

Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions **50th Anniversary**

Introduction

This year marks the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican II's *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*. This document transformed the Church's attitude towards believers from other religions. For the first time in history, the Church spoke positively about other religions. The *Declaration* is widely considered a "watershed" in the relations between Catholics and believers from other religions. Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have called it the *Magna Carta* of the Church's new attitude and approach to other religions. It continues to inspire and to guide Catholics in forging relationships of mutual respect and collaboration.

The Latin title is taken from the opening lines and means "in our time". The 50th anniversary provides us the opportunity to read the *Declaration* again, to appreciate its significance, to celebrate its fruits, but most of all, to apply it to the multi-religious reality of Australia and the world "in our time", midway through the second decade of the third millennium.

History of the Declaration

Nostra Aetate is part of Vatican II's updating the Catholic Church to bring it into relationship with the modern world. Its genesis was in the mind and heart of Pope John XXIII, who had witnessed first-hand the tribulation of the Jewish people during the Second World War and had used his then office as Apostolic Delegate to Turkey to provide them safe passage. After a meeting with the Jewish historian, Jules Isaac, who presented him with a document showing how Church teaching had contributed to the anti-Semitism which had fuelled the *Shoah*/Holocaust, the good Pope John directed that changing this situation was to be included in the preparations for the Council. Originally it was to be a statement on the Jews only, included in the document on the Church.

Cardinal Augustine Bea steered the text through several drafts in the Vatican Council. In the volatile atmosphere of that time, shortly after the establishment of the State of Israel, the bishops of the Middle East cautioned that a statement on the Jews only would be seen as taking political sides and would have negative consequences for the Christian minorities. Accordingly, a section was added on Islam and relations with Muslims. The bishops of Asia then asserted that their very different situation of living as a minority among the believers of the other world religions was overlooked, so further sections were added. In the process, the statement became a separate document in its own right. On 28 October 1965, in the fourth and final session, the Council Fathers approved the final draft with an overwhelming majority of 2,221 to 88. This ringing endorsement made *Nostra Aetate* the official Catholic teaching on relations with believers from other religions.

Summary of the Contents

Nostra Aetate consists of five brief sections:

1. A statement on the unity of the human race, our shared origin and destiny, with religions providing answers to our common questions about the meaning of life, suffering, good and evil and what lies beyond death;
2. A description of religion as a response to a hidden power, with reference to the practices and teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism, stating that the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions;
3. A positive treatment of Muslim affinities with Catholic teaching and practice, based on references to some of the Pillars and beliefs of Islam, proposing that past hostilities be put aside in favour of mutual understanding and cooperation for the common good.
4. An account of the spiritual ties between Christians and Jews, which reproves indiscriminate accusations of Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus, affirms the ongoing validity of the Covenant between God and the people of Israel, and repudiates hatred, persecution and anti-Semitism as contrary to God's universal love;
5. A final affirmation that since we call God "Father", all human beings are brothers and sisters, made in God's image, so there should be no unjust discrimination but Christians should live peaceably with all.

Nostra Aetate must be read in the light of the other fifteen documents of the Vatican Council, especially *Lumen Gentium*, which teaches that the church is "like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument ... of the unity of the whole human race", with whom we share the pilgrim journey of life; *Gaudium et Spes*, which describes how Christians share the "joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties" of all peoples and contribute to the betterment of society; and *Ad Gentes*, which acknowledges "truth and grace" as "a secret presence of God" in the rites and cultures of people in anticipation of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Definition

The new approach to believers from other religions is called "dialogue". This name and method had been introduced to the Church by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), which had shaped the deliberations of the Council. Cardinal Arinze describes the dynamic as follows:

Interreligious dialogue is a meeting of people of differing religions, in an atmosphere of freedom and openness, in order to listen to the other, to try to understand that person's religion, and hopefully to seek possibilities of collaboration. It is hoped that the other partner will reciprocate, because dialogue should be marked by a two-way and not a one-way movement.

Cardinal Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers* (1997), p. 5.

Today, the expressions "interreligious relations" and "interfaith relations" are used interchangeably with interreligious dialogue.

Implementation

The promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* launched a flurry of activities to implement this new approach. Already in May 1964 Pope Paul VI had established the *Secretariat for Non-Christians* (re-named the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* by Pope John Paul II in 1998). Study of other religions was undertaken, visits to leaders and sacred places of other religions were arranged, and delegations of representatives of other religions were received at the Vatican. Dioceses, national conferences of bishops and regional bodies set up commissions to educate and form people for dialogue with believers from other religions.

Here in Australia there is the *Bishops Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Relations*. Many Australian dioceses have similar commissions to implement the Church's teaching in response to the particular multi-religious mix in their respective territories. Their mandate is to foster relations with the leaders and congregations of other religions, organize joint services to celebrate national events and to show a united religious response to local, national and international tragedies—bushfire, drought, flood and terrorist attacks—publish messages on interfaith relations and to promote the Church's teaching on interreligious dialogue.

Since the Church's relationship with the Jews is unique—we have a shared ancestry and a common scripture, such that the more we Christians know about Jesus as a first century Galilean Jew the better we come to know ourselves—Christian-Jewish relations are treated by the *Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews*, a special department within the *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*. In Australia, this work is generally included in the mandate of the above-mentioned diocesan commissions.

Teaching Documents

These fledgling attempts at dialogue raised a host of new questions. How do we reach out to others? What have we to say to them? What have we to learn from them? Suspicions had to be overcome – was dialogue a covert attempt to seek converts? Had dialogue replaced mission? Is dialogue a betrayal of mission? If dialogue is all there is, what remains of the missionary mandate to bring the saving message of Jesus Christ to all nations? The Church has responded to these questions and more through a series of teaching documents, of which we mention only three:

1. In 1984 the Secretariat for Non-Christians published *The Attitude of the Church toward the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, known by the abbreviated title *Dialogue and Mission*. Among other things, this document introduced the four forms of dialogue:
 - Dialogue of life - sharing the events of our daily lives at home, work and play with our neighbours of different faiths;
 - Dialogue of action – based on shared religious and moral values, working together on matters of common social concern for the betterment of society;
 - Dialogue of theological exchange – sharing and discussing our religious beliefs to better understand one another and identify more precisely what we hold in common and where our differences lie;

- Dialogue of religious experience – sharing about the spiritual practices and fruits of prayer and worship in our respective traditions.
2. In 1991 the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples together published *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, known by the abbreviated title, *Dialogue and Proclamation*. This was a five-year collaboration over several drafts and is a sustained reflection on the nature and purpose of dialogue and proclamation and on the relationship between them.
 3. In 2014 the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue published *Dialogue in Truth and Charity: Pastoral Orientations for Interreligious Dialogue*, a reflection on the practical implementation of the Church's teaching on interreligious dialogue.

There is also the example and the teaching of the popes. Of special mention is the 26-year pontificate of Pope John Paul II. He regularly met with leaders of other religions on his travels and received them at the Vatican. He treated interreligious dialogue in his many messages, speeches, audiences and encyclicals. He called the religious leaders of the world to come together at [Assisi to pray for peace](#) (27/10/1986). He was the first pope to visit the [Jewish synagogue in Rome](#) (13/04/1996). He led a “[Day of Pardon](#)” which included asking forgiveness “for the distrustful and hostile attitudes sometimes taken towards the followers of other religions” (12/03/2000). He was the first pope to visit a mosque ([Umayyad Mosque, Damascus](#), 06/05/2001). Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have reaffirmed the teaching on interreligious dialogue and followed the same practice of meeting leaders of other religions.

There are also related documents from other Vatican offices which address religious plurality, for example, [Christianity and the World Religions](#) from the International Theological Commission (1997), [Dominus Iesus](#) from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2000) and [The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible](#) by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (2002)..

It is important to acknowledge that the development of the teaching and practice of interreligious dialogue is not exclusive to the Catholic Church, but other Christian traditions, the World Council of Churches, ecumenical organizations and other religions have also shown significant initiatives and contributed to the growing body of wisdom and expertise in interfaith relations. Secular organizations too, such as national, state and local governments, and community relations commissions, have proved themselves committed allies in overcoming conflict, promoting civic harmony and combatting violence.

Our Responsibility in Our Time

While much has been achieved in the past fifty years since *Nostra Aetate* was published—the radical transformation that has taken place in relationships between Catholics and Jews and between Catholic and believers of the other world religions in the space of a few decades, in contrast to the centuries of animosity that went before, is nothing less than a miracle—there is still much to be done.

A brief glance at the news headlines shows that there is still a lot of animosity between people of different religions. Ignorance and stereotypes hinder good relations. Religion is used, abused and misused for ulterior purposes, leading to conflict and violence. Atrocities committed overseas have had flow-on effects in Australian suburbs, leading to suspicions and an increase in tensions in and between religious communities. The threat of violence, real or imagined, creates fear and alarm. There have been incidents of provocation, harassment and intimidation. All these animosities threaten to destabilize our relatively harmonious, multi-religious, multi-cultural Australian society.

On this occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, we urge all Catholics to build on the foundations it laid. As the subsequent teaching has shown, interreligious dialogue is not just a preparation for mission, but an integral part of the mission of the Church. Also, as all the recent popes have affirmed, in our globalised, multi-religious society, interreligious dialogue is the only way to secure peace and harmony.

What We Are Doing

In dioceses in Australia, interfaith commissions are guiding, forming and leading the Catholic faithful in building interreligious relations. Bishops, commission members and heads of Catholic organisations meet with imams, rabbis, swamis and leaders from other religions. They issue joint statements on matters of shared concern. Multi-faith prayer services have been held to pray for victims of tragedies—flood, bushfire and acts of violent terrorism—here and overseas. Representatives of the Jews, Christians and Muslims participate in state and national ecumenical dialogues, while the faithful come together for the “Abraham Conference” and for other interfaith events. On occasions, believers from different religions have shared meals together, an ordinary but profound act of communion. There have been exchanges between schools. Graduates of the [Young Catholic Women's Interfaith Fellowship](#) are making a difference to interfaith attitudes and actions at home, at work and in society. But there is so much more to be done. This important work is not for leaders and a select few only. We all have our part to play in transforming relations in our multicultural, multi-religious Australian society.

What Can You Do?

All members of the Catholic Church are called to build relations with believers from other religions. Each is to do it in his or her own way, according to their state in life, in response to the shared call to mission. Following one or more of the four forms of interreligious dialogue mentioned above—dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange and dialogue of religious experience—opens up many possibilities. Here are a few suggestions:

- Meet and greet your neighbours and work colleagues from other religions; offer congratulations for a wedding or a birth, offer condolences on a death; a smile can make a world of difference.
- Learn about the faiths of others from a reliable source; the best way to break down stereotypes is to meet with one of the faithful, so that their religion is not just an idea, but has a face and a name.
- Be curious; ask questions; do not be invasive, but a sincere, respectful enquiry will almost always allay fears, elicit a genuine response and lead to better mutual understanding.
- Visit the place of worship of another religion to experience their sacred space; some mosques and temples have guides who explain the beliefs and practices of the religion.
- Invite a representative from another religion to address your class, school, congregation, church or social group.
- Hospitality is a biblical and cultural virtue; extend an invitation for a cup of tea or a meal, showing sensitivity by observing appropriate dietary restrictions; be open to receive hospitality; sharing an *iftar* meal to break the fast at the end of the day during Ramadan is a great way to build relations with Muslims.
- Work together on matters of common social concern, justice and peace issues, education, child-care, social services, aid to those in need and care for the environment.
- Offer greetings on major feast days, such as *Deepavali* (Hindu), *Eid al-Fitr* (Muslim), *Pesach* (Jewish) and *Vesach* (Buddhist).
- Attend celebrations of major feast days as a gesture of solidarity and interest.
- Learn about and practice *The Golden Rule*, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Mt: 7:12)
- Pray for believers from other religions; on special occasions such as feast days, include them in the prayers of the faithful.
- Take part in multi-religious events for various occasions, celebrating national days, praying for peace, showing shared religious solidarity in the face of natural and other disasters.

The above are just a few possibilities. There are many other ways of building relations with people of other faiths. Be open to be guided by the Spirit who is constantly inspiring and animating all people towards harmony in diversity in accord with God’s plan.

Conclusion

On this occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, in response to the opportunities and challenges of religious plurality *in our day*, we pledge to live and relate with believers from other religions according to the principles and guidelines set out in the *Declaration*.

We extend to all our sisters and brothers who follow Aboriginal, Baha’i, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and other religions and spiritualities our respectful greetings. We extend this greeting to those who do not confess any faith and who follow secular and humanist traditions. We commit ourselves to work with all of you towards mutual understanding and

collaboration in together building a just, harmonious, multi-religious, multi-cultural Australian society.

We make the concluding words of *Nostra Aetate* our own as we urge “the Christian faithful to ‘maintain good fellowship among the nations’ (1 Peter 2:12), and, if possible, to live for their part in peace with all people (see Rom 12:18) so that they may truly be daughters and sons of the Father who is in heaven (see Mt 5:45).”