

Nostra Aetate at Sixty: Confrontation, Relationship, Hope

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Your Excellencies, Dignitaries, Colleagues, Friends,

My grandparents could not have imagined this.

I don't mean that they could not have imagined Jerusalem as the capital of the sovereign State of Israel. They, like their ancestors for two millennia, dreamed about it and prayed for it. I mean that they could not have imagined Jewish and Catholic leaders together, marking sixty years of a relationship without precedent in nearly two thousand years of shared and painful history. This, no one dreamed.

Sixty years. We have lived long enough now that there are generations who have never known a world without Nostra Aetate. They take for granted what their predecessors could not have imagined. That is both our achievement and our challenge.

To understand what changed, we must remember what was.

For centuries, the official theology of the Church required Jewish diminishment. The accusation of deicide, passed from generation to generation. Crusades that left Jewish communities in ashes. Inquisitions and autos-da-fé. Forced disputations whose verdicts were written before they began. Conversionary pressure framed as love. The image of the Wandering Jew, preserved in misery as theological witness.

I do not recite this history to reopen wounds. I recite it because without it, we cannot understand the magnitude of what Nostra Aetate accomplished. The Council Fathers did not merely change a policy. They reversed a current that had flowed for centuries. That took courage. It took theological imagination. Pope John Paul II would later speak of "purification of memory." To Jewish eyes, it looked like *teshuvah*: repentance, turning, return.

A declaration does not write itself. It required human beings willing to take risks.

On June 13, 1960, a French Jewish historian named Jules Isaac, then eighty-three years old, had a private audience with Pope John XXIII. Isaac's wife and daughter had been murdered by the Nazis. In the years since, he had devoted himself to documenting what he called "the teaching of contempt." He came to Rome with a dossier and a plea: let the Council address this wound.

Pope John listened. Three months later, he instructed Cardinal Augustin Bea to draft a declaration on the Church's relationship with the Jewish people. Jules Isaac did not live to see Nostra Aetate promulgated. But his voice echoes through every line.

Cardinal Bea found a partner in Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the refugee from Warsaw who had become America's prophetic conscience. He sat with Bea in meetings that shaped the Council's declaration. There is a famous photograph from a 1963 dinner in New York, the two of them leaning toward each other, the rest of the room forgotten. The scholar Eva Fleischner wrote: "If ever I have seen Buber's I and Thou caught visually, here it is."

Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee organized the Jewish initiative and was the only rabbi present at the Council as an observer. He described the debates of September 1964 as "a profound turning point... positions articulated with such fraternal love as to make clear that something unprecedented had taken place."

Isaac, Heschel, Tanenbaum. They were not diplomats. They were men who had seen where contempt leads and refused to let it have the final word.

But a declaration is only words on paper. What followed was the patient work of turning words into relationship.

In 1970, the Jewish world faced a question: How do we respond to this outstretched hand? Some embraced the Church's overture. Others were skeptical and cautious. My own teacher, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, urged caution. After centuries of asymmetry and coercion, why should Jews trust that dialogue would not become another form of pressure?

IJCIC, eleven organizations, representing the broad spectrum of religious and civic groups, set aside internal differences and organized to meet this moment together. That same year, the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee was established. In 1974, Pope Paul VI created the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. And then began the long, quiet work of building trust—meeting after meeting, year after year.

I honor the leaders who shepherded this work on the Catholic side: Cardinal Bea, who began it; then Cardinal Willebrands, Cardinal Cassidy, Cardinal Kasper, and Cardinal Koch—five men across six decades, each receiving the baton from his predecessor and running further with it, each understanding that this work is generational. I am honored to stand here with Cardinal Koch this evening.

And on the Jewish side, those who carried forward what Isaac, Heschel, and Tanenbaum began: Gerhart Riegner of the World Jewish Congress, who in 1942 sent the telegram that first alerted the world to the Final Solution. Rabbi James Rudin, and other past IJCIC chairs with us this evening: Rabbi David Rosen, Rabbi Richard Marker, Rabbi Dan Polish, and Rabbi Noam Marans.

And the popes, three of them now saints of the Church. Pope John XXIII, who welcomed a Jewish delegation with the words “I am Joseph, your brother.” Pope John Paul II, who in 1986 became the first pope since Peter to enter a synagogue, who stood at Yad Vashem and did not look away, who stood at the Kotel and prayed. Pope Benedict XVI, who continued with theological precision. Pope Francis, who declared again and again that antisemitism is a sin against God. And now Pope Leo XIV, who on his very first day as pontiff pledged to “continue and strengthen the Church's dialogue and cooperation with the Jewish people in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*.”

These were not gestures. They were a Church showing, pope after pope, that it meant what it said.

And the documents, culminating in 2015 with “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable.” That title alone, drawn from Paul's Letter to the Romans, represents a theological revolution. The covenant with Israel stands. God does not break promises.

Sixty years of dialogue does not mean sixty years without difficulty. To pretend otherwise would dishonor what we have built.

We have navigated disagreements about historical memory, about theological claims that still carry shadows of supersessionism, about how the Church speaks about Israel, and about the Jewish people's connection to the land.

And these recent years have tested us.

October 7, 2023, was for the Jewish people a pogrom. The murder of families in their homes, of young people at a music festival, of grandparents and infants. And in the aftermath, as we buried our dead and searched for our hostages, we watched antisemitism surge across the world with a ferocity we thought belonged to the past.

In that moment, we needed our friends. We needed clear voices. Some we heard, and we will not forget them. Pope Francis met with the families of hostages, and that mattered. But there were also words from friends we trusted that caused real pain — statements that seemed to equate victim and aggressor, language that hesitated to name Hamas's intent, silences where we longed for clarity. Old asymmetries, we feared, had returned.

I will not catalog grievances from this stage. But I will say this: we stayed in the room. When it would have been easier to walk away, we chose to remain. Because sixty years of relationship, though strained, held.

Perhaps this is the deepest teaching of *Nostra Aetate*. It did not promise us agreement. It promised us relationship. Relationships weather disagreement. They do not survive abandonment.

We are still here. Together. In Jerusalem.

I spoke earlier of my teacher, Rabbi Soloveitchik, and his caution. In his essay “Confrontation,” he set boundaries to protect a vulnerable community still finding its voice after a catastrophe. But he also set a vision, a vision of cooperation in “the universal human confrontation,” standing together as bearers of the dignity of humanity, facing outward, confronting a world that desperately needs what our traditions know.

We confront together a world that knows more about the human being than any civilization before it, and yet struggles to say what a human being is for. Both our traditions can. Each in its own voice. And louder together.

And we confront together the temptation to despair, the seductive whisper that history is entropy, that the arc bends nowhere. We are both traditions that have refused that whisper. Hope is not optimism. It is defiance.

And we have discovered something that perhaps only sixty years of sustained encounter could teach: that faithful dialogue with the other does not diminish us. It clarifies us. Standing before a tradition that is not our own, we come to understand our own with greater depth and greater honesty. We return from the encounter not less Jewish, not less Catholic—but more so. And more human.

In Psalm 122, the Psalmist describes Jerusalem as עִיר שְׁחִבְרָה-לָהּ יוֹדֵדוּ, the city that is joined together as one.

The root is ח-ב-ר—the same root that gives us *chaver*, friend, partner. Jerusalem is not a city without conflict. But it is a city whose mission is to join, holding together what the world pulls apart.

Sixty years ago, the Church and the Jewish people were not joined. We faced each other across centuries of pain. Today we stand in this city, not as adversaries, not merely as allies, but as *chaverim*, as friends and partners in a task larger than either of us alone.

The work is not complete. It will not be complete in our lifetimes. But we have learned something: the bond is stronger than we thought. And we are stronger for holding it together.

This is the city of joined destinies. Its very name *Yerushalayim* carries within it the word *shalom*, peace. The Psalmist describes what that means: חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת נִפְגְּשׁוּ צְדָקָה וְשָׁלוֹם וְנִשְׁקָו. Kindness and principle—so often in tension—embracing. Justice and peace—so often at odds—reconciled.

That is the work. And we are not yet finished.