

50th Anniversary Commemoration of Nostra Aetate

St. Gerard's Catholic Church

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It has been noted by many commentators regarding the publication of Nostra Aetate in 1965 that it represented a “sea change” for the Catholic Church. Indeed, the metaphor is an apt one for if one were to imagine a large cruise liner coming about and heading in the reverse direction, one could make two important observations. The first is that the course change takes time as the cruise liner makes a wide turn on the high seas. Change of this magnitude requires significant realignment of attitudes and behaviour which rarely comes speedily. The second observation is that the turn in direction is only visible to those who are at the helm of the ship as well as the few who are on deck or looking out from the luxury cabins of the upper decks. Those passengers in the lower decks, who comprise the majority on the ship, might sense that the ship is turning but would continue about their activities as before until told differently.

In light of these two perspectives on the cruise line, I would like to address the impact of Nostra Aetate upon the religious and clerical leadership of both religions for whom this doctrine has clear implications and then speak about the laity of our respective religions who are much less aware of it and whose embrace has still not been complete.

Let me begin at the helm of the ship by addressing the historical relationship of the official religious leadership of Christianity and Judaism. We can clearly describe Nostra Aetate as a “sea change” in theological navigation by the Catholic Church after steaming ahead for 1500 years in one direction. To understand how this was perceived by Jews, I cite a relatively contemporary example from Jewish history. I quote Theodore Herzl, the founder of the modern Zionist Movement, who wrote in his diary on January 26, 1904 following an audience with Pope Pius X in which he was seeking the Catholic Church's support for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine:

“We cannot give approval to this movement. We cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem, but we could never sanction it. The soil of Jerusalem, if it was not always sacred, has been sanctified by the life of Jesus Christ. As the head of

the Church, I cannot tell you anything different. The Jews have not recognized out Lord; therefore, we cannot recognize the Jewish people... The Jewish religion was the foundation of our own; but it was superseded by the teachings of Christ, and we cannot concede it any further validity. The Jews, who ought to have been the first to acknowledge Jesus Christ, have not done so to this day."

Pope Pius X was merely stating the traditional Church position on Jews and Judaism. Before Vatican II, Jews and Judaism were considered to be the antithesis of what was good and truthful in Christianity. The teachings of preplacement or substitution theology, termed "supercessionism," evoked images of the Jewish God as ethnic, vindictive, and wrathful in a religion that was characterized as formalistic and legalistic. Thus, in a broad brush stroke, Christianity was spiritual while Judaism was carnal. Jews were the ones responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus and they stubbornly refused to accept the good news of the Christian faith. The purpose of continued Jewish existence, therefore, was to serve as a witness to what happens to those who reject the message of Jesus Christ. This, in turn, led to the negative portrayal of Jews in preaching and in the teachings of the Church, thus infusing a systemic anti-Semitism into Catholicism and Western culture.

The climax of the pernicious anti-Semitism that was embedded in Europe was the Holocaust. Pope John XXIII, born as Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, lived through World War II and witnessed the Holocaust. He was honored as one of the "Righteous" at Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial for having personally intervened to help save thousands of Jewish lives. Pope John XXIII truly felt distressed that the Catholic Church's widespread "teaching of contempt" had produced a kind of apathy leading to insufficient action among many Christians when Jews were persecuted by the Nazis.

The Holocaust profoundly challenged the Catholic Church's attitudes toward Jews and Judaism and the subsequent soul-searching within Catholicism was one of the primary factors, in the opinion of many, leading to Vatican II and the declaration of *Nostra Aetate*. As a result, in the past 50 years there has been more progress in Jewish-Catholic relations than in the previous 1500 years. *Nostra Aetate*, thus, became a ground-breaking, transformative, and watershed event in the history of Jewish-Christian relations.

Now, instead of being accursed of God, Jews became beloved and Judaism was accorded an intrinsic and inherent respect worthy of its eternal covenant with God. The Catholic Church moved from a theology of exclusivism to one of religious pluralism, recognizing that there can be truth found in other religious traditions, a perspective that has always been fundamental to the Jewish worldview.

On the charge of deicide, the Vatican Council took the position the *“even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ, neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion... the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed, as if this followed from holy scriptures.”*

For *Nostra Aetate* to be more than a piece of archival paper, the Catholic Church had to commit itself to re-educating the Catholic clergy and laity about its new realizations and attitudes about Jews and Judaism. This prompted several documents, guidelines, and notes regarding preaching and teaching within the Catholic Church. It also necessitated that *Nostra Aetate* not become merely an internal church document but rather that it was actualized in its newfound relationship with the Jewish People. This was realized through such historic events as Pope John Paul II’s visit to Rome’s chief synagogue, the 1993 Israel-Vatican Accord establishing full diplomatic ties, Pope John Paul II’s visit to Israel in 2000, and the participation of the Catholic Church in numerous interfaith dialogue organizations such as the Council for Christians and Jews.

In addition to these actions, the Catholic Church, by recognizing the validity of God’s covenant with the Jewish People, has ceased conversionary efforts directed at Jews to become Christians. Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry, stated in a 2002 address at Boston College, *“This does not mean that Jews in order to be saved have to become Christians; if they follow their own conscience and believe in God’s promises as they understand them in their religious tradition, they are in line with God’s plan, which for us, came to its historical completion in Jesus Christ.”*

It is through this “sea change” in the direction of the relationship between Catholicism and Judaism that a deeper and more profound appreciation of the other has occurred. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, wrote this about Christianity, *“Both Judaism and Christianity share the prophets’ belief that God chooses agents through whom His will is made known and His work done throughout history. Both Judaism and Christianity live*

in the certainty that mankind is in need of ultimate redemption, that God is involved in human history, that in relations between man and man God is at stake; that the humiliation of man is a disgrace of God; that the infamy of a wicked act is infinitely greater than we are able to imagine... The Roman Catholic Church represents a rock of solidarity, belief, and morality in the world where so many values in the moral, ethical, and religious spheres have foundered..."

What I have thus far addressed is what I first referred to at the beginning of my remarks as having been pertinent to those at the helm of the ship or those in the upper decks. Much of the progress in Catholic Jewish relations occurs at the level of clergy interaction or at the highest levels of leadership in the religious structures. For the leaders of Judaism and Catholicism, there remain issues that demand attention, dialogue and collaboration. Better education and religious literacy about the other's tradition is essential, requiring textbooks, classes, and sermonic materials to be developed to bring truer knowledge and understanding to bear between us. Along the same lines, better scriptural interpretation and more enlightened liturgical references about Jews in particular is warranted. Furthermore, struggling with the legacy of the Holocaust must entail honest self-reflection and a willingness to combat anti-Semitism in the present along with struggling against the persecution of Christian minorities in many parts of the world. Lastly, leaders of both Catholicism and Judaism must respond passionately and compassionately to the pursuit of peace in the Middle East so that all peoples are accorded security and human dignity.

As for the majority of the people who are below deck, they have been only minimally aware of the "sea change." I recall in the early 90's when a neighbourhood child told my son, who was about 8 years old at the time, that Jews killed Christ. It was a teachable moment for my son but it was deeply disturbing for me to hear the old canard being espoused by yet another generation of Christians. For the most part, positive changes in relationships between Christians and Jews have come from more progressive attitudes in society about diversity and pluralism than from an awareness that new theological positions. More attention needs to be directed at enlightening one another about our beliefs about our role in the world, the meaning of salvation and redemption, and how we view others.

In conclusion, the creation of Nostra Aetate has led to a profound redefinition of the relationship between Catholics and Jews and more generally Christians and Jews. It did so in an era when religion was beginning to lose its voice in society and in world affairs. In the past decade, we have witnessed a return of religion as a major force in the global political arena with the extremist, radical expressions of religion destroying all that lies in their path.

Never has there been a time as crucial as today in which Jews and Christians should stand together in the defense of our religious and political liberties. Neither has it ever been as important for us to expand our model of cooperation to the full Abrahamic spectrum by including our Muslim co-religionists in the pursuit of justice, human dignity and peace. This is the legacy and the challenge of Nostra Aetate on its 50th anniversary.