

Fifty Years After Nostra Aetate – An Appreciation
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The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council convened by blessed Pope John XXIII almost fifty years ago embodied a unique and transformative moment in the history of the Catholic Church; but it heralded an absolute revolution in terms of Catholic-Jewish relations.

Among the fruits of the Council was the document known by its first words *Nostra Aetate*, only promulgated in 1965; and section 4 of this document addresses the teaching of the Church in relation to Judaism and the Jews, past and present.

In order to understand the significance of its content, we need to have some historical perspective, which lamentably is a very tragic one. A problematic aspect of the success of Christian-Jewish reconciliation in our times is that that this tragic past is often forgotten or unknown to younger generations and thus the significance of the transformation is not fully grasped. Accordingly I recall now the negative attitude towards the Jews that prevailed in the past, only in order to highlight the enormity of what *Nostra Aetate* has meant for the Jewish-Christian relationship.

As the community of Jewish believers in Jesus of Nazareth expanded into the gentile world, the connection between the movement that became known as Christianity and its Hebrew origins weakened.

There were two major forces at work here. The one was the need to gain greater acceptance in the Roman world. Indeed, especially once Christianity was established as the faith of the Holy Roman Empire, it had every pragmatic interest in minimizing if not denying its connection to the Jewish people.

The second fact, theologically more significant, was the unfortunate competition between Church and Synagogue for the title of the heir to the Biblical heritage and its promises. In this process, not only was there the desire to affirm legitimacy and authority; but also the need to deny the legitimacy of the other.

Thus not only did the Church see itself as the new Israel and the true Israel. There was also the prevalent assumption that the old Israel was a failed Israel rejected by God. This was attributed to Jewish failure to accept the Christian dispensation and collective guilt for complicity in the crucifixion. Justin Martyr interpreted the destruction of the Temple by the Romans and the exile as proof of Divine rejection; and Origen declared that “the blood of Jesus falls on Jews not only then, but on all generations until the end of the world.” The 4th Century writings of John Chrysostom reflect how this concept of “replacement theology” had reached a new level of hostility towards the Jews whom he describes (in *Orations against the Jews*) as

“the most worthless of all men. They are lecherous, rapacious and greedy. They are perfidious murderers of Christ. They worship the Devil. Their religion is sickness. The Jews are the odious assassins of Christ and for killing God there is no expiation possible, no indulgence or pardon. Christianity may never cease vengeance and the Jew must live in servitude forever. God always hated the Jews and thus all Christians must hate them.”

This leitmotif of the Jews being of the devil and in league with the devil was to be a recurrent theme throughout the following almost two millennia. But it was the deicide charge that was used most of all to justify the most terrible actions against Jews. Accordingly Jews were overwhelmingly viewed as the enemy of God and as a diabolical force of evil. This led to the horrendous and preposterous defamations and accusations such as the blood libel, originating in Norwich, England in the eleventh century and repeated thereafter with regularity. It also led to blaming the Jews for the Black Death and various other plagues and disasters, providing “justification” for pillaging and destroying Jewish communities and burning synagogues. Such was the case especially during the Crusades when the call “kill a Jew and save your soul” rang out throughout Europe.

Ironically, the negative theological understanding of the meaning of Jewish survival often served to mitigate some of these excesses. Christian theologians who believed that the only purpose of the Jewish people was to prepare the way for the Christian dispensation and that Jewry had accordingly now been replaced by the Church in the Divine plan, needed to explain why the Jewish people continued to exist at all. St. Augustine explained that it was precisely part of Divine intention that the Jewish people should survive to wander as testimony to their obduracy and thus confirming the truth of Christianity. Accordingly, Pope Innocent III (12C) for example, explained that while “inherited guilt is on the whole (Jewish) nation (as) a curse to follow them everywhere like Cain to live homelessly; nevertheless like Cain they should never be destroyed, but remain as a testimony until the time of Jesus’ truth and the consequences for those who reject it.”

Albeit the Council of Trent not only rejected the deicide charge, but stressed that the responsibility for the death of Jesus is upon all humanity and especially Christians themselves, since – it declared - they profess him as Lord and Saviour, yet choose to violate his teachings. A contemporary scholar on anti-Semitism has written that were “this understanding of the crucifixion (to have) been widely preached and taught ...the history of anti-Semitism might have taken a different course”.

There were indeed some more sympathetic voices, such as St. Ignatius of Loyola, who when accused of being Jewish retorted that he would be greatly privileged if that were so. “What? To be related to Christ Our Lord and to Our Lady the glorious virgin Mary?” This approach however was altogether not typical.

Indeed the attitude that we refer to today as “the teaching of contempt” (a term coined by the Jewish historian Jules Isaac) provided theological justification for Jewish homelessness and marginalization. Accordingly, the idea of the return of the Jewish people to assume sovereignty in its ancestral homeland that received political form in the late 19th Century as the Zionist Movement, was not viewed favorably by the Church; and Pope Pius X told Theodor Herzl so, at their meeting in 1903.

As indicated, there were notable Christians whose treatment of and even solidarity with the Jewish people transcended this “teaching of contempt”. A great exemplar in this regard was the scholar Johannes Reuchlin who in 1510 published the first Christian defense of the Talmud which had been consistently defamed and publicly burnt during the preceding centuries. In more modern times, among the notable Catholics who took brave and public stands against anti-Semitism was the theologian Jacques Maritain who declared that “Israel

is the Jesus among the nations and the Jewish Diaspora within Christian Europe is one long Via Dolorosa”.

While there were such harbingers of the change in Christian attitudes towards Jews and Judaism, especially with modern scholarly research and perspective (facilitated in no small part within the Catholic Church by Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Afflante Spiritu*), the process received its greatest impetus in the wake of the terrible tragedy of the Shoah, the Holocaust, during World War II. As devastating as the Shoah was for Jewry, its implications and ramifications for Christianity were profound.

As the Christian writer David L. Edwards puts it: “Righteous Gentiles including some bishops did save tens of thousands of Jews, but their efforts were small in comparison with the fact of six million murders, a colossal and cold blooded crime which would have been impossible without a general indifference to the fate of the victims.” “Not only ignorant peasants or monks but also eminent theologians and spiritual teachers had attacked the Jews as the “killers of Christ”, as a people now abandoned by God, a race deserving not its envied wealth but revenge for plots and acts against innocent Christians. Not only had the Jews of Rome been forced to live in a ghetto until the papacy no longer governed that city, not only had Luther allowed himself to shoot inflammatory words at this easy target, but almost everywhere in Europe, Jews had been made to seem strange, sinister and repulsive.”

As mentioned there were many Christian heroes who stood out as exceptions in these most horrific of times, but one man in particular personifies the transition and transformation in Christian thought. He was the Nuncio – the Papal Ambassador – in Turkey, during the period of the Shoah and was one of the earliest western religious personalities to receive information on the Nazi murder machine. This man, Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, helped save thousands of Jews from the clutches of their would-be murderers and was deeply moved by the plight of the Jewish people. Within little more than a decade he was elected as the new pontiff and took the name, John XXIII. Contrary to the widespread perception of him, Pope John proved to be nothing less than a visionary for his time, convening the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council with a determined resolve that one of the major tasks would be to redress what he saw as the theological misunderstandings, if not perversions, in past Christian thought and teaching in relation to Jews and Judaism; and he gave the task of preparing such a declaration to Cardinal Augustin Bea.

Nostra Aetate - only promulgated in 1965 after Pope John XXIII's death - was profoundly influenced by the impact of the Shoah, and transformed the Catholic Church's teaching concerning Jews and Judaism. It rejected the portrayal of Jews as collectively guilty for the death of Jesus at the time, let alone in perpetuity, reaffirming the position articulated at the Council of Trent. However, it went much further and positively affirmed the unbroken Covenant between God and the Jewish people (quoting from Paul in Romans II v. 29) and in so doing, eliminated in one stroke, as it were, any theological objections to the idea of the return of the Jewish people to its ancestral homeland and to sovereignty within it. Furthermore, Nostra Aetate pointedly acknowledges the Church's indebtedness to Judaism, declaring that in the latter “the beginnings of (the Church's) faith and her election are already found.” As opposed to the idea of having replaced the Jewish People, Christians are described as “included in the Patriarch (Abraham)'s call” .

Moreover, this Christian indebtedness is not presented as a thing of the past, but – on the basis of Paul’s image of the Church as the wild olive branch grafted on to the “root” of the people of Israel- Nostra Aetate affirms, in the present tense, that the Church “cannot forget that she *draws* sustenance from the root of the good olive tree.”

Dr. Eugene Fisher, the former director for Catholic-Jewish relations for the USCCB, has noted that in this regard, Nostra Aetate resolves an internal Christian debate concerning Romans 9:4-5 where Paul refers to the Divine election and gifts granted to the Jewish People. The tense of the verb used in the Greek is not clear and may be translated in the past tense. Nostra Aetate however used the present tense and clarifies that the Jewish people “*have* the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenant and the law and the worship and the promise.” Dr.Fisher points out the enormous significance of this:- “for if God’s covenant remains valid for the Jews today as much as in Biblical times, then the Jews cannot legitimately be described as “unfaithful”, “blind”, or “legalistic”, in remaining faithful to it ! Rather, Jews practicing Judaism must be honored by Christians precisely for their faithfulness; and in this way Christians honor God’s faithfulness to His promises.”

The late Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, the first president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry, gave special emphasis to the particular sentence in Nostra Aetate, which is repeated in the Council’s major constitution on the Church in the modern world, Lumen Gentium (No.16) :- “ As the Church ponders the mystery of salvation of all mankind in Christ, she is able to affirm the deep spiritual bond between Jews and Christians within God’s loving plan for the redemption of the world.” Dr. Fisher highlights the daring theological nature of this statement, in which Christians are called “to see the Church as not alone in the unfolding and proclamation of the Divine mysteries; to view another religion, and one traditionally pilloried by Christians....., as the Church’s special partner *within* God’s redemptive design (using) the sacred terminology normally reserved for the sacraments themselves – “mystery of salvation”, “spiritual bond” – to describe the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people.

In addition, Nostra Aetate categorically condemned anti-Semitism and also called for “fraternal dialogue and biblical studies” between Christians and Jews.

As significant as Nostra Aetate was and is; it was only part of the ‘aggiornamento’, the renewal process of the Church ushered in by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. One of the Council’s major fruits was the emergence of dynamic movements designed to revitalize and reinvigorate the Catholic faith in contemporary life. One of the most notable of these was and is the Neocatechumenal Way founded by Kiko Arguello and Carmen Hernandez that sought to inject the spirit and teachings of the Council into Catholic communities.

Pope Paul VI continued the path forged by John XXIII, but this transformation ushered in by *Nostra Aetate* moved into an even higher gear with the ascension of blessed John Paul II to the papacy. Undoubtedly his own personal history contributed extensively to this – both his childhood friendships with Jews and his experience of the Shoah in Poland. While significant documents were issued by the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry during his pontificate, and while he himself wrote many significant statements and homilies pertaining to Catholic-Jewish reconciliation; only a minority of people read and internalize documents and statements. It was John Paul II's profound understanding of the power of images and their capability through modern media to reach millions, that broadcast to the world the rediscovered brotherhood and love between the Church and the Jewish people. This was evident first and foremost with his visit to the Great Synagogue in Rome in 1986 when he described the Jewish people as "the dearly beloved elder brother of the Church". A further stage in this process of reconciliation was achieved with the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel, facilitated by the Pope's personal involvement and making it clear to all that the Church had completely repudiated the idea that the Jews were destined to remain wanderers from their ancestral homeland – on the contrary. However it was probably the Papal pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the year 2000 that provided the ultimate testimony of the extent of the transformation in Christian-Jewish relations. The images of the Pope standing in tearful solidarity with Jewish suffering at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, and in prayerful respect for Jewish tradition at the Western Wall, placing there the text of the prayer he had composed for a service of repentance in the Vatican, asking Divine forgiveness for sins perpetrated against Jews down the ages; these had an enormous impact on the Jewish world and, I suspect, on the Christian world as well.

Little more than a month after Benedict XVI's ascension to the papacy he received a delegation of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations. This roof body embracing the principle Jewish advocacy organizations as well as the major streams of contemporary Judaism, is the official partner of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry and I was privileged to preside over it for four years. Notably, Benedict received our delegation almost immediately into his Pontificate, before he had even received delegations from representative bodies of other branches of Christianity, let alone other religions. In his words at this meeting he declared, "In the years following the (Second Vatican Ecumenical) Council, my predecessors Pope Paul VI and in a special way, Pope John Paul II, took significant steps towards improving relations with the Jewish People. It is my intention to continue on this path."

Moreover, the first place of divine worship of another religious community that he entered as Pope, was the synagogue in Cologne which he visited in August 2005 during his journey to Germany for the World Youth Day. On that occasion he referred to the abovementioned meeting stating that: "Today I wish to reaffirm that I intend to continue with great vigor on the path towards improved relations and friendship with the Jewish People, following the decisive lead given by Pope John Paul II."

On both occasions he continued to outline his thoughts on the nature and purpose of this relationship. While acknowledging the tragic past and deploring resurgent anti-Semitism; he asserted that: "The 'spiritual patrimony' treasured by Christians and Jews is itself the source of the wisdom and inspiration capable of guiding us towards a future of hope in accordance with the Divine Plan. At the same time, remembrance of the past remains for both communities a moral imperative and a source of purification in our efforts to pray and work for reconciliation, justice, respect and human dignity, and for that peace which is ultimately a gift from the Lord Himself. Of its very nature this importance must include a continued reflection on the profound historical moral and theological questions posed by the experience of the Shoah."

Still in the first year of his pontificate, Pope Benedict continued to meet with an array of Jewish organizations and leaders including the Chief Rabbis of Israel and the Chief Rabbi of Rome. In receiving the latter he declared "The Catholic Church is close and is a friend to you. Yes we love you and we cannot but love you, because of the Fathers: through them you are very dear and beloved brothers to us."

The Pope also expressed his gratitude for the Divine protection of the Jewish people that has guaranteed its survival over the course of history: "The People of Israel have been delivered from the hands of enemies on frequent occasions and in the centuries of anti-Semitism and during the tragic moments of the Shoah, the hand of the Almighty sustained and guided them."

Indeed already in December 2000 in an article entitled '*The Heritage of Abraham: the Gift of Christmas*' published in *Osservatore Romano*, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote: "Abraham, Father of the People of Israel, Father of Faith, has become the source of blessing, for in him 'all the families of the earth shall call themselves blessed'. The task of the Chosen People is therefore to make a gift of their God – the One true God – to every other people. In reality, as Christians we are the inheritors of their Faith in the One God. Our gratitude therefore must be extended to our Jewish brothers and sisters who, despite the hardships of their own history, have held on to faith in this God right up to the present and who witness to it in the sight of those peoples who, lacking knowledge of the One God 'dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death' (Luke 1:79)."

Arguably the most remarkable testimony of Pope Benedict XVI's commitment to continuing to advance the path of his predecessor in Catholic-Jewish reconciliation, has been precisely in following the latter's dramatic example both in visiting the State of Israel and according full respect to the State's highest political and civic as well as religious authorities; and in his visit to the Great Synagogue in Rome. For one could have argued that the initiatives of John Paul II were idiosyncratic and personal, born out of his own historical experience and proclivities. In following in his predecessor's footsteps, Pope Benedict has actually enshrined these actions as it were into the fabric of the Papacy, affirming John Paul II's statement that the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people is unique, connected at the very foundation of its faith, unlike the Church's relationship with any other community.

Yet, this stunning transformation in Catholic-Jewish relations, has not been internalized universally. This depends to a large extent on the relevant social, cultural and political context.

The United States of America is arguably the ultimate success story in this regard, for it is here that one finds vibrant and self-confident Jewish and Catholic communities living alongside one another – both minorities, neither dominant – but feeling fully part of and committed to the society at large. Here Jewish-Catholic relations have been able to fully embrace and even lead the path trail blazed by Nostra Aetate, with dozens of institutes of higher learning for Christian-Jewish studies; and with scores of programs involving youth and adults in mutual education and cooperation.

However in many parts of the world, Jews do not even appear on the Christian radar screen. This is the case in much, if not most of Latin America, many parts of Africa and Asia, and even in much of Europe where significant Jewish communities are no longer to be found. And indeed even in the United States today, demographic trends are changing the makeup of the Catholic Church and much of a new generation is not the natural beneficiary of the aforementioned changes that have taken place in the U.S. over the last half century.

It is here that the role of educational and formation structures is so important and where the work of the movements, in particular the Neocatechumenal Way, has become so critical. As one of the most powerful Catholic movements – especially in the Spanish speaking world – but indeed across the globe; the profound commitment of the Neocatechumenal Way to ensuring that the pathway of Nostra Aetate becomes a highway for the Church, is of inestimable importance. Through its programs, in seminaries of Redemptoris Mater, and in particular its work in Israel in Domus Galilaea where myriads of the faithful and thousands of the clergy are re-immersed in the Jewish roots of their faith and reconnected to the Jewish People, the message of Nostra Aetate is being disseminated on a regular basis.

Through this work, a healing process also takes place within Jewish communities – especially and significantly in Israel - where Jewish people are discovering the true Christian message of love and respect, instead of the tragic image in Jewish minds of Christianity as a hostile antagonistic force.

Accordingly it gives me great pleasure tonight, to be able to pay tribute to the work of the Way and thank its leadership for all they do to promote this reconciliation and above all education throughout the Catholic world.

This process is not achieved overnight, and indeed in historical terms it has only just begun and will take generations to bring to the fullest fruition. Nevertheless a new era was ushered in by Nostra Aetate, not only overcoming the tragic past and paving the way for a rediscovery of brotherhood; but even opening up the way for us to view each other in a new way theologically, as part and parcel of the Divine blessing for humanity that we are called to be. Today more and more, Jews and Catholics are coming together to affirm the sacred values we share, while respecting the profound differences that make us each who we are. But our commitment to those shared messages, especially regarding human dignity that flows from each and every person being created in the Divine Image, is the fruit of our historic reconciliation facilitated by Nostra Aetate. In the words of blessed John Paul II “as the children of Abraham we are called to be a blessing to the world. In order to be so, we must first be a blessing to one another.”