



Celebrating and Deepening the New Christian-Jewish Relationship

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A Statement from the International Council of Christians and Jews on the Golden Jubilee of the Second Vatican Council Declaration, *Nostra Aetate* 2015 ICCJ Annual Conference in Rome

Introduction

The Second Vatican Council's 1965 declaration on the relationship of the Catholic Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* is rightly described as groundbreaking, revolutionary, a watershed, and transformative. Although some of its ideas had been previously expressed in earlier post-Shoah writings, *Nostra Aetate* had an unparalleled global impact as a normative expression of the teaching authority of the world's largest Christian community. Fifty years later, we rejoice in the new relationship between Jews and Christians signaled by *Nostra Aetate* §4. We reflect on what we have learned and what ongoing challenges confront us. Like people dreaming of what were once unimaginable possibilities (Psalm 126:1), we look forward to a future full of hope.

The Distance We've Come

Not so long ago prominent thinkers in both communities claimed that it was either impossible or undesirable for Christians and Jews to speak in a religiously meaningful way to one another. Centuries of Christian denigration and oppression of Jews had instilled deep-seated avoidance mechanisms and suspicions in both peoples. Neither community imagined it had very much to learn from the other.

Today this situation has dramatically changed in many places. Major communities of Christians have come to realize that they are not alone in being God's faithful people. Coming to a genuine appreciation of the holiness of ongoing Jewish covenantal life with God, they have set aside past conversionary agendas. Likewise, some Jews participating in the maturing interfaith dialogue have glimpsed the presence of the Holy One in conversations with Christian interlocutors. We are both becoming aware that many theological ideas that arose in ancient adversarial contexts are increasingly unhelpful today. We have been learning how to speak to one another as friends and companions.

The Relationship Today

We are now living in an era when – for the first time in history! – Jews and Christians can work and study together in a sustained way, thereby enriching each other's covenantal lives. However, this unprecedented blessing for today's generations imparts the responsibility to use well the opportunity that has been given to us. To meet this duty, we must together face current and ongoing challenges.

- Too many Christians and too many Jews are unaware of the rapprochement that is unfolding between us. We cling to the "mental ghettos" to which we've become accustomed. Rigorous and constant education to a true knowledge of each other's traditions is more important than ever to ensure better self and mutual understanding. While this is especially crucial in the preparation of our future leaders, "grassroots" initiatives must also be undertaken. In all our communities, there should not be any discrepancies between what our official statements declare and our everyday activities – they should inform and reflect each other.

- The habits of centuries cannot be unlearned in only a few decades. Inherited reflexes need to be retrained into new ways of acting. This happens only through regular interaction. For instance, Christians who study rabbinic texts with Jewish guides soon perceive the injustice of the timeworn caricature of Judaism as heartless legalism or its ancestral innovators, the Pharisees, as more concerned about rubrics than people. Similarly, Jews who explore church traditions with Christian companions can encounter a questing and humble spirituality far removed from any arrogance and condescension they may have expected.
- The long shadow of the Shoah will continue to raise difficult questions between us for many long years. Jews struggle with the awful legacy of victimization and fears of annihilation. Christians grapple with guilt for the long history of Christian antisemitism. This challenge takes a particularly pointed form when judging the actions of historical figures: does their being immersed in an antisemitic society excuse personal antisemitic views they expressed or deeds they performed? That would be a dangerous argument since social antisemitism remains widespread today. We believe that only together can Christians and Jews help each other heal and effectively confront the fraught legacy of the Shoah.
- The seemingly intractable conflicts in the Middle East generate interreligious tensions and even hostility all around the world. The spiritual significance for Jews of the Land of Israel remains difficult for Christians to fathom. Moreover, the end of Jewish exile from their ancestral homeland with the establishment of a modern nation-state poses unprecedented challenges to the religious perspectives of Jews and Christians alike. As religious people, we believe that making mutual interreligious understanding the priority must guide all of our conversations and actions in the years ahead. We need to strive to be critically self-aware of how our own respective presuppositions and histories can hinder genuine empathy and insight.
- Today, religious minorities throughout the world still suffer mistreatment, persecution, and violence. The overcoming of racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, and Islamophobia should be a top priority of all those engaged in interfaith work.

In our world of globalization, ecological degradation, growing disparities between the rich and poor, and rapid technological change, the growing rapprochement between Jews and Christians can be an invaluable sign of hope that even the most protracted enmities and deepest divisions can be transformed into solidarity and renewal.

The Journey Ahead

As we look to the decades ahead, we are acutely aware that as Christians and Jews we are engaged in an unprecedented journey that has led us from hostility to the beginnings of friendship. We have begun to care for each other, be concerned about each other's pain, rejoice in each other's rich spiritual heritage, and desire the best for each other. The ICCJ and its national member organizations throughout the world pledge to deepen the new relationship between Jews and Christians and to expand our culture of dialogue. We will strive to intensify theological discourse and education throughout our communities. Our ultimate goal is to see God in the face of the other. Like the encounter between Jacob and Esau after years of animosity, so should we see the religious value in the our brothers and sisters. Then we can all say, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God" (Genesis 33:10).