

EXAMINING *NOSTRA AETATE* AFTER 40 YEARS

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AFTER 40 YEARS

Catholic-Jewish Relations in Our Time

Edited by
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Preface

For those working in the field of Christian-Jewish dialogue, it is difficult to remember what was it like before October 28, 1965, when the Catholic bishops of the world voted to approve the shortest and perhaps most controversial document of Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, which addressed the relationship of the Catholic Church to non-Christian religions, especially Jews. Before that time it was not uncommon for Christian churches to discount Judaism as an antiquated religion that had been replaced or superseded by Christianity. Many Christians probably believed that Jews needed to be converted and held an implicit attitude of contempt toward them, believing them to be blind and stubborn to the truth of Jesus. Interfaith marriages were rare and interreligious meetings were exercises in apologetics more than discussion.

The *Nostra Aetate* document was written for Christians, but it signaled to Jews and to the world that the Catholic Church was rethinking its attitudes, teachings, and practices regarding Jews. *Nostra Aetate* is best understood in the context of subsequent statements by the Holy See, the popes, and the conferences of bishops that are trying to implement it. Official Vatican documents such as the *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration, Nostra Aetate* (1974), *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* (1985), *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), and *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* (1998) all follow the lead of *Nostra Aetate* and deplore all persecutions, hatreds, prejudice, discrimination, and displays of anti-Semitism leveled at any time or from any source.

Nostra Aetate encouraged dialogue and mutual understanding between Christians and Jews by way of “biblical and theological enquiry and friendly discussion.” Catholic universities and Jewish institutions have a special responsibility in fostering dialogue and understanding for the sake of discovering truth and promoting peace and justice. Centers and institutes of Jewish-Christian studies and interreligious studies as well as Jewish Studies departments have been established in an increasing number of secular universities. The frequency of workshops and conferences where scholars and students share biblical and theological insights is increasing, and the warmth of that shared wisdom is beginning to bear fruit in excellent collaborative publications by scholars of different faiths. The Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University is proud to be a leader in this most important effort of those who seek the deepest truth of human relations based on God’s invitation to work for peace and justice.

The dialogue process of the past forty years initiated by *Nostra Aetate* has challenged many Christian denominations to write significant statements and publish recommendations for future relations with the Jewish people. Similarly, several Jewish organizations and individuals have also published promising statements that attest to their willingness to continue this vital conversation. Of course, there will continue to be disagreements and misunderstandings by all parties, but these can be key parts of rather than impediments to ongoing and productive dialogue.

We are living in extraordinary times and are blessed because people of good will have reached out in trust and friendship. The present volume is intended to be a testament of and contribution to that continuing effort. The papers herein were contributed by prominent leaders in the field of Christian-Jewish understanding whose words and lives play an important part in the *Nostra Aetate* story. Collectively, the essays that follow describe the past, present, and future of that story, calling attention to the pioneers and pivotal events that have paved the way, assessing from various points of view where we are now, and sketching in detail what needs to be done as we move ahead turn the vision of *Nostra Aetate* into a lasting reality.

The volume begins with an essay by Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy in which he describes *Nostra Aetate* as a document that “left the Catholic Church throughout the world with a binding and irreversible commitment to turn away from almost 2,000 years of hostility towards the Jewish people, and to set out on a new journey of mutual trust and understanding.” Cardinal Cassidy focuses on the steps taken in the decades after *Nostra Aetate* to further this mutual trust and understanding, including the formation of commissions and study groups, and the convening of regular international conferences to further the Catholic-Jewish dialogue that had for many years been conspicuous by its absence. This dialogue is still the proverbial “work in progress,” and Cardinal Cassidy acknowledges the various difficulties in overcoming “the past spirit of suspicion, resentment and distrust,” some of which have surfaced particularly in ongoing dialogue about the Holocaust, and how the *Shoah* should be commemorated. But without minimizing the remaining strains and challenges, Cardinal Cassidy envisions “an exciting future.” The essay concludes with a detailed examination of how the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* continues in a variety of recent publications by both Catholic and Jewish scholars that affirm not only mutual respect but the deep commonalities of Christianity and Judaism, and, as one document puts it, their shared “Covenant and Mission.”

While Cardinal Cassidy takes us from *Nostra Aetate* to the present, Lawrence E. Frizzell places *Nostra Aetate* in its own historical circumstances, and examines the document in the broad context of the Second Vatican Council’s “contribution to Catholic-Jewish relations.” While acknowledging that *Nostra Aetate* is indeed a significant breakthrough, Frizzell shows how its spirit and indeed even many of its particulars can be seen in such documents as *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, *Lumen Gentium*, *Dei Verbum*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Dignitatis Humanae*. *Nostra Aetate* is, as it were, not so much a moment as a momentous articulation of an evolving modern tradition.

At the same time, *Nostra Aetate* is certainly a break from an earlier longstanding tradition. In “A Bridge to New Christian-

Jewish Understanding: *Nostra Aetate* at 40,” John T. Pawlikowski highlights ways in which this document may be taken as not only a new direction in the Catholic understanding and treatment of Jews but also a document with potentially radical theological consequences, affecting how Catholics understand Catholicism. Pawlikowski surveys contemporary scholarship (by Robin Scroggs and others) that emphasizes how earlier attempts to define Christianity by stressing its break and differences from Judaism should perhaps give way to a deeper awareness of the continuing rootedness of Christianity in Judaism. A number of contributors to this volume pertinently discuss the ways in which *Nostra Aetate* is a significant step forward in one faith tradition’s understanding and relating to the “Other.” Pawlikowski nicely complements this by reminding the reader of the extent to which *Nostra Aetate* should also be taken as a critical opportunity for members of one faith tradition to understand itself.

Mordecai Waxman’s essay was originally published in a *Festschrift* honoring Cardinal John O’Connor, but fits particularly well here not only as it acknowledges Cardinal O’Connor’s many contributions to the “revolutionary change of attitude” marked by *Nostra Aetate* but also because it provides a behind-the-scenes narrative of some of the key meetings and events prompted by *Nostra Aetate* that initiated, as his title puts it, “Progress in Jewish-Christian Dialogue.” Waxman brings to life the “agenda, discussion, and character” of international meetings going as far back as 1975, and we hear first-hand recollections of the negotiations, tensions, and breakthroughs that are inevitable parts of what is a very complex conversation and move toward reconciliation. Waxman focuses particularly on crises surrounding Pope John Paul II’s audience with former U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim, whose early association with the Nazi party had recently been revealed, and the controversy that erupted when a group of Carmelite nuns attempted to turn a building in Auschwitz into a convent. Waxman tells a fascinating story about how these and other such potentially divisive events and tensions were overcome, and in fact came to emblemize the difficult process of dialogue in which “From the bitter came forth the sweet.”

Much like Waxman, Judith Hershcopf Banki surveys the bitter and the sweet in her recollections of “Landmarks and Landmines in Jewish-Christian Relations.” In her work with the American Jewish Committee, one of her particular concerns has been examining the contents of Christian teaching material, and the sad fact she documents in this essay is the persistence of anti-Semitism supported by a deeply-ingrained “teaching of contempt.” It is embarrassing and painful to recount the details of the continuing tradition of caricatures, slanders, mistreatment, and insensitivity that never seems far from the surface in popular and even institutionalized relations with and conceptions of Jews, Judaism, and the state of Israel, but Banki affirms that if the aim of *Nostra Aetate* is ever to be realized, one key imperative is that “Christians must learn something about the history of Christian anti-Semitism as part of their religious education.” She acknowledges that “The progress that has been made since Vatican II is remarkable,” but measures this against “the background of estrangement that preceded it” and continues to this day in a variety of misunderstandings, outrages, and missed opportunities. She perhaps speaks for all the contributors to the volume when, guardedly optimistic, she concludes her essay with wise words of assessment, motivation, and hope: “We still have much work to do together.”

The “background of estrangement” that Banki speaks of is sketched out in detail in Eugene Fisher’s essay, “Catholics and Jews: Twenty Centuries and Counting,” which provides a far-ranging overview of Catholic-Jewish relations from the days of Jesus to our own time. Fisher organizes his panoramic treatment around what he labels as “Six Moments of Crisis in Catholic-Jewish History,” and even though he presents an abbreviated summary covering over two-thousand years, he attempts to avoid giving a “flattened” view and instead tries to capture some of the complexities of a story that may “open up possibilities for the future.” Each of the historical periods he surveys shows the separating of the two religions, a process that Fisher insists was not inevitable—that was in fact not a reflection of but a regrettable deflection from the origins of

Christianity and the spirit of the New Testament. “Separation” turns out to be far too neutral a word: the history that Fisher traces is an ominously accelerating one of triumphalism, exclusion, oppression, and the teaching of contempt, culminating in the “racialist” theories that developed during the so-called “Enlightenment” and took even more monstrous form in the twentieth century. But for Fisher a comprehensive historical view alerts us to not only a shameful series of events that must be repudiated and repented but a glimmer of missed opportunities that must not be missed again. He calls for a return to a kind of Christianity without the accretions that contributed to anti-Semitism, one that again, as in the early days, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, acknowledges and enacts the “sacred bond” between Catholics and Jews, a process that will be furthered as each group comes to learn each others’ “language.”

Fisher’s concluding emphasis on the centrality of dialogue is complemented by my case study of how the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* can be embodied and propagated in a structure such as the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding (CCJU) of Sacred Heart University, set up to, as the subtitle to the essay notes, foster “Dialogue and Understanding.” Like Frizzell and several others in the present volume, I place *Nostra Aetate* in the context of a series of papal documents (including *Dei Verbum*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis*) that put forth a new agenda for renewal and reconciliation, and make practical suggestions for realizing these goals. I describe how the CCJU promotes interreligious dialogue and understanding through an ambitious program of teacher education, conferences, study tours, awards, and publications. One of the intentions is to help create not just moments but a “culture of dialogue,” and in describing the origin and operation of the CCJU, I attempt to provide a blueprint for the development of what one hopes will be many more such centers that facilitate learning with and about the Other, valuable in itself, of course, but also, as many of the essays in this volume reiterate, insofar as it is a vital part of learning about oneself.

Philip A. Cunningham highlights the radical qualities of *Nostra Aetate* as what he calls “A Catholic Act of *Metanoia*,” that is, “a total reorientation of attitude or action.” Cunningham adds to the contextual study of *Nostra Aetate* undertaken in other essays in this volume by examining its stark contrast with an unfinished encyclical by Pope Pius XI, begun in 1938, that even though it was evidently “intended to condemn racism in the wake of Hitler’s rise to power in Germany” was circumscribed by conventional notions of Jews as Christ-killers, perennially separate from all other people. This is a prominent part of the theological landscape that the framers of *Nostra Aetate* had to alter, and worked to do so, Cunningham points out, against sustained opposition that has not disappeared even forty years later. Cunningham’s essay focuses on seven key affirmations of *Nostra Aetate*: its repudiation of the charge of deicide; emphasis on the shared legacy of Judaism and Christianity; reiteration of the covenantal link of God and the Jews; disavowal of acts of hatred against and persecution of the Jews; call for “accurate biblical interpretation and religious education” as well as further collaboration between Jews and Christians on “biblical and theological enquiry”; and disinclination to attempt to baptize Jews. Besides being a very clear primer on much of the essence of this extraordinary document and the process through which it was forged, Cunningham’s essay also implicitly underscores a key instance of how a religion that prides itself on stability and tradition is also quite capable, when circumstances warrant, of dynamic change.

This element of dynamism is on full display in the concluding essay in the volume by Frans Jozef van Beeck, which is animated by his sense that the Great Tradition of Catholicism rests on the possibility—indeed, the inevitability—of change, earth-shattering and optimistic change, and that being a “good Catholic” is no mere matter of holding “enforced truths” and obeying conventional prescribed “rational rules.” One of the sub-themes of his far-ranging—and impossible to summarize—meditation on Christian theology and human history is that “Human Openness to Otherness” is at the core of Christianity, and there is a familiar

reference point for this thought. If *Nostra Aetate* is radical, it is so by returning us to the fundamental radicalness of Jesus. Neither world nor Church history has remained true to this spirit, and van Beeck surveys many of the mis-steps along the way. But he is ultimately, and persuasively, an optimist, and in his attempt to answer the question posed in his title—"What Difference Is [*Nostra Aetate*] Making in North America?"—he learnedly and rhapsodically suggests that it is part of an urgent call for Jews and Christians to faith and responsibility, to challenges that must—and can—be met daily.

All the contributors to this volume attempt to deepen our understanding and appreciation of *Nostra Aetate* by putting it in one or another context, either personal, social, political, historical, or theological. Van Beeck's essay serves as a fit conclusion to the volume because it adds one more to all of those: he places *Nostra Aetate* ultimately in the context of the *imitatio Christi*, which serves as a stirring inspiration, solid rock, and reminder of the inevitable strains and difficulties as we endeavor, among other tasks, to affirm the unity and connectedness of all humankind and to make the world more fair, just, and loving.

A special word of thanks is due to my dear friend, Rabbi Joseph H. Ehrenkranz, executive director of the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding (CCJU) of Sacred Heart University, for his tireless and heartfelt efforts to bring Jews and Christians together in peace and understanding—beginning with the two of us. He and his associate, David L. Coppola, have done a great service to both religions by promoting dialogue that has resulted in deep friendships and lasting scholarly collaborations.

I am also grateful to Ann Heekin, director of programs and publications for the CCJU, all those at the Center who assisted with this volume, and Sidney Gottlieb, director of editorial and production work for the Sacred Heart University Press. I am further grateful to Dr. Gottlieb, along with Dr. Coppola, for assistance in writing the prefatory overview to the volume.

Finally, I want to thank all the contributors to this volume, whose ongoing commitment to interreligious dialogue is a declaration of hope for the future, and all those people who for the past forty years had the vision and courage to promote the ideas contained in *Nostra Aetate*. Let us move forward together—without fear and with ever-renewing energy—to bring about God’s vision of peace and justice.

