

# The Catholic-Jewish Dialogue: Twenty Years After 'Nostra Aetate'

**'Nostra Aetate' helped open the Catholic Church to dialogue with all religions and to see improved relationships, not only as human efforts, but as God's mysterious initiative in history**

To those of us who were directly involved in the preparations and four sessions of Vatican II, no draft had a more unplanned, tortuous and threatened journey than did "Nostra Aetate," especially its No. 4 on the Jews.

Consider the beginning of the beginning. According to Pope John XXIII's secretarial confidant, Loris Capovilla, "it never entered Pope John's mind that the council ought to be occupied with the Jewish question and with anti-Semitism" until a week after the Pope had created the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (S.P.C.U.) on June 5, 1960, and had appointed Cardinal Augustin Bea, S.J., its president on the following day.

The Jewish theme reached the Pope's consciousness and conscience during a private half-hour conversation, on June 13, 1960, with Jules Isaac, a Jew and a French historian who had been director of education in France. He presented to Pope John a lengthy memorandum on the history of Catholic teachings and practices toward the Jews.

In Isaac's unedited memoirs, he reminisced: "How in a few minutes was I to make the Pope understand that there had always been a Catholic teaching of contempt (*mépris*) [towards the Jews]?" But Isaac saw that tradition facing a growing counterpressure, "a purificator" in the church, and he felt that between these two contrary tendencies Catholic opinion was divided, and "remains wavering." "The head of the church," he said, "could show the good path by solemnly condemning the teaching of contempt as, in essence, anti-Christian."

Isaac suggested a papal committee to study "the Jewish question." "I thought of that from the beginning of our meeting," replied Pope John. "You are right in having

hope." In September, John XXIII charged Cardinal Bea's S.P.C.U. with the task.

In mid-November of 1960, we held the first S.P.C.U. Commission meeting of 16 bishop-members and 20 consultants to deal with Christian unity. Our president communicated the special papal mandate, but unlike the inter-church topics, even the fact of the S.P.C.U.'s initial discussions on the Jewish question was, at the Pope's request, "sub secreto."

Cardinal Bea gave no reasons. We on his staff did know that the Pope and the Cardinal, both wise in their 78 years, foresaw an inevitable coalition of two opponents to their objectives.

On the one hand, what Isaac called "the teaching and practice of contempt" would be seeking support and even reinforcement through the council. One could not so easily dismiss the strong tradition of papal decrees, conciliar statements and church legislation that had enclosed the Jews in both spiritual and material ghettos. Was Catholic theology prepared for a shift, and were the bishops prepared for that theology?

On the other hand, no matter how purely theological and pastoral the conciliar intentions might be, any positive developments in Catholic-Jewish relations would have political implications in the Middle East, saturated with Christian, Moslem and Jewish conflict. Beleaguered minority Catholic communities would express that anxiety through their bishops. And Arab diplomats to the Holy See would bluntly state their disquiet. They had already been successful in contributing to the Holy See's refraining from diplomatic relations with Israel.

This internal and external pressure strongly surfaced during Vatican II, and twice placed the draft itself in

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jeopardy. Nevertheless, by the council's end 2,221 council fathers, with their approvals (versus 88 negative votes), committed the Catholic Church to an irrevocable act, a "hesbon ha-nefesh," a reconsideration of soul. In November 1985, Cardinal Jan Willebrands, who is president of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and who is usually cautious with superlatives, told the Synod of Bishops that Vatican II "introduced a real, almost miraculous conversion in the attitudes of the church and Catholics toward the Jewish people."

I highly recommend Edward Flannery's classic *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-Three Centuries of Antisemitism* (Paulist; revised and updated, 1985). His description of the underside of the Christian heritage reveals how the 15 long Latin sentences in No. 4 of "Nostra Aetate," began a shift in 1,900 years of relationships between Catholics and Jews.

The surprise is that while, over the two decades, the results of the dialogue have been changing the theological and pastoral horizons, the political pressure, subtle or not so subtle, has stubbornly refused to subside.

In fact, this political pressure had caused the longest delay in any Vatican follow-up of a Vatican II statement. "Guidelines on Religious Relations with the Jews" was issued only in 1974, and produced those few timid additions that appear in "Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechetics" (June 1985)—issued by Cardinal Willebrands's commission, but not without assistance from the Vatican Secretariat of State.

**T**wenty years have indeed passed. Given the pre-Vatican II Catholic-Jewish estrangements, the dialogue understandably remains an infant, new and unique, learning to take its first steps, often fumbling, often whining, a little too impatient, not too trusting.

I still experience how difficult the dialogue continues to be, even to those of us who are engaged in it at whatever level. And lest we deceive ourselves, it is important to note that those individuals and groups are composed of a very small minority of Catholics and Jews, whether scholarly or less erudite folk.

Often our dialogue consists of disparate monologues. Both Jews and Catholics find it so difficult to listen before speaking, or so easy to judge the others—even their intentions—before allowing them truly to state the essential traits, traditions and experiences by which they define themselves and make their decisions.

The centrality of Jesus in the mystery of the triune God is as much outside the Jewish experience as the relationship of covenant to land, and of the Jews to Israel, is outside the Christian experience. The Catholic consciousness in faith of the church as a new covenant that transcends every ethnic designation is far removed from the Jewish experience of themselves as a religious people. And the Catholic experience of the Eucharist is not identical with the Jewish

one of the Seder. Nor should it be. In fact, the most difficult hurdle in true dialogue is to grasp the other's pieties.

How can we begin to touch common chords? Suggestions for dialogue are now coming from Jewish-Catholic efforts, not just from one side. This desired method could hasten a balance in the present dialogue. At least on the local level, the emphasis is still too much on what the church thinks of the Jewish people, and not enough on the Jewish understanding of Jesus and of the emergence of the church from the synagogue, and of Catholic teaching and practice today.

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True, Christians find only their origins in Judaism, and most Jews may regard the Christian community as one more non-Jewish religion. But since much of Judaism has developed within the Christian ambit of overpowering influence, the relationship between the two is, in Rabbi David Novak's phrase, "historically unique." At least, that historical relationship pleads for a dialogue that is not lopsided.

Despite the stumblings, the child is learning to walk—forward. At least for the Catholic, the positive signs are present not only in "Nostra Aetate," but also in the movement of the dialogue into the Holy See's 1974 "Guidelines" and into the 1985 "Notes." I would like to consider seven major themes from these documents.

1. *The church's interest in the Jewish people* is not due simply to de facto religious pluralism, nor is it motivated by a guilt complex. The church searches into its own identity, its own mystery: "It remembers the spiritual bonds that tie the people of the new covenant to the offspring of Abraham."

In this search the church finds the beginnings of its faith and its election in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. The story of salvation took place within the Jewish people. Jesus, Mary, the apostles, the early disciples were as much members of that people as the few who were among the enemies of Jesus ("Nostra Aetate").

Jesus was a Palestinian Jew, sharing in the anxieties and hopes of His fellow Palestinians. He taught in synagogues and in the Temple. He achieved the supreme act of the gift of Himself in the setting of the domestic service of the Passover. "The Church and Christianity, for all their novelty,

find their origin in the Jewish milieu of the first century of our era" ("Notes").

Through the dialogue, the church is beginning to appreciate that the Jewish tradition did not end, or slope downward with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., but since then has had a continuing development, "a spiritual fecundity." That tradition is just as essential to an understanding of the Jews today as are the unfolding events and developing teachings during the two millenia before Jesus of Nazareth. Yet there is still "evident a painful ignorance of the history and traditions of Judaism" among Catholics ("Guidelines" and "Notes").

In our common era, as Edward Flannery has documented, Jews tend to highlight those very facts that Christians have "conveniently forgotten." Yet as we are remembering with painful remorse the Christian contribution to anti-Semitism in teaching and attitudes, in persecutions and houndings of the Jews, we are also learning not to falsely equate suffering and persecution with Jewish history. In that case, the Jewish tradition would become synonymous with anti-Semitism. All of it becomes, in the complaining words of the Jewish historian S. W. Baron, "lachrymose."

2. *The Jews, then, today and always*, remain most dear to God. Their election stands, for God neither repents of the gifts He makes nor reneges on the call He issues ("Nostra Aetate"). No human decision—or church council!—can break this bond (Rom. 11:28-29). In Pope John Paul II's words, both the church and the Jewish people belong to "the unfathomable design of God, who does not reject His people" (Ps. 94:14; Rom. 11:1).

How many Christians still regard the Jews, not for what they are, but for what they could become—"potential Christians," and regard Judaism, not as having salvific validity in God's promise, but only as a preparatory religion-on-the-way?

3. *After centuries of a tradition* that blamed all Jews, dead or living, for the crucifixion of Jesus, and that too often sought God's support for Christians' applying the punishment, the church now insists that in Christian teaching the Jews "should not be represented as rejected by God or accursed." Indeed, "nothing is to be taught or preached that is out of harmony with the truth of the Gospel" ("Nostra Aetate").

During the Vatican II debate, a few bishops questioned a possible distortion of biblical texts to prove that point. Since then, biblical scholars are seeing New Testament references that are "hostile or less than favorable to the Jews" in the context of later conflicts "between the nascent church and the Jewish community" ("Notes"). Texts in Matthew's and John's Gospels, for example, tend to excuse the disciples and to accuse more and more Jews by excluding more and more Romans.

*The Catechism of the Council of Trent* (1564), as "Notes" states, taught that "Christian sinners are more to blame for the death of Christ than those few Jews who

brought it about; they indeed 'knew not what they did' (Lk. 23:34), and we know it only too well." For the Christian, the cross is a sign of God's all-embracing love through forgiveness, and not a whipping post for any class of people or a club to herd people into salvation.

"Nostra Aetate" deplores hatred, persecutions and manifestations of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time by anyone. True, anti-Semitism has been rooted in a corrupted theology, centered around the accusation of deicide and the old Israel's total replacement by the new—the church. But anti-Semitism has also often been derived from secular sources that dressed in religious garb to bolster political, economic or social policies.

These admitted facts still do not get Catholics off the hook. It is most difficult to listen carefully to our Jewish sisters and brothers and come to the shocked realization that religion has often been used to bring out the worst in us and to justify our personal and collective pathologies. To paraphrase G. B. Shaw, we have not enough religion to love others but just enough to hate them and seek their destruction—a demonic law not confined to Christians.

Anti-Semitism may be still alive in Catholics today, and it may take a long time to wither away. But as Cardinal Willebrands said, it "becomes every day more difficult to have anti-Semitism linked with official, approved Catholic teaching."

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4. *The 20th-century holocaust* and the emergence of the state of Israel enter as an inseparable pair of events in the self-definition of the Jewish people.

Despite the historical books, films and television dramas, the stark horror of the holocaust is fading from non-Jewish consciousness. The event is sometimes deliberately deflated as merely another statistic about man's inhumanity to man, or one more in a series of injustices inflicted on the Jews.

More often, it seems, there is no intentional burial of the holocaust, but a blur. The psyche in most sensitive people can cope with only so many immediate, more recent horrors: calamitous wars in Africa, Northern Ireland, Central America, along the Persian Gulf and in Southeast Asia; sub-Saharan drought and the hunger pains of thousands and thousands; ubiquitous refugees in the millions; terrors on the seas and in the skies; the voices of the oppressed—economically, politically, racially, sexually. All form that long list of present violences, at home and abroad, whose

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images run wild in our memories. Too much has come, continues to come, too quickly, too soon.

Yet Jews and Christians together are asked neither to diminish the uniqueness of Auschwitz, nor to stop wrestling with its meaning. What *is* this horrendous event in that salvation history in which both synagogue and church continue to participate?

We both can painfully wonder if Auschwitz was not a climactic sign of what already has taken place through the manipulative technology that has come to dominate Western culture, now spreading worldwide. "Extermination as the final solution," warns Gregory Baum, "may be built more deeply than we think into the quantified, efficient world."

Since 1972, the Vatican S.P.C.U. Commission has met 12 times with the International Jewish Committee on Inter-religious Consultations. Last October, this liaison committee, backed by the Pope's address to it, decided jointly to study the historical events and theological implications of the holocaust or, in Hebrew, "shoah." It is certainly a giant leap off the platform of "Nostra Aetate"!

5. *A few years after the holocaust*, the state of Israel emerged. This recovery of a land, promised, found and then lost, also enters into the self-understanding of most Jews, whether they reside in Israel or not.

Catholics, unintentionally, still image the Jewish people as a peculiar type of denomination or church, somehow bearing the ecclesial note of a corporate faith-life that transcends every land, every nation. We are slowly learning that the Jews are sustained by a belief that that land is the visible expression of a faithful God who wills by covenant the permanence of the Jewish people.

For both the Jew and the Christian, theology and ethics include reflective experience. Together we need, I suggest, to make distinctions between the questions on our shared agenda: 1) What is the relationship between the people and the land? 2) Between the land and the state of Israel? 3) Between Israel and its consistent and shifting ideologies? 4) Between these ideologies and Israel's governmental decisions in practical social ethics?

The lack of such distinctions causes much confusion, even impasses, in the dialogue. For example, Catholics are very uneasy that, by recognizing the Jewish religious understanding of people-to-land, they will be inexorably led to

approve (lest they be accused of being anti-Jewish or at least inconsistent) every boundary Israel claims for itself and its protection, every military means to protect its threatened survival, every governmental act that directly affects the plight of Palestinian refugees in the area.

On the other hand, as Henry Siegman of the World Jewish Congress summarizes: "While for most religious Jews, the return of Jews to their ancestral homeland is clearly an act of divine providence, that would not necessarily imply a religious significance for the state of Israel" (Jerusalem Post, Sept. 2, 1985).

In short, no one should be asking for indiscriminate religious approval or condemnation of every act of Middle East governments, including Israel's. At the same time, a spectrum of Catholic and Jewish views should not remove all these related questions from our common agenda.

To state a question is already to state its seriousness, even though there will be a wide divergence of interpretation among Catholics, among Christians, among Jews and between Christians and Jews. Politics should not be allowed to place theology in chains. And the insistence that theology and politics should remain completely separate on *this* issue—of course, they are to be distinguished—is itself both a theological statement and a political act.

Until 1985, the Vatican's understandable pastoral worries about immediate, partisan political misinterpretations have muzzled any reference to the state of Israel in public statements from the Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews. The exact title reveals the distinction between religion and politics, and the separation is so structured; political judgments are the business of the Secretariat of State.

A breakthrough began in the 1985 "Notes." The "religious attachment" between the Jewish people and the land of Israel "finds its roots in the biblical tradition" and is an essential aspect of Jewish covenantal "fidelity to the one God." The "Notes," however, refrain from going a step further—the existence of the state of Israel from a perspective which is in itself religious. The "Notes" state, in very careful words, that the political options of Israel should be guided by "the common principles of international law."

The Holy See does not question the sovereign statehood of Israel. For example, in his Apostolic Letter of Good Friday in 1984, Pope John Paul II affirmed: "For the Jewish

people who live in the state of Israel and who preserve on that land such precious testimonies of their history and their faith, we must ask for the desired security and the due tranquility that is the prerogative of every nation and the condition of life and of progress for every society."

It is understandable that in the secular international arena the Vatican refrains from going beyond the dictate that only "common principles of international law" should apply to Israel, as they should apply, no more or no less, to every other sovereign state in the Middle East, whether Islamic or secular.

Because the Holy See acknowledges the validity and necessity of the Jewish state, and because the Vatican, as a "sovereign state," justifies its active tradition of diplomatic relations with nations, now including the United States, many Catholics strongly urge that the Vatican reinforce its recognition of Israel by diplomatic ties. Such a step would be a clear signal in the international arena that the Vatican in no way supports those Arab states that reject even the right of Israel to exist and insist that by political and military means Israel should be forced to disappear from the Middle East.

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## **Is open dialogue a betrayal of Christian mission? Or is mission a betrayal of dialogue?**

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6. *The most sensitive issue*, I find, at least on the more local level, is not that of covenant and land, or of diplomatic relations, but that of mission or witness. What is the Catholic understanding of "mission to the Jews," without its distortions by proselytism? And what is the Jewish understanding of "witness to the non-Jew," without its charge that the church's mission necessarily betrays open dialogue?

In summarizing another entire Vatican II document on the missionary activity of the church, "Nostra Aetate" affirms: "The duty of the church is to proclaim the cross of Christ as a sign of God's all-embracing love and as a fountain from which every grace flows." And the "Notes" assert Christian belief: "It is through Christ that we go to the Father (Jn. 14:6); 'this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou has sent' (Jn. 17:3)." But the "Guidelines" reminds us: "Lest the witness of Catholics to Jesus Christ should give offense to the Jews, [Catholics] must take care to live and spread their Christian faith, while maintaining the strictest respect for religious freedom in line with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council."

Some Catholics and Jews detect an ambivalence. Is open

dialogue a betrayal of Christian mission? Or is mission a betrayal of dialogue? The questions echo in our common history. The Christian, no matter how sincere, can only glimpse the outlines of the deep scars in the Jewish consciousness of "forced conversions," of subtle manipulations or overt organized drives to "save the Jews in and for Jesus."

At first hearing, the questions do sound foreign and unreal to the Catholic ear. Only at the price of ceasing to be, could the church and its faithful withdraw from a mission to serve the entire human family and to bear witness, by word and deed, to the healing power of Jesus before all peoples, everywhere, to the end of time. Failure in that witness, Catholics believe, is failure to the radical fidelity that a jealous God demands.

But in fidelity to that same God and to God's pedagogy, according to Vatican II's "Declaration on Religious Freedom," Christians in their witness should shun all conversionary attitudes and practices that do not conform to the ways a free God freely draws individuals to serve in spirit and in truth.

Catholics and other Christians should not give the impression that among themselves and their traditions there is a common understanding and practice of mission and dialogue, of witness and proselytism, of biblical conversion and religious membership. To me, this is also one of the most important issues in the dialogue within the divided Christian family, especially with our conservative evangelical brothers and sisters.

The issue also should make us Catholics more sensitive to the radical difference, with immediate pastoral consequences, between an interchurch marriage, say, between Catholic and Protestant, and a marriage between Jew and Christian—the preparation, the religious ceremony itself, if such takes place, and the aftercare of both partners and their children.

7. *In the dialogue with the Jews*, the question of the understanding and practice of mission raises another: What is the *common* witness of the church and the synagogue to humanity, including those of other world faiths?

During the drafting, "Nostra Aetate" was enlarged to include the church's relationships with those of every religion. The statement helped open the Catholic Church to dialogue with all of them and to see improved relationships, not only as human efforts, but as God's mysterious initiative in history.

True, for the Catholic, the Jewish people and the church are not only facts of history, but articles of faith. Yet what is our common responsibility with others not of the covenant? "Judaism and Christianity," writes Irving Greenberg, "do not merely tell God's love for man as the central key to life and history. They stand and fall on their fundamental claim that, therefore, the human being is of ultimate and absolute value."

With this faith conviction, are not both Jew and Chris-

tian called to join all who believe in God to risk encounter under the shadow of impending global catastrophe? Turning away from such encounter would be horrifying beyond measure. As the Jewish writer C.E. Vernoff has said: "Trying to evade what may be an inescapable 'kairos' must openly invite incalculable loss—loss which, on the shrinking globe where human folly has enlisted cosmic power in its service, can only be estimated by the holocaust."

In this context, a specific triologue is urgent: Christian/Jewish/Moslem, whether in the Middle East, Europe, North America or elsewhere. No matter how "imprudent" this triologue may be for some, it seems imprudent to be prudent by withholding these three partners from respond-

ing to a common religious call. The proclamation of faith always implies a risk in making the "correct" response, which is seldom required in peaceful times but always in troubled ones.

In hindsight, I now see a serious providential smile in the last sentence of the last paragraph of "Nostra Aetate." Even if one were asked to cancel its New Testament quotation and references, Moslem, Jew and Christian could accept its plea to faithful people that they "'maintain good fellowship among the nations' (1 Pet. 2:12), to live for their part in peace with all (Rom. 12:18), so that they may truly be sons and daughters of the Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:45)."

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## Epilogue

*Think of me in the dying embers.  
Think of heat among the ash.*

*I came among you from roots and grass,  
Stood among you with moss at my feet,  
The stones and wind my playthings.*

*All meadow and sea came to my growing.  
I in my wardrobe, my greens or reds,  
Even in my nakedness I stood to my company  
The seasons: gentle, slow, lost, empty.*

*Ferns, mushrooms, adder's tongue,  
A harmony of population.*

*Thrush, owl, bluejay—inspectors.  
I kept my place for your keeping,  
The right place for moisture and bears.*

*Now the single purpose: a moment's comfort.  
Cracks and boils*

*This bark and sap upon me, this time  
Grown in rings from the center*

*Hit with a blow of light, a flash of heat  
Splitting me open. A fire to my dying.*

**CHRISTOPHER DE VINCK**

