



A Church in Dialogue

The Catholic Church and Interreligious Dialogue

Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, on the Church's Relationship to Non-Christian Religions, 1965-2015

"Dialogue is born from an attitude of respect for the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It assumes that there is room in the heart for the person's point of view, opinion, and proposal. To dialogue entails a cordial reception, not a prior condemnation. In order to dialogue, it is necessary to know how to lower the defences, open the doors of the house, and offer human warmth."



Photo: © L'Osservatore Romano

In 2011, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio wrote these words on interreligious dialogue in a book he co-authored with his friend and colleague Rabbi Abraham Skorka, entitled *On Heaven and Earth* (Image Books, 2013). As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, then-Cardinal Bergoglio was known to be a close friend of Argentina's Jewish community. When, just a year later, he was elected as Pope Francis, many commentators highlighted his long-standing commitment to interreligious relations as an important gift he brought to the papacy—continuing

the powerful example set by his predecessors, especially Pope Saint John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. At the root of that papal leadership in the area of interreligious dialogue lies the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and a brief but highly significant 1960 audience between Pope Saint John XXIII and the French Jewish historian Jules Isaac.

■ The Beginnings of *Nostra Aetate*

Isaac, a prominent scholar who had suffered the loss of several family members during the *Shoah*, had come to speak personally with Pope Saint John XXIII about his recent announcement of an ecumenical council of the world's Catholic bishops—a council that today we know as the Second Vatican Council. Isaac brought the Pope a dossier of materials he had researched while in hiding during World War II, as he tried to understand the roots of the long-standing Christian attitude of viewing Jews and Judaism in a negative light, which many saw as a factor contributing to the tragedy of the *Shoah*.



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Isaac requested that the Pope put a discussion of Catholic attitudes toward Judaism on the Council's agenda. Could he at least hope for that? "You have a right to more than just hope" was Pope Saint John XXIII's now-famous reply.

The document whose seeds were sown at that 1960 meeting was *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Time"), the Second Vatican Council's landmark 1965 Declaration on the relationship of the Catholic Church to non-Christian religions. Spearheaded by the distinguished German Jesuit biblical scholar Cardinal Augustin Bea, a small committee of experts prepared the first drafts of a proposed document which was initially called simply *De Judaeis* ("On the Jews"), since the authors' original mandate was limited to addressing the Christian-Jewish relationship. Its subject matter made it a challenge: should it be part of a larger document on the Church, or perhaps linked to a document on dialogue with other Christians? In the end, the input of bishops from around the world led the writers to expand the Declaration to include several other religious traditions. The longest section (§4) remains focused on Judaism.



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In its overall structure, *Nostra Aetate* begins with general guiding principles, and then proceeds to more specific comments on various religious traditions. It begins by pointing out how, in our modern world, different religions increasingly interact with each other. Because it belongs to the Church's

mission to foster the unity of all God's children, the document seeks to highlight the things that Christianity shares in common with other religions, and to emphasize their positive, life-giving aspects, which Christians can appreciate and value. Despite their obvious differences, each religion seeks to answer certain basic questions about the cosmos, the meaning of life, the nature of good and evil, and the goal of our existence. A sense of the transcendent is common to religious traditions because, as our faith tells us, an orientation toward the transcendent is implanted deep within us as human beings. Our grappling with these fundamental issues links all believers, and through our sharing of our respective religious heritages, mutual enrichment is possible and, indeed, desirable.

■ The Church's Relations with Hinduism and Buddhism



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Section 2 of *Nostra Aetate* provides a brief but thoughtful reflection on two of the largest religious families of the East, Hinduism and Buddhism, highlighting some aspects of each one's spirituality. Hindus, the document says, "contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths, and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek freedom from the anguish of our human condition either through ascetical practices or profound meditation or a flight to God with love and trust." Similarly, "Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which human beings, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination."

In the five decades since *Nostra Aetate* was promulgated, religious leaders and scholars have often noted that its portrayals of ancient, complex and diverse traditions are necessarily incomplete. Yet, the very fact of their inclusion represented a major step forward for Catholicism. It was a concrete acknowledgement of the spiritual traditions encountered by over a hundred million Christians in Asia and elsewhere. By setting out to emphasize aspects of each religious tradition that Christians could affirm and value, the bishops fostered a new, more positive discourse that opened the door to further conversation and deeper understanding. In these and many other matters, *Nostra Aetate* provided an essential starting point, *and not* an end



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point, for these discussions, which have considerably deepened our understanding of other religious traditions. Many subsequent official Church documents have explored *Nostra Aetate's* themes and have furthered the insights it contained. Here is the basic principle found in *Nostra Aetate*, which continues to inform Catholic engagement with these religions:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), in whom people may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (Cf 2 Cor. 5:18-19). The Church ... exhorts her children that, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these people. (n. 2)

Whatever is good, beautiful or true is ultimately rooted in the goodness, beauty and truth of God, who is the source of all beauty and truth. This rootedness in God provides the foundation for a Christian dialogue with peoples of all beliefs. Such dialogue, the Declaration reminds us, must be rooted in love. But it also demands thoughtful, faith-based discernment, and aims to support and build upon what is most praiseworthy in the religious tradition of the other.

■ The Church’s Relations with Islam



Photo: © Hikrcn/Dreamstime.com-Nabawi mosque, Medina, Saudi Arabia Photo

In its third section, the Declaration addresses a question which has taken on increased importance in recent generations: the nature of the relationship between Christians and Muslims. The first line of that section provides a brief but important orientation to that discussion: “The Church *regards with esteem* also the Moslems.” Like Christians, Muslims believe firmly in the oneness of

God, although differently from the Christian Triune understanding: a God who is both almighty and all-merciful. Almost all of the *suras*, or chapters, of the Qur’an begin by invoking God, who is the essence of mercy itself. The document emphasizes the daily efforts of devout Muslims who wholeheartedly submit themselves to God’s revealed will, as did Abraham, our shared father in faith. It reminds Christians that both Jesus and Mary are highly revered in the Islamic tradition, even if the Christian and Muslim understandings do not coincide. Like Christians, Muslims aim to live lives of righteousness, generosity, devotion and prayer, and, like Christians, they look ahead to the Day of Judgment, when God will judge all human beings according to their actions.



Photo: © L'Osservatore Romano

Nostra Aetate's words regarding the painful history of Muslim-Christian relations are prophetic as we look back on them fifty years later: the Council urges all "... to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve, as well as to promote together for the benefit of all humankind, social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom."

Especially under the last three Popes, dialogue with the Islamic world has taken on a new importance and depth, for which *Nostra Aetate* laid the essential theological foundations.

■ Relations with the Jewish People



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The fourth and longest section of the Declaration is devoted to the Jewish people, and begins with a beautiful reflection pointing to the close bond between Christians and the Jewish people; the Synod fathers proclaimed that "As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to the descendants of Abraham."

Moreover, in the Church's effort to understand herself more deeply, she necessarily finds her relationship with the Jewish people profoundly rooted in the events and key figures of the Hebrew Scriptures—Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, the Exodus experience, the Israelite monarchy and the words of the Prophets—and in Jesus, Mary and the first followers of Jesus, who were themselves Jews.

Indeed, it is through Judaism that Christianity received the message of the first part of its Bible. Drawing upon St. Paul's Letter to the Romans (cf. 11), Christianity continues to "draw sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree" which is the Jewish people, and their special covenantal relationship with God. As Sacred Scripture proclaims, "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen" (Rom 9:4-5).

“OUR BELOVED ELDER BROTHERS”

On April 13, 1986, Pope Saint John Paul II made history, becoming the first Pope in 1900 years to enter a synagogue, the Great Synagogue of Rome, just a few short kilometers from the Vatican. During his address there, the Pope emphasized both the ongoing validity of the Jewish covenant with God and the special relationship Catholics have with Jews:

“The Jews are beloved of God, who has called them with an irrevocable calling ... The Jewish religion is not ‘extrinsic’ to us, but in a certain way is ‘intrinsic’ to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers, and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers.”

His phrase “our elder brothers” went on to become a significant part of the vocabulary of Jewish-Catholic relations. When Pope Saint John Paul II died in 2005, his death was widely mourned by the world’s Jewish community, both in Israel and globally.



Photo : © L'Osservatore Romano

The relationship of Christianity to Judaism *continues* to strengthen and enrich the Church, even today. From both a historical and a theological perspective, our Christian connection to Judaism is different from that which the Church has with any other world religion. While acknowledging the areas where Jews and Christians disagree theologically, *Nostra Aetate* also reminds its readers that “[the Jewish people] are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:28-29), thereby uprooting

a long-standing misunderstanding called *supersessionism*—that Christianity supplants or replaces Judaism in God’s loving plan of salvation. Similarly, the bishops sought to correct a widespread, but mistaken, theological interpretation of a generalized Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus: “What happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today ... the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures ... Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of human beings and out of infinite love, in order that all might reach salvation.”

In the wake of the murder of millions of Jews during the Second World War, the Council’s words were very clear: “The Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews, ... decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”

In 1998, the Holy See, in an official document called “We Remember: A Reflection on the *Shoah*,” acknowledged that “the history of relations between Jews and Christians is a tormented one,” and it raised a painful question: “Did Christians give every possible assistance to those being persecuted, and in particular to the persecuted Jews?” Some did, but others did not. The document states: “Those who did help to save Jewish lives as much as was in their power, even to the point of placing their own lives in danger, must not be forgotten ... Nevertheless ... alongside such courageous men



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and women, the spiritual resistance and concrete action of other Christians was not that which might have been expected from Christ's followers." The document continues with a call for penance and a deep sense of regret for Christians whose response to this evil was wanting: "For Christians, this heavy burden of conscience of their brothers and sisters during the Second World War must be a call to penitence ... We deeply regret the errors and failures of those sons and daughters of the Church."

This document concludes, however, with a hope-filled vision: "We pray that our sorrow for the tragedy which the Jewish people have suffered in our century will lead to a new relationship with the Jewish people. *We wish to turn awareness*

of past sins into a firm resolve to build a new future in which there will be no more anti-Judaism among Christians or anti-Christian sentiment among Jews, but rather a shared mutual respect, as befits those who adore the one Creator and Lord and have a common father in faith, Abraham." This new and much more positive relationship to the Jewish people has been warmly received by the Jewish community, and has contributed to the flourishing of Catholic-Jewish initiatives over the last five decades.



Photo: © L'Osservatore Romano

Nostra Aetate concludes with a powerful denunciation of racially or religiously justified discrimination, hatred and violence, and a ringing reassertion of the fundamental unity of the human family: “No foundation ... remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between one person and another, or between one people and another, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned. The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, colour, condition of life, or religion.” We are all children of our heavenly Father, and our calling as believers is to seek to live in peace and harmony with everyone.

■ A New Way Forward in Interfaith Relations

THE HOLY SEE'S OUTREACH TO RELIGIOUS GROUPS

For more than fifty years, the Popes have been leading the way in terms of the Church's outreach to other religious groups. In 1964, Blessed Pope Paul VI undertook a papal pilgrimage to the Holy Land—the first time since the time of the Apostle Peter that a Bishop of Rome had visited the Holy Land. That initial visit has now been reprised three times: by Pope Saint John Paul II in 2000, by Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 and, most recently, by Pope Francis in 2014. All three Popes have visited mosques on their international travels, and have met extensively with the leaders and followers of other religious traditions, both in Rome and overseas.

On several occasions, modern Popes have invited the world's religious leaders to come together to pray for peace and harmony in Assisi, the city of St. Francis. In 1986, in 1993 and again in 2002, Pope Saint John Paul II presided over these gatherings; in 2011, Pope Benedict XVI marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first interreligious prayer day with dozens of representatives of the world's great religions.

Each year, on significant occasions on the calendars of the world's religions, the Holy See issues formal greetings on behalf of the Holy Father—to Muslims at the end of the holy month of Ramadan, to Hindus on the feast of Deepavali, to Buddhists for the feast of Vesakh, and to Jews for the High Holy Days each autumn.

Born out of the bitter experience of the *Shoah*, and out of the many positive interactions of believers in the modern world, *Nostra Aetate* marked a dramatically new approach to inter-religious relations from the perspective of the Catholic Church. Rather than focusing on areas of disagreement, conflict or perceived “shortcomings,” *Nostra Aetate* offered a new paradigm which enabled Christians to engage fruitfully with other religions, and to be enriched by them and their spiritual treasures, while also witnessing, faithfully and respectfully, to their own faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

The first ripple effects of *Nostra Aetate* were almost immediate. Catholics who were curious about other religions quickly began to develop local study and dialogue groups, and to reach out to their non-Christian neighbours in creative new ways. Religious leaders met together, and their communities often began to collaborate on local initiatives to help eliminate suffering, promote human dignity, and lay the foundations for greater justice and peace, both locally and globally.

Here in Canada, *Nostra Aetate's* impact can be seen concretely in the many interreligious

networks, forums and groups that exist across our country, which work together on issues like poverty and hunger, human trafficking, domestic violence, religious extremism, and peace-making in the Middle East. Since 2012, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has engaged in a bilateral Catholic-Hindu dialogue, which brings together members of both communities to promote better understanding and to seek ways to collaborate on important local and national initiatives.



Photo : L'Osservatore Romano

In 1984, the National Christian-Muslim Liaison Committee was established to provide a forum where a broad cross-section of Islamic and Christian representatives could meet five times per year to dialogue about areas of common interest, to share concerns, and to learn more about each other's beliefs and activities. With our Jewish partners in Canada, dialogue has found rich expression in both local and national forums. Nationally, the Canadian Christian Jewish Consultation, which started in 1977, has brought together Jewish, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant representatives to explore areas of commonality and difference. Our manner of dialoguing on the national level continues to evolve with the Jewish community, exploring new ways of how to listen most effectively to one another as people of faith.

In addition to these formal structures, numerous local churches throughout the country have developed their own network of relationships with local mosques, synagogues, temples and houses of worship. These allow for a broad range of cultural, educational and religious exchanges, and enable believers of different traditions to come to know each other in friendship, trust and respect. Especially in larger centres, our rich ethnic and cultural diversity, in which Canadians rightly take pride, allows for many types of exchanges and cooperation, helping people to break down the barriers of prejudice and misunderstanding and to face together the challenges of our contemporary society.

Fifty years after *Nostra Aetate*, we are continually being enriched and challenged by this ground-breaking document. Beginning with the Jewish-Catholic relationship, the Catholic Church has sought to relate in new ways to the great religious traditions of humanity, acknowledging and affirming the elements of truth that God has entrusted to each one, seeking to understand their faith as accurately and fairly as possible, and working hand in hand in the service of the moral and religious values that we all cherish and seek to uphold.

The Council made it clear that there is no contradiction between being a faithful Catholic and having respect for the goodness and virtues found in other religions, seeking to understand them and allowing for a genuine dialogue in which both partners could be enriched. The Church underscored this authentic and beautiful relation between dialogue and proclamation in a document released in 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, entitled "Dialogue and Proclamation."



Photo: Vivian Kwok, courtesy of the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Affairs, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto – Dialogue meeting of the Muslim-Catholic Student Dialogue of Toronto.

The document highlights the complementary yet distinct relationship between dialogue and proclamation, noting that they are both authentic elements of the Church's mission. The Church teaches that they are *"intimately related, but not interchangeable: true interreligious dialogue on the part of the Christian supposes the desire to make Jesus Christ better known, recognized and loved; proclaiming Jesus Christ is to be carried out in the Gospel spirit of dialogue. The two activities remain distinct but, as experience shows, one and the same local Church, one and the same person, can be diversely engaged in both"* ("Dialogue and Proclamation," 77).

CANADIAN INTERFAITH LEADERSHIP

Canada boasts a number of institutions and groups which promote interreligious dialogue and friendship year-round, to which the Catholic Church contributes leadership and energy. These include the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism in Montreal, the Christian-Jewish Dialogue of Toronto, the Centre for Jewish, Catholic, Muslim Learning at King's University College in London, Ontario, the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Toronto, and the Christian Jewish Dialogue of Montreal.

The ecumenical and interfaith officers of many Canadian Catholic dioceses and archdioceses are actively involved in building up relationships on the local and regional levels, and regularly host special events that bring the best of contemporary interreligious thinking to a broader Catholic audience. Many Canadian Catholic universities and colleges offer post-secondary courses and programs that help their students appreciate the diversity of religious belief, practice and thought.

As early as 1965, many commentators argued that *Nostra Aetate* was one of the greatest achievements of the Second Vatican Council, helping to correct many historical misunderstandings and opening the door to a new way of thinking and speaking about religions beyond the bounds of Christianity. *Nostra Aetate* was the shortest of the sixteen Council documents, and in many ways it merely sketched out the contours of a renewed Catholic approach, which continues to develop and unfold to this day.

In 1974, the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews published "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*," and in 1985, the same Commission issued "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church." The Pontifical Biblical

Commission published a major document in 2001, "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible," delving into some of the questions that contemporary Jewish-Christian relations have raised for our reading and interpretation of the Bible. Many national Bishops' Conferences around the world have issued profound and powerful statements pointing to the close relationship between Jews and Christians and the overall commitment the Catholic Church has to interreligious dialogue.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops released a document in the year 2000 entitled "Jubilee: Renewing Our Common Bonds with the Jewish Community." In marking the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Christ, the Catholic Bishops of Canada reflected on how we can come to a better understanding of Christ by knowing more intimately the traditions and lived experiences of Judaism. Emphasizing the close

proximity and common mission between the two faiths, the Bishops concluded the document by proclaiming, “As children of Abraham, Jews and Christians are called to be a blessing for the world. (Genesis 12:2 ff.) This promise and call of Abraham invites a common commitment to the promotion of peace and justice among all peoples.”

■ **Methods and Modes of Dialogue**

Over the past thirty years, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has published several significant documents to guide Catholic involvement in the interreligious sphere. These statements identify four major “modes” or “methods” of interreligious dialogue:

- ▶ *The dialogue of life*, in which believers live side by side and come to know each other through daily interactions and friendships with their neighbours and colleagues;
- ▶ *The dialogue of works or of practical cooperation*, in which believers collaborate on important projects on a local or broader level, to meet basic human needs and help to improve the community;
- ▶ *The dialogue of experts*, in which specialists come together to examine important things of similarity and difference between faiths, and to understand more deeply the meaning of their beliefs and teachings;
- ▶ *The dialogue of religious experience*, in which believers share with each other about their forms of prayer, their spiritual ideals, and their sense of the transcendent.

In this sense, interreligious dialogue is not a task reserved only to scholars or religious leaders, but can be, and is, a part of the life of religious believers on a grassroots, everyday level. Catholic teaching about interreligious outreach continues to grow and develop with each passing decade; the personal witness of our Holy Fathers has played a particularly powerful role in that development.

■ **Conclusion**

Nostra Aetate offers a vision of hope and a model of respectful, meaningful interaction. It marked a critical beginning point for contemporary interreligious dialogue for Catholics; fifty years after its publication, *Nostra Aetate* continues to provide inspiration and guidance as to how, despite our differences, Christians and people of other beliefs can work together to build up a world that reflects the best of our religious heritages, where religion is a source of peace and collaboration, instead of an excuse for violence or division. That is the vision of *Nostra Aetate*, and its challenge remains every bit as relevant today as it was half a century ago—and perhaps even more so.

■ For Further Reading

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