

**“Nostra Aetate”, Forty Years After Vatican II. Present & Future Perspectives
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The late Pope John Paul II described the Declaration “Nostra Aetate” that emanated from the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council as “an expression of Faith” and “an inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as a word of Divine Wisdom”.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry has described the impact of Nostra Aetate as “an astonishing transformation”. Indeed in relation to the Jewish People the implications were truly revolutionary in the most positive sense of the word. With the promulgation of this declaration, a people – formerly viewed at best as a fossil but more often as cursed and condemned to wander and suffer – was now officially portrayed as beloved by God and somehow very much still part of the Divine plan for humankind.

In his visit to the Rome synagogue in 1986, Pope John Paul II referred to the Jewish people as “the beloved elder brothers of the Church”. He developed this idea with his own notable formulation of the essential message of Nostra Aetate. One of the occasions on which I was privileged to meet with John Paul II was in Assisi in January 1993 on the occasion of the gathering he had convened for prayer for peace in the Balkans. In receiving me and my colleague, he declared “I have said, you (the Jewish People) are the beloved elder brother of the Church of the original Covenant never broken and never to be broken”.

This phrase does not just reflect a transformation in attitude and teaching towards the Jews; it has profound implications for the Church in terms of its own theology. Indeed Pope Benedict XVI himself has said that the Church has not yet fully discovered all the profound implications of Nostra Aetate. Part of the reason for this lies in the very novelty of the Declaration. Cardinal Augustin Bea at the time of the declaration’s promulgation, emphasized its ground-breaking nature. Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, former President of the Holy See’s Commission for

Religious Relations with Jewry, elaborated on this idea further affirming that never before had such “a systematic, positive, comprehensive, careful and daring presentation on Jews and Judaism been made in the Church by a Pope or a Council”.

Moreover Catholic theologians such as Michel Remy have noted that “of all the documents promulgated by the Second Vatican Council, that on the Jews is the only one which contains no reference whatsoever to any of the Church’s teachings – patristic, conciliar or pontifical.” There are, therefore, in paragraph 4 of *Nostra Aetate* and in the Holy See’s 1975 “Guidelines and Suggestions on the implementation of *Nostra Aetate*”, innovative elements and hence radical changes. As Prof. Father John Pawlikowski has put it, in returning to Romans 9-11 as its exclusive scriptural source, *Nostra Aetate* in fact said that “the Church is now taking up where Paul left off in his insistence that Jews remain part of the Covenant after the Resurrection despite the theological ambiguity involved.” This is not to ignore the fact that the text itself in its final version after much argument and many compromises, fell disappointingly short of the originally proposed text, which we now know was the hope and intention of Pope John XXIII.

As has also been pointed out frequently, the implications of *Nostra Aetate* can only be properly understood in the light of subsequent teaching of the Magisterium – in particular, the aforementioned ‘Guidelines’; the 1985 Notes on the correct way to present Jews and Judaism; the statements of Pope Paul VI and in particular the extensive body of Pope John Paul II’s declarations on this subject, as well as those of various Episcopal conferences. This dynamic had sought to preclude any negative interpretations which might otherwise have been possible in expounding the text of *Nostra Aetate* itself. Thus as Dr. Eugene Fisher has pointed out, in Pope John Paul II’s articulation concerning God’s Covenant with the Jewish People to which I referred above; and in calling for a joint mission of witness to the Name of One God “by Jews and Christians in and for the world”, he sought to resolve the question of abrogation/supersession in favor of ‘mutual esteem’ and cast into an entirely new framework the ancient question of proselytism/conversion. Indeed a number of Cardinals and Bishops Conferences have categorically rejected the need for “a mission to the Jews”. For example the U.S. Bishops Committee for

Ecumenical and Interreligious affairs declared in its Reflections on Covenant and Mission (August 2002) that the distinctive Jewish witness must be sustained if Catholics and Jews are to truly be as Pope John Paul II envisioned, “a blessing to one another”.

In keeping with Pope John Paul II’s statements, Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry, stated in an address at Boston College, in November 2002, “This does not mean that Jews in order to be saved have to become Christians; if they follow their own conscience and believe in God’s promises as they understand them in their religious tradition, they are in line with God’s plan, which for us came to its historical completion in Jesus Christ”.

It seems to me that the 2001 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission entitled, ‘The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible’, published under the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s imprimatur and with his introduction, is very much in keeping with this spirit, when it declares that “the Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain Like them we too live in expectation.”

However the position relinquishing the invitation for conversion to Christianity to Jews has come in for strong criticism and arguably there is no other issue that remains a bone of theological contention within the Church in relation the Jewish People as this matter.

This was already evidenced in the treatment of the working document of 1969 prepared by a special committee for the Holy See’s office for Catholic-Jewish relations entitled “Reflections and Suggestions for the Application of the Directives of *Nostra Aetate*”. This document declared that as far as Christian relations with Jews are concerned, “all intent of proselytizing and conversion is excluded”. Yet the Guidelines that were promulgated in 1975 by the newly established Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry on the basis of the working document, did not include this explicit directive, though the Commission’s President, Cardinal Willebrands, did echo this view on a number of occasions.

Similarly, at the significant Jewish-Catholic International Liaison Committee meeting in Venice in 1978, Professor Tommaso Frederici presented his study outline on *The Mission and Witness of the Church* in which he called for a formal renunciation of evangelical outreach to Jews. While Jewish organizations translated the text from Italian and published in its original full form, in the Holy See's official published version of Frederici's lecture issued a few years later, this call had been substantially qualified. Evidently even though the Church has repudiated proselytization and no longer allocates material resources for the conversion of the Jews, the theological position of the Church still awaits full clarification from the Holy See.

Some Catholic scholars have suggested that the very reason that there has not been more theological reflection exploring the meaning and power of *Nostra Aetate* on the part of the Church, is precisely because the document obliges Christian theologians to rethink their Christology and ecclesiology in keeping with the idea of God's abiding covenant with the Jews. Indeed there are some recent signs not only of a reluctance to do so, but even of attempts to minimize this very idea and the significance of *Nostra Aetate* itself. For example in May 2003 an interview with an Italian theologian (Illana Morelli) was published by the Zenit News Service expressing the position that as *Nostra Aetate* is a pastoral document it has no doctrinal authority and that to attribute such to it would be "greatly ingenuous" and a "historical error".

This attitude echoes positions that I hear from some Christian theologians and clergy in the Holy Land and the Arab world, who claim that *Nostra Aetate* was nothing less than a contextual product of European Christian guilt over the Shoah and thus its reappraisal of Jews and Judaism are not really relevant for them.

Moreover Cardinal Avery Dulles, who criticized the aforementioned USCCB *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*, stated at the *Nostra Aetate* 40th anniversary conference in Washington last March that it is "an open question whether the Old Covenant remains in force today" and has opined that it is still a Catholic duty to invite Jews to receive the Christian faith (his text has recently been printed in the publication "First Things")

As an outside observer, it would appear to me that these comments categorically contradict the late Pope John Paul II's clearly articulated teachings on the subject, as well as those of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry and several statements of leading Bishops' Conferences. I must confess to some disappointment that there is no refutation, distancing, or at least clarification on this from the Church authorities in Rome.

It appears to me that there is a pressing need for a clear reaffirmation of the Magisterium in this regard. Without such, there will remain not only an unhealthy ambiguity in our relationship, but we will continue to have to deal with unfortunate and unnecessary tensions regarding motives, including the presence and role of specific personalities in the Church whose background is particularly pertinent to this relationship.

In many parts of the world the internalization at all levels within the Church of the essence of *Nostra Aetate* and its positive teaching regarding Jews and Judaism is a great success story. This of course is especially the case where Catholic communities live alongside vibrant Jewish communities and interact positively with them – the United States of America is the most striking example of this. However there are places in the world where my travels take me, where I find that even the content of *Nostra Aetate* itself is often unknown to Catholic leaders let alone the rank and file.

One of the most important relevant instructions to bishops regarding Christian-Jewish relations was issued last year by the Holy See's Congregation for Bishops, in its Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004, p.31, no. 19): "The Second Vatican Council recalls the spiritual bond uniting the people of the New Testament with the descendants of Abraham. By virtue of this bond, the *Jewish People* have a special place in the Church's regard for members of non-Christian religions: to them 'belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ' (Rom 9:4-5). The Bishop should promote among Christians an attitude of respect towards these our 'elder

brothers', so as to combat the risk of anti-Semitism, and he should be vigilant that sacred ministers receive an adequate formation regarding the Jewish religion and its relation to Christianity.”

I sincerely congratulate the Holy See's Congregation for Bishops for this important directive and pray that it will be fully implemented. Yet to the best of my knowledge *Nostra Aetate* and the subsequent relevant teachings of the Magisterium on Jews, Judaism and Israel are still not even a required component of the curriculum for the formation of priests throughout the Catholic world. Ensuring that the fruits of *Nostra Aetate* are more firmly embedded in the formal fabric of the Church seems to me to be a principle challenge ahead for the Church.

All this is of course in no way to minimize the achievements of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry and the important documents it has produced. In response to the establishment of this Commission, the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Relations (IJCIR) was established to represent World Jewry to the Holy See and it is currently my privilege to be President of this body. These two bodies constitute the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee to which I have referred and which has produced some dozen important joint statements on a wide spectrum of contemporary challenges reflecting what *Nostra Aetate* describes as our “shared patrimony”, without in any way minimizing regard and respect for the profound differences that make us two separate faith communities. This collaboration is the blessed and impressive fruit of *Nostra Aetate*.

However inevitably in the same way as the sociological context has determined the degree to which the fruits of *Nostra Aetate* have been internalized in the Catholic world; the extent to which Jewish communities have understood and responded to the changes has also varied according to the degree to which those communities function in living engagement with Catholic neighbors. Thus we have seen throughout the majority of the American Jewish community a sea change in attitudes towards the Catholic Church, to the point where arguably no other religious community is viewed by U.S. Jewry as more important and empathic to its well being. Indeed in terms of joint programming, publications and centers for

Christian-Jewish studies – the Catholic-Jewish partnership in the US is unparalleled. The American Jewish Committee has been privileged to have been able to play a key role in this dialog and cooperation across the country – in particular the Catholic/Jewish Educational Enrichment Program in Catholic and Jewish schools that the AJC initiated from East to West Coasts. Comparable programs are hardly to be found and often not even feasible elsewhere in the Jewish world.

The charge of *Nostra Aetate* and its subsequent teaching are of course not just concerned with removing past prejudice and eliminating incorrect information about each other. The 1975 Guidelines on *Nostra Aetate* emphasize the importance for Catholics of understanding Jews as we understand ourselves. Indeed understanding the other as he/she sees him/herself is an essential prerequisite for true mutual respect. Yet this is not always an easy task, especially as we tend to interpret concepts through our own religious and cultural lenses, which may be seen and understood very differently by the other. A concept that many Christians have had difficulty in fully comprehending is the centrality of the State of Israel for contemporary Jewish identity. This centrality is not in conflict with the Jewish Biblical and Rabbinic vision of universalism – on the contrary. It is by striving to live as a people in keeping with God's Word and Will, ideally as the Bible indicates in the Land of our Forefathers, that we are called to testify to such possibilities, *mutatis mutandis*, for all peoples. Certainly Judaism teaches that wherever the Jewish people resides, it testifies to the Divine presence that has preserved it against all odds. But the Biblical ideal is clearly to communicate the Divine universal values to the world, while still striving to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" living independently in the Biblically mandated land itself.

I believe that the Catholic Church, especially under Pope John Paul II, came to a significant understanding of this centrality of the State of Israel for Jewry and of course Pope Benedict XVI when he was President of the Pontifical Council for Doctrine of the Faith played a key role in this process.

Accordingly the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel was generally seen within our communities as both a blessing and the removal of an obstacle on the way paved by *Nostra Aetate* itself. But

precisely because of Israel's significance for contemporary self-understanding of Jewish identity everywhere, the establishment of these bilateral relations was of great significance not only for Israel itself, but also for Diaspora Jewry and as a result for Catholic-Jewish relations generally. Not least of all it facilitated the historic state visit of Pope John Paul II to Israel in the Church's jubilee year of 2000 that had an enormous impact including upon the bilateral interreligious relationship.

In Israel in particular the previous absence of official bilateral relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel implied to many if not most, that the Church still had a problem with Jewish rule in the Holy Land and raised questions about the sincerity of the Church's new attitude towards Jewry. Especially in some of the more religiously conservative circles in Israel, my own work and that of other Orthodox Jews in this field had been viewed with skepticism, if not worse. Indeed not only was there almost total ignorance about the momentous changes that had taken place in the Catholic world, there was even an unwillingness to hear about them as a result of the deep-seated prejudices conditioned by the past tragic historic experience. The establishment of full relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel that in fact culminated with the Papal visit which personified and visualized this achievement, had enormous impact upon Israeli society in overcoming this ignorance and resistance: and the Papal pilgrimage not only changed public perception in Israel, but also facilitated new paths for Catholic-Jewish dialog.

One of the most notable characteristics of Pope John Paul II's Pontificate was his powerful use of grand and visible gestures that conveyed profound messages to a world audience. This was the case with his visit to the synagogue in Rome in 1986. Even those who had never heard of *Nostra Aetate*, the Guidelines, the Notes on Preaching and Catechesis and even the Pope's own homilies and addresses; were able to understand that there was an entirely new and positive relationship on the part of the Church towards Jews and Judaism – and it was even more so the case with his visit in Israel in the year 2000.

I like to use two metaphors to portray the impact on public perception among Israel Jewry. The one is to describe the Jewish people as having had their ears boxed

so often in the course of history that their eardrums are damaged to the extent that they are often unable to distinguish between evil sounds and beautiful music. Accordingly, the latter often cannot even be identified when it is being played, especially when it is assumed on the basis of past experience that those playing the instruments only make hostile sounds and continue to do so. However, it is the hearing that has been damaged and not the vision. Thus a new reality can be heard, as it were, only when it can be seen. This, as I have said, was part and parcel of the significance of the Papal visit to the Synagogue in Rome in 1986 and this was even more the significance of the Papal visit to Israel, when he was seen at Yad Vashem at the Holocaust memorial in tearful solidarity with Jewish pain and suffering; at the Western Wall in respect for Jewish Tradition and placing there his prayer from the liturgy of repentance that he had conducted in St. Peter's shortly beforehand, asking for Divine forgiveness for sins perpetrated by Christians against Jews down the ages. Indeed, the official State receptions, on arrival, departure and at the President's residence, reflected both the recognition and respect for the sovereign Jewish nation reestablished in its ancestral homeland.

The other metaphor I like to use is of a garden that is surrounded by high walls. This is the garden of Christian-Jewish relations, which for the overwhelming majority of its history has been an ugly place covered with brambles, weeds and full of lurking dangers. In the last forty years, the garden has been overwhelmingly transformed into an impressive place. It might not yet be the Garden of Eden and there are still areas of rocky terrain, but it is generally a good place to be. However, for most Israelis walking along the street outside, as it were, they were unaware of that transformation because they had not seen inside those high walls. They thought that it was still the dangerous and unpleasant place it used to be. The Papal visit opened up the gates and revealed to many who had not known of it, or believed it, the new reality of Catholic-Jewish relations to discover that the head of the Church himself was in fact a sincere friend of the Jewish People who sought its welfare and mutual respect.

But the dividends of this revelation were not purely a matter of public perception. The Pope's meeting with the Chief Rabbis opened up the way for a remarkable development with the establishment of a permanent committee of the Chief

Rabbinate of Israel for dialog with the Holy See. In order to appreciate the full significance of this we should note that Jewish involvement in interreligious relations in past decades has overwhelmingly come from the liberal streams of Judaism. Orthodox Jews, Orthodox Rabbis, were few and far between in this field. Indeed in the past, the very dominance of Reform Jewish leaders in this endeavor tended to intensify Jewish Orthodox disinterest if not alienation from it.

Certainly there had been little involvement at all of Israeli Orthodox rabbis in this arena – especially as the more narrow experience of most Israeli rabbis, as well as the sense of the burden of tragic past history, added to their suspicion of such activity.

The participation of figures from the Israeli Orthodox religious establishment in mainly representational interreligious events began more or less in parallel to the commencement of bilateral negotiations between the Holy See and the State of Israel.

However the idea that the Chief Rabbinate of Israel would establish a permanent commission for interreligious dialog with the Holy See would have been viewed as an unrealistic fantasy only a few years ago. Indeed when as a result of Pope John Paul II's visit, the proposal was raised within the Council of the Chief Rabbinate the matter was hotly debated and there are still those within the Council who are opposed to it, accusing its proponents of naiveté. Not surprisingly the members of the Council of the Chief Rabbinate who serve on this standing committee for dialog with the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry are those among the Council who have a wider education and experience. The five bilateral meetings so far have exceeded expectations in terms of content and in the personal relationships that have been established, to the degree that this framework is now quite firmly established. Accordingly opposition to the process has diminished enormously although one cannot deny that some skepticism still prevails in certain quarters. Nevertheless this bilateral commission is nothing less than a historic achievement that also represents the remarkable fruit of *Nostra Aetate* and Pope John Paul II's personal commitment and contribution to its fulfillment.

Religious Orthodoxy in Israel does not represent the majority of Israeli Jewry, but it exercises profound influence on many aspects of national life, especially of course in matters that have some direct or even indirect bearing on religious sensibilities. Moreover, while the Rabbinat in Israel does not represent all Orthodox Jews, let alone Israeli Jewish society at large; it has a special representative role and the abovementioned committee has already given support to the introduction of educational materials into Israeli society that will reflect the current character of Christianity itself, and not only its new relationship with the Jewish People. This development also has important ramifications for the Diaspora. The greater breadth and depth of the Jewish participation in the dialog over the last decades and especially in the U.S. has understandably come from the non-Orthodox streams of Judaism and not just because they represent ninety percent of U.S. Jewry but because they reflected and reflect a greater openness to change in Jewish attitudes and response. Indeed in order to define itself against Reform and Conservative Judaism in this regard, American Orthodoxy has embraced a well-known convoluted if not contradictory guideline, taken from an article written by the late Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik. Yet this is a peculiar American Orthodox idiosyncrasy from a community in which Rabbi Soloveitchik had played such a unique role.

European Orthodox Jewish leadership for example, generally did not feel the need to design such constraints. Either one was against any contact with the Churches, or if one was in favor of this, there was no reason to fear the content of discourse.

However the very engagement of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel in an official dialog with the Holy See gives something of a green light (or at least an amber one) for those who may have previously been interested but timorous, and obviously strengthens the hand of those who had already advanced ahead of the camp. For European Jewish communities which are overwhelmingly led by Orthodox rabbinic leadership and where such leadership has been cautious about engaging in Jewish-Christian dialog, the establishment of the bilateral commission for dialog between the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See is of very great importance.

But it has also been important for Orthodoxy in the United States as well, and even though Orthodoxy is a small minority among U.S. Jewry it exercises a significant

influence. Despite the strength of American Jewry, Orthodoxy in the U.S. as around the Jewish world, very much follows the line set by the Israeli Orthodox Rabbinate. Inevitably this does have an effect upon the rest of Jewry as well. Moreover to the degree that the Israeli Chief Rabbinate impacts on religious and public policy issues in Israel, its positions impact upon Diaspora Jewry as a whole.

There are even more practical fruits of this collaboration. In recent years the remarkable relationship between the Catholic Church and Jewish communities in different parts of the Diaspora – especially in the U.S – has meant that they have been able to enlist each other on one another's behalf for international as well as local issues of respective interest. Accordingly, for example, the U.S. bishops were able to enlist U.S. Jewish leadership effectively over the crisis in Nazareth caused by the invasion of Muslim radicals into the precincts of the Basilica of the Annunciation.

Allow me to digress here to clarify matters concerning understandable sources of distress for many Catholics and Jews who care both about Israel's well-being and the welfare of its Christian communities. Since the establishment of full relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel almost twelve years ago there have been a few issues that have been a source of tension between the two. The Nazareth controversy was one; the unresolved negotiations between Israel and the Holy See regarding taxation law has been another. There are those who suggest that such difficulties have resulted from some animus. I assure you all that this is truly not the case. I am not saying that there is no room for criticism of Israel's conduct; but where it is deserved, it is for reasons such as misplaced perception of internal political interest. Above all it has been the continuous political and military pressures that Israel faces that have prevented these issues and more attention to the needs of Christian communities from receiving the degree of priority that they should have received.

In relation to this I might mention the noteworthy development in the establishment of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish relations with local Christian communities. While Christians have played a unique role in the interfaith movement in Israel, this

has primarily been the work of expatriates and there has been little emphasis on the indigenous Christian communities. This new initiative is designed precisely to advance their wellbeing and nurture relations between the indigenous Christian communities and the majority of Israeli society.

Another most significant current development is the establishment of an official Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land involving the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Latin Patriarchate as well as the Palestinian Shaaria Courts and the other Christian Patriarchs and Bishops. It is hoped that this body will play a significant role in future communication and reconciliation.

There is no doubt that what happens in the Holy Land impacts upon Christian-Jewish relations around the world, and not least of all in this regard is the need for a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that will obviate the need for Israel to have to protect itself from violence with walls and roadblocks that make life so difficult for Palestinians – Christians among them. I believe that both the remarkable relationships between the Catholic and Jewish communities as well as between the Holy See and the Israeli state and religious authorities, offer us opportunities for intensified cooperation in all these respects.

Indeed practical cooperation has become a new hallmark of the International Jewish-Catholic Liaison Committee as we have sought to work together and support philanthropic and welfare initiatives. Cardinal Kasper has described this as the dialog of joint action. I might add though, that if joint action is not simply to be the fruit of a pluralistic world outlook and of ethical values that we share with many other Faith communities, it has to be underpinned by what his predecessor Cardinal Edward Cassidy referred to as a theology of partnership, born out of a conviction that our bilateral relationship is unique and not just historically.

These forty years since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* have seen a remarkable reckoning of the soul on the part of the Church and its rediscovery of its unique relationship with Judaism and the Jewish People which itself is now at the beginning of its own reappraisal of this relationship. Certainly a notable development in this regard was the 2001 declaration “Dabru Emet” (speak the truth)

signed by hundreds of rabbis (albeit primarily from the liberal streams of Judaism). This statement of a Jewish religious reappraisal of Christianity received a remarkably warm response from Catholic leaders. Unquestionably its impact was in no small part due to its wide dissemination and high profile publicity. However in many respects it was less far reaching than for example, the Jewish component of the 1993 document of the International Council of Christians and Jews, on the rationales for Christian-Jewish Co-operation. However the latter did not enjoy anything like the same exposure, and thus did not merit the same response. Indeed there have been some significant Jewish initiatives in this regard in recent years and today we are witnessing an increasing effort within Jewish circles to discern the deeper meaning of our relationship and what it demands of us both separately and together. Moreover we should note that there are notable examples of such a positive theology of Christianity in pre-modern Jewish thinking. The 17th century leading Jewish rabbi and commentator Rabbi Moses Rivkes, long preceeded Martin Bubers's comment that Jews and Christians "share a book - and that is no small thing !" when Rivkes declares that there is a special Jewish obligation to show respect towards Christians because they share the belief in the One Creator of the Universe and in His revealed Word at Sinai. And Rabbi Jacob Emden who preceeded Franz Rosenzweig by many generations, uses the language of the Mishnah in describing Christianity as "a gathering for the sake of Heaven that is of lasting value". In fact the Hebrew word for "gathering" is the same word for "Church" and so Emden thus describes the Church as having permanent validity and purpose ! There are also Jewish thinkers today who point our, in the same was as has Pope Benedict XVI, that our two Heritages are two expositions on a common text, made fundamentally distinctive by our different religious experiences. Not least of all, some Jewish scholars have pointed our that the highest Jewish obligation of Sanctifying God's Name in our lives and conduct, places a special responsibility upon us precisely in relation to those who affirm these values and their Source as their own.

This process of discovering and delving into the nature and meaning of our relationship is the inspiring fruit of Nostra Aetate's historic transformation that calls on us to work together for the betterment of our world at large.

As the late Pope John Paul II put it in these now famous words:

“As the children of Abraham we are called Christians and Jews to be a blessing to the world. In order to be such, we must be first of all a blessing to one another.”

In conclusion, allow me to summarize that traditional Jewish blessing for the most special occasions and give thanks to the One Lord, Creator and Sovereign of the Universe who has preserved us in life so that we may reach this day, to praise Him for His Spirit manifest in this historic transformation that we celebrate tonight.