism in the Catholic textbooks that were used to teach religion at that time, and uncovered a range of inaccurate, exaggerated or stereotyped images that negatively affected the way in which many parochial school students thought and felt about Judaism. It was one of three textbook studies undertaken at the time under the sponsorship of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), looking at how various religious and ethnic groups were portrayed in Jewish, Catholic and Protestant educational materials.

Aware that her study illuminated areas of prejudice in a Church unaccustomed to public self-criticism, Thering felt that the Catholic populace would regard her findings as credible only if a priest published them. She suggested John Pawlikowski, a priest of the Servite Order and ethicist, be commissioned to write a book on her dissertation and that of her colleagues Linus Gleason of the Sisters of Charity of Providence and Rita Mudd of the Sisters of St. Joseph, whose dissertations had analyzed literature and social studies textbooks. Pawlikowski agreed; his *Catechetics and Prejudice: How Catholic Teaching Materials View Jews, Protestants and Racial Minorities* appeared in 1973. Thering had not anticipated the larger impact her study would make when Judith Banki, now working in the Interreligious Affairs office of the American Jewish Committee, drew upon Thering's dissertation and the work of Claire Huchet Bishop, who had initiated similar studies in Europe. Banki drafted a memorandum that the American Jewish Committee submitted on July 13, 1961 to Augustin Cardinal Bea, a biblical scholar and head of the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity. Titled "The Image of the Jew in Catholic Teaching," the thirty-two-page memorandum detailed the caricatures and distortions of Judaism that the Thering and Bishop studies had uncovered. While no single factor suffices to account for the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* on October 28, 1965, the textbook studies seem to have exercised a major influence on Cardinal Bea, the driving force behind Vatican II's declaration. (Mary C. Boys, "Women's Contributions to Jewish-Christian Relations," in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, edited by Rosemary Skinner Keller, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Marie Cantlon. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, 1277)

Sister Rose's textbook study would, therefore, turn out to be an important contributing factor that led to the development of *Nostra Aetate*, with its efforts to uproot traditional Catholic misrepresentations of Judaism. Her textbook studies were subsequently repeated and updated, by Dr. Eugene Fisher (published as *Faith Without Prejudice: Rebuilding Christian Attitudes Toward Judaism*, 1977; rev. 1993) and by Dr. Philip Cunningham (published as *Education for Shalom: Religion Textbooks and the Enhancement of the Catholic and Jewish Relationship*, 1995). As the late Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin said, "[these studies] have shown a steady development in the presentation of the Catholic-Jewish relationship, from one marked by classical stereotypes to one focused on the bonding of Christians and Jews within the one covenanted family. Not all problems have been resolved, but the progress has been remarkable".

Sister Rose went on to become a beloved professor on the faculty of Seton Hall University in South Orange, NJ, where she taught for more than 40 years, working as a tireless leader in the development of Jewish-Christian dialogue. As one of her long-time friends and colleagues remembers:

Rose also played a role in the movement to free Soviet Jewry and in establishing mandatory Holocaust education in public schools. She trained Christian teachers to teach Judaism and led thirty-three

missions to Israel. She went head to head with [Austrian Chancellor and former Nazi soldier] Kurt Waldheim, with the nuns at Auschwitz, with anyone who spoke against Israel or Jews, and even with Jews who tried to hide their identity. Rose related to Israel not only as the Holy Land but as the living, modern Jewish homeland. She understood ... In fact, whenever a Christian would use the term 'Holy Land,' she would recite her mantra, 'Say Israel.' (Blue Greenberg, "My Interfaith Friendships: Blessings and Challenges," in *Chapters of the Heart: Jewish Women Sharing the Torah of Our Lives*, edited by Sue Elwell and Nancy Fuchs Kreimer. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013, 121)

Sister Rose Thering, a pioneering figure in contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue, died on May 6, 2006, at the age of 85, not long after the premiere of the document "Sister Rose's Passion," which highlighted her life's work and her many accomplishments, which continue to be honoured and perpetuated at Seton Hall University.

Suggestions for further reading and study:

Cunningham, Philip A. "Textbooks," in *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations*. Edited by Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 422-23.

"In Memory of Rose Thering"; online at

https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/news/thering_tribute.htm

Trailer for the movie "Sister Rose's Passion"; online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lfkyto0466Q>