

Fifty years since Nostra Aetate – a historical retrospective

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The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council convened by Saint Pope John XXIII 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*, promulgated almost exactly fifty years ago; 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.

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 papal delegate 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 a widespread perception of him, Pope John proved to be nothing less than a visionary for his time, convening the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council to address the major challenges of modern society and update the Church’s teaching and *modus operandi*. His experiences during the Shoah and his historic meeting with the French Jewish historian Jules Isaac, also convinced him of the critical need 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.

This was not a simple matter and faced some serious opposition. In the end it was only possible to succeed in addressing the Church’s relationship to the Jewish people within the context of its relationship to other religions in general.

However section four of the document 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.

But it went much further in positively affirming 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.

Moreover, *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.

Promulgated after Pope John XXIII's death by his successor Pope Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate* paved the way for the formation of a formal International Jewish Liaison Committee to advance the bilateral relationship and in 1974 the Church's work in this regard was further institutionalized with the establishment of a Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry

which also issued official Guidelines for the implementation of Nostra Aetate. The ILC has continued to meet, now biennially, holding a colloquium on a different theme

This journey of Catholic-Jewish reconciliation moved into an even higher gear during the papacy of John Paul II. Undoubtedly his own personal history contributed extensively to this – both his childhood friendships with Jews and his experience of the Shoah in Poland.

Other significant documents were issued by the Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry during his pontificate, and he himself wrote many significant statements and homilies pertaining to Catholic-Jewish relations. He was particularly forthright in his condemnation of Antisemitism, describing it as a sin against God and man. -However, 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.

To crown it all, the Papal pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the year 2000 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.

In addition during this visit, Pope John Paul II proposed to the Chief Rabbis of Israel, the establishment of a bilateral commission for Jewish-Catholic dialogue under their joint authority. This body meets every year alternating between Rome and Jerusalem

Little more than a month after Benedict XVI's ascension to the papacy he received the delegation of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC.) This roof body consists of the principle Jewish advocacy organizations as well as the major streams of contemporary Judaism, and is the official partner of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry, together constituting the International Jewish Catholic Liaison Committee.. Notably, Pope 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, and pledged himself to continuing the path of his predecessors in advancing relations with the Jewish People.

Indeed 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 where he declared "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."

Still in the first year of his pontificate, he received a number of Jewish visitors 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."

Arguably the most remarkable testimony of Pope Benedict XVI's commitment to continuing to advance the path of his predecessor in Catholic-Jewish reconciliation, was 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 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.

Certain "vaticanisti" predicted that after the surprise resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, that there would never again be a Pope for whom Catholic-Jewish relations would be a priority; or for whom the Shoah would have any personal significance. They could not have been more wrong. No Pope since Peter, has known the Jewish People as intimately as Pope Francis. Aside from his deep personal friendships with Jewish leaders when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires (having written a book with his friend Rabbi Avraham Skorka on Jewish and Catholic perspectives and teachings); he was a regular visitor to synagogues and hosted Yom HaShoah memorials in his Cathedral.

He invited Jewish representatives to his Papal investiture, giving them a pride of place and special mention, and has received Jewish visitors and delegations with great warmth and affection. His first official meeting with Jewish representatives was similarly with a delegation of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC), to whom Pope Francis declared "because of our common roots, a true Christian cannot be anti-Semitic." – a statement he has repeated frequently. Indeed he has condemned Holocaust denial as "a madness" and also described the denial of the Jewishness of the State of Israel as Antisemitic. In his first Encyclical he echoed *Nostra Aetate* in declaring that "The Church, which shares with Jews an important part of the sacred Scriptures, looks upon the people of the covenant and their faith as one of the sacred roots of her own Christian identity (Romans 11:16-18)" in keeping with an interview he gave in which he declared that "since the Second Vatican Council we have rediscovered that the Jewish People are still for us the holy root that produced Jesus". He also stated that despite the horrors inflicted on the Jewish People by the Shoah, "God never abandoned his covenant with Israel, and notwithstanding their terrible suffering over the centuries, the Jewish People have kept their faith. For this, we will never be sufficiently grateful to them as a Church, but also as human beings. In the persistence of their faith in the God of the Covenant, they summon all, including us as Christians, to recall the fact that we are awaiting the return of the Lord as pilgrims, and must therefore always remain open to Him and never retreat from what we have already achieved."

He reiterated his profound love for the Jewish people during his historic visit to Israel becoming the third Pope in succession to do so; and subsequently hosted President Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas together with religious representatives from the three Faiths in the Holy Land to pray for peace and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. Indeed throughout the world today the Pope is known as a friend of the Jewish People – a stunning shining new reality in the shadow of the tragic history of relations between our communities

Yet, this wondrous transformation in Catholic-Jewish relations, has not been internalized universally. This extent to which it has, 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 parts of the world where there are no significant Jewish communities to be found today, Jews often do not even appear on the Christian radar screen. 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. Among the pioneers in this regard were the Sisters of our Lady of Sion. The work of the “movements” in the Catholic Church has also been particularly important. Some of these and their commitment to Catholic-Jewish relations are long standing and well known, such as the Focolare and the community of Sant Egidio. But other movement have lately come to play a significant role. One such example is the Neocatechumenal Way, which is particularly significant not only because of its growth but because of its prevalence (flowing from its origins) in the Spanish speaking world. Its profound commitment 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 Galilea 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 such 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.

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 Saint 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.”

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