

Nostra Aetate: The Catholic Church's Journey into Dialogue

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The Declaration

Nostra Aetate (NA) is Vatican II's ground-breaking document on the Catholic Church's relation with people of other religions.¹ The two previous Popes have called it 'the Magna Carta' of the Church's new direction in interreligious dialogue.² For centuries church teaching and practice in regard to other religions had been encapsulated in the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church no salvation). *Nostra Aetate* represents a 'radically new understanding of the relations of the church to the other great world religions.'³

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1. Vatican II, '*Nostra Aetate*: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,' in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents. A completely revised translation in inclusive language*, ed. Austin Flannery OP (Northport, NY/Dublin, Ireland: Costello Publishing Company/Dominican Publications, 1996).
2. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia: The Church in Asia* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999), No 31; Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with Representatives of Some Muslim Communities,' http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050820_meeting-muslims_en.html; 'Ambassadors of Countries with a Muslim Majority and to representatives of Muslim Communities in Italy,' http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060925_ambasciatori-paesi-arabi_en.html.
3. Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, *Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue: Unitatis Redintegratio, Nostra Aetate*, Rediscovering Vatican II series (New York; Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 135.

Nostra Aetate did not spring out of nowhere. Its remote antecedents were the European Enlightenment and society's growing appreciation of other religions deriving from increasing contacts and study. More proximately was widespread revulsion at the *Shoah* and Christianity's complicity in the animosity which fuelled the Nazi racist ideology. Most immediately, its genesis was the mind and heart of Pope John XXIII, who had witnessed first-hand the tribulations of the Jewish people and had used his diplomatic role as Apostolic Delegate to Turkey to assist them in their need. This personal experience made him receptive to Jules Isaac's challenge to change the Church's attitude to the Jewish people. In this task, he found a willing collaborator in Cardinal Augustin Bea, who persevered in steering the document's difficult passage through the Council. Another important person was Pope Paul VI, through whose programmatic encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* the word 'dialogue' entered the Catholic lexicon for the first time.⁴ Of course, *Nostra Aetate* was also fashioned in the ferment of Vatican II, so must be read in the context of the Council's other documents, especially *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes* and *Ad Gentes*.

Nostra Aetate is the shortest of the Council documents, a mere forty-one sentences in five paragraphs. The first deals with the unity of the human race, our globalised world, our shared origin and destiny and religions' answers to our common questions on the meaning of life, suffering, good and evil and what lies beyond death. The second treats traditional religions in terms of awareness of a hidden power and then refers to the teachings and practices of Hinduism and Buddhism, acknowledging what is true and holy as 'a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women.' The third treats Muslims, with positive references to their worship and practices, acknowledging past antagonisms and looking for mutual understanding and cooperation for the common good. The fourth affirms the links that Christians have with the Jewish people, including common ancestry, the Old Testament and the Jewishness of the first generations of Christians, reproves indiscriminate accusations of Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus and Christian claims of supercessionism, and repudiates all hatred, persecution and anti-Semitism as contrary to God's universal love. The final paragraph opens out to all peoples, that since we call God 'Father' then we are all sisters and brothers, made in God's image, so there should be no unjust discrimination and Christians should live peaceably with all.

When read in the context of our contemporary, liberal, secular, democratic, multi-cultural and multi-religious Australian society where freedom of religion and religious plurality (including 'nones'!) is taken for granted, *Nostra Aetate* seems quite *ho hum!* But it was the most hard-fought-over document of the Council, second only to *Dignitatis Humanae*.⁵ Rigid Lefebvists continue to

4. Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam: Paths of the Church* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1964).

5. For specific treatment of the passage of the drafts through the Council see Thomas Stransky, 'The Genesis of *Nostra Aetate*,' *America* (October 24, 2005), accessed at http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=4431. For more general treatment see John W O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

oppose it and have made it an ideological pretext for their rejection of Vatican II.

The drafts of *Nostra Aetate* were controversial for several reasons. The initial proposal was for a statement on Judaism only, possibly to be included in the document on the Church. However, in the volatile cauldron of Arab-Israeli politics of the time, Bishops from Muslim-majority countries feared that addressing the 'Jewish question' might be seen as favouritism towards Israel and have negative ramifications on the minority Christian communities in the Middle East. Next the Bishops from Asia voiced their concern that insufficient account was being taken of their vastly different context as minorities among the other world religions. Therefore, the scope of the draft was extended beyond Judaism to include Islam and other great world religions and the document became a Declaration in its own right. Finally, both 'Traditionalists' and 'Conservatives' felt the drafts ran counter to previous papal and other magisterial teaching on the supremacy of the Church so would harm the authority of the Church, relativize its position in regard to other religions and damage its missionary zeal.

However, despite these initial reservations, the final draft of the document received overwhelming support. At the highest level of Church teaching—an ecumenical council with nearly all of the bishops of the Church—*Nostra Aetate* expresses a radical change in the Church's teaching and attitudes towards other religions. It is the first time that the Church had spoken positively about other religions.

Before commenting on the implementation of *Nostra Aetate* and the development of the Catholic Church's teaching in this area, it is important to acknowledge that the World Council of Churches, the Protestant Churches and the Orthodox Churches were also making similar strides in their approaches to other religions, collaboration with which contributed to the developments in the Catholic Church's approach. It is also important to acknowledge that, as well as responding to Catholic overtures, individuals and organisations within other religions were also making initiatives in interreligious relations and forging new approaches out of their own religious resources.

Implementation

The promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* sparked a flurry of activities. Already in May 1964 Pope Paul VI had erected the Secretariat for Non-Christians.⁶ Its three-fold task was promoting mutual understanding, respect and collaboration between Catholics and the followers of others religious traditions; encouraging the study of religions;⁷ and promoting the formation of persons for dialogue.⁸ To

6. This office was re-named the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue by Pope John Paul II in 1998.

7. I am a beneficiary of this policy, being a graduate of the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islamics in Rome.

8. For example, I teach tertiary level courses in Islam and interreligious dialogue at the Catholic Institute of Sydney and the Broken Bay Institute.

achieve these aims, members of the Secretariat researched and published basic information on other religions and guidelines on dialogue with their adherents,⁹ visited organizations of other religions in other countries, hosted delegations of visitors from other religions at the Vatican and took part in international conferences. They also encouraged Bishops Conferences and dioceses to set up Commissions to help implement this teaching, in practice often in tandem with ecumenism, as happens in Australia.¹⁰

Three Key Documents

The first decade after Vatican II was a time of creative experimentation and learning. The novelty and exoticism of interreligious dialogue attracted a lot of interest and enthusiasm. Although much progress was made, it was not without growing pains and difficulties. Often the partners in dialogue had centuries of mistrust to overcome. They had to allay suspicions—was dialogue a covert way of getting converts? They had get to know each other, sometimes stepping on toes, unknowingly giving offense, learning the skills of dialogue, its opportunities and pitfalls. In the process, many questions arose and people sought guidance.

Dialogue and Mission

In response to this need, reflecting on the twenty years of the praxis of dialogue since its foundation, in 1984 the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions published *The Attitude of the Church toward the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, known by the abbreviated title of *Dialogue and Mission* (DM). The document is very well written, with an easy flow and style rare in church teaching documents which makes it a delight to read. It treats the origin and expressions of mission; names the various tasks that make up the contemporary Church's mission; explains the foundations and four forms of dialogue; and treats of the mutual relations between dialogue and mission. Unfortunately, both the title and the structure of the document gave the impression that 'dialogue' and 'mission' are separate activities. This is contrary to what the text itself says and had to be remedied in a subsequent teaching document. Despite this oversight, *Dialogue and Mission* remains a contemporary document and deserves to be much more widely studied and promoted in the Church.¹¹

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9. For example, Secretariat Pro Non-Christianis, *Guidelines for Dialogue between Muslims and Christians*, Indian ed. (Cochin: KCM Press, 1979).
 10. For example, I am a member of the Australian Catholic Council for Ecumenism and Interreligious Relations (ACCEIR), which advises the Australian Catholic Bishops Commission for Ecumenism and Interreligious Relations, see http://www.catholic.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1156:bishops-commission-for-ecumenism-and-inter-religious-relations&catid=86:commissions&Itemid=393
 11. For commentary on DM see Felix A Machado, 'Dialogue and Mission: A Reading of a Document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue,' in *Milestones in Interreligious Dialogue: A Reading of Selected Catholic Church Documents on Relations with People of Other Religions*, ed. Chidi Denis Isizoh (Rome, Lagos: Ceedee Publications, 2002).

Dialogue and Proclamation

To address continuing concerns about dialogue, in 1991 the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (formerly known as the Secretariat for Non-Christians) and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples together published *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, known by the abbreviated title *Dialogue and Proclamation* (DP).¹²

In this new document, terms are carefully defined. The word 'proclamation' is employed for inviting people to accept faith in Christ and to be baptized into the Church; 'dialogue' is used for building relations with believers from other religions; and the words 'mission' or 'evangelization' are used to describe the whole, complex and articulated evangelizing activity of the Church. These definitions overcome DM's seeming split between 'dialogue' and 'mission'. What is now clearly established for the first time is that dialogue is not just a preparation for mission, not just a prelude for mission, but is itself already an integral part of mission.

Proclamation and dialogue are thus both viewed, each in its own place, as component elements and authentic forms of the one evangelizing mission of the Church. They are both oriented towards the communication of salvific truth. (DP, 2; see also DP, 77)

DP appeals to a scriptural and theological basis for dialogue and affirms its place in the mission of the Church. Different forms of dialogue are acknowledged, along with what favours it and what impedes it. Moreover, DP affirms the mandate of Christ, the role of the Church, its reliance on the Holy Spirit, and the content, urgency, and manner of proclamation. In a final section, the relationship between dialogue and proclamation is addressed.

The five years of collaboration between the two high-level Vatican departments, the wide international consultation and the several drafts it underwent make *Dialogue and Proclamation* the most sustained and profound reflection on interreligious dialogue in Catholic teaching.¹³

Redemptoris Missio

Another important contribution to interreligious dialogue is Pope John Paul II's 1991 missionary encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (RM).¹⁴ This was published

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12. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Strathfield, NSW: Columban Mission Institute, 2008).
 13. For a detailed and analytical commentary see Jacques Dupuis, 'A Theological Commentary: *Dialogue and Proclamation*,' in *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation*, ed. William R Burrows (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).
 14. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio: On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1990).

just months before DM and uses similar language, evidence that the author had access to the unpublished draft of that document. In fact, the documents complement each other and need to be read together. Chapter 5 of the encyclical, *The Paths of Mission*, has sections on the various activities of mission, one of which is entitled *Dialogue with our Brothers and Sisters of other Religions* (RM, 55-57). Unlike DM, this structure shows that dialogue is a part of mission, as is confirmed in the text:

Interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions.

An unresolved tension in the encyclical is that on the one hand it asserts that dialogue and proclamation 'should not be confused, manipulated or regarded as identical' (RM, 54) and that dialogue has 'its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity' (RM, 56). On the other hand it asserts that 'proclamation is the permanent priority of mission' and that all forms of missionary activity are directed towards it (RM, 44). If so, then it is hard to see how dialogue is not instrumentalised and made a means to an end, confirming the suspicions that dialogue is a covert means of seeking converts! More work needs to be done to refine how these component elements of mission are related to each other.

Papal Teaching and Example

Pope John Paul II

During his twenty-five-year pontificate, Pope John Paul II contributed much more to the teaching and practice of interreligious dialogue in his other encyclicals, speeches, audiences and especially in his actions.¹⁵ Like Pope John XXIII, his sensitivities were forged in personal experience. His childhood friends included Jews, some of whom disappeared in the Shoah. Another, Jerzy Kluger, was a life-long friend and frequent personal guest at the Vatican. These friendships fashioned his sensitivity in interfaith relations, especially with the Jewish people.

As a young priest and bishop Karol Wojtyła had embraced a humanist philosophy against the dehumanizing totalitarian regime that ruled over his Polish homeland. This formative experience ensured that when he became Pope John Paul II he used his philosophical orientation to address the wider currents

15. For a summary of Pope John Paul II's contribution to interreligious dialogue see Jacques Dupuis, *Toward A Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 173-179.

of his time in terms of these common human concerns. His contributions to the teaching on interreligious dialogue can be summarised under three themes.

1. The first is the 'mystery of unity' of the whole human race, not just in origin or destiny, but especially in Christ: 'man (sic!)—every man without any exception whatever—has been redeemed by Christ, and because with man—with each man without any exception whatever—Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it.' (RH, 14)¹⁶
2. The second theme, further confirming the unity of the human race, is the universal presence and action of the Holy Spirit: the Spirit's 'presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time...The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only the individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions.' (RM, 29)
3. Finally, where Vatican II avoided the word 'religions' and spoke in euphemisms such as 'rites and customs' (LG, 17) or 'customs and cultures' (AG, 9), Pope John Paul II named the religions openly and clearly. More particularly, based on his conviction of the universal presence and activity of both the Word and the Spirit, he affirmed their positive role in God's plan of salvation: God's presence to peoples is mediated 'through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression' (RM, 55).

Another of the formative influences on the young Karol Wojtyła was his interest in theatre, a gift which he used to dramatic effect on the international stage of the papacy. He was the first Pope to visit Auschwitz, where he stood in silent mourning for all those murdered in the *Shoah* (7 June 1979). He was the first Pope to address a crowd of thousands of Muslim youth (Morocco, 19 August 1985). He was the first Pope to visit the Jewish synagogue in Rome (13 April 1986). He invited the religious leaders of the world to come together at Assisi to pray for peace (27 October 1986, and again in 1993 and 2002). During the Jubilee year he led prayers of repentance for the sins that had been committed against the followers of other religions (12 March 2000). Later that same year he prayed at the Western Wall in Jerusalem where, poignantly, he placed the text of the prayer: 'God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your name to the nations. We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who, in the course of history, have caused these children of yours to suffer.' He was the first Pope to enter a mosque (Ummayyad Mosque, Damascus, 6 May 2001). His teachings and actions have left a rich legacy, which we can continue to mine for inspiration and encouragement.

Pope Benedict XVI

In contrast to his more outgoing and philosophically oriented predecessor,

16. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis: The Redeemer of Man* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1979).

the young Josef Ratzinger had been formed and practised as a theologian, so when the shy academic became Pope Benedict XVI his approach to the wider world was more cautious and circumscribed. He did not resile from the teachings of Vatican II and the subsequent magisterium on interreligious dialogue but repeated them on numerous occasions in his meetings with leaders of other religions. However, his was not mere iteration. His theological acumen ensured a deeper and more nuanced approach to other religions, especially in terms of countering relativist tendencies.

Reflecting on the purpose of interreligious dialogue he said: ‘religious freedom, interreligious dialogue and faith-based education aim at something more than a consensus regarding ways to implement practical strategies for advancing peace. The broader purpose of dialogue is to discover the truth.’¹⁷ And again: ‘dialogue does not aim at conversion, but at better mutual understanding—that is correct. But all the same, the search for knowledge and understanding always has to involve drawing closer to the truth.’¹⁸ Thus he sharpened the cutting edge of dialogue. It is not just a cosy chat, but a robust engagement that must have consequences.

Due to lack of familiarity or lack of guidance, Pope Benedict suffered self-inflicted wounds in the area of interreligious dialogue. His address on reason and faith during a visit to his former University at Regensburg was a profound analysis of the topic,¹⁹ but his unfortunate choice of a quote disparaging the Prophet Muhammad was manipulated to foster outrage in the Muslim world. Someone more attuned to others’ religious sensibilities would have recognized the inflammatory nature of the quote and omitted it or at least qualified it.

Yet even this *faux pas* had a fortuitous outcome. Within a month, thirty-eight Muslim scholars had written a courteous letter of rebuttal. Then a year later, 138 Muslim scholars wrote an open letter to the Pope and to Christian leaders everywhere entitled ‘*A Common Word*’. Quoting the Qur’an and the Bible, the authors propose that love of God and love of neighbour are foundational to both Islam and Christianity and therefore form a common basis for dialogue.²⁰ The dedicated website now has over 400 signatories, a broad consensus representing every branch of Islam. Contrary to the tiny minority of ‘Islamist’²¹ extremists whose violent actions attract media attention, *A Common*

17. Benedict XVI, ‘Meeting with Representatives of Other Religions,’ (Liberia Editrice Vaticana), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080417_other-religions_en.html.

18. ‘Address to the Roman Curia,’ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121221_auguri-curia_en.html.

19. ‘Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections,’ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html.

20. Muslim Religious Leaders, ‘A Common Word Between Us and You,’ The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, <http://www.acommonword.com/>.

21. I use the word ‘Islamist’ to distinguish this extremist ideological position from the traditional follower of the religion of Islam.

Word is an authoritative and representative expression of the Muslim world's commitment to world peace:

Christians and Muslims reportedly make up over a third and over a fifth of humanity respectively. Together they make up more than 55% of the world's population, making the relationship between these two religious communities the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world.

These words echo those of Pope Benedict XVI in his first meeting with representatives of the Muslim community in Cologne in 2005:

Interreligious and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends.²²

Another of Pope Benedict's decisions attracted both Catholic and Jewish concern. In 2007 he declared the 1962 Roman Missal—including the controversial Good Friday prayers and their derogatory reference to the Jewish people—the 'extraordinary form' of the Roman Rite. After protests, a substitute Good Friday prayer was quickly provided, not the more generic prayer from the 'ordinary form' of the Rite, but a new text which, although it omitted the offensive words, now included reference to conversion of the Jewish people. In this and other controversies it is evident that doctrinal positions continue to shape how the other is perceived.

Other Catholic Teaching

Dominus Iesus

In the years following the Council, the theology of religions became a hotly contested area, including censure of some theologians. To counter apprehensions that some pluralist approaches to other religions were compromising the identity and role of Jesus Christ, in 2000 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) published *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (DI).²³ This was primarily addressed to theologians, rather than the Catholic faithful, let alone believers in other religions. Yet its negative assessment of other churches and other religions—their faith status (DI, 7)²⁴, their scriptures (DI, 8), their rituals (DI, 21), their salvific status (DI, 22)—created controversy and so deserves mention.

22. Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with Representatives of Some Muslim Communities.'

23. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (Sherbrook, QC: Mediaspaul, 2000).

24. I argued for a more nuanced position in Patrick J. McNerney, 'Towards a More Positive Appreciation of the Faith of Muslims: Theological Resolution of Vatican Ambivalence,' *Australian EJournal of Theology* 19, no. 1 (2012), http://aejt.com.au/2012/vol_19/vol_19_no_1_2012.

Despite these negative judgements, *Dominus Iesus* also affirms the role of sacred writings in nourishing other people's relationship with God (DI, 8); invites theologians to explore how figures and elements of other religions fall within God's plan of salvation (DI, 14); and encourages research into how God's grace, given by Christ through his Spirit and related to the Church, comes to non-Christians 'in a way known to God' (cf. GS, 22), so as to know God's salvific plan better (DI, 20). Although these questions are complex and difficult, Catholics' relationship with believers from other religions is not served by avoiding them, but will be enhanced when we seek to answer them with integrity to the Church's tradition. For this reason, *Dominus Iesus* needs to be included in any Catholic discussion on interreligious dialogue.

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)

While *Dominus Iesus* is a very academic and deductive approach to the theological task and is sourced in church documents, the churches in Asia, living mostly as a minority among the great world religions, have contributed a more inductive approach to interreligious relations which is sourced in lived experience. In their situation, dialogue is a way of life. Accordingly, the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) has affirmed the triple dialogue with the poor, with cultures and with religions.²⁵ We have much to learn from this organic and relational approach to interfaith relations.

Contemporary Missiology

Recent decades have seen three major stages in the development of missiology. Vatican II recovered *missio dei*, that mission is first and foremost *God's mission* and only secondarily that of the Church, which participates as partners in God's mission. Then in the 60s and 70s it was recognized that liberation and the work for justice are essential aspects of the Gospel message. Finally, during Pope John Paul II's pontificate his teaching presented a nexus of interrelated associations of church, kingdom of God, Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ as the one, unique, universal saviour. These three missiological developments have coalesced in a new synthesis called 'prophetic dialogue'. The phrase was first proposed by the 2000 General Chapter of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) and has been developed by Steve Bevans and Roger Schroeder.²⁶

The phrase 'prophetic mission' keeps in creative tension the various elements of mission, highlighting simultaneously both the prophetic nature of the Church's presence and mission in the world, which is always carried out dialogically, and the Church's dialogical engagement with believers from other

25. For treatment see Jonathan Y. Tan, 'Missio Inter Gentes: Towards a New Paradigm in the Mission Theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences,' *Mission Studies* 21, no. 1 (2004).

26. Stephen Bevans SVD, 'Mission as Prophetic Dialogue.'

religions, with the secular world, and with the world of nature, which always involves communication of a prophetic message of hope and transformation and peace and justice and of God's unbounded love.

In 2010 the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales published *Meeting God in Friend & Stranger: Fostering Respect and Mutual Understanding between the Religions*.²⁷ This teaching document is an excellent account of the Catholic Church's contemporary position on relations with believers from other religions.

Along with the responses, initiatives and joint activities of believers from other religions referred to earlier, the secular world has also come to recognize the importance of dialogue for reducing conflict and promoting harmony. Local government councils have set up interfaith and intercultural bodies with which religious organizations can fruitfully partner for mutual benefit. State and federal governments also often prove good allies through community relations commissions and umbrella organizations for religious bodies.²⁸

Three Ways Forward

While questions about interreligious dialogue and the theology of religions continue to arise, there are clear directions to follow in practising dialogue, which will eventually provide answers. The first is appreciating *missio dei*, that mission is first and foremost God's mission, that the persons of the Trinity are constantly creating, uniting, healing and reconciling the world through the universal presence and action of the Word and the Spirit bringing about the Kingdom of God in creation and in all of human history. So God is present and active in all peoples, cultures and religions, always and everywhere, long before the missionary arrives. This affirmation is in fact a recovery of ancient teaching, St Irenaeus' image of the Word and the Spirit as the 'two hands of God' working in creation and redemption, later expressed in the more technical terms of scholastic teaching as the mission of the Word and the mission of the Spirit. God's mission came to ultimate human expression in the incarnation of the Word by the power of the Spirit. Jesus realized the Kingdom of God in word and deed, culminating in his life, death and resurrection. The sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is a *co-mission-ing* of his followers to continue Jesus' mission through the power of the same Spirit. They are made partners in God's mission, seeking and serving the coming Kingdom of God wherever the Spirit and the Word are active. So the church does not have a mission; rather the mission has a church.

The second way forward is a necessary corollary of the first. With God's

27. Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *Meeting God in Friend & Stranger: Fostering Respect and Mutual Understanding between the Religions* (London: The Catholic Truth Society, 2010). The document is available at <http://www.cbcew.org.uk/meeting-god-in-friend-and-stranger.html>

28. For example, in NSW see the Community Relations Commission (CRC) at <http://www.crc.nsw.gov.au>. At federal level see Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO) at <http://www.ncca.org.au/partnerships/139>

mission of the coming Kingdom of God as the horizon within which the Church is called to mission, we must maintain a broad vision of the Church's mission. DM teaches that mission is 'a single but complex and articulated reality' (DM, 13). DP quotes this and summarizes 'the principal elements of this mission: presence and witness; commitment to social development and human liberation; liturgical life, prayer and contemplation; interreligious dialogue; and finally, proclamation and catechesis.' (DP, 2) Similarly, Chapter Five of *Redemptoris Missio* spells out the 'Paths of Mission' as witness (42-43), initial proclamation (44-55); conversion and baptism (46-47), forming local churches (48-50), 'Ecclesial Basic Communities' (51), incarnating the Gospel in Peoples' Culture (52-54), dialogue with our brothers and sisters of other religions (55-57), promoting development by forming consciences (58-59) and concludes with a reflection on charity, source and criterion of mission (60). That is, the mission entrusted to the Church is as broad and varied as the times and peoples it is called to address. It cannot be reduced to one single dimension, no matter how foundational, central and important that may be, but must maintain the breadth and depth of mission out of which the grace of proclamation may flower. Instead, following their Master, Christians must reach out in the variety of ways which till the soil and water the seed until the appointed time when God brings forth the fruits He has determined.

Thirdly, even when we consider interreligious dialogue itself, we still need to maintain a broad vision. Dialogue is carried out in the following four forms:

- a. *dialogue of life*, living out one's faith in neighbourly ways, sharing each other's joys and sorrows, responding to each other's needs in daily life;
- b. *dialogue of action*, working together on shared values for the common good,
- c. *dialogue of theological exchange*, learning about each other's religious doctrines and values;
- d. *dialogue of religious experience*, sharing about spirituality, prayer and ritual. (DM,28-35 and DP, 42)²⁹

No member of the church is excluded from this task, but all have their part to play. 'Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice dialogue' (RM, 57) 'All Christians are called to be personally involved in these two ways of carrying out the one mission of the Church, namely proclamation and dialogue.' (DP, 82) Considering the objection that dialogue was fine for those with time on their hands but impractical for those engaged in the many demands of family, work, parish and pastoral activities, Cardinal Arinze responded: '*you are singing outside the choir of the Church.*'³⁰

29. Teasdale uses the more organic names: dialogue of life, dialogue of the hands, dialogue of the head and dialogue of the heart, to which he adds a fifth, dialogue of friendship, which is simply enjoying the kinship we share with each other. See Wayne Teasdale, *Catholicism in Dialogue: Conversations Across Traditions*, ed. Robert A Ludwig, Catholic Studies Series (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

30. Cardinal Francis Arinze, 'Inter-Religious Dialogue Today' (Columban Mission Institute, North Turramurra, NSW, 26th July 1997).

There are many ways to add our voice to the Church's relations with other faiths: from a simple smile to strangers in the street, informing ourselves by reading a reliable book, meeting and getting to know a person from another religion, visiting each other's places of worship, exchanging greetings on feast days,³¹ inviting a guest speaker, giving and receiving hospitality by sharing a meal together (*iftar* dinners with Muslims during Ramadan have proved very helpful in breaking down prejudices), screening a quality DVD about other religions, offering a prayer of the faithful for people from other religions, especially on their feast days, attending an interfaith or multi-faith conference or celebration, working together on pressing social issues (neighbourhood watch, child care, drugs, environment...)...the only limit to what we can do is our imagination—and the Spirit stretches even that!

Reflecting on what has already been achieved in the transformation of Jewish-Christian relations since *Nostra Aetate* Chief Rabbi David Rosen said:

... perhaps never has there been a transformation of quite this order, that a particular community was viewed as cursed and as rejected, in league with the devil, the source of evil to be absolutely abhorred and to be condemned. This is surely the ultimate demonstration of how the tragic past can be overcome, of how a new relationship may be engaged in, of how it is possible not only to nurture, respect an understanding, but how indeed—as Pope John Paul II has put it—we may indeed be 'a blessing to one another, and as a result, a blessing to humankind at large.'³²

To achieve this grand vision, perhaps the most poignant image of interfaith relations that we can offer for our age is the humble posture of Pope Francis on his knees, washing the feet of a Muslim woman detainee. The Lord has commanded us to do likewise (Jn 13:14).

31. According to two Muslims to whom I spoke independently last year, the photo of a church billboard with a greeting to Muslims on the occasion of *Eid al-Fitr* went viral on social media among Muslims and 'created a tsunami of good will.'

32. David Rosen, 'Christians and Jews in a Radically New Relationship,' <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=956>.