

“Protestants and Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate* (October 28, 1965)”
Panel at St. Gerard’s Roman Catholic Church, Calgary
25 November 2015

Introduction

I want to thank those who planned this event for including me and the Protestant perspective in this panel. In a sense, Protestants were eavesdroppers at Vatican II. Yet, they benefited from it, and built upon the attitude and vision that it represented.

Of course, it is impossible to speak for Protestants as a whole on any subject since they represent such a diverse phenomenon. That is true for my subject this evening, “Protestants and Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate*.” Anglican Bernard Pawley drew attention to this back in 1962: “There is no such thing as a Protestant response to the Second Vatican Council, for ‘Protestantism’ does not represent ‘a homogeneous body of doctrine’” (Pawley 1962:22). There may be as many views as there are Protestants, and this fact makes Protestants somewhat different from Roman Catholics.”¹ I will consider Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate* mainly in relation to three Protestant groups, the Anglicans, the Presbyterians, and the United Church of Canada.

One would expect Protestants to respond to Vatican II, to take account of it, because of its unprecedented magnitude and significance. “The final [16] documents of the council are the products of the largest committee in the history of the world.” They were the work of some 2,300 bishops from 116 countries. The meetings of the Council were held for 10-week sessions in fall each year from 1962 to 1965.² For the first time,

¹ Graham A. Duncan, “A Protestant perspective on Vatican II & 50 years: An engagement with dissent.” *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* Vol. 69, No 1 (2013). See: <http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/1911/3519>

² Patricia McMurray, “Georgetown Expert Looks at the Unprecedented Impact of Vatican II,” *Georgetown Magazine* (Jan. 24, 2013). See John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Belknap Press, 2008).

Catholics were encouraged to foster friendly relations with Orthodox and Protestant Christians, as well as with Jews and Muslims, and to pray with them. The Council condemned all forms of anti-Semitism and insisted on respect for Judaism and Islam as Abrahamic faiths along with Christianity.³ It also encouraged interreligious activity. Since the Reformation, Catholics had not been allowed to attend non-Catholic religious events or to attend non-Catholic colleges without their bishop's permission. The Council encouraged Catholics to build friendly relations with Protestant and Orthodox Christians. "In the Council documents, the Church makes clear that it is open to the rites and traditions of all cultures," says John O'Malley.⁴

Gerald O'Collins, author of *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions* (2013), identified the Council's teaching on other religions as a fundamental change in the Catholic Church's self-understanding. Its teaching represented "a massive shift in the official doctrine and practice of the Catholic Church."⁵ *Nostra Aetate* explained the new "attitude" or "relation" that Catholics should have toward persons of other religious communities: "an attitude not of confrontation or competition, but of dialogue and collaboration."⁶ Not surprisingly, *Nostra Aetate* was the first conciliar document quoted by Pope Francis in the course of his pontificate.⁷

What prompted *this shift in attitude* in the 1960s? John O'Malley answers: "The

³ John W. O'Malley, "Opening the Church to the World," *The New York Times* (Oct. 10, 2012). See: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/11/opinion/vatican-ii-opened-the-church-to-the-world.html?_r=0

⁴ Rev. John O'Malley, S.J., "The Unprecedented Impact of Vatican II" (Jan. 24, 2013). See: <http://magazine.georgetown.edu/2013/winter/jan-feb/tier1/vatican.html>

⁵ Gerald O'Collins, S.J., *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶ Reid B. Locklin, "Parsing *Nostra Aetate*," *Newman Rambler, Vatican II Special Edition* 10:1 (Fall 2013), p. 16.

⁷ Massimo Faggioli, "Nostra Aetate after Fifty Years: History, not only Memory, of Vatican II," *ABC Religion and Ethics* (30 Oct. 2015). Massimo Faggioli is Associate Professor in the Department of Theology at the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota. This article is adapted from a lecture delivered on 30 August 2015 at the Aquinas Institute of Theology, St. Louis.

life experiences of Pope John XXIII, which were unlike those of any previous pope.”

As a young priest, he served in the Italian Army in World War I; later he spent nearly two decades as a Vatican diplomat in Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece, and was papal nuncio to Paris at the end of World War II. He knew diversity, turmoil, sin and evil firsthand, but he also knew goodness as he found it in people of other faiths. As far as I know, he never used the word ‘reconciliation,’ but it captures, I believe, what inspired him.⁸

Also important in the shift was the work of two influential Catholic figures involved in drafting *Nostra Aetate*, Cardinal Augustin Bea and Gregory Baum, an advisor to Cardinal Bea. In 1960 Bea became the first president of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. Pope John XXIII asked Cardinal Bea to write a statement on Catholic relations with Jews in light of the murder of six million Jews. Theologian Gregory Baum, a Canadian born of a Jewish mother and a Protestant father, was a survivor of the Holocaust, and arrived in Canada as a refugee. Baum’s perspective was crucial to Bea’s work.⁹

On October 28th 1965, the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* was approved by 2,221 votes in favor, with 88 against.¹⁰ Pope Paul VI set forth the Catholic Church’s first significant engagement with the reality of religious pluralism in general, and the reality of Jewish life in particular. *Nostra Aetate* is a 5 paragraph long statement on the Catholic Church and non-Christian religions, the shortest document issued at Vatican II, at 1,600 words. Yet, of the Council’s 16 documents, “none are more studied, more argued over, more written about or more relevant to how the Church lives its mission now.”¹¹

Here is how *Nostra Aetate* begins:

⁸ John W. O’Malley, “Opening the Church to the World,” *The New York Times* (Oct. 10, 2012).

⁹ Michael Swan, “*Nostra Aetate* opened Catholics to the world,” *The Catholic Register* (October 25, 2015).

¹⁰ *Nostra Aetate* was neither a decree nor a constitution, claiming neither dogmatic nor pastoral authority.

¹¹ Swan, “*Nostra Aetate* opened Catholics to the world.” Over the last four years of academic conferences, books and celebrations to mark a halfcentury since the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* is the only Vatican II document to inspire the CCCB to issue an entire catechetical program for Canadian Catholics.

In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship. One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all ...

Later it reads:

Religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing “ways,” comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.

This synod remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham’s stock. Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit of biblical and theological studies, as well as of fraternal dialogues.

The Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved by the Gospel’s spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism directed against Jews at any time and by anyone. The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion.¹²

These words give you some idea of the significance of *Nostra Aetate* as a step forward in Christian relations with Jewish people and with members of other world religions.

In my presentation this evening I consider, first, the Protestant presence at Vatican II; then, features of the Council that made it attractive to Protestants; and finally, how Anglicans, Presbyterians, and the United Church of Canada responded to *Nostra Aetate*.

¹² DECLARATION ON THE RELATION OF THE CHURCH TO NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS, *NOSTRA AETATE*, PROCLAIMED BY HIS HOLINESS POPE PAUL VI ON OCTOBER 28, 1965.

Protestants at Vatican II

Protestants were not altogether absent from Vatican II and the deliberations that gave rise to *Nostra Aetate*. Invitations were issued to Protestants on behalf of Pope XXIII by Augustin Cardinal Bea, S.J., president of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. As a result, 54 observers attended the first session in 1962; that number rose over the duration of the council, with 63 non-Catholic religious leaders attending the second session, and 106 observers at the final session in 1965.¹³ These numbers included Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists, a Quaker, members of the Disciples of Christ and of the Unitarian Universalist Association, as well as from the Church of South India, the World Council of Churches, and delegates from 11 Orthodox churches. Eight more Protestants attended as guests of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.¹⁴ Throughout the Council, it was not always the same denominational representatives who attended; most of these groups had substitute delegates who also attended. Anglicans, for example, had eight observers at the Council over the course of the four sessions, four of them from North America.¹⁵ The positive Protestant response indicated the current worldwide interest in Christian unity.¹⁶

Pope John XXIII received the observers in an audience two days after the council began. “While many were wary of meeting the pope, they came away stunned by the

¹³ The observers held their own meeting every Tuesday afternoon while Vatican II was in session to compare impressions and ideas. Typically, a representative of the Vatican’s Christian Unity Secretariat was also present. See Glen Argan, “‘Observers’ added different outlooks in Vatican II talks,” *WESTERN CATHOLIC REPORTER* (June 10, 2013).

¹⁴ Father Placid Jordan, O.S.B., “63 Non-Catholic Observers Attending Second Session.”

¹⁵ Bishop Christopher Butler, “Anglican Reactions to Vatican II,” chapter 6 of *In the Light of the Council* (Darton Longman & Todd, 1968).

¹⁶ Father Placid Jordan, O.S.B., “63 Non-Catholic Observers Attending Second Session.”

See: <https://vaticaniiat50.wordpress.com/2013/09/27/63-non-catholic-observers-attending-second-session/>

warmth with which they were received.”¹⁷ And Cardinal Bea “not only welcomed observers from the World Council and from other world denominational bodies, but treated them with the utmost confidence.” Such overtures helped Protestants feel that they were involved in the work of the Council.¹⁸

Anglican Archdeacon Bernard Pawley, for example, was resident in Rome well before the beginning of the Council, as the personal representative of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher. By the time the Council opened, “an Anglican presence was firmly established in Rome thanks to the work of Bernard and Margaret Pawley.”

Another Anglican observer, Canon Howard Root, noted:

During the Council itself the Pawley flat was the place of endless social occasions and also of many serious discussions between Anglican observers and fathers of the Council. I do not doubt that in some ways — not spectacular but not unimportant — those discussions affected the way things went in certain Council debates. In some future history of the Council I have little doubt that the work of the Pawleys will deserve a long and laudatory footnote.¹⁹

A member of the British and World Council of Churches, and of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s First Liaison to the Vatican Secretariat for Unity, Pawley later became vice-chairman of the Church of England Commission on Roman Catholic Relations.

At the same time as Catholics were welcoming Protestant observers to Vatican II, Catholic involvement in the ecumenical movement was steadily increasing.

At the meeting of the Faith and Order Commission and of the Central Committee at St. Andrews in 1960, there were four Roman Catholic observers, approved but not officially nominated. At the general assembly of the World Council of Churches at New Delhi in 1961, there were five Roman Catholic observers officially nominated. At the fourth World Conference of Faith and Order at Montreal in 1963, at least sixteen Roman Catholics were present, either as official observers or officially invited guests. At the fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Uppsala in July 1968, apart from

¹⁷ Glen Argan, “‘Observers’ added different outlooks in Vatican II talks.”

¹⁸ FR. BERNARD LEEMING, S.J., “I BELIEVE IN ONE CHURCH,” *The Way: A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY* (APRIL 1969), p. 136.

¹⁹ Canon Howard Root, “The path to reunion,” *The Tablet* (25th August 1979).

official observers and guests, there were approximately one hundred and fifty Roman Catholics present. Two Roman Catholics gave addresses to the whole assembly, Fr Robert Tucci, S.J. and Barbara Ward.²⁰

To sum up: “For these Protestant observers, Vatican II helped them attain a new threshold of understanding along with a desire for closer relationships. The Council marked a paradigm shift which brought all to the brink of a new ecumenical era.”²¹

Features of the Vatican II Council that attracted Protestants

There is a sense in which *Nostra Aetate* is the most “Protestant” of the documents of the Vatican II Council because all the quotations are from Scripture; here we have *sola Scriptura*, and no reliance on tradition. The Catholic theological tradition is not cited—not even when *Nostra Aetate* speaks about the mystery of the Church.²²

It is also clear that Pope John XXIII set a tone for the Council that Protestants found appealing, with his emphasis on the themes of renewal of the Church and reunion with separated Christian brethren. These themes are usually referenced as *aggiornamento* (Italian for dialogue with the modern world) and *ressourcement* (French for returning to older sources for contemporary thinking).²³ When Pope John XXIII convened the Council, he stated as his two goals: “the enlightenment, edification and joy of the entire Christian people,” and “extending a renewed cordial invitation to the separated churches to participate with us in this feast of grace and brotherhood.”²⁴

²⁰ LEEMING, S.J., “I BELIEVE IN ONE CHURCH,” *The Way*, p. 136.

²¹ Duncan, “A Protestant perspective on Vatican II & 50 years: An engagement with dissent.”

²² Massimo Faggioli, “*Nostra Aetate* after Fifty Years: History, not only Memory, of Vatican II,” ABC Religion and Ethics (30 Oct. 2015).

²³ “Perhaps Vatican II’s greatest legacy was its attempt to bring traditional and progressive Catholics together through these two concepts.” Patterson, W. Morgan. “A Baptist Historian Views Vatican II,” *Baptist History and Heritage* Volume 1, Issue 2 (1966), p. 7. Also see George Lindbeck, “Re-Viewing Vatican II: An Interview with George Lindbeck,” edited by George Weigel, *First Things* (December 1994).

²⁴ Rev. John O’Malley, S.J., “The Unprecedented Impact of Vatican II” (October 2012).

Protestants responded favourably to this agenda. By the time of Vatican II, many Protestant denominations were already working towards cooperation with Protestants of other denominations. And Catholics and Protestants were talking about collaborating on a variety of issues. Anglicans were considering the idea of uniting with Catholics.”²⁵

Anglicans and Vatican II's Nostra Aetate

Anglican observer, Bernard Pawley, has argued that Anglicans were the most positive of non-Catholic Christians in their evaluation of the Council and its achievements.

Anglicans recognized in the declaration on religious liberty “one of the most substantial results of the Council,” and found new hope that the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches could now work towards a joint statement on religious liberty.

Anglican observer, Canon Howard Root, expressed “warm appreciation” for the declaration on the non-Christian religions. While conservative Protestant critics generally took an unfavourable view of the declaration, Anglicans showed genuine sympathy for the Catholic view of God’s grace working outside of Christian churches.²⁶

The Anglican Church also agreed with Vatican II in seeing Christian-Jewish relations as a paradigm for other inter-religious relations.

The text of *Nostra Aetate* moved from an initial draft focused entirely on the topic [of Christian-Jewish relations] to become a statement speaking also about relations with Muslims, and more widely with Hindus, Buddhists, and other religions. Catholic theology sees the distinctiveness of Christian–Jewish relations as being in some sense paradigmatic for all other interfaith relations: the church’s primary relation to the Jewish other shapes its relation to all religious others in a multifaith world. Cardinal Walter Kasper used an evocative phrase for this insight: “Judaism is a sacrament of every otherness that the Church must learn to discern, recognize and celebrate.”²⁷

²⁵ Duncan, “A Protestant perspective on Vatican II & 50 years: An engagement with dissent.”

²⁶ *The Second Vatican Council. Studies by Eight Anglican Observers*. Edited by Bernard C. Pawley (Oxford University Press. 1967). See also Bishop Christopher Butler, “Anglican Reactions to Vatican II,” chapter 6 of *In the Light of the Council* (Darton Longman & Todd, 1968).

²⁷ The initial draft was the “Decree on the Jews” (*Decretum de Iudaeis*). Walter Cardinal Kasper, “Address on the 37th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*” (October 28, 2002); <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/650-wk02oct28>

A change of rhetoric occurred in the Anglican churches during and after the Second Vatican Council. The increasing openness of the Roman Catholic Church forced the Church of England to redefine itself. Anglicans moved away from a negative anti-Roman identity, and developed a far more positive attitude.²⁸

Presbyterians and Vatican II's Nostra Aetate

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) have completed three phases of International dialogue, the first during 1970-77, the second 1984-90, both of which published reports. A third phase began in 1998, and its report was finalized in 2005.²⁹

Even before American Catholics were using the Vatican II *Sunday Lectionary for Mass* (1969; Eng. tr. 1969), the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA) had obtained and published it. In doing so, three worship models converged, Catholic, Evangelical, and Reformed, to enrich the worship not only of Presbyterians but also of other Christian churches.³⁰

In 2004, the PC (U.S.A.) Assembly approved a policy statement in which it distanced itself from anti-Roman-Catholic language in its confessions, saying that it does not represent PC (U.S.A.) understanding of the Catholic Church today. "Specific statements in the 16th and 17th century confessions and catechisms in *The Book of Confessions* contain condemnations and derogatory characterizations of the Catholic

²⁸ Mark Chapman, "Vatican II and the redefinition of Anglicanism." Although this approach had been adopted by Anglo-Catholic enthusiasts earlier in the century, it gradually spread through other sections of the Anglican Churches. See: <http://dc2015.ei-research.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/DC2015-Abstracts-and-Biographies.pdf>

²⁹ Mons. John A. Radano, "Report on Catholic-Reformed Relations." See: <https://www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/CATREF04.HTM>

³⁰ Harry E. Winter, "Presbyterians Pioneer the Vatican II Sunday Lectionary: Three Worship Models Converge," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* Vol. 38 Issue 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2001), pp. 127-150.

Church: Chapters XVIII and XXII of the Scots Confession; Questions and Answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism; and Chapter II, III, XVII and XX of the Second Helvetic Confession. (Chapters XXII, XXV and XXIX of the Westminster Confession of Faith have been amended to remove anachronous and offensive language. Chapter XXVIII of the French Confession does not have constitutional standing). These statements reflect 16th and 17th century polemics. Their condemnations and characterizations of the Catholic Church are not the position of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and are not applicable to current relationships between the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Catholic Church.”³¹ This new policy statement was inserted into the Preface to the Presbyterian Church’s *Book of Confessions*.

The United Church of Canada and Vatican II’s Nostra Aetate

The British Columbia Conference of the United Church of Canada at its Annual Meeting on May 4, 1996, passed the following resolution: “Local Churches are encouraged to use the following prayer during Holy Week or during the next year. The prayer is attributed to Pope John XXIII shortly before his death in 1963. He expressed the hope that it would be read in all Catholic Churches”:

We now recognize that for many centuries our eyes were covered with blindness, so that we no longer saw the beauty of Your chosen people and no longer recognized the features of our firstborn brother. We admit that the sign of Cain is on our forehead. For centuries, Abel was lying on the ground in blood and tears because we had forgotten Your love. Forgive the curse that we unjustly pronounced over the name of the Jews. Forgive that we crucified You again in their flesh.³²

This 1996 resolution testifies to the continuing impact of the spirit of Vatican II, and of *Nostra Aetate* in particular.

³¹ Radano, “Report on Catholic-Reformed Relations.”

³² Resolution: “A call to do something about possible anti-Jewish feelings within the Church,” British Columbia Conference of the United Church of Canada at its Annual Meeting (May 4, 1996).

The United Church of Canada also fulfilled the intentions of *Nostra Aetate* in the statement and supporting documents that arose out of the 38th General Council of the United Church of Canada in August 2003: “Bearing Faithful Witness: Statement On United Church – Jewish Relations Today.” The **preamble** reflects that “Jesus commands us to love our neighbours, but all too often Christians have treated Jews, our sisters and brothers, as enemies. We believe that our faith calls us to repent when the church has been unfaithful in its witness by not loving Jews as neighbours.”³³ The Statement goes on to **acknowledge** “a history of anti-Judaism and antisemitism within Christianity as a whole, including the United Church of Canada,” and “a history of interpretation of New Testament texts which has often failed to appreciate the context within Judaism from which these texts emerged, resulting in deeply-rooted anti-Jewish misinterpretation.” The Statement **rejects** supersessionism, “the belief that Christians have replaced Jews in the love and purpose of God,” and rejects “proselytism which targets Jews for conversion to Christianity.” The Statement **affirms** “that the gifts and calling of God to the Jewish people are irrevocable”; it affirms “the uniqueness for Christianity of the relationship with Judaism,” and that “the State of Israel has the right to exist in peace and security.” Finally, the Statement **encourages** members of the United Church of Canada “to be vigilant in resisting antisemitism and anti-Judaism in church and society.”³⁴

All of this is fully within the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*.

Conclusion

Nostra Aetate was a statement from the Catholic Church which caught the attention of the world and reflected the spirit of the age. It came into the world at the

³³ The United Church of Canada, “Bearing Faithful Witness: Statement On United Church – Jewish Relations Today” (38th General Council of the United Church of Canada, August 2003).

³⁴ UCC, “Bearing Faithful Witness: Statement On United Church – Jewish Relations Today.”

same time as Canadians were discovering multiculturalism. “What started as the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in 1963 had by 1969 resulted in successive waves of immigration, constantly remaking Canada. In acknowledging the Japanese, the Jews, the Italians and the Portuguese in our midst, the 1969 final report of the royal commission invented the word ‘multiculturalism.’”³⁵ For Canadian Protestants who were the children of multiculturalism, *Nostra Aetate* struck a chord.

Pope Paul decided in 1965 that *dialogue* would be the key word. “Dialogue with other Christians, dialogue with other religious traditions and dialogue with people without a religious faith.” Every Pope since then has spoken of the Church in terms of dialogue, none more so than Pope Francis. “Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world,” Pope Francis said in 2013. And so it is a duty for Christians, including Protestants, as well as other religious communities.³⁶

Nostra Aetate continues to point us in the way forward as together, as Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, we seek reconciliation among the world’s faiths.

³⁵ Swan, “*Nostra Aetate* opened Catholics to the world.”

³⁶ Swan, “*Nostra Aetate* opened Catholics to the world.”