NCCB, USA: Statement on Catholic-Jewish Relations

29.11.1975 | National Conference of Catholic Bishops U.S.A.

Ten years after Nostra Aetate. November 1975.

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Ten years have passed since the Second Vatican Council promulgated its statement on the Jewish people (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 4). This decade has been a period unique in Catholic-Jewish relations. The vantage point of ten years later provides a timely opportunity for the Catholic Church in the United States to recall, reaffirm and reflect on the principles and teachings of the conciliar document, and to evaluate their implementation in our country.

For this task we welcome the new Guidelines and Suggestions for implementing *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4 issued in January of this year by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews recently established by the Holy See. And we are reminded of the still very applicable programs recommended by the Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations which our National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued in 1967. We are gratified that the latter have been highly regarded, especially in the Jewish community, and that some of their recommendations anticipated portions of the new Guidelines of the Holy See and also of several diocesan documents.

These two documents, themselves fruits of *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4, elucidate the conciliar declaration, considerably extend its perspectives and broaden the paths it opened. Both are eloquent testimonies to the new horizons the Second Vatican Council succeeded in bringing into Catholic view.

These ten years make it clear that *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4 initiated a new era in Catholic-Jewish affairs. Calling for "fraternal dialogue and biblical studies" with Jews, it ended a centuries-long silence between Church and Synagogue. An age of dialogue was begun. Conversations between Catholics and Jews proliferated rapidly in many forms. Productive meetings took place on every level, from the highest intellectual exchanges to the most popular types of social gatherings, often referred to as "living room dialogues." our own Bishops" Conference was among the first to form a national commission which sought to implement the Council document. Even before the close of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the United States Bishops had decided to establish a commission in the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to promote Catholic-Jewish understanding and in 1967 the first full-time Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish relations was in operation.

Since that time the Secretariat has maintained fruitful contact with the major groups within the Jewish community and has been in regular communication with the dioceses of the country. Many dioceses have followed the example of our Conference and have established Commissions or Secretariats for Jewish-Catholic relations. Numerous projects have been undertaken, including, for example, a careful and systematic analysis of Catholic teaching texts in order to eliminate offensive references to Jews and replace them with materials showing Judaism in a positive light. Numerous

theological discussions have been undertaken and Catholic collaboration with the Jewish community has resulted in a variety of social action programs. We are pleased to observe that many of these initiatives have been emulated on the unofficial level by many individuals and groups across the country who have shown admirable sensitivity, dedication and expertise in promoting Catholic-Jewish amity.

We do not wish to convey the impression that all our problems are behind us. There still exist areas of disagreement and misunderstanding which create tensions in both communities. We hope that the difficulties can be resolved to some degree in amicable discussion. Certainly the Catholic view on aid to non-public schools should be the subject of serious dialogue and concern. We are pleased that this and other exchanges have already been held on important subjects of disagreement, and it is our hope that progress will be made in mutual understanding by furthering this dialogic method.

Recalling past centuries, however, invites a sobering evaluation of our progress and warns against becoming over-confident about an early end to remaining problems. Those were centuries replete with alienation, misunderstanding and hostility between Jews and Christians. While we rejoice that there are signs that anti-Semitism is declining in our country, conscience compels us to confront with candor the unhappy record of Jewish suffering both past and present. We make our own the statement of *Nostra Aetate*, "...for the sake of her common patrimony with the Jews, the Church decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism staged against Jews at whatever time in history and by whomsoever" and we reaffirm with the new Vatican Guidelines that "the spiritual bonds and historical links binding the Church to Judaism condemn (as opposed to the very spirit of Christianity) all forms of anti-Semitism..." We urge all in the Church who work in the area of education, whether in the seminary, the school or the pulpit, not only to avoid any presentation that might tend to disparage Jews or Judaism but also to emphasize those aspects of our faith which bear witness to our common patrimony and our spiritual ties with Jews.

Much of the alienation between Christian and Jew found its origins in a certain anti-Judaic theology which over the centuries has led not only to social friction with Jews but often to their oppression. one of the most hopeful developments in our time, powerfully assisted by *Nostra Aetate*, has been the decline of the old anti-Judaism and the reformation of Christian theological expositions of Judaism along more constructive lines.

The first major step in this direction was the repudiation of the charge that Jews were and are collectively guilty of the death of Christ. *Nostra Aetate* and the new Guidelines have definitely laid to rest this myth which has caused so much suffering to the Jewish people. There remains however the continuing task of ensuring that nothing which in any way approaches the notion of Jewish collective guilt should be found in any Catholic medium of expression or communication. Correctly viewed, the disappearance of the charge of collective guilt of Jews pertains as much to the purity of the Catholic faith as it does to the defense of Judaism.

The Council"s rejection of this charge against Jews has been interpreted by some commentators as an "exoneration" of the Jewish people. Such a view of the matter still persists. The truth is that the Council acknowledged that the Jewish people never were, nor are they now, guilty of the death of Christ.

Nostra Aetate was a new beginning in Catholic-Jewish relations and, as with all beginnings, we are faced with the task of revising some traditional understandings and judgments. The brief suggestions of the Council document have been taken up by some theologians, but their implications for theological renewal have not yet been fully explored. We therefore make a few recommendations in line with two themes of the document: the Jewish origins of the Church and the thought of St. Paul.

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Christians have not fully appreciated their Jewish roots. Early in Christian history a de-Judaizing process dulled our awareness of our Jewish beginnings. The Jewishness of Jesus, of his mother, his disciples, of the primitive Church, was lost from view. That Jesus was called Rabbi. that he was born, lived and died under the Law; that He and Peter and Paul worshipped in the Temple - these facts were blurred by the controversy that alienated Christians from the Synagogue. How Jewish the Church was toward midpoint of the first century is dramatically reflected in the description of the "Council of Jerusalem" (Acts 15). The question at issue was whether Gentile converts to the Church had to be circumcised and observe the Mosaic Law? The obligation to obey the Law was held so firmly by the Jewish Christians of that time that miraculous visions accorded to Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10) were needed to vindicate the contrary contention that Gentile Christians were not so obliged. By the third century however, a de-Judaizing process had set in which tended to undervalue the Jewish origins of the Church, a tendency that has surfaced from time to time in devious ways throughout Christian history. Some catechists homilists, and teachers still convey little appreciation of the Jewishness of that heritage and rich spirituality which we derive from Abraham, Moses, the prophets, the psalmists, and other spiritual giants of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Most essential concepts in the Christian creed grew at first in Judaic soil. Uprooted from that soil, these basic concepts cannot be perfectly understood. It is for reasons such as these that *Nostra Aetate* recommends joint "theological and biblical studies" with Jews. The Vatican Guidelines of 1975 encourage Catholic specialists to engage in new research into the relations of Judaism and Christianity and to seek out "collaboration with Jewish scholars." The renewal of Christian faith is the issue here, for renewal always entails to some extent a return to one"s origins.

The Council document cites St. Paul, particularly in chapters 9 to 11 of his Letter to the Romans. We find in these rediscovered, precious chapters Paul"s love for his kinsmen and a firm basis for Christian reverence for the Jewish people. Admittedly, Paul"s theology of Judaism has its more negative aspects; they have been adequately emphasized over the centuries in Catholic teaching. It would be well today to explore and emphasize the positive elements of Paul"s thought that have received inadequate attention.

In these chapters Paul reveals his deep love of the Jewish people. He tells of his willingness to accept damnation itself for the sake of his kinsmen (9:3), even though he also expresses his painful disappointment and incomprehension at Israel"s failure to accept Jesus as its Messiah. Crucial to an understanding of his admiration of the Jewish people and to a Christian understanding of their situation is the following text. Written at the midpoint of the first century, Paul refers to his "kinsmen according to the flesh who are Israelites, who have the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the legislation and the worship and the promises; who have the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh" (9:3-5), thus making clear the continuing validity of Israel"s call. Paul, moreover, insists that God has by no means rejected his people. "Is it possible that God has rejected his people? of course not. I, an Israelite descended from Abraham through the tribe of Benjamin, could never agree that God has rejected his people, the people he chose specially long ago" (11:1-2). What proof does Paul offer for the enduring validity of Israel"s relationship to God even after the founding of the Church? "God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice" (11:29).

Paul warns fellow Christians against showing contempt for the Jewish people by reminding them that they (Christians) are wild branches grafted into the olive tree itself to share its life. "....remember that you do not support the root: it is the root that supports you" (11:18). And he invites his listeners to a love of the Jews, since they are "still loved by God for the sake of their ancestors" (11:28).

In effect, we find in the Epistle to the Romans (9-11) long-neglected passages which help us to construct a new and positive attitude toward the Jewish people. There is here a task incumbent on theologians, as yet hardly begun, to explore the continuing relationship of the Jewish people with

God and their spiritual bonds with the New Covenant and the fulfillment of God"s plan for both Church and Synagogue.

To revere only the ancient Jewish patriarchs and prophets is not enough. The all too common view of Judaism as a legalistic and decadent form of religion that lost all significance with the coming of Christ and all vitality after the destruction of the Temple has lingered on in the Christian centuries. The 1975 Guidelines put us on guard against such a view and urge us to see post-biblical Judaism as rich in religious values and worthy of our sincere respect and esteem. The Guidelines in fact discourage us from attempting to define the Jews in exclusively Christian terms, explicitly stating, "dialogue demands respect for the other as he is" (Part 1). Again, "Christians must therefore strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism: they must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience" (Introduction).

In dialogue with Christians, Jews have explained that they do not consider themselves as a church, a sect, or a denomination, as is the case among Christian communities, but rather as a peoplehood that is not solely racial, ethnic or religious, but in a sense a composite of all these. It is for such reasons that an overwhelming majority of Jews see themselves bound in one way or another to the land of Israel. Most Jews see this tie to the land as essential to their Jewishness. Whatever difficulties Christians may experience in sharing this view they should strive to understand this link between land and people which Jews have expressed in their writings and worship throughout two millennia as a longing for the homeland, holy Zion. Appreciation of this link is not to give assent to any particular religious interpretation of this bond. Nor is this affirmation meant to deny the legitimate rights of other parties in the region, or to adopt any political stance in the controversies over the Middle East, which lie beyond the purview of this statement.

On this tenth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* we reaffirm our wholehearted commitment to the principles of that document as well as to the directives of the Guidelines of 1975. Aware of the magnitude of the task before us and of the excellence of the many practical guidelines and suggestions contained in the documents, we urge that special attention be given to the following exhortations:

1. That all dioceses, according to their needs and circumstances, create and support whatever instrument or agency is appropriate for carrying out the recommendations of *Nostra Aetate,* n.4, the Vatican Guidelines of 1975 and the American Bishops" Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations of 1967.

2. That homilists and liturgists pay special attention to the presentation and interpretation of scripture so as to promote among the Catholic people a genuine appreciation of the special place of the Jewish people as God"s first-chosen in the history of salvation and in no way slight the honor and dignity that is theirs.

3. That Catholic scholars address themselves in a special way to the theological and scriptural issues raised by those documents which deal with the relationships of the Church with Judaism.

We are firm in our faith that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and He whom we consider Israel"s fairest Son will sustain us in this holy endeavor.

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