The Catholic Church and the Jewish People: Evaluating the Results of the Second Vatican Council

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EDITED BY
VAL AMBROSE McINNES, O.P.

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Preface

On December 8, 1990, the Roman Catholic Church marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council. Six years have passed since the extraordinary Synod of Bishops convened by Pope John Paul II to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the completion of the Council and to assess the state of its implementation. The work of implementing the Council's program of renewal continues throughout the world. It is an important task. Pope John XXIII foresaw that the Council would be the instrument of the Holy Spirit and would renew the Church and the world, "as through a new Pentecost."

The passage of over a quarter of a century since the close of Vatican II provides an opportunity for taking stock of its accomplishments, the "aggiornamento" within the Church and the struggle for unity among the Christian churches and the renewal of the dialogue with our Jewish sisters and brothers in the Lord. At the same time, it provides an opportunity to see the relevance of the Jewish-Christian tradition for the dialogue with the rest of the world religions and of all God's people.

The opportunity of sharing new historical visions presents itself today based on new insights into the Jewish-Christian dialogue. Historically speaking, scholars like Professor Sean Freyne are shedding new light on the origins of the Jewish-Christian encounter from the first to the fourth centuries. He describes how traces of anti-Semitism are presently manifest in the New Testament, and especially in John's Gospel.

Other scholars, like Professor Robert L. Wilken, are pulling the curtain back on aspects of the early model of holiness and virtue common to both Christians and Jews.

A new theological basis for the Jewish-Christian dialogue today and tomorrow is articulated with great sensitivity by Profes-
15. B. Berakhot 28h, 29a.
20. Isaiah 47.4 and often.
23. B. Sotah 48b.
32. Exodus Rabbah XIX, 4.

The Catholic Church
and the Jewish People:
Evaluating the Results of the Second Vatican Council

LAWRENCE E. FRIZZELL

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965)

THE FOURTH AND LAST SESSION of the Second Vatican Council ended in December, 1965. The Declaration on Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate) was promulgated by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965, in the presence of a large crowd, including four young Israelis. I had been showing these young people around Rome and arranged for them to attend the ceremony in Saint Peter’s Basilica. The Pope’s address was already recognized as an important moment in Catholic-Jewish relations, but only in hindsight can we appreciate its full implication.

The Challenge of Change

Many will remember “good Pope John,” proclaimed by the pundits to be a “transition Pope” because of his venerable age. Although his announcement on January 25, 1959, of an ecumenical council surprised everyone, few would have guessed its impact on the Church’s life. Indeed, we still meet people who reminisce about “the good old days” of the Church, blaming the Council for what they consider to be the woes of our time. A review of the Church’s history offers other examples of turmoil after a council. Certainly many pastoral lessons can be learned from the errors made in promoting those changes that affected
the life of the faithful. The change from Latin to the vernacular and the adaptation of the laws of fast and abstinence touch only the surface of spiritual reality, but such practices allowed for quick identification of a person's adherence to the Church. Did the clergy offer a careful explanation of the reasons for each change? Even when this was the case, much more attention should have been given to the time needed for an emotional response. Some of the clergy and a few religious women gave the impression that these changes meant that all was in flux. Certainly, the faithful in general deserve praise for their patience in this time of rapid transition. *Ecclesia semper reformanda*! The Church is always in need of reform! At any state of history, the Church is on a pilgrimage, in need of being purifed of spot and wrinkle so that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:27). But how can change, however necessary, be appreciated as a sign of growth, not feared as a disruptive force? The Council Fathers of every age have been conscious of the challenge to reform without destroying. Like Jeremiah, they may see the need to pluck up or break down, but only as a prelude to the positive tasks of building and planting (Jer. 1:10). Thus, during the years of Vatican II, they and the preparatory Commissions used a prayer of Saint Isidore of Seville, composed in 619. It reads in part: "May You, who are infinite justice, never let us be disturbers of justice. Let not our ignorance induce us to evil, nor ignorance sway us, nor material interest corrupt us. But unite our hearts to You alone... so that, with the gift of Your grace, we may be one in You and may in nothing depart from the truth."¹

The Council began with this earnest plea, and its first published text was a "Message to Humanity." Just as Pope John XXIII's great encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (April 11, 1963) was addressed to "all people of good will," so already on October 20, 1962, all people and nations were greeted. The goal of the Council was stated simply: "In this assembly, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we wish to inquire how we ought to renew ourselves, so that we may be found increasingly faithful to the Gospel of Christ."²

For a considerable period of time before the Council was convened, preparatory Commissions had worked to provide texts for the discussion of the Council Fathers. Pope John XXIII, stimulated by a visit of the Jewish historian Jules Isaac in 1960, charged Augustin Cardinal Bea with the task of drafting a document on the Church's relation with the Jewish people. The vagaries of the versions of this text have been traced by Msgr. John M. Oesterreicher.³ It finally emerged in 1965 as the keystone of the Council's Declaration on Non-Christian Religions. Like all the sixteen texts promulgated by Pope Paul VI and the Council Fathers, this Declaration is addressed to us Catholics, informing us about the Church's teaching and the demands that flow from it for the faithful. The Church's description of Jews, Moslems, Hindus, and others, however, does arouse their interest, precisely because the Catholic Church is both numerous and worldwide. Because of the long and checkered history of the Church's relationship with Jews and Judaism, they exhibited considerable interest in this document during the Council and afterwards. In the light of speculation about Jewish and Arab influence at the Council, it is important to note that the Church's concern was not merely to promote interfaith harmony. With regard to the Jewish people and their faith/culture, the Church's words are in essence a search to express her own integrity. Indeed, with regard to the Jewish people we modern-day Catholics had a need "to renew ourselves, so that we may be found increasingly faithful to the Gospel of Christ." This need remains pertinent through subsequent decades, as work springing from *Nostra Aetate* shows. No one has expressed this better than Pope John Paul II, who said in his speech to the Jewish community in Venezuela on January 15, 1985:

I would like to confirm with the deepest conviction that the teaching of the church, given during the Second Vatican Council in the declaration of *Nostra Aetate*... always remains for us, for the Catholic Church, for the episcopate... and for the pope, a teaching to which one must adhere, a teaching which one must accept not only as something relevant but even more, as an expression of the faith, as an inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as a word of divine wisdom.⁴

What did the Council Fathers emphasize concerning the
Church’s relationship to the Jewish people? First, the Church sees a continuity from the time of Abraham and Sarah down to the immediate forebears of Jesus and the Apostles. Only with a deep knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures can Christians fully appreciate the content of Jesus’ teaching and work. Of equal importance is the continuity of life and sustenance that is expressed in Saint Paul’s image of the good olive tree.

Christian faith envisioned the work of Jesus, especially in his death-and-resurrection, as the source of reconciliation for human beings among themselves and with God the Father. In the drama of salvation, some leaders of the Jewish people opposed Jesus; however, in these activities, the Jewish people as such were not implicated. A large percentage of Jews lived outside the Holy Land at that time and, even among those in the Land, many did not encounter Jesus.

Jesus went to his death, not merely as one judged to be a criminal but as one who freely offered himself as the sacrificial victim for the forgiveness of the world’s sins. Therefore, Christian teaching must focus on the mystery of Jesus’ death as the sign of divine mercy.

The Church repudiates all persecution as contrary to the human rights of each individual, created in God’s image. Anti-Jewish prejudice, known by the antiseptic term anti-Semitism, is rejected forcefully because of the Church’s profound appreciation of all she has received from the Jewish people. The tragic past, with mutual misunderstanding and recriminations, should be put behind us. So the Council recommended dialogue based on biblical and theological study as the most solid foundation for true progress. Although there was no ulterior motive behind this recommendation for dialogue, the Church expresses the faith and hope derived from the Jewish Bible: a time when all peoples will praise God in unison, both in word and deed.5

Other Vatican II Texts on Catholic-Jewish Relations

The Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, and especially the section on the Jewish people, must be studied in the context of the other achievements of the Council.6 Only then will we be able to evaluate its importance and understand how it came to be integrated into the daily spiritual life of Catholicism.7 At the same time we will note the need for continued efforts to ensure that Catholics strive to overcome prejudice and search for justice and peace in their homes, communities, and workplaces. Of course, a number of important Christian statements were made to condemn anti-Semitism in the years between the Second World War and Vatican II, preceded in 1928 by a declaration of the Holy Office.8 But even the 1948 and 1961 documents of the World Council of Churches did not bring about a great impact on those member Churches. Both Protestant and Jewish experts acknowledge that the implementation of Vatican II regarding Catholic-Jewish relations has provided others with a basis for emulation.9 Although perfect harmony may be achieved only in Paradise, it is a commonplace perception that the climate has changed for the better; we now have the beginnings of an environment of trust within which problems can be aired and greater understanding achieved.

THE MAJOR CONSTITUTIONS

The centrality of the liturgy or public worship of the Church is affirmed in terms that draw from the biblical heritage. Christian life is described as a pilgrimage reminiscent of the Jewish tradition of focusing on Jerusalem and the Temple: “In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem to which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” [Liturgy #8].10 Throughout the course of history, “the liturgy is the summit toward which all the activity of the Church is directed, it is also the font from which all her power flows” (#10).

Although the liturgical reforms that developed from the Second Vatican Council were intended to foster the spiritual life of Catholics, it is felicitous that the wider range of biblical readings provides many occasions for reflecting on our roots in the biblical and Jewish heritage. The Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium) develops biblical insights about the
mystery of God’s plan for salvation, beginning with the call of Abraham and coming to fulfillment in the work of Jesus (see Rom. 16:25–26). The image of the olive tree (from Rom. 11:13–26) in Lumen Gentium #6 and Nostra Aetate #4 helps Catholics to emphasize the continuity of God’s plan. Then phrases like “new Covenant” and “new People of God” will not be interpreted as implying abrogation of the old Covenant or rejection of the Jewish people. These same terms, however, do teach the claim that a new reality has been achieved in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus’ death-and-resurrection.

The Constitution on Divine Revelation situates the Sacred Scriptures within the liturgy, at the heart of the Church’s life. The Council declared that the Jewish Scriptures (commonly known as the “Old Testament”) are the true Word of God: “That is why these books, divinely inspired, remain permanently valuable” (#14). Lessons for every age can be discovered in all parts of these books, which deserve to be studied for themselves, as well as in relation to the New Testament.

As in Nostra Aetate and elsewhere, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World stresses the respect that is due to every human person: “Everyone should look upon his neighbor (without any exception) as another self, bearing in mind above all his life and the means necessary for living it in a dignified way.” (#27). The challenge is laid on all Catholics to come to the aid of any person in need, especially the least fortunate. After providing principles that should inspire people to eliminate prejudice, the Council tried to foster greater human understanding: “Those also have a claim on our respect and charity who think and act differently from us in social, political and religious matters” (#28).

THE DECLARATION ON RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

For Jews and other minorities in European and other countries with a Catholic majority, the touchstone for evaluating the Council’s success is found in the Declaration on Religious Liberty. In the past the principle behind the exercise of authority in these nations had often been enunciated as follows: “Err—
times, but the search for authenticity in loving imitation of God demands this effort.

II. Post-Conciliar Developments

Introduction

There were no delusions among those who worked so hard to bring the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions to fruition. Augustin Cardinal Bea stated in a news release on October 20, 1965, that this Declaration was but "the beginning of a long and demanding way toward the arduous goal of a humanity whose members feel themselves truly to be sons of the same Father in heaven and act upon this conviction."14

Father Jean-Paul Lichtenberg, a French Dominican priest active in Jewish-Christian relations, commented that the Council document represents "a first stage of the difficult but necessary dialogue between the Church and Israel; a first invitation to Christians and Jews to understand each other better in order to love each other more sincerely, that is the true meaning of the present text. Another stage could be reached when the Church acknowledges Judaism as a living and effective religion. . . . Finally as a third stage the Church would have to recognize the State of Israel."15 These "stages" will be discussed in the context of historical developments since 1965.

The term dialogue has been used on several levels by those who have sought reconciliation between Jews and Christians. In the years that preceded the Council, a number of Christian thinkers were attracted to Martin Buber's "I-Thou" understanding of authentic human encounter.16 Without explicit reference to Buber, many consider that serious discussions between people of comparable background in their own faith traditions may be called "dialogue." Each person coming to the encounter is expected to respect the integrity of the other's commitment, so any intention of trying to convert the other person is set aside. Mutual understanding cannot be a condition of such dialogue, but should be one of its effects. The Council suggested that the focus of discussions might be the common spiritual heritage of Christians and Jews. Of course, scholars had shared over the decades, especially in the areas of biblical studies, Hebrew and Aramaic, archaeology, etc. This sharing was especially true of modern liberal Protestants and Jews in England and the United States. Soon after the Council, an increasing number of Catholic scholars entered creatively into these fields because the Council document on divine revelation reinforced the encouragement that Pope Pius XII had given to biblical scholars. Publications have included scholarly exchanges that, for the most part, show sensitivity to the work of others who come from different backgrounds. There is now a wealth of material, much of which is in English, upon which people from both communities can develop their understanding of the spiritual heritage that we share.17

After the Council the development of programs like "Living Room Dialogues" brought the good will fostered by the Council to the local parish and synagogue communities, especially in the cities and suburbs of the United States. At times these groups would include both Catholics and Protestants; for the most part, the Jewish traditions represented were Reform and Conservative. Both on the scholarly and grassroots levels, Orthodox Jews for the most part adhered to a statement by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the highly respected teacher at Yeshiva University in New York. He proposed discussions on humanitarian and cultural endeavors and man's moral values, but not on theology as such.18

The education of clergy and laity for a deeper understanding of the Council's synthesis of Catholic theology began almost immediately. At times there was resistance, perhaps only a half-hearted response to certain changes in the liturgy, ecumenical attitudes, etc. Teachers in seminaries and other houses of spiritual and theological formation often took more extensive training than the parish clergy.19 Gradually new programs for the education of children were developed. Usually these were
monitored carefully with regard to the portrayal of Jews, Protestants, and others.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Implementing Nostra Aetate by the Vatican}

In early 1966 Father Cornelius Rijk, a scholar from Holland, was appointed to work for Catholic-Jewish relations within the Secretariat for Christian Unity. In April, 1969, he convened a meeting of twenty-one Catholics from fourteen countries for the purpose of preparing a "schema" or text that would be background for the plenary session of Bishops belonging to the Secretariat. The text that emerged from the Bishops' meeting in November, 1969, was published later,\textsuperscript{21} but there was a frustrating delay, during which time Father Rijk resigned. In October, 1974, Pope Paul VI set up a Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and on December 1, 1974, "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate" was promulgated by Cardinal Willebrands.\textsuperscript{22}

Already the National Conference for Catholic Bishops and several dioceses in the United States and Europe had offered Guidelines for the faithful, taking into account national and local needs.\textsuperscript{23} The work of the Council was further enhanced by the Vatican Guidelines, especially in parts of the world where little initiative had been taken. After a preamble, there are four sections in "Guidelines": dialogue, liturgy, teaching, and joint social action.

What is new? The milestone in Catholic-Jewish relations expressed in the Conciliar Declaration is set in the historical context of the Shoah, often designated as "the Holocaust." All forms of anti-Semitism and discrimination are condemned: "Christians must strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism; they must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience."\textsuperscript{24} Certainly the Church here recognizes Judaism to be a living religion, as Father Lichtenberg desired. The text explains: "Dialogue demands respect for the other as he [or she] is, above all respect for his [or her] faith and religious conviction."\textsuperscript{25} Here principles articulated by the Council with regard to Christian ecumenism are applied to Catholic-Jewish relations. The same is true regarding the mission of the Church to present Christ to the world: "Lest the witness of Catholics to Jesus Christ should give offense to Jews, they must take care to live and spread their Christian faith while maintaining the strictest respect for religious liberty."\textsuperscript{26} Points from the Constitutions on the Sacred Liturgy and Divine Revelation are the basis for insisting that the clergy be alert to the Jewish heritage and take great care not to reiterate stereotypes or generalizations about Jews.

The acceptance of Judaism as a living religion is reinforced: "The history of Judaism did not end with the destruction of Jerusalem, but rather went on to develop a religious tradition ... rich in religious values."\textsuperscript{27} Specialized research is encouraged: "wherever possible, chairs of Jewish studies will be created, and collaboration with Jewish scholars encouraged."\textsuperscript{28} Improved Jewish and Christian relations should have results that go far beyond the two communities as such: "Love of the same God must show itself in effective action for the good of humankind."\textsuperscript{29}

On June 24, 1985, the same Vatican Commission promulgated "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis."\textsuperscript{30} The task of transmitting the faith on every level, both in liturgy and in the classroom, must be approached with learning and care. More than twice as long as the 1974 "Guidelines" (thirteen printed pages compared with six), "Notes" has six sections: religious teaching and Judaism, relations between the Old and New Testaments, Jewish roots of Christianity, the Jews in the New Testament, the liturgy, and Judaism and Christianity in history.

Quoting Pope John Paul II's speech to Catholic experts on the Church's relation with the Jews [March 6, 1982], "Notes" stresses the unique relation between Christianity and Judaism; thus the Jewish people and Judaism should occupy an essential place in Christian education ("their presence there is essential and should be organically integrated").\textsuperscript{31} Pope John Paul II has
spoken more profoundly and more often about the Church's relationship to the Jewish people and Judaism than any of his predecessors. Although Catholics do not expect Jewish theologians to agree, it is extremely important that we recognize that the two religions are "linked together at the very level of their identity." Their bond is "founded on the design of the God of the Covenant." As Bishop Mejia, then Secretary of the Commission, explained: "It is a practical impossibility to present Christianity while abstracting from the Jews and Judaism, unless one were to suppress the Old Testament, forget about the Jewishness of Jesus and the Apostles, and dismiss the vital cultural and religious context of the primitive Church." Unfortunately, he did not comment on the awkward clause: "It should be organically integrated." I would suggest that only a thorough portrayal of the main themes of Jewish thought and practice, through the prism of the Sadducee, Pharisee, and Essene movements, can achieve this ideal of "integration." It is not enough merely to describe the context necessary to understand given passages in the New Testament, although this is a beginning. An understanding of the dynamic vitality of Jewish life and thought will have the effect of removing the basis for stereotypes of Judaism as moribund and Jews as legalistic and hypocritical. An added benefit will be the elucidation of the places where the teaching of Jesus builds on the common insights of his contemporaries into the biblical heritage and where Jesus and the Church made unique contributions.

Another passage of the Pope's speech of March 6, 1982, is quoted: "To assess the common patrimony carefully in itself and with due awareness of the faith and religious life of the Jewish people as they are professed and practiced still today, can greatly help us to understand better certain aspects of the life of the Church." "Notes" draws this conclusion: "It is a question then of pastoral concern for a still living reality closely related to the Church." The Holy Father implied that all Catholics should have this positive appreciation of Judaism. In Mainz on November 17, 1980, he had made this point already in a ponderous German sentence: "The first dimension of this dialogue, that is the meeting between the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God [see Rom. 11:29], and that of the New Covenant, is at the same time a dialogue within our Church . . . between the first and second part of her Bible." The Old Covenant has never been revoked by God! The implications of this statement for Catholics are considerable and have been discussed at length. "Notes" discusses the relationship between the two Testaments in detail, differing from a theory of Franz Rosenzweig (1889–1929) that God has two Covenanted communities that complement each other: "The Church and Judaism cannot then be seen as two parallel ways of salvation and the Church must witness to Christ as the Redeemer for all, while maintaining the strictest respect for religious liberty."

In the final section, "Notes" reiterates the truth that Judaism is a living faith: "The history of Israel did not end in 70 A.D. It continued, especially in the numerous Diaspora which allowed Israel to carry to the whole world a witness—often heroic—of its fidelity to the one God . . . While preserving the memory of the land of their forefathers at the heart of their hope [Passover Seder]." Then "Notes" offers a comment related to Father Lichtenberg's third stage: "The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principle of international law." The Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews does not consider political questions, since these belong to the Secretary of State. The Pope has spoken on a number of occasions about the necessity for the State of Israel to have secure borders and peace with her neighbors, at the same time he mentions the legitimate human rights of Palestinian Arabs and of the need to take their aspirations into account. Any solution to a question of debate between people of two religious traditions can be resolved only by adherence to the principles of international law. Recent years have been a time of grave danger to Israel and its people. We pray fervently that current initiatives will achieve what has so long eluded the peoples of the Near East: a just and lasting
peace that will permit Jews and Arabs to grow into a dialogue toward mutual understanding.

Why does the Vatican not recognize the state of Israel? This question comes again and again from Jews, whether they are interested in dialogue or not. In a way, this questioning may be interpreted as an indication of a Jewish perception of the Pope’s authority. If only he would act, the world would acknowledge Israel, especially the Arab countries. Would that this were true!

The first point that must be stressed is that the Vatican does recognize the state of Israel. Although Pope Paul VI paid only a brief visit to the shores of Lake Gennesaret in 1964, the prime minister and other high officials of Israel’s government have been received at the Vatican on several occasions. There is, however, yet to be the full diplomatic relations that includes the exchange of ambassadors.

The reasons given by representatives of the Secretary of State for the lack of full diplomatic relations are as follows: (1) The Vatican normally enters full diplomatic relations only with nations whose boundaries are clearly defined; thus there is no ambassador sent to Jordan or Israel; (2) There is grave concern for the situation of the small Christian minorities in Moslem lands, especially in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq; (3) There is a concern for the status of Jerusalem and the holy places, with access for all. I would add another: The Pope is not only concerned about peace but also about ways in which he can use the good offices of Vatican diplomacy to foster peace. Would Israeli leaders be interested in an ongoing and developing relationship with the Vatican in which frank discussions of goals and policies would be part of the agenda? The Vatican ambassador would not have a deciding influence in any issues, but perhaps his voice would be worth listening to from time to time.

My personal hope is that the present peace initiatives will bring a solution to all the long-standing questions about the borders of Israel with Jordan and Syria, the status of a united Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and a way in which Palestinians can achieve human and civil rights. Then, within a short time we could hope for an exchange of ambassadors between the Vatican and Israel. Although the third stage in Catholic-Jewish relations will not lead immediately to world peace, every positive step is laden with enormous significance.

The Church is not identified with the Vatican; the relationship between Catholics and the 106-acre Vatican State is not analogous to that of Diaspora Jews to Israel. The leadership of the Church does not count merely on diplomatic endeavors to cope with the world’s problems, or with the problems of Catholics. Rather, the Church’s desire, continuing the work of the Council, is to deepen the relationship of the faithful with God. Then from that grace-filled understanding of herself, the Church hopes to move with humility and courage to face the challenges of the age.

Recent Developments

There have been some misunderstandings and tensions between the Jewish and Catholic communities over the decades. Predictably, these points of friction have been considered much more newsworthy by the mass media than the careful work that has been developing across many countries. Neither the “incidents” nor the positive steps can be traced at length here.99

From September 3 to September 6, 1990, the thirteenth meeting of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultation took place in Prague, Czechoslovakia.90 The papers and discussions focused on anti-Semitism in Christian history, the Shoah, and contemporary developments in Eastern Europe. There was a joint statement at the end of the conference offering the following highlights: “The Catholic delegates condemned anti-Semitism as well as all forms of racism as a sin against God and humanity, and affirmed that one cannot be authentically Christian and engage in anti-Semitism” and the fact “that anti-Semitism has found a place in Christian thought and practice calls for an act of teshuvah [repentance] and of reconciliation on our part.”41

New political developments in Eastern and Central Europe allow the Church a freedom that it has not possessed since the
1930s. The teaching of the Second Vatican Council and later documents can now be translated and published for wide dissemination. The Prague statement offers a number of suggestions to guide the Bishops and other authorities in their educational efforts.

Two more recent events are also significant: the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Nostra Aetate (in Rome on December 5, 1990) and the Pastoral Letter of the Polish Bishops on Jewish-Catholic Relations (dated November 30, 1990, and read in all Polish Churches on January 20, 1991). Members of the same groups who met in Prague in September came to Rome for a one-day ceremonially confirmation of the Prague statement. Pope John Paul’s speech made several important points that deserve our attention. The foundation for this celebration was “nothing other than the divine mercy which is guiding Christians and Jews to mutual awareness, respect, cooperation and solidarity.”

This wording reminds us of the prayer by Saint Isidore of Seville, which was recited at the beginning of every session of the Second Vatican Council. The work of building upon the declaration Nostra Aetate is not merely an exercise in Christian-Jewish relations, laudable as that is. It is an act of service—to God and to divine truth.

The Pope suggested that the strength of the Declaration came from its approach “to all peoples from a religious perspective.” This perspective is “the deepest and most mysterious of the many dimensions of the human person.” Perhaps he had in mind the 1991 World Day of Peace Message, issued in December, 1990, in anticipation of the new year. The message is entitled “Respect for Conscience: Foundation for Peace.”

This openness of Nostra Aetate is “anchored in a high sense of the absolute singularity of God’s choice of a particular people, His own people, Israel according to the flesh, already called ‘God’s Church’” (citing Vatican II, Lumen Gentium #9). The biblical passages cited indicate that the seemingly incongruous term “Church” refers to the qahal, the convocation by God’s Word of the people gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai. Then the Pope stressed that the Church’s self-definition must include an insight into her relation with the descendants of Abraham by stating, “The Church is fully aware that Sacred Scripture bears witness that the Jewish people, this community of faith and custodian of a tradition thousands of years old, is an intimate part of the ‘mystery’ of revelation and salvation.” Probably he was alluding to the clause in John 4:22 “for salvation is from the Jews.”

The mysterion, the divine plan that was unfolded slowly to guide human beings to their true goal in history, is not abstract but rather clothed in the body of Israel.

The Pope then pointed to the place of the Scriptures (Miqra) and especially Torah in the Jewish tradition. “You live in a special relationship with the Torah, the living teaching of the living God,” said the Pope. “You study it with love in Talmud Torah, so as to put it into practice with joy.” The Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council already stresses that “the true word of God is found in the Old Testament: these books, written under divine inspiration, remain permanently valuable” (#14). The Pope’s words showed his grasp of what the Torah and the two other parts of the Hebrew Bible mean to the Jews—and certainly this paragraph should be used by all Catholic teachers.

What characterizes Jews from the religious point of view? The Pope responded: “God, his holy Torah, the synagogue liturgy and family traditions, the Land of Holiness, at whose center lies Jerusalem.” Dialogue must not overlook the Shoah. Pope John Paul II endorsed the Prague statement vigorously and asked for vigilance to protect “human and religious rights.” The Pastoral Letter of the Polish Bishops is expressly a continuation of the Church’s effort to interpret and apply the contents of Nostra Aetate to life in Poland. It is rooted in documents of the Universal Church and provides a fine summary of Nostra Aetate and quotes teachings of Pope John Paul II frequently.

The idea that Christians replaced or superseded the Jewish people is rejected, as is the deicide charge. The history of Polish-Jewish relations is sketched briefly, with considerable detail given to the Shoah. As the “Avenue of Righteous Gentiles” in Jerusalem proclaims, many Poles attempted to save Jews. No
mention is made in this letter that each person realized that, if caught, he or she and his or her entire family would be killed by the Nazis. Only in Poland was the penalty so severe.

Indifference on the part of some was noted by the Bishops: "We are especially disheartened by those among Catholics who in some way were the cause of the death of Jews. They will forever gnaw at our conscience on the social plane . . . we must also ask forgiveness of our Jewish brothers and sisters."46 Picking up a thought from Nostra Aetate, the Bishops deplored "all the incidents of anti-Semitism which were committed at any time and by anyone on Polish soil." They went on to say, "We do this with the deep conviction that all incidents of anti-Semitism are contrary to the spirit of the Gospel and . . . remain opposed to the Christian vision of human dignity."

These efforts to instruct Catholics will accomplish a great deal if the spirit and content of this pastoral letter become integrated into the Church’s preaching of the Gospel to adults and the Church’s instruction of children. The recent visit of Polish president Lech Walesa to Israel showed that the Church’s teaching has resonances in public life and international affairs.47

Conclusion

This sketch of the Council’s teaching in relation to the Jewish people and their place in the Church’s self-definition has shown how profoundly the biblical vision influences the life of Catholics. The process of renewal is the result of many influences, but the most profound of these is the impact of God’s Word on the Church and her members. The subsequent official documents that have been included in this review are but representative of the intense and extensive work accomplished by people of good will in many nations. The spirit of the Council is certainly being felt throughout the world; in Catholic-Jewish relations this is true especially in places with a large Jewish population or a long Jewish history. This is, however, not merely a matter of intercultural harmony or interfaith relations; rather the new attitude of appreciation for Judaism and the Jewish people involves a rediscovery of the Church’s roots.48 Certainly, unceasing efforts to overcome anti-Jewish prejudice continue to be extremely important; yet this work is deepened by being placed within the context of the Church’s search to express her own faith and practice. Anti-Semitism was an aspect of Jewish-Gentile relations long before Christianity emerged. The elimination of all such prejudice will require ongoing vigilance, so the Catholic community must take to heart the realization that anti-Semitism is a sin against God and humanity.49 Would that the phrase “Christian anti-Semitism” be recognized by all to be an oxymoron!

One can but wish that the sentiments of the following words of Pope John Paul II would become universally true:

The relationship between Jews and Christians has been radically improved in these years. Where there was ignorance and therefore prejudice and stereotype, there is now a growing mutual knowledge, appreciation and respect. There is, above all, love between us: that kind of love I mean, which is for both of us a fundamental injunction of our religious traditions and which the New Testament has received from the Old.50

NOTES

2. Ibid., 3–4.
4. This text is cited in the “Pastoral on Jewish-Catholic Relations,” of the Polish Bishops, the latter is published in Origins 20 (February 14, 1991): 592.
5. This summary might be supplemented by commentaries on Nostra Aetate #4.
6. Addressing delegation of the American Jewish Committee on March 16, 1990, Pope John Paul made this very point: “Although the Catholic teaching concerning Jews and Judaism is summarized in (Nostra Aetate) #4, many of its fundamental elements are also present in other documents of the Council . . . Perhaps
the time has come, after 25 years, to make a systematic study of the Council's teaching on this matter" [Osservatore Romano, Italian ed. March 17, 1990].


9. Less has been accomplished in Orthodox Christian circles, see George Papademetriou, Essays on Orthodox Christian-Jewish Relations (Bristol, Ind.: Wyndham Press, 1990).


14. Oesterreicher, art. cit. 130.

15. Ibid., The original article appeared in Esprit (June, 1966), the quotation is from p. 1178.


42. Both events are linked with the Prague meeting, although the letter of the Polish bishops builds on work of several years. See note 4.


44. The text is published in *Origins*, 472–476.


46. On April 28, 1980, the Catholic Bishops of Germany stated: “In Germany we have particular cause to ask forgiveness of God and of our Jewish brethren. Even though we thankfully remember that many Christians supported the Jews, often at great sacrifice, we may not, nor do we wish to, either forget or suppress what has been done by our nation to the Jews. We call to mind what the Bishops’ Conference at Fulda in 1945, their first meeting after the war, proclaimed: ‘Many Germans, including Catholics, allowed themselves to be deluded by the false teaching of National Socialism, and remained indifferent to the crimes against human freedom and human dignity, many abetted the crimes, through their behavior, many became criminals themselves. A heavy responsibility rests on those, who by reason of their position, knew what was happening in our country, who through their influence could have prevented such crimes and did not do so, and so made these crimes possible, and by so doing, declared their solidarity with criminals.’” The citation is from Rabbi Jack Bemporad’s presentation in Rome on December 6, 1990, published in *Catholic International* 2 (February 15–28, 1991): 170.

47. The first visit of a Polish leader to Israel was reported by *The New York Times*, May 21, 1991, p. A5.

