

Olivier Rota
Apostolat catholique et travail social en milieu juif:
Les Ancelles de Notre-Dame de Sion (1926-1964)

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The Sisters of Our Lady of Sion (“Sisters of Sion”) are a Catholic congregation founded in 1847 by Father Theodore Ratisbonne, a convert from an assimilated Jewish family in Strasbourg, France. They are a teaching congregation, active on five continents, with a small contemplative branch. They and the much smaller “Fathers of Sion” were considered philosemites in the context of the First Vatican Council, praying daily for the conversion of the Jews but not proselytizing in an aggressive manner. Their history, moving from a desire for conversion of the Jewish people to dialogue, especially in the decades from 1945-1965, has been examined thoroughly by Celia Deutsch in this journal in 2016 (“Journey to Dialogue: Sisters of Our Lady of Sion and the Writing of *Nostra Aetate*” 11:1 [3]).

Olivier Rota presents another dimension to this history in this detailed account of a community of women with a special interest in the Jewish people. The title of this book describes their initiative: *Catholic Apostolate and Social Action in the Jewish Environment*. As explained by Paul Gauthier, a priest-worker in Israel in 1964, this call is understood to be Christian charity in action, not intended primarily for individual conversions but to foster a coming together to prepare for the eschatological mass conversion described by Paul (17). A group of young French women, motivated by the command of Jesus to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19-20), felt a call to become missionaries in Palestine and formed “the Ancelles (handmaids) of Our Lady of Palestine.” Several years later they encountered the Sisters of Sion and in 1937 became the apostolic branch of this congregation. Rota chronicles their efforts to navigate between their wish to belong to a religious congregation and their commitment to quiet social action in the Jewish communities in Europe and Israel (18).

During World War II, the Ancelles, along with some teaching Sisters, were active in the French Resistance, trying to assist Jews. Rota has chronicled the history of this tiny group in great detail, using documentation from Sion archives. When the Ancelles joined the Sister of Sion as the apostolic branch in 1937 they

were a mere handful among the 2,085 Sisters (61). They wore secular clothes and lived in small groups close to their work.

This research describes the moves of the Ancelles into cities in France, Spain, and Palestine and chronicles Sisters' benign but blundering efforts to situate them in the rhythms of religious life: "The history of the Ancelles is one of an unfortunate graft of a group of religious women who were engaged in the vicissitudes of the world to a congregation, welcoming but unprepared, for such an addition. For almost thirty years the Ancelles navigated between their wish to be better integrated into Sion and their will to preserve their specificity within the Congregation" (18).

Unknown to the Ancelles, in 1947 Pope Pius XII issued a document, "Provida Mater Ecclesia," giving principles for founding secular institutes, pious organizations for lay people desiring to live a commitment to spiritual ideals but not linked to a religious congregation. In the context of the Second Vatican Council, and of Sion's General Chapter in 1964, the Ancelles did become a secular institute named *Pax Nostra* (Our Peace, referring to Jesus from Ephesians 2:14 in the context of the Christian hymn celebrating the unifying power of Jesus' death-and-resurrection).

As in his other studies of mid-twentieth century Catholic-Jewish relations, Rota drew heavily from archival sources to paint a poignant picture of Catholic good will and of the Ancelles' committed life of quiet witness. While his narrative stops in 1964, just before the issuance of *Nostra aetate*, this good will reflects the Church's continuing efforts to cultivate and improve these relations. They kept in touch with the Sisters of Sion and took the Second Vatican Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate* into their spirituality.

This study includes an appendix of original texts from the period immediately after World War II and an index of names.