

A Journey of Friendship

Rabbi Shira Lander, PhD
Hilton Head, SC
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It is absolutely wonderful to be celebrating 50 years of the historic declaration of the Catholic Church, *Nostra Aetate*. Sometimes communities celebrate events that are merely symbolic; but I am very pleased to report that this is not one of those times. Not that I'm denying the enormous symbolism of a council with over two thousand bishops, convened by the Pope, extending a hand of friendship to the Jewish community. But what is truly extraordinary about this declaration is that it did not simply sit on a shelf for the past 50 years and gather dust. Subsequent popes, interfaith consultations, and religious leaders have continued to ponder its implications for Catholic-Jewish relations, Jewish and Catholic theology, biblical scholarship, and religious education. Jews and Catholics have been very busy over the past 50 years: Learning from one another, working together to eradicate hunger, poverty, violence, & injustice, and, most recently, advocating environmental responsibility. The kind of sustained and thoughtful consideration of how the Church and the Jewish people should and could be engaged is a model for how religious communities all around the globe can overcome centuries of hostility.

I was very fortunate to grow up in the post-*Nostra Aetate* era of reconciliation. I grew up in Western Massachusetts, where many of my classmates were Catholic—Polish Catholic, Irish Catholic, and a few stray Italian Catholics who wandered in from Boston. We had a lot in common. On the bus to and from school, we were busy with our second shift of homework: I had Hebrew school homework; they had their catechism workbooks. We were surprised to

learn that many of the questions were the same: What did Abraham do? Who led the Exodus from Egypt? And we would ask each other for help. We also shared the experience of missing school for feast days that our Protestant classmates never heard of.

My father was a campus rabbi who worked closely with the other college chaplains. The Catholic chaplain, whose office was right across the hall from my father's, was Sister Judith O'Connell. Sister Judith always welcomed me into her office, and she allowed me to raid the candy jar she had on her desk. Every December we would join her and the other sisters for Christmas, and I looked forward to drinking egg nog as we gathered around the sparkling Christmas tree.

My appreciation for the religious customs of my Catholic neighbors was nurtured at an early age. Sister Judith's smile was as sweet as the candy she gave me, and I grew up with her as my first women religious role model. Years before the first woman was ordained a rabbi (in 1972), I decided I wanted to be a rabbi—an idea planted in my imagination by knowing Sister Judith.

She had a picture of Pope Paul VI in her office, who, she explained to me, was kind of like the head rabbi of the Church. That made sense to my five year-old mind, since he wore a head covering that looked just like a yarmulke! And I somehow knew that this Pope's gentle smile was a friendly one, just like Sister Judith's.

That Pope brought *Nostra Aetate* into being, and continued to promote Jewish-Catholic relations. He was the first Pope to make an official pilgrimage to the holy land since the time of the apostles. His successor, Pope John Paul II (1978-2005), continued to break new ground by being the first Pope to visit a synagogue, make pilgrimages to Holocaust sites, and establish

diplomatic relations with the state of Israel. He described Jewish-Catholic relations using the image of brotherly love, and he expressed regret for the difficult past between our two communities. I'm sure many of us have sealed in our memories the image of him inserting a prayer at the Western wall of the ancient Jerusalem temple during his Holy Land pilgrimage of 2000; fewer of us know that the prayer was the very same one he had offered at the Mass of Pardon in St. Peter's Basilica nine days earlier (March 12, 2000). The prayer expressed sorrow for Jewish suffering and enjoined Catholics to "genuine brotherhood with the People of the Covenant." Pope John Paul II showed his deep respect for Jewish belief and practice by omitting the Trinitarian formula traditionally recited at the end of confessions ("of sins against the people of Israel"—here construed as Jews, not both Jews and Catholics, as was normative in Catholic writings). And by using the phrase "People of the Covenant," he echoed the words of Pope Paul VI's historic visit to the Holy Land on January 5, 1964.

Pope Benedict XVI (2005-13), whom I had the honor of meeting in 2005, maintained the legacy of his predecessor, although he was not without his critics in the Jewish community. The current Pope, His holiness Pope Francis, is the first Pope with deep, personal, life-long friendships with Jews. We are probably all aware of his celebrated relationship with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, as Monsignor Haley mentioned earlier tonight. The Pope and the Rabbi co-authored a book chronicling their conversations ("On Heaven and Earth"). This personal relationship has enriched the Pope's sensitivity to the Jewish psyche, as he has said: "The friendship which has grown between us makes us bitterly and sincerely regret the terrible persecutions which [the Jews] have endured, and continue to endure, especially those that have involved Christians." He has noted that "to be a good Christian, it is necessary to

understand Jewish history and traditions.” He has also said: “With the help of God, and especially since [*Nostra Aetate*] ... we have rediscovered that the Jewish people are still, for us, the holy root from which Jesus originated.” Postscript: Just today the Vatican COMMISSION FOR RELIGIOUS RELATIONS WITH THE JEWS clarified the Catholic position on relations with Jews in a long and extremely thoughtful encyclical, “‘THE GIFTS AND THE CALLING OF GOD ARE IRREVOCABLE’ (Rom 11:29). A REFLECTION ON THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS PERTAINING TO CATHOLIC–JEWISH RELATIONS ON THE OCCASION OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF ‘*NOSTRA AETATE*’ (NO.4). This document, which marks another historic watershed in the relations of Jews and Catholics, asserts that “the mystery of God’s work...is not a matter of missionary efforts to convert Jews, but rather the expectation that the Lord will bring about the hour when we will all be united, ‘when all peoples will call on God with one voice and ‘serve him shoulder to shoulder’ (*Nostra Aetate*”, No.4)” [37]. While recognizing the mystery of Christ’s universality, the document states: “the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews. While there is a principled rejection of an institutional Jewish mission, Christians are nonetheless called to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews, although they should do so in a humble and sensitive manner, acknowledging that Jews are bearers of God’s Word, and particularly in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah” [40].

As we can see by how far Jewish-Catholic relations have come, the innovation of *Nostra Aetate* cannot be overstated: For the first two millennia of Christian-Jewish relations, Catholic teaching portrayed Jews as guilty of killing Jesus and accursed for rejecting him as messiah. The Church held that God’s covenant with the Jewish people was superseded by the new covenant

of Christianity. These negative attitudes are referred to as the “teachings of contempt,” and they are clearly rejected by *Nostra Aetate*.

Although most scholars attribute the transformation of *Nostra Aetate* to Catholic self-reflection regarding Christian culpability in the Holocaust initiated by Pope John XXIII (1958-63), its roots can actually be traced back to 19th century France.¹ The French Sisters of Zion were founded in 1843—according to their charter: “to witness in the Church and in the world that God continues to be faithful in his love for the Jewish people and to hasten the fulfilment of the promises concerning the Jews and the Gentiles” (Const. 2). Originally the order’s mandate was interpreted as a mission to convert Jews. But this soon changed when Alfred Dreyfus, a French Jew of Alsatian ancestry, was wrongly convicted of trumped-up charges of espionage (1895) and exiled to the Devil’s island prison. Although Colonel Dreyfus was eventually exonerated (1906), the antisemitism that his trial unleashed throughout Europe provoked the Sisters of Zion to reexamine their mission. They committed themselves to a new kind of witness, one that interpreted God’s continued faithfulness to the Jewish people as a call to improve Catholic-Jewish relations and to stand up against all forms of antisemitism. The Sisters of Zion were a significant force advancing the Jewish agenda of *Nostra Aetate*.

They were among the thousands of observers, members of religious orders, scholars, laymen and laywomen, who worked behind the scenes daily to produce this historic declaration. In its broadest sense, *Nostra Aetate* reframes the relation of Catholics to non-Christians. In this context, the council advocated “mutual understanding and appreciation.” It is paragraph four which focuses specifically on Catholic-Jewish relations. That paragraph acknowledges the Jewish origins of Christianity; it asserts that God’s gifts and covenant with the

Jewish people are irrevocable; it affirms a theological view of Jews (first promulgated in the mid-16th century by the Council of Trent) that the Church often ignored in earlier centuries, namely, that “neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during” the suffering and death of Jesus. Most importantly, *Nostra Aetate* condemns using the Bible to promote anti-Judaism in no uncertain terms: “Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy scripture... [the Church] deplores all hatreds, persecutions, displays of antisemitism directed against the Jews at any time or from any source.” Bold words indeed; Words whose profound effects can now be measured in hindsight, 50 years later.

In closing, I’d like to leave you with two ideas about Jewish-Catholic dialogue that I have learned in my forty-plus years of engagement in this holy conversation: One is that this is a relationship first and foremost between people, not institutions; and the second is that we, who are privileged to live at this time in history, in this country, have a sacred duty to nurture and cultivate this relationship worldwide.

What kind of relationship should we cultivate? A relationship not of convenience, but of love and mutual respect. One of unconditional love, with no strings attached. We need to invest time in getting to know each other so we can discard the erroneous preconceptions we might have about who the other is or is not. And we should not attach conditions to the relationship; this is not a political treaty negotiation.

The fruits of this relationship are already apparent, but need to become more well-known and widespread. To give you a personal example: I had a colleague at St. Mary’s seminary, Father James Caan, who also taught me Latin. I invited him to join our family for

dinner one night, and as we chatted in the kitchen while I cooked, we stumbled upon the realization that some of our traditions' more puzzling rituals served the same purpose. Performing these rituals on a regular basis served as a lifeline, tethering us to God and our communities even when we didn't have the inclination to stay connected. By talking openly and honestly, without judgment, we learned something that neither of us had known about ourselves before the conversation. And those are the types of delightful surprises and rewards that dialogue can bring. These kinds of relationships need work to be sustained, however, and they require a tremendous amount of perseverance and patience.

Finally, because of the where we live and the privileges we enjoy, dialogue is our sacred duty. At this season of light, we have a responsibility to bring light to others, to other nations. Other parts of the world don't have the privilege of dialogue—either because the socio-political climate doesn't permit it, or because of there are too few or no Jews to dialogue with. Our experiences in this country have given us a precious gift. As Jews and Catholics, as people of God, we both know that we dare not squander this gift, but are obligated to make the most of it. This is a time when the world needs to see examples of religious healing and harmony, rather than religious dissention and discord. Together, as Jews and Catholics, we are in a unique position to show the world that religion can be used for plowshares and pruning-hooks, rather than spears and swords.

I leave you with the wisdom of two great sources. The first, from the Gospel According to Luke (12:48): From those to whom much is given, much is required. The second, from Rabbi Tarfon, who lived in the wake of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem:

לא עליך המלאכה לגמור,

You are not obliged to complete the work,

ולא אתה בן חורין לבטל ממנה

But neither are you exempt from engaging in it.

So let us take up the work of dialogue, and bring light to this community and beyond.

¹ Personal conversation with Prof. Celia Deutsch, who is working on a paper researching this history.