



Updating Nostra Aetate today

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I am very happy to have the opportunity to join this discussion among such reputable speakers at this podium. Naturally this topic is especially close to my heart as being the Catholic in this setting and the responsibility for my words bears down on me.

It is also an honor for me to be here today because I am from Vienna, where John Oesterreicher and Franz Kardinal König have lived and worked, who contributed significantly to this declaration. As John Connelly notes in his book “From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933–1965” [Harvard University Press, 2012], many of the protagonists of Nostra Aetate were, to quote Peter E. Gordon’s review, “at the symbolic crossroads of national and religious affiliation, as children who had grown up in the polyglot and multiethnic territories of East-Central Europe, where confidence of an integral identity was always uncertain.” To this day, the cultural area along the Danube remains diverse and exciting. Franz König was a scholar of Religious Studies and it was his idea to transform the drafted document about Jewish-Christian relations into a declaration generally on the Church’s relationship to non-Christian religions. In doing so, he rescued the statement on Jews and Judaism for the Council. At least that’s the way the story is told in Vienna. But we know that legends about saints are a literary genre unto themselves.

How should we write Nostra Aetate in today’s world? Without any need to be creative, it would be good to first simply note how far the church pronouncements about Christian-Jewish relations have developed since 1965. Even though church doctrine often considers itself eternal and immutable, it is still a product of its time and its zeitgeist, so it is helpful to summarize and document what has been achieved, based on various ecclesiastical sources, joining Luther in saying, “Here I stand. I cannot do other”. Thankfully, Phil Cunningham did just that a number of times in his theological writings. Unfortunately, doctrinal authority has not yet been ascribed to these essays.

This winter, the Catholic press agency in Austria published an upbeat analysis to mark the anniversary of Nostra Aetate, claiming that Nostra Aetate condemned anti-Semitism, confessed that the Church was guilty of persecuting the Jews, and called for the Church to never forget that its spiritual root is in Israel. Unlike the well-intentioned editor of Kathpress, you here in this room today know, of course, that Nostra Aetate failed to do any of these things – at best gesturing in these directions. However, the article illustrates how widely accepted the perceived achievements of the Christian-Jewish renewal are today and how closely they are associated with this document.

The Council only “decried” anti-Semitism, it did not condemn it, and the Church did not confess its guilt until Pope John Paul II did so in the Holy Year 2000.

Furthermore, the Council doesn’t have a single positive thing to say about Judaism per se, only talking about Judaism in relation to the Christian faith. With regard to Muslims, Nostra Aetate 3 states “The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God”. There is no such appreciate of the Jewish faith in Nostra Aetate 4. Since then, thankfully, the Pontifical Biblical Commission as well as Pope Francis have made clear statements to bring closure to the point left open by Nostra Aetate: “God has never neglected his faithfulness to the covenant with Israel, and through the awful trials of these last centuries, the Jews have preserved their faith in God. And for this, we, the Church and the whole human family, can never be sufficiently grateful to them.” [Pope

Francis' letter to Eugenio Scalfari]

There we have the basic issue that we must certainly address in “Nostra Aetate today”: positive inclusion of Judaism, as it sees itself, as a chosen people with a lasting covenant with God, the gift of the Torah and the Promised Land. We should reinforce the concept that as Christians or Catholics, we are indivisible from the Jews throughout time and on the same path until the Day of the Lord.

Furthermore, we should recall that the second chapter of Nostra Aetate is also a key to understanding chapter four: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings.”

When it comes to Judaism, Christian teaching and preaching often fail precisely to do this. How often do teachers and preachers claim to know exactly where Judaism and the Torah seem outdated, archaic, inhuman, incomplete and merciless, where the Jewish tradition needs renewal and improvement, whereas Jesus and Christianity represent the pinnacle, fulfilment, overabundance and perfection in love?

I would describe my vision like this: The classical Nostra Aetate is Church-focused and views Judaism from the Church's perspective because it has recognized that in discrediting Judaism, it discredits its own identity. Our new “Nostra Aetate revised” must be Holy Scripture-focused and build first on Israel as God's chosen people and God's revelation to the people of Israel. The Church, churches and Christians follow second. Of course churches and the Christian theology have developed on their own throughout history and adopted various cultural, theological and philosophical traditions. However, from this redemptive perspective, it must be clear from this point forward that the Jewish categories and aid to understanding are immutable guidelines for us, as immutable as Jesus's Jewishness. Of course “Nostra Aetate revised” takes this position for our sake, for the sake of the Church, because Judaism needs no affirmation from a magisterium that they are God's Chosen People. It is a different stance altogether: The Church is not explaining that the other is like this or like that. Rather, the Church is listening to how Judaism views itself and is thus the learner committed to being open to challenge through the presence of the living people of Israel. And the Church is grateful to have received the gift of revelation from Israel and to be permitted to share it with the People of the Covenant.

We so need a new hermeneutic, a new key to understanding our faith. That is not easy to achieve and we'll have to struggle along the way. Historical scholarship will contribute its part, as will religious Jewish punditry and the experience of those currently engaging in encounter and dialogue with existing Jewish communities – across all of its branches – as our neighbours. The painful memory of the Shoah and the active concern for its victims over generations will not fail to influence our search. We can by no means quickly expect a clear mission to evolve as uniform as one might be inclined to wish as a Catholic. But *ex negativo* it stands that the polemic view of the Jewish authors of our New Testament toward other forms of Judaism in that specific historical situation in the second half of the first century in the Common Era may no longer represent the normative guideline for today's understanding of our Jewish brothers and sisters. We must require this new key to be applied, specifically in Systematic Theology and especially in Christology, even if that means giving up some traditional views and expressions. The fact that these view and expressions have lasted 1,500 years may seem to give them an air of permanence or even immutability, measured in human terms, however *sub specie aeternitate* it may be only an episode, a brief diversion down the wrong track.

Beyond a church document, we have to win the trust of our Jewish brothers and sisters in the seriousness, the irrevocability and the longevity of our efforts to achieve a viable Christian-Jewish relationship. We can do this by attending to our personal contacts and friendships with Jewish

people, by showing our loyalty to the causes of local Jewish communities, by studying of Jewish texts carefully and drawing clear consequences from them for our own Christian practice and understanding of faith.

The Jews we talk to might ask us: We have explained how we understand the coming of the Messiah. We have told you what “Son of God” can mean from our perspective. We have aided you in considering anew the message of the Rabbi Jesus as a teacher of the life-giving Torah. We have shown you what the Pharisees really taught and how they thought. What consequences do you draw from that? Do you really want to hear from us or is this just some sort of occupational therapy without any consequences?

Furthermore, they might ask us: Why do you read the Passion narratives from start to finish, in your church services, in holy contexts? They are polemic against Jews in general and are gravely lacking in knowledge about our legal tradition. You actually read them twice, on Palm Sunday and on Good Friday, and because the reading is so long, you sometimes don’t even take the time to elucidate or comment on them in a sermon. That gives the impression that they are “reports”, rather than theologically constructed doctrinal narratives. Why do you tear open old wounds like that year after year?

Thank goodness Jews don’t regularly attend mass on Sundays and don’t hear the things that are said about them. But theological studies have introduced the “hermeneutic Jew”: What would I preach and proclaim if a Jew were in attendance?

As a draw to a close, allow me to express a thought that applies to all Christians, not only to Catholics: We have to think about our profession of faith and expand it and make it more precise in several ways. For example theologians have brought up the fact that our credo completely lacks all mention of Jesus’s acts of liberation and healing during his life on earth. For our topic here, we must insist on clarifying that “God, the Father, the Almighty” is the God of Israel who chose and declared holy Israel as his people and gave them the Torah. And Jesus did not “become man” in general, but “became a Jew” – *judaeus factus est*. I think if we repeat that every Sunday and those words would enter and exude from our hearts naturally, that will change how we think and act.

Now, please don’t ask me how that could be implemented in detail in all churches and how we can agree on a new formulation. I trust the Holy Spirit on that one – but if it needs me, I’ll help where I can.

Thank you.

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Dr Markus Himmelbauer, from 1996 until 2015 General Secretary of the Austrian Council of Christians and Jews ("Koordinierungsausschuss für christlich-jüdische Zusammenarbeit").