

Report to the Rabbinical Council of America

Catholic-Jewish Dialogue and the 60th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate

IJCIC-CRRJ Meeting in Jerusalem, February 11–12, 2026

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I am writing to report on the recent IJCIC-CRRJ meeting held in Jerusalem on February 11–12, 2026, commemorating the 60th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*. This was a significant gathering, bringing together senior Catholic and Jewish leaders at a moment of both strain and opportunity in the relationship between our communities. What follows is an account of the meeting and its context, beginning with a brief review of the history of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue and the RCA's role in it.

Background: Nostra Aetate and Its Significance

On October 28, 1965, the Second Vatican Council promulgated *Nostra Aetate* (“In Our Time”), a declaration that fundamentally changed the trajectory of Catholic-Jewish relations for the first time in almost 2,000 years. The document repudiated the charge of deicide, the claim that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus, and affirmed the ongoing validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people, representing a significant repudiation of supersessionism. It also condemned antisemitism in the strongest terms, “at any time and by anyone.”

The Church's motivation for this historic shift was twofold. First, coming in the wake of the Shoah, there was a profound sense of guilt and self-recrimination, a recognition that 2,000 years of anti-Jewish theology had created fertile ground for the antisemitism that led to the murder of six million Jews. It was, in a real sense, a *teshuvah* moment for the Church. Second, there was a growing appreciation of the Jewishness of Jesus and the Jewish roots of Christianity, and a recognition that Christianity could not be properly understood without engaging seriously with Judaism, both biblical and Second Temple Judaism, as well as its contemporary expressions.

The Jewish Response

The Jewish response to *Nostra Aetate* was not monolithic. Abraham Joshua Heschel, who had been deeply involved during the deliberations leading up to the declaration, warmly embraced both the document and its call for dialogue. Others were far more suspicious. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *zikhrono livrakhah*, worried that this was simply another avenue for converting Jews, that if the Church could not succeed over 2,000 years by the sword, perhaps it would try to succeed with honey.

Just before *Nostra Aetate* was published, Rabbi Soloveitchik published his landmark essay “Confrontation” in *Tradition*, in which he described Jews confronting the world in two capacities: as people of faith bound by a covenant with God, and as human beings sharing a world with others. While he restricted theological dialogue, he was open to cooperation on shared human concerns: poverty, war, the economy, immigration, and

related issues. The RCA officially adopted his guidelines, and to this day our dialogues with the Church and other groups do not engage in purely theological exchange.

The Jewish motivation for engagement was driven in large part by concerns about antisemitism and the desire to build relationships that could help address it, as well as the need for understanding and support for the State of Israel.

The Establishment of IJCIC

In the years following *Nostra Aetate*, dozens of Jewish organizations came to the Vatican eager to participate in the newly offered dialogue. The Church responded by asking the Jewish community to organize itself and designate a single body as its official dialogue partner. In 1970, IJCIC, the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, was established as the coordinating body representing World Jewry in formal dialogue with the Holy See. IJCIC brought together eleven major international Jewish organizations, including the Rabbinical Council of America and the Orthodox Union.

The Vatican's official counterpart in the dialogue is the CRRJ, the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. Notably, this commission sits within the Dicastery for Christian Unity, rather than the Dicastery for Interfaith Relations. This placement reflects the Church's self-understanding of Christianity as having evolved from Judaism, in contrast to other world religions, which had no role in the development of Christian identity.

RCA Representation in IJCIC

Early RCA representatives to IJCIC included Rabbi Fabian Schoenfeld, *zikhrono livrakhah*, who was deeply engaged in IJCIC and also led the OU and RCA consultation with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) for many years, and Rabbi Walter Wurzberger, *zikhrono livrakhah*, a past president of the RCA and a distinguished philosopher who played an important role in these dialogues.

Each of IJCIC's eleven member organizations has four representatives. The current RCA representatives are Rabbi Dr. David Berger, Rabbi Arie Folger, Rabbi Dr. Joe Kanofsky, and I currently serve as chair of IJCIC.

The Dialogue Format

Generally, every two years or so, IJCIC and the CRRJ convene a three- to three-and-a-half-day conference on a topic of mutual interest, topics that are "kosher" according to Rabbi Soloveitchik's guidelines. These gatherings provide an opportunity to sit together, share ideas, and, perhaps most importantly, to get to know each other on a human level.

The Current State of Catholic-Jewish Relations

The state of Catholic-Jewish relations took a significant hit in the years following October 7th. Pope Francis, who in the early years of his papacy spoke forcefully against antisemitism, calling it a "great sin" and declaring that a Christian by definition could not be an antisemite, made a number of troubling statements and gestures in the aftermath of the attacks. Among the most widely noted was the image of him before a

crèche with the baby Jesus swaddled in a *keffiyeh*. There were other problematic statements and actions as well. The result was a genuine crisis in Catholic-Jewish relations, one that was recognized on both sides.

Recently, at a commemoration of *Nostra Aetate*, Pope Leo himself acknowledged the strain in Catholic-Jewish relations and expressed his hope that dialogue could help bring about healing. It is worth noting that on the very day of his election, Pope Leo wrote to Jewish leaders pledging to continue and strengthen the Church's dialogue with the Jewish people in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*. That he took time amid the enormity of that moment to reach out to representatives of the world's fifteen million Jews was deeply noted and deeply appreciated.

The Jerusalem Meeting: February 11–12, 2026

On February 11th and 12th, Catholic and Jewish representatives from the Vatican and IJCIC gathered in Jerusalem for a meeting to commemorate the 60th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*. Among the participants were Cardinal Koch, president of the CRRJ and head of the Dicastery for Christian Unity, and Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. Cardinal Pizzaballa is a nuanced and important figure, a friend of the Jewish people who understands us and is committed to positive relations with both the Jewish community and the State of Israel. Other high-ranking members of the Catholic clergy, as well as scholars and theologians, participated as well.

Day One: *Nostra Aetate*, Past and Future

The first day focused on *Nostra Aetate* itself, its history and its future directions. Among the key concerns discussed were the tensions arising from October 7th and its aftermath; the shifting demographics of the Catholic Church toward the Global South, where most Catholics have no personal experience with living Jews and no historical memory of the Holocaust, creating significant challenges for how the relationship is nurtured going forward; and the Church's understanding of Israel. While the Church maintains diplomatic relations with the State of Israel, it has never developed a theological framework for understanding the Jewish people's religious claim to the land, God's promise and the covenant of the Land of Israel with the Jewish people. Put simply: the Church affirms that God's covenant with the Jewish people is irrevocable, but it has not yet addressed what that affirmation means for the land promises that are so central to that covenant. This is important theological work that still needs to be done.

A recurring and important theme throughout the day was the imperative to understand the other from their own perspective, not merely through one's own theological or cultural lens. Participants on both sides spoke about the need to develop genuine empathy for the other's experience and self-understanding. Notably, Catholic participants pushed each other to continue developing their theology in line with what *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent Vatican documents had initiated but have not yet completed, an acknowledgment that the theological work of reckoning with Judaism remains very much in progress within the Church itself. There was also an important and related insistence that much Catholic engagement with Judaism still draws primarily on the Judaism of the biblical and Second Temple periods, as though the Jewish people were frozen in the first century. The living reality of Jewish life today, its

liturgy, its legal tradition, its intellectual vitality, and its internal diversity, remains largely unknown even to many well-intentioned Catholic partners. A number of participants stressed the need to encounter Jews as we are, not only as we were.

Day Two: Human Dignity from Catholic and Jewish Perspectives

The second day, framed around the theme of human dignity from Catholic and Jewish perspectives, included important discussions about our understanding of self, as well as open and honest exchanges about October 7th and its aftermath, including the right of Jews to self-protection and self-defense. There were moments of real mutual vulnerability and that empathy is not a concession but the precondition of honest dialogue.

The overall dialogue was genuinely special. Participants came ready to be honest, vulnerable, and respectful with one another. We were able to say things that were hard to say and hard to hear. There was a shared sense among both Catholic and Jewish participants that we were beginning to take important first steps toward healing the dialogue and moving it in directions that would benefit everyone involved. I should note that Arie Folger and Joe Kanofsky made meaningful contributions to the conversations and to the broader relationship-building work throughout the gathering.

On a personal note: I left Jerusalem encouraged by the willingness on both sides to engage difficult topics with honesty and care. The candor in the room was real, and so was the commitment to moving forward together. It is not always easy work, but it is necessary work, and I believe this gathering represented an important step forward in a relationship that matters deeply to both communities.

Highlights

Among the highlights of the gathering was a visit by Cardinal Koch and part of the delegation to Yad Vashem, which was a deeply meaningful experience. Wednesday evening featured a public session attended by over 200 people from both the Jewish and Christian communities that included remarks by Cardinal Koch and me, followed by a panel discussion moderated by Matti Friedman. A YouTube video of the public session is available, and the link is appended to this report, along with a copy of my remarks.

Looking Ahead

There is a great deal of work that remains to be done. One of the ongoing critiques of *Nostra Aetate* is that much of its impact has remained at the elite level, with leaders engaging in high-level discussions, some of which trickles down into seminaries that train priests, but very little of which reaches the pews. On the Jewish side, the same is true at the grassroots and lay levels. Spreading awareness of this work and its significance is a challenge that both communities need to take seriously.

It is important for Jews and Catholics alike to know what is happening in these dialogues and why they matter. As we mark 60 years since *Nostra Aetate*, the relationships we build and the conversations we have are more vital than ever.

What RCA Rabbis Can Do

I encourage our members to consider ways to bring this work closer to our communities. Adult education sessions on the history and significance of *Nostra Aetate* and its impact on Catholic-Jewish relations can help our congregants understand this important chapter. Where appropriate, a brief reference from the pulpit, particularly around this anniversary year, can raise awareness of the ongoing dialogue and what it means for the safety and standing of Jewish communities worldwide. Rabbis in communities where there is a local Catholic presence might also consider hosting or participating in interfaith events that are consistent with Rabbi Soloveitchik's guidelines: conversations on shared social and moral concerns such as poverty, immigration, religious liberty, and the sanctity of human life. These kinds of encounters build the personal relationships that are the real foundation of any meaningful dialogue.

I am happy to assist any member of the RCA who would like help on initiating or participating in local interfaith engagement, and I welcome your questions about this work. The dialogue between our communities is entering a new chapter, and the RCA has an important role to play in shaping it.

Recording of evening program:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTtEdbsRzLY&t=7826s>