A living question mark

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This month marks the 50th anniversary of the promulgation of Nostra Aetate, one of the shortest but conceivably among the most influential of the major documents to come out of the Second Vatican Council. Its promulgation in October 1965 was controversial, and its appearance was therefore delayed. When it was finally published, its scope had been enlarged. It was no longer a document focused solely on Judaism and Jewish-Catholic relations; it also included brief reflection on other non-Christian faiths, especially Islam.

Looking back with the advantage of 50 years' hindsight on what Nostra Aetate said about Judaism, our first reaction might be surprise at what it says and doesn't say, and at its tone. It states that the Jews of today cannot be held responsible for the passion of Christ, but this comes across as a rather grudging declaration, prefaced as it is with the remark, "True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ . . ." An explicit reference to expunging the charge of deicide (the killing of God) had been present in an earlier draft but was eventually omitted as a result of pressure from representatives of Middle Eastern Catholics. It was noted that the church "decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone," but there was no overt admission that the church and its adherents had been guilty of precisely such actions many times over many centuries.

A careful reading of the paragraphs in the document relating to Judaism makes it apparent that the theological position adopted could be described as a soft supersessionism (the belief that Christianity has superseded Judaism and made it obsolete). Liberal Catholic critics noticed that though Nostra Aetate described other religions such as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism in terms that followers of those faiths would regard as authentic, the same courtesy was not applied to Judaism, which was clearly viewed through Christian spectacles, albeit with a gaze that was seeking to be as benevolent as possible.

In spite of such limitations, Nostra Aetate was a watershed in the field of Christian-Jewish relations, not simply for what it said, but because of the radically new direction it encouraged—and not merely among Catholics. Other Christians, including many of the mainline Protestant churches that are members of the World Council of Churches, found themselves wanting to rethink their engagement with Judaism and their theological understanding of the Jewish-Christian relationship. Indeed, it is arguable that it was Nostra Aetate and the change of Catholic institutional direction resulting from it that prompted the World Council of Churches to open its own interreligious dialogue office in 1971.

Although the initial Jewish reaction to Nostra Aetate was mixed, by 1970 a representative group of Jews, largely American but coming from across the Jewish religious spectrum, had formed the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, initially to be a bilateral dialogue partner with the Catholic Church. (Later the IJCIC also entered into bilateral dialogues with other Christian bodies, including the World Council of Churches.)

In 1974 the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews was established. The very existence and name of this body witnesses to the ambiguities of the relationship with Judaism in Catholic eyes. First, a deliberate decision was made not to include Judaism among the "other religions" for which the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue was responsible, but to locate

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the relationship with Judaism within this commission, which is attached to but autonomous within the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. This marked out Judaism as somehow enjoying a special relationship with Christianity, at least in Catholic eyes.

Second, it was significant ...

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