



Vatican II on Jewish-Christian relations

Church & Synagogue: a new friendship for a new era

Has the relationship between Christians and Jews changed?

Yes. Since the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church has expressed a clear desire and a public commitment to renew its relationship with the Jewish people. The Vatican II document on inter-religious dialogue, *Nostra Aetate* (Latin for 'Our Times'): the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, devotes chapter 4 to this topic, launching the Church into a radical reappraisal of its relationship with Judaism. So deep and far-reaching is this process of renewal, that it promises to change forever the way we Catholics relate, not only to contemporary Jews, but to our own scriptures, prayers, celebrations, people... indeed, to Jesus himself.

A short document with plenty of punch!

Nostra Aetate is the shortest of the 'big sixteen' documents promulgated at Vatican II. Just five paragraphs, it was adopted by the council fathers (voting 2221 for, 88 against) on 28 October 1965. Paragraph 4 deals with Jewish-Christian relations.

A fascinating feature of *Nostra Aetate*, 4 is that, apart from scripture references, there is a conspicuous absence of footnotes quoting church fathers, popes and earlier

statements. This gives some indication of the radical nature of this document. Scripture aside, there are no prior texts to quote! From the 20th century, the church began reflecting on its relationship with Judaism in a *new* way.

What did Vatican II say about Jewish-Christian relations?

Let's begin with a story: A Jewish scripture scholar addressed a large audience of Christians. She began by asking those who actually knew a Jew personally to raise their hands. About eight hands went up. She then pointed to the image of the crucified Jesus on the wall behind her, saying, "Ah, but you all know this Jew, do you not?"¹

This story brings home an essential point made in the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*: Jesus, Mary, the apostles, and others who were among the first Christians were all Jews. And yet how often do we treat Jesus and the early Church as if they were somehow separate from Judaism? At Vatican II the Council Fathers sought to correct this distortion. In fact, the Church's deepest roots are in the Jewish people. One cannot meet Jesus Christ without meeting Judaism.

What else did Vatican II say about Jewish-Christian relations?

In *NA*, 4 the Council affirmed the 'spiritual ties' that link Christians, the people of the new covenant, to Jewish people, 'the stock of Abraham'.

- Jews and Christians have shared Scriptures and a common spiritual heritage.
- The Church emerged from the Jewish people.
- Christ has reconciled both Jews and Christians.
- The Jews remain God's chosen people.
- Jewish-Christian dialogue is to be encouraged.

¹ See Amy Jill Levine, *Same Stories Different Understandings*. Manila: CBAP, 2004.

- The Jews, as a people, should not be held responsible for the death of Jesus.
- There must be no discrimination against Jews. Anti-Semitism is the antithesis of Christianity.
- In *Nostra Aetate*, 4 the Church affirms the fact that, historically and spiritually, Jews and Christians share a common ancestry in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. It was through the chosen people of Israel that the Church received the revelation of the Old Testament. The salvation through Christ proclaimed by the Church is foreshadowed in the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The teaching of the Church is that, through Jesus' death and resurrection, both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) are reconciled and made one in Christ.
- *Nostra Aetate*, 4 notes that the New Testament scriptures say that the Jews as a people did not accept Jesus as Saviour. However this does not mean that the Church considers the Jews to be rejected by God. God does not take back God's promises and therefore the Jews, a people chosen, will always be dear to God's heart. Fifteen years later John Paul II was to refer to this point when he spoke of: "...the people of God of the Old Covenant, which has never been revoked..." (Mainz, 1980).
- Conscious that Christians and Jews share a common spiritual heritage, *Nostra Aetate*, 4 urges a deeper understanding and mutual appreciation between the two religions. How? By way of friendly dialogue as well as biblical and theological studies. The Church rejects any kind of anti-Semitic attitude or discriminatory action towards the Jewish people. Care should be taken

when interpreting scripture with reference to the death of Jesus. The Church has always held and continues to hold that Christ, out of infinite love, went freely to his death because of the sins of all, so that all might be saved. Sadly, in practice, the portrayal of the Jews in Christian preaching and conversation has not always reflected true Christian teaching. Nonetheless, the Church proclaims "the cross of Christ as the sign of God's universal love and the source of all grace" (NA, 4).

Why this focus on Jewish-Christian relations?

Why this focus on Jewish-Christian relations? Haven't we got enough to think about as it is? Why put before us notes about how Jews and Christians relate? The answer is clear. This topic is not the pursuit of anyone's personal agenda or hobby horse. *It is a response to the call of the Church.*

It is in response to this call that some Christians give their lives to the work of Jewish-Christian dialogue. Others collaborate in this work. But whether the perspective is academic, pastoral or simply about friendship in the local neighborhood, all Christians are called to build bridges between church and synagogue, and thereby respond to the Church's renewal in our age.

We need not be overwhelmed by the task at hand. We need simply take a small step. By taking the time to read this newsletter item you are taking an important step. And, by sharing some of this material in your own parish/school newsletter (note how it is assembled in brief, bite-size paragraphs!) you can encourage others to take a step.

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