

'Nostra Aetate': A Lever That Moved the World

The 2016 John Courtney Murray, S.J., lecture

Rabbi Daniel F. Polish

14 Jan 2016

<http://americamagazine.org/issue/nostra-aetate-lever-moved-world>

*Editors' Note: On Tuesday, Jan. 12, Rabbi Daniel Polish delivered this year's John Courtney Murray, S.J., lecture. At the end of this page, you can find a video recording of his address and audience discussion moderated by **America's** Editor in Chief Matt Malone, S.J.*

It is a great honor to be with you this evening. I am grateful to America Magazine and to Matt Malone for inviting me to share some reflections on the "Nostra Aetate," the document from the Second Vatican Council that was issued 50 years ago last Oct. 28.

And it is very much a privilege to speak at a gathering that honors the memory of John Courtney Murray. Even when I knew virtually nothing about Catholic thought, I was familiar with Murray. It seems to me that in books like *We Hold These Truths* and his work on "Dignitatis Humanae," Murray contributed to the mindset that is reflected in "Nostra Aetate." You could say that "Nostra Aetate" and "Dignitatis Humanae" are twins. It was Murray who gave the church the uniquely American perspective of pluralism in the political—what he would call the "social"—sense. One could argue that "Nostra Aetate" represents an attempt to express the theological implications, the theological basis of that stance.

I feel blessed—all of us are blessed—to be living in the midst of a profound transformation. Tonight is really an emblem of that change. The idea of a rabbi being invited to speak at a Catholic gathering, about a document of the Catholic Church—such a thing would have been unimaginable 52 years ago.

Now, as it turns out, I was asked to speak on this same subject at a conference at Notre Dame University on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of "Nostra Aetate." There I focused on the immediate moment of the Council and the historical background of the document. So I will touch only briefly on those issues now. In a way what I was doing was to place "Nostra Aetate" in a historical continuum, a product of a particular moment in time.

So tonight I want to focus on that continuum in the years after 1965. The fact is "Nostra Aetate" is so precious to us that it has become almost a sanctum and like all sancta we see it in almost mythic terms and lose sight of the messy human realities that surround it and historical context.

So let us look very briefly at that historical context and begin by noting that "Nostra Aetate" did not emerge without opposition. There was intense opposition to it, both theological and geo-political. At one point the document was on the verge of being withdrawn altogether and survived only through the dogged determination of the Jesuit Cardinal Augustin Bea. In the end "Nostra Aetate" was adopted by a vote of 2,221 in favor/88 opposed. The end product of the process of compromise yielded a statement about the church and other religions, including section 4 which was specific to the Jews.

But in the end, most significantly Cardinal Bea said, it is unlike any statement ever made by the church about other religions.

The other reality is that we tend to treat “Nostra Aetate” as singular. In reality it is part of a continuum leading up to it, historical realities of that moment: the Shoah, the creation of the State of Israel. There are several Christian pre-histories to “Nostra Aetate.” The history of Pope John XXIII, who as a nuncio during WWII saved thousands of Jewish lives and the history of a growing movement toward reconciliation symbolized by personal relationships. Here in the United States, the creation in the 20s of the NCCJ [the National Conference of Christians and Jews] and in Europe by movements that eventuated in conferences like Seelisburg or Appledorn. And that continuum stretches beyond 1965 and we will focus on that.

But first a very quick review of the document itself. Jews and Catholics are so accustomed to speaking about “Nostra Aetate” that we may have fallen into the reflex of imagining that our conversation was the sum and substance of the document. It is useful to remember that as it was finally written it addresses all non-Christian religions. Those historical circumstances caused the document to be more general. Section 4 is devoted to the question of the Jews; it is the longest of the sections. It was originally intended to be a free-standing “Statement about the Church and its Relations with Jews.” In the course of section 4 the document:

- reminds its readers that Jesus, Mary and the apostles and the early disciples “the foundation stones and pillars of the Church,” were Jews;
- asserts that G-d holds the Jews most dear;
- states that with the emergence of Christianity G-d did not revoke the gifts promised to the Jews;
- quoting Romans it defines Christianity as a “wild shoot grafted onto a well-cultivated olive tree”;
- states that the death of Christ cannot be charged “against all the Jews, without distinction then alive nor against all Jews of today”;
- maintains that “the Jews should not be represented as rejected by God or accursed as if this followed from Holy Scripture”;
- rejects “all persecutions against any person,” singling out “manifestations of anti-Semitism directed against Jews at any time and by anyone”;
- and expresses the wish to “foster mutual understanding and esteem.”

Section 4 is specific in a way that none of the other sections are. The other sections are on a much higher level of generalization and abstraction and considerably less urgent. Section 4 is a bold and unequivocal. It is radical in the literal sense of the word, in that it uproots previous teachings of the church. It charts a new course for the relationship between Jews and the church. There is no way to avoid saying it; it is momentous and transformative.

And we are living proof of the transformation. We should note the concluding section of “Nostra Aetate,” section 5, which begins with the powerful charge: “We cannot truly call upon God, the Father of all, if we refuse to behave as brothers and sisters with anyone, created as all are in the image of God.”

Throughout we are confronted with a church speaking in a way it has not since its inception. “Nostra Aetate” represents a tectonic shift. As a document it is remarkable and unique. Certainly it is the shortest of all 16 documents issued by the council: 1,941 words in the original—other statements could reach 100,000.

Father Sidney Griffith of Catholic University has pointed out unlike any other document produced by the church, “Nostra Aetate” does not—and really cannot—produce positive references to previous documents of the church’s magisterium. All it contains in that vein is a single footnote to an 11th-century statement. And yet in its few words it totally transformed 2,000 years of teaching. “Nostra Aetate” was not the coda to the transformation; it was the overture.

The Beginning of the Beginning

Of course “Nostra Aetate” is important because of what it did. It is even more important because of what it made possible. It was a seed that is blossoming into a nurturing plant. I am reminded here, again of John Courtney Murray. Murray died in August 1967. If he were with us tonight he would not recognize the new realities that unfolded from the document issued just two years earlier. But then of course he had written: Do not repeat what I have said. Improve on it. Extend it. Correct it. Attack the problems that remain unsolved.

The church certainly has done in these last 50 years. When we talk about “Nostra Aetate,” we do not really mean the document alone; “Nostra Aetate” is a process that has continued and will no doubt continue to continue. When we celebrate “Nostra Aetate,” what we celebrate is the process that was initiated in 1965. As Cardinal Walter Kasper has said “Nostra Aetate” is the beginning of the beginning.

Significantly when it was issued it was not seen by Jews as the sea change that it was. There was a pronounced skepticism. My friend and colleague Noam Marans of the American Jewish Committee reminds us that the first official reaction of his organization concludes: “Much will depend on the manner and vigor with which the affirmative principles embodied in this Declaration will be carried out.”

And in the end, the manner and vigor with which the principles were carried out has been breathtaking. Just last Dec. 10 the Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews issued a document called “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable: a reflection on theological questions relating to Catholic-Jewish Relations.” In many ways it represents the fullest explication to date of what may have been implicit or avoided in the document of 1965. It is a profound expression of what “Nostra Aetate” has become.

The document that emerged from the council was manifestly imperfect. As noted it would not have emerged at all had it not folded the issue of relations with the Jews into a broader discussion of non-Christian religions. Yet the result of that compromise was to compromise the salience of the special relationship that bound these two communities of faith together for 2,000 years. Like Jacob and Esau in the womb—wrestling, struggling, striving.

In a way this is implied in the structure of the document itself. The treatment of Judaism—indeed the very amount of space and specificity—is far different from the treatment accorded other “non-Christian religions.” Over the last five decades the special nature of that relationship has been made explicit, affirmed and emphasized.

When in 1974, the Vatican established a Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews, it is significant that it chose not to house that commission in the Secretariat for Non-Christians, but rather attached to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, but operationally independent of it. In doing so the Vatican emphasized the reality that Judaism occupies a distinct and singular place in Catholic self-understanding, suggesting that for the church to understand Judaism is to understand a part of itself.

On April 13, 1986, when Pope John Paul II made his historic visit to the great Synagogue of Rome, he emphasized the idea that Judaism is intrinsic to Christianity. Using a phrase he would repeat frequently thereafter, he called Jews “our elder brothers of the ancient covenant never to be broken.” Cardinal Kurt Koch, the current president of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, made the distinction explicit. He writes, “Judaism cannot be seen as one among many religions; it has a special relationship.”

And in his encyclical of 2013, “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” Pope Francis discusses relations with Judaism in a separate section from his discussion of relations with other world religions and from the section on relations with other Christian traditions. He writes, “We hold the Jewish people in special regard because their covenant with God has never been revoked, for ‘the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.’”

This past summer Pope Francis expressed that relationship in compellingly personal terms. He wrote, “Every day I pray with the Psalms of David my prayer is Jewish. Then I have the Eucharist which is Christian.”

And then last December in the Commission document the second section is entitled “The special theological status of Jewish-Catholic Dialogue.” The first paragraph begins, “The dialogue with Judaism is for Christians something quite special.” The document goes on:

For an outside observer, the Conciliar Declaration “*Nostra Aetate*” could give the impression that the text deals with the relations of the Catholic Church with all world religions in a relationship based on parity...However the fourth article of this conciliar Declaration, which deals with a new theological relationship with Judaism represents almost the heart of the document...” (No. 19).

And continues, “From a theological perspective the dialogue with Judaism has a completely different character that is on a different level in comparison with the other world religions.”

The unique bond between these two communities of faith, which may have been implicit in the document of 1965, has become explicit over the last five decades and occupies a special place in the realities of the two traditions beyond anything that could have been imagined in 1965.

It is emblematic of the evolution in understanding in every area that has taken place over the past five decades. One way to get at the sweep of the evolution is to start with something I said in that talk on the 20th anniversary.

I took note of the fact that much initial Jewish reaction to “*Nostra Aetate*” focused on the fact that six significant words do not appear in that document: 1) *Deicide*—even though it was proposed in one of the earlier drafts, it was removed from the final document; 2) *Shoah*—or even *Holocaust*—though clearly it is the necessary backdrop of the document; 3) *Israel*—the State, though I believe its creation is among the things that precipitated “*Nostra Aetate*” and also engendered much of the opposition to it; 4) *Judaism*—as a living and vital reality; 5) *Supersessionism* and 6) *Conversion or evangelization of Jews*.

The absence of these fundamental terms, a skeptic might tell us, suggests that the church was either not serious in seeking to reformulate its teaching or failed to comprehend the reality of Jewish life. But the fact is that the absence of those words has been the subject of significant conversation in the dialogue that has been taking place in the years since 1965 and over those years various arms of the church have issued statements that have addressed them and made profound gestures that dramatize an evolution in thought.

So let us revisit that list of words that are absent from “Nostra Aetate” because in them we can see the evolution of the process that “Nostra Aetate” is.

Deicide

No, the word does not appear in the document. Perhaps more troubling is the hesitant, perhaps oblique way it is addressed there. But with time the issue is more fulsomely addressed. In the 1985 [“Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church,”](#) we read:

The Gospels are the outcome of long and complicated editorial work. The dogmatic constitution Dei Verbum, following the Pontifical Biblical Commission's Instruction Sancta Mater Ecclesia, distinguished three stages: "The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explicating some things in view of the situation of their Churches, and preserving the form of proclamation, but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus" (no. 19). Hence it cannot be ruled out that some references hostile or less than favorable to the Jews have their historical context in conflicts between the nascent Church and the Jewish community. Certain controversies reflect Christian-Jewish relations long after the time of Jesus. To establish this is of capital importance if we wish to bring out the meaning of certain Gospel texts for the Christians of today. All this should be taken into account when preparing catechesis and homilies for the last weeks of Lent and Holy Week (Guidelines, II, Sussidi per l'ecumenismo nella diocesi di Roma, 1982, 144b).

And then goes on to say:

22. The delicate question of responsibility for the death of Christ must be looked at from the standpoint of the conciliar declaration “Nostra Aetate”, (no. 4) and of the Guidelines and Suggestions (part III): "What happened in (Christ's) passion cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living without distinction nor upon the Jews of today," especially since "authorities of the Jews and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ."

Again, further on:

Christ in his boundless love freely underwent his passion and death because of the sins of all men, so that all might attain salvation" (“Nostra Aetate”, no. 4). The Catechism of the Council of Trent teaches that Christian sinners are more to blame for the death of Christ than those few Jews who brought it about - they indeed "knew not what they did" (Lk. 23:34) and we know it only too well. In the same way and for the same reason, "the Jews should not be presented as repudiated or cursed by God, as if such views followed from the holy Scriptures" (“Nostra Aetate”, no. 4), even though it is true that "the Church is the new people of God.

Though the struggle to craft a compromise is manifestly evident in the inclusion of that last sentence, the statement as a whole moves beyond “Nostra Aetate” itself in clarity and explicitness. It is true that the word deicide, itself, continues to be absent from official documents. But the rejection of the concept shines clearly through subsequent documents of the church and the actions of its representatives.

Judaism

Here we must acknowledge the role of Pope John Paul II. He elevated the dialogue beyond the words of “Nostra Aetate.” On April 13, 1986, he became the first sitting pope to visit a synagogue—in other words to recognize the living religious tradition of the Jewish people. He continued to visit synagogues on his travels around the world, a practice that has been continued by all of his successors.

Pope Benedict XVI visited a synagogue in his native Germany, a gesture with meaning on so many levels. In 1982 John Paul II spoke of the Christian need for “due awareness of the faith and religious life of the Jewish people as they are professed and practiced still today.” In 1988 the Commission issued a document called “God’s Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catachesis.”

The December 2015 document goes further still. It states:

God revealed himself in his Word.... For Jews this Word can be learned through the Torah and the traditions based on it. The Torah is the instruction for a successful life in right relationship with God.... By observing the Torah the Jew receives a share in communion with God (24).

If skeptics took note of the absence of reference to a living Judaism in “Nostra Aetate,” the presence of the very word and everything it implies and the actions of subsequent popes must belie that concern.

Shoah

In 1979 Pope John Paul II, who had himself experienced the horrors of the Shoah growing up in Poland, became the first pope to visit Auschwitz, where he prayed for the victims of the Shoah. Throughout his papacy he would refer to the tragedy of the destruction of Jewish life in Europe. Later when a group of Carmelite nuns erected a cross at Auschwitz, he intervened, recognizing that its presence was disrespectful of the Jewish legacy at Auschwitz.

In November 1990 John Paul II said, “for Christians, the heavy burden of guilt for the murder of the Jewish people must be an enduring call to repentance.” In 1998 the Commission released a document entitled “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah,” which opened the way to explicitly discuss that horror and explore the role of Catholic teaching in preparing the way for it.

Later Pope Benedict XVI also visited the death camp and spoke frequently about the Shoah and its meaning in Jewish life.

Nor do I think that it is insignificant that when Pope Francis was asked to name his favorite work of art he named Marc Chagall’s powerful Shoah image, which depicts a crucified Jewish Jesus with his Tallit/his prayer shawl, symbolizing the millions that were being murdered, even as Chagall was creating it. And this morning we learn that Pope Francis is planning to make his own pilgrimage to Auschwitz later this year.

This painful subject left unspoken in the document has been unequivocally addressed in actions and in words in the years since.

Israel

Perhaps the most glaring omission in “Nostra Aetate” is the State of Israel. The document does not give a hint that such an entity was in existence as it was being written, nor that that entity was of consequence to the way that Jews understood themselves.

It is true that while the document was still being debated Pope Paul VI traveled there, but what a strange and stained trip it was. He spoke of his trip as a spiritual pilgrimage to “the holy land” and never in terms of the living Jewish state. He never mentioned the name Israel, nor did he meet with any officials of that state. When he later wrote the President of Israel, Zalman Shazar, he sent the letter to Mr. Zalman Shazar, Tel Aviv, without mentioning his title or acknowledging the fact that Shazar’s official residence was not Tel Aviv but in Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, and, of course, not using the country name Israel.

But things were very different in 2000 when Pope John Paul II visited. When his plane landed at Ben Gurion airport he was formally received by President Ezer Weizman, whom he visited in his official residence. On that visit he met with Israel’s two Chief Rabbis and visited Yad VaShem, the Holocaust memorial, and met with victims of the Shoah. And, most significantly, he prayed at the Western wall, where he followed the custom of leaving a personal prayer between the stones of the wall itself.

Of course by the time of that visit it was possible for John Paul II to recognize the State of Israel because in 1993 full bilateral diplomatic relations were established between the Vatican and the State of Israel. This was a profound evolution in relations between the Vatican and the Jewish people.

John Paul II’s footsteps to Israel were followed by his successor Benedict. By the time Pope Francis ascended the throne of Saint Peter it had become a matter of course for a pope to visit Israel. In fact, Pope Francis made that journey very early in his papacy. He, too, visited Yad VaShem and met survivors of the Shoah. And, like his predecessors, he prayed at the Western wall.

But Pope Francis added a visit that made the trip unique: He became the first pope to visit the grave of Theodore Herzl, the founding father of political Zionism, and he laid a wreath on Herzl’s grave, a remarkable affirmation of the reality of the Jewish state. Also a far cry from an incident in the life of Herzl himself: In 1904 Herzl visited one of Francis’ predecessors, Pope Pius X, to enlist his support for Herzl’s great dream the creation of a Jewish state. Pius X answered him:

We cannot give approval to this movement. We cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem. But we could never sanction it....The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people. If you come to Palestine and settle your people there we will be ready with priests and churches to baptize all of you.

What a far distance we have travelled from Herzl being rejected by Pius X

To Francis laying a wreath on Herzl’s grave, a journey impossible without “Nostra Aetate,” even if the name Israel is not mentioned in the document.

And then this past October, as part of a celebration of that document, Pope Francis brought the issue to its final evolution when he said, “To attack Jews is anti-Semitism. But an outright attack on the state of Israel is also anti-Semitism.”

If “Nostra Aetate” the document was silent about the State of Israel, “Nostra Aetate” the process certainly is not.

Supersessionism and Conversion

The last sentence in Pius X's response brings us to the last two items on that list of words not present in "Nostra Aetate": supersessionism and conversion—evangelizing Jews. I choose to treat the two together because both rest on the notion of the Jewish religion being a dead religion—the people an empty husk and worthy of—and needing—to be brought to a truer faith.

The fact is that each of these issues has been grappled with by the church in the intervening years. In 1977 Professor Tommaso Federici, a consultant for the Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews, at a joint Catholic Jewish convocation, presented a paper on "Mission and Witness in the Church," suggesting that the church forego mission to the Jews. Federici's proposal was never accepted as an official policy and the church has not spoken unequivocally about these issues. They are fraught with complexity and challenge.

As an example this was an issue that roiled relations between the U.S.C.C.B. and the Jewish community between 2002-05. When the National Council of Synagogues and representatives of the U.S.C.C.B. released a statement stating that Catholics should not evangelize Jews, the statement provoked strong reaction. Cardinal Avery Dulles argued strongly against it. The USCCB initially acquiesced to Dulles and then in the face of strong Jewish response took the issue back for re-examination and modification.

It has been an excruciatingly difficult issue for the church to deal with. On one hand, it wants to reach out to the Jews. On the other, its self-identity is wrapped up in a commission to evangelize. We see this struggle in the 1974 Guidelines [and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration "Nostra Aetate", No. 4](#):

In virtue of her divine mission, and her very nature, the Church must preach Jesus Christ to the world (Ad Gentes, 2). Lest the witness of Catholics to Jesus Christ should give offense to Jews, they must take care to live and spread their Christian faith while maintaining the strictest respect for religious liberty in line with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (Declaration Dignitatis Humanae). They will likewise strive to understand the difficulties which arise for the Jewish soul—rightly imbued with an extremely high, pure notion of the divine transcendence—when faced with the mystery of the Incarnate Word.

Here the issue is couched in of what Murray would identify as political – or social – civil rights. Now with the December 2015 document, I would argue that for the first time the church has formally addressed these issues that are so much at the heart of a relationship of true mutuality and respect.

On the issue of Supersessionism the document says:

“On the part of many of the Church Fathers the so-called replacement theory or supersessionism steadily gained favor until in the Middle Ages it represented the standard theological foundation of the relationship with Judaism: the promises and commitments of God would no longer apply to Israel because it had not recognized Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God but had been transferred to the Church of Jesus Christ which was now the ‘new Israel’, the new chosen people of God....”

With its declaration “Nostra Aetate” the Church unequivocally professes within a new theological framework...[a] replacement or supersession theology...is deprived of its foundations.”

Here we have an evolution from the document on which it stands: a clear explication of a perspective which may—at best—have been implicit in “Nostra Aetate.” An unambiguous rejection of a position which, as the document itself asserts, was a “standard theological foundation” of church teaching. By itself this assertion represents a profound step forward in the relationship. But no less radical is the assertion in the last section of the document that addresses “the Church’s mandate to evangelize in relation to Judaism.”

It states:

It is easy to understand that the so-called ‘mission to the Jews’ is a very delicate and sensitive matter for Jews, because, in their eyes, it involves the very existence of the Jewish people...the Church is therefore obliged to view evangelization to Jews, who believe in the one God, in a different manner from that to people of other religions and world views. In concrete terms this means that the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed toward Jews (40).

Perhaps this is the affirmation to which the whole document builds. It is a remarkable evolution beyond the reticence of “Nostra Aetate” to address this complicated issue. And beyond the hesitance of the intervening years, it is a fitting way to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the document that made this affirmation possible.

In sum, much as we celebrate the document that was affirmed on Oct. 28, 1965, we have far greater cause to rejoice in what has flowed from it. Filling in the lacunae of that document and elaborating on the tentative affirmations it contained so that today we stand in far greater mutuality and cooperation than we could have imagined when “Nostra Aetate” was promulgated.

The Jewish Response(s)

Let me note that not all the evolution has been on the Catholic side. Soon after the process began one Jewish skeptic said, “What they need from this is to understand themselves. What we need is for them to leave us alone.” The observation trivialized the enormity the transformation and ignored the profundity of what was involved. He failed to understand, as well, that the process of “Nostra Aetate” had consequence and meaning for Jews as well as Catholics.

In these past 50 years there have been consequential Jewish responses. Institutionally, at the suggestion of the church in 1970, the various Jewish organizations that engaged in dialogue with the church formed a common entity called The International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC), a condominium whose very existence is a miracle.

Upon its creation the IJCIC and the Commission formed a joint entity known as the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (ILC), which meets biannually to exchange perspectives and monitor the state of the relationship. It is at these ILC meetings and regular informal consultations that the two communities of faith can exchange concerns and clarify issues that inevitably arise. To be honest, there has been talk of an asymmetry in the Jewish response. Can it be that the church has been so forthcoming and the Jewish community has been withholding?

In fairness we could respond that there is a structural asymmetry in the relationship. The church rightly struggles with the Jewish reality at its core. Jewish tradition is not in an analogous situation. There is no Christian reality at the root or the core of its being. To understand themselves, Christians need to understand Judaism. Jews do not need to understand Christianity for the same kind of self-understanding. More significantly, of course

in the end there can be no Jewish equivalent to “Nostra Aetate” because there is no Jewish magisterium and no Jewish body to promulgate one. There is no central Jewish authority as there is one in Catholicism; and there is no central Jewish voice—just a plethora of voices. Each, perhaps, regarding itself as dispositive but each, in the end, speaking only for itself.

The closest thing to a unified voice in matters of interfaith activities is the IJCIC. And it is, finally a consortium of disparate bodies that can only speak after achieving consensus. Much as IJCIC is the official Jewish representative to the Vatican it is not a Jewish analogue of the Vatican.

That said, my colleague and friend, David Sandmel of the Anti-Defamation League, has written that in response to “Nostra Aetate” there have been several attempts by Jews to formulate positions on Christianity.

He lists four. All have perforce been unofficial or even personal. The one that comes closest to having some kind of official imprimatur was Dabru Emet, a statement in 2000 written by several Jewish academics and published as an ad in The New York Times. Signed by over 200 rabbis and thinkers from across the whole spectrum of Jewish life, Dabru Emet focuses on eight major affirmations Jews must make about Christianity:

1. Jews and Christians worship the same God.
2. Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book.
3. Christians can respect the claim of the Jews on the land of Israel.
4. Jews and Christians together accept the moral principles of the Torah (Pentateuch).
5. Nazism is not a Christian phenomenon.
6. The controversy between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture and no one should be pressed into believing another’s belief.
7. A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice.
8. Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.

And then in this past year two additional Jewish statements with official sanction. One from leaders of the French Jewish community and a very nuanced and—significantly—theological statement from a group of Orthodox rabbis from around the world, which includes the assertions, “We Jews and Christians have more in common than what divides us,” and “Both Jews and Christians have a common covenantal mission to perfect the world under the sovereignty of the Almighty.”

Such Jewish statements would have been inconceivable before the promulgation of “Nostra Aetate.” It is important to recognize that the Jewish community itself has been profoundly changed by “Nostra Aetate.” In the 2,000 years of recrimination, threat and death we ourselves adopted attitudes not only of fear but of reciprocated contempt and suspicion.

“Nostra Aetate” has lifted from our shoulders *our* burden of suspicion, resentment, contempt and hatred which corrode the soul and distort the spirit. Liberated from the need for self-defense and derogation, we are freed to engage with the literature of early Christianity, not

creedally, not through the eyes of faith, but to look at it without any sense of betrayal of our own identity, as a product of a particular moment in *our* history and an essential window on a fuller understanding and appreciation of the reality of Judaism in flux during the second Temple period—and beyond—and the spectrum of perspectives it proposed.

In “Nostra Aetate,” both communities are engaging in sincere and constructive dialogue and both emerge changed. All of this is not to suggest that there have not been times of disagreement and stress in these last 50 years. There have been profound issues: the aforementioned cross erected at Auschwitz; the reintroduction of the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass, which includes an anti-Jewish Good Friday prayer; the declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, signed by Joseph Ratzinger on Aug. 6, 2000, “*Dominus Iesus*,” which seemed to re-affirm the doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, and others.

‘An Orderly Conversation’

But significant and real as the issues have been, much more impressive and much more consequential has been the way in which they have been handled. There is now a mechanism for communication. And more: a relationship that is strong enough to allow frank and direct conversation, mutual sensitivity to our respective realities, an empathy that assures that each other’s concerns are heard and understood and a commitment to one another that moves each of us to make things right for the other.

As it says in the statement issued at the 2011 meeting of the ILC:

Much has developed over the past 40 years; the former confrontation has turned into successful cooperation, the previous potential for conflict has become positive conflict management, and the past co-existence marked by tension has been replaced by resilient and fruitful mutuality. The bonds of friendship forged in the meantime have proved to be stable, so that it has become possible to address even controversial subjects together without the danger of permanent damage being done to the dialogue. This was all the more necessary because over the past decades the dialogue had not always been free of tensions. In general, however, one can observe with appreciation that in Jewish-Catholic dialogue since the new millennium above all, intensive efforts have been made to deal openly and positively with any arising differences of opinion and conflicts, in such a way that mutual relations have become stronger (10).

All of this is much in keeping with Murray’s vision of pluralism, about which he says:

...amid the pluralism a unity would be discernable—the unity of an orderly conversation. The pattern would not be that of ignorant armies clashing in the night but of informed men locked together in argument in the full light of a new dialectical day... (We Hold These Truths, p. 24).

As we celebrate “Nostra Aetate,” as a document and as a process, I think we would do well to reflect on the fundamental question of what it all means.

A few suggestions:

- “Nostra Aetate” is an embrace of the idea that people of faith share perspectives and values across doctrinal lines that differ from those of non-religious outlooks or ideologies.

- “Nostra Aetate” is an embodiment of human hope. If these two communities separated by 2,000 years of the most intense estrangement can reconcile, can come to call one another brother, then what human problem could possibly be insurmountable? What division between people cannot be overcome? (Can we not hope for a “Nostra Aetate” between Shia and Sunni Muslims?)
- “Nostra Aetate” stands as a beacon for this fraught moment. Our rapprochement becomes an emblem of what can yet happen and must happen between us and other communities of faith. It does represent the conversation that must still be had with Islam.

On an intrapersonal level, Bishop Denis Madden suggests that “Nostra Aetate” is an expression of the power of listening. Just as listening to one another is the essence of the project of dialogue which yielded “Nostra Aetate,” so it is “crucial to our relationships with one another.” As “Nostra Aetate” bore fruit, so real listening can bear fruit in our lives.

“Nostra Aetate” is a lesson in how change happens even before “Nostra Aetate.” Tolerance and respect existed in both communities at the margins—in this country, in the NCCJ, in Europe in Seelisberg and Appledorn, and in the lives of individuals. Progress in every area emerges from the margins and becomes consequential when it moves to the mainstream. Perhaps we can say it becomes so strong on the margins that it becomes inevitable for the mainstream.

The Challenge of Secularism

“Nostra Aetate” presents us with an ideological issue: the role and meaning of secularism.

Murray makes the distinction between what he calls the Jacobin/laicist version of secularism, which is hostile to religion and mandates a hostility to religion, and the American version of secularism, which involves religion not making use of the instruments of government to impose its perspectives on people. And there is the personal secularism which involves a person’s general disengagement with religion.

In Vatican circles these days there seems to be a great deal of discussion and concern about secularism. “Nostra Aetate” raises the obligation to be precise about the nature of the secularism that is at issue. Historically, “Nostra Aetate” represents an unarticulated transformation for the church, a response to an unstated challenge.

It is a familiar accusation that religion is a source of conflict. And all of us recognize that this sadly is too often true. The corollary of this charge must be that religion becomes destructive when it is linked with power. “Nostra Aetate,” along with “Dignitatis Humanae,” represents a Catholic Church divesting itself of power, which is very much at the heart of Murray’s teaching.

He endorses religion’s right to participate in debates and convince people of its perspectives. He rejects the idea of religious groups exercising coercive power, and that represents the secular model to which all religious traditions must aspire.

“Nostra Aetate” presents us with two theological lessons: “Dignitatis Humanae” represents the beginning of a new theology of religion, that is, religion in a civil society, which must include civil and human rights. As Father Christian Rutishauser, the Provincial of the Swiss Jesuits says, this puts the human being and his relation to truth at the center, not doctrine. Father Sidney Griffith of Catholic University says before “Nostra Aetate” any dialogue was a conversation with the infidel. “Nostra Aetate” annuls that. Now we are talking with a fellow human being.

A New Paradigm: Religious Humility

And this raises the second theological issue embodied in “Nostra Aetate.” John Pawlikowski raises this issue very gingerly. He writes:

In the development of Christianity’s dialogue with other world religions, especially Islam, the new perspective on Christian self-understanding emerging from the scholarship involved in the Christian-Jewish dialogue needs to take center stage. We cannot conduct these other dialogues as if the dialogue with Judaism has not significantly altered Christianity’s classical self-perception and self-expression.

In getting to this point, we can trace a historical evolution that moves us beyond what Murray taught. “Nostra Aetate” represents a new theology: religious humility.

It rests on a new paradigm. The old paradigm asserted we have all the truth. In 1864 Pope Pius IX addressed the idea that “liberty of conscience and worship is each man’s personal right.” Responding to that, Pope Pius called that idea “insane.” This position is what Murray argued against, even if his position often put him in the ill-graces of his church.

In 1953—12 years before the Second Vatican Council—Pope Pius XII allowed for the “toleration of ‘errors.’” There was no duty to repress religious or moral error.

And Murray says an embrace of pluralism means we must allow other faiths—even if they are wrong. *Even if they are wrong.* That is a form of toleration which can be seen as condescending. It is paternalistic, rather than fraternal.

“Nostra Aetate” is a fraternal document. And it is here is that “Nostra Aetate” moves beyond Murray’s “toleration” and with it the suggestion that those other faiths are “wrong.”

In November 1964, while “Nostra Aetate” was being debated, Jean Danielou—later Cardinal Danielou—serving as a Peritus said, “this text makes Christianity one religion among others.” Though he may not have meant that as an endorsement, I believe that that, finally, is the theology of “Nostra Aetate”: a theology of humility; of relinquishing the claim to exclusive truth, embodied if not in the text, then certainly in the process.

It is embodied in Pope John Paul II’s invitation to leaders of every religious group to Assisi on Oct. 26, 1986, and regularly repeated in the years since. It is embodied in Pope Francis’ invitation to people from all religious paths to join him at Ground Zero when he was in New York. It is embodied in the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of “Nostra Aetate” at the Gregorian University and at the papal audience that culminated it that was shared by representatives of all the world religions.

On the occasion of the 37th anniversary of “Nostra Aetate,” Cardinal Walter Kasper, then the President of the Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews, characterized the relationship with Judaism as “The sacrament of every otherness.”

That is the final and, I suggest, the deepest theological meaning of the process that is “Nostra Aetate.”

In Our Time

One last question: Where should this continuum take us as we move forward? Is there any work left for us? For the church? I believe the church must be aggressively proactive in disseminating teaching about “Nostra Aetate” and the new attitudes it embodies in the global south, where the church is growing in numbers and which is growing in significance within the church and where very few Catholics have actual human contact with Jews, which would serve as a counterbalance to the traditional teachings.

Also for the church, it is clear that the church has accepted the *political* reality of the State of Israel and the *religious* realities of the Jewish people. I believe it still needs to grow in understanding of the *religious* meaning of Israel for Jews if it is going to fully come to terms with Jewish self-understanding.

For Jews, we have a responsibility to do a far better job than we have of teaching our people about the existence of “Nostra Aetate” and what it means.

For Jews, now that we no longer need to deal with Christianity from the crouch of self-protection, we need to do a better job of teaching about Christianity in our religious education programs and probably in our homiletic presentation as well.

We need to teach our children more objectively about the religion of their neighbors and friends and speak of Christianity from the pulpit in other than invidious terms. If we expect this of the church, we can expect no less of ourselves.

For Jews, we need to evolve a theology that deals with Christian religiousness. We often evade this issue by taking recourse to the Noahide covenant, which merely affirms that Christians are human beings too—hardly a theological break-through. Often we affirm that Christianity is not Avodah zara (not idol worship)—hardly sufficient. Certainly we are comfortable speaking about Christians as some kind of sibling. We have endured each other for a long time, thrown together by historical exigencies. But can we affirm the *Christianity* of our Christian brothers and sisters with clearly different understandings and affirmations? But brothers in faith each in relationship to the same father each on its own path to Avinu Shebashamayim (our father in heaven) and each with a place in that one God’s design. If we are to be truly brothers than no less is called for for both of us.

“Nostra Aetate”—in *our* time; it is inescapable for us to be tireless in extending what we have learned, in extending what we have become to the Muslim world. Not to combat the tiny minority that is consumed with nihilistic fantasies, but to reach out to the vast majority that needs to be embraced and welcomed into a world of respect and mutuality. For both of us and, no doubt, for those who come long after us. None of us have yet articulated a real theology of the existence of the other.

How can different peoples attest to the same G-d? What role do we ascribe to G-d in causing us to be different in our understandings of G-d? What hope does G-d have for us? Living together, embracing one another repairing the world G-d has bequeathed to all of us together. If G-d is our common father, what does it really mean to be brothers?

And so we close where we began. We are blessed to be part of as remarkable a religious transformation as any humanity has experienced. It calls to mind for me the narrative arc of the Book of Genesis, that first book of the Scripture we share, which is bookended by stories of brothers. The first act features Cain and Abel—envy, hatred and bloodshed—and the profound question that resonates throughout the text, “am I my brother’s keeper?” And the book concludes with the narrative of Joseph, starting also in envy and hatred and brutal

separation but the conclusion of the story—the climax—is a powerful dramatization of the re-integration of a shattered family of reconciliation and renewed love and the affirmative answer to that first question, am I my brother's keeper, with an emphatic yes.

In the Talmud, one discussion hinges on how we can know when it is morning. One modern commentator has answered by teaching it is morning when you can see the face of your brother. Of course, that leaves us with the question, who is our brother? "Nostra Aetate" and all that flowed from it has moved Jews and Christians toward the dawning of the light when we can see one another's faces and know that we are brothers.

We have travelled a great narrative arc. Let us give thanks to G-d, that he has given us life sustained us and allowed us to be part of this moment

Amen.

Daniel Polish, the Rabbi of Congregation Shir Chadash of the Hudson Valley in LaGrange, N.Y., is vice-chairman of the International Committee for Interreligious Consultations with international religious bodies and the author of Bringing the Psalms to Life.