



ICCJ President's Greetings for 2015

31.01.2015 | Philip A. Cunningham

Dear Members of the ICCJ Family, Our Member Organizations and Friends, and Everyone Who Works to Build Understanding and Solidarity between Jews and Christians and among all religions,

Greetings to all as the New Year on the common calendar gets underway!

To the horror of us all, 2015 has begun with the tragic events that have occurred in Paris. These terrorist attacks involve many dimensions, including geopolitical, historical, cultural, economic, socio-psychological factors, and also, to our dismay, interreligious ones. There may be similar acts of violence in the future.

All the more reason for all of us who are dedicated to mutual understanding and enrichment among Jews, Christians, Muslims, and all people to intensify our efforts. We have a positive story to tell! We should try not to let the global discourse be completely dominated by narratives of hostility and fear.

Since the turn of the year is customarily a time to reflect on the past and to make resolutions for a better future, I'd like to offer some personal thoughts about the year 2015 and the vision of Christian and Jewish amity to which we're all dedicated. They're offered in the hopes that they will stimulate concrete planning for the year ahead.

Celebrating a Landmark Moment in Christian-Jewish Relations

2015 marks the Golden Jubilee of a milestone in interfaith relations: the issuance by the Second Vatican Council of its declaration on the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church to non-Christian religions. Known by its opening Latin words, *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Time"), it was not the first Christian document in the aftermath of the Shoah to decry antisemitism or to repudiate the hoary accusation of Jews as accursed "Christ killers." We who today are part of the ICCJ or any of its family of national member organizations stand on the shoulders of a few dozen Christian and Jewish pioneers who came together in the Swiss town of Seelisberg in 1947 for an "Emergency Conference on Antisemitism." This gathering, which gave birth to the ICCJ itself, released its famous "Address to the Churches" that in Ten Points called upon them to reform their teachings about Jews and Judaism. (You'll recall that the ICCJ commemorated this in Berlin in 2009 with the issuance of a major statement, "A Time for Recommitment: Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians," which included an expanded "Twelve Points of Berlin," addressed to both Christians and Jews.) There were also important statements issued by the World Council of Churches, by national Protestant churches, and by theologians and clergy as individuals and in groups.

Greatly indebted to these forerunners, *Nostra Aetate* possessed a unique authority as an expression of the teaching magisterium of the world's largest Christian community. It profoundly revolutionized relations between Jews and Catholics. It also gave a major boost to the interreligious efforts begun in other Christian traditions and inspired new initiatives for dialogue among religious communities around the globe.

To commemorate this landmark moment the ICCJ will hold its 2015 annual conference in Rome, hosted by the Amicizia Ebraico-Cristiana di Roma, in collaboration with the Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews, and with the support of many religious, academic, and civic organizations. We will celebrate what has been achieved and recommit ourselves to the continuing journey.

There is much to celebrate!

Only a few decades ago there were prominent thinkers in both communities who 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. A potent supposition persisted that for one tradition to be legitimate, the other had to be illegitimate. Neither community imagined it had very much to learn from the other.

As 2015 begins, this situation has dramatically changed in many parts of the world. 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. Both Christians and Jews are becoming aware that many theological ideas that developed in ancient adversarial contexts are increasingly unhelpful today. They are both retrieving from their respective traditions overlooked positive approaches to one another.

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.

There is much work to be done!

As 2015 commences, I am reminded of this insightful observation by Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy:

"Let us then turn to consider the future. Our first aim must of course be to press forward. To stand still is to risk going backwards ... [W]e refuse to be tied down to the past by chains that hold us back from building a new future, a new partnership between Jews and [Christians], a future based on mutual trust and understanding."

Given the amazing progress of the past five decades, it is perhaps easy to underestimate the difficulty in unlearning the inherited reflexes of many centuries of hostility. Even setting aside the extremist violence and rhetoric that assaults our world, it seems to me that there is evidence all around us that old habits die hard. To mention briefly a few examples:

1. Even though all Christian communities officially condemn antisemitism, scenes of mob protests and violence against Jews and synagogues in several countries in response to last summer's military conflict between Hamas and the State of Israel show that a habit of imputing blame collectively to all Jews everywhere has mutated from its Christian origins into the modern secular world. These public displays of antisemitism have prompted the Executive Board of the ICCJ to extend its semi-annual meeting in January in order to consult with several experts and representatives of European ICCJ member organizations. Please watch for a report in February about this gathering.

2. On a related topic, the ICCJ Executive Board noted the following in its 2013 statement, "As Long as You Believe in a Living God, You Must Have Hope":

When we hear some Christians today say that the Jewish claim to be a 'chosen people' shows how overly particularistic Judaism is in comparison with universal Christianity, or when other Christians identify Jesus' primary opponents during his earthly life as 'the Jews', just as 'the Jews' are enemies of Palestinian Christians today, we have to wonder if centuries of anti-Jewish stereotyping and replacement theology are finding new expression in political rather than religious discourse. At least there seems to be a Christian fixation on the Jewish state and its policies, some of which are indeed legitimately questionable. ... Such statements make us ask if the Jewish people—and now also the State of Israel—continue to play an important, even indispensable negative role in Christian theology as the perpetual 'other' [§7].

Indeed, the polarization that the Middle East conflicts engender continues to afflict even Christian-Jewish dialogue groups that have prospered for decades. It is exacerbated by widespread Islamophobic bigotry. However, it is the ICCJ's mission to foster interreligious conversation even about divisive subjects. This is why ICCJ supports, along with a number of universities, the research project: "Promise, Land, and Hope: Jews and Christians Seeking Understanding to Enable Constructive Dialogue about Israeli-Palestinian Issues," which will convene in Jerusalem in August of 2015. Watch for further news.

3. There remains a persistent tendency among both Christians and Jews to regard as peripheral the work of nurturing their still fledgling new relationship. Some feel that by rejecting bigotry and being respectful they have sufficiently addressed the issues between the traditions; further reforms are unnecessary. This marginalizing of the task to nurture our new relationship enables some Jews to dismiss Christianity as having only a distorted relationship with the Holy One, while like-minded Christians persist in caricaturing Judaism (perhaps epitomized in the persons of the Pharisees or rabbis) as heartless legalism that cares little about people. Such ideas can be expressed liturgically in traditional prayers and hymn lyrics and, for Christians, in preaching that misrepresents Hebrew prophecy as photographic anticipations of Christ or that casually reiterates polemics found in certain Gospel passages.

4. The enduring influence of our tragic history is also evident when Jews and Christians carelessly fall back into negative "default" attitudes when the other is not kept consciously in mind. It seems to me that it will be a sure sign that our respective theologies are truly promoting right relationship between us when we consistently refer to the Christian or Jewish other in the same affirming way when they are absent as when they are present.

Nostra Aetate's 50th Anniversary is More Important than Its 100th Will Be!

For these and other reasons, I strongly believe that the jubilee of *Nostra Aetate* in 2015 is a rare occurrence that cannot be squandered by anyone dedicated to deepening Christian and Jewish interactions. This is even truer in the face of terrorism and violence.

A friend of mine, Msgr. Michael Carroll of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, recently remarked that observing this benchmark fiftieth anniversary is more important than will be the case on the one hundredth anniversary. He explained that in 2015 there are many people who have lived through the recent enormous sea change in Jewish-Christian relations, whereas there presumably will be no one with that experience in 2065. We, therefore, are better able to perceive both how far we have come and how far we have yet to go. The kind of anniversary our descendants will mark in 2065 may in large measure be determined by our actions in 2015.

With this observation in mind, I ask everyone to please work locally and nationally to sponsor

creative ecumenical and interfaith observances that will inform and uplift people, especially the young, to devote themselves to Christian and Jewish rapprochement in particular and interreligious amity in general. Consider composing joint statements of respect and resolve. Join with the ICCJ in Rome from 28 June – 1 July, 2015 to explore together the unfolding paths of our interfaith journey. Let us counter all the news of interreligious conflict and increasing religious persecutions in the world with inspiring celebrations of a genuinely epochal turn to interreligious solidarity!

Will Christians and Jews take the occasion of the golden jubilee of *Nostra Aetate* to intensify educational efforts about our new relationship? Will we honor the pioneers of the post-Holocaust decades by bringing new energy to the groundbreaking work that they began? Will we help each other dismantle theologies and habits that fostered disdain and in their place construct together theologies of right-relationship? Will we pray for the grace to study our respective traditions as friends who enjoy learning about the Holy One from one another?

Let us make these our New Year's resolutions for 2015!

Phil Cunningham

Dr Philip A. Cunningham

ICCJ President

Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia