

Introduction

On December 2, 2015, the Israeli Embassy to the Holy See, together with the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and the Pontifical Urbaniana University, held a conference in Rome to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*. This was one of many conferences and events held that year, in Rome, Israel and around the world, to mark the anniversary of the historic, profound change in the position of the Catholic Church towards Jews and Judaism.

Initiated by Pope John XXIII, and proclaimed by Pope Paul VI at the Second Vatican Council on 28 October 1965, *Nostra Aetate* revolutionized the attitude of the Catholic Church towards Jews and Judaism. After 2,000 years, the Jewish people were exonerated from the collective blame of Jesus's death, an accusation that has been one of the main sources of religious anti-Semitism throughout history.

The purpose of this book is twofold: first of all, to publish the proceedings of this Conference, and second, to provide the reader with the most recent, important views on the issue of dialogue and reconciliation between Jews and Catholics.

The book is divided into two parts:

1. The first part includes transcripts of the speeches by the following conference participants:
 - *Cardinal Kurt Koch*, President of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity and of the Vatican Commission for Reli-

gious Relations with the Jews. Cardinal Koch is responsible for dialogue with the Jews, including the Chief Rabbinate in Israel. In his speech, titled “*Nostra Aetate* as the Enduringly Reliable Compass of Jewish-Catholic Dialogue”, he highlights how: “Within the context of Catholic-Jewish relations, this commemoration is a sort of little Jubilee, and we have good reason to celebrate it.”

- *Rabbi Dr. Riccardo Di Segni*, Chief Rabbi of Rome. In his speech, Rabbi Di Segni explains that *Nostra Aetate* had limits, but these limits have been partially overcome by developments since Vatican II.
- *Professor Raymond Cohen*, from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Prof. Cohen points in his speech to the fact that political and religious issues are intertwined between both Israel and the Holy See as well as between Jews and Catholics. When the subject of a reappraisal of Catholic attitudes towards the Jews arose within the context of Vatican II, the Israeli Government saw it as a possible route to diplomatic recognition.
- *Professor Paolo Trianni*, from Pontificia Università Urbaniana. Prof. Trianni considers in his speech the document *Nostra Aetate* as an essential tool to avoid the religious wars that afflict our time.
- In my own opening remarks at the conference, I emphasized two points: firstly that *Nostra Aetate* paved the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Holy See, and secondly the importance of spreading the message and spirit of *Nostra Aetate* to Christian Communities in the four corners of the world (especially Africa and Asia).

In addition to the conference speeches, we also included in this first part of the book, two other important views:

- A speech by *Rabbi David Rosen* titled “The Fundamental Agreement – a Culmination of *Nostra Aetate*”¹. Rabbi Rosen has been a key participant in the Jewish-Catholic dialogue in recent years and currently serves as International Director of Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee. In his speech, he provides a historical overview of the relations between Catholics and Jews and further explains how *Nostra Aetate* paved the way to the words of Pope Francis in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (“God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant and to bring forth treasure of wisdom which flow from their encounter with His word...”).
 - An article by *Rabbi Abraham Skorka* of Buenos Aires, who is a personal friend of Pope Francis, and published with him the book “On Heaven and Earth” based on a long-term dialogue they conducted over the years. In his article², Rabbi Skorka stresses that dialogue is the only solution to hate that pushes people into conflict with others.
2. The second part of the book includes the speeches of Pope Francis and Chief Rabbi Di Segni on the occasion of the visit of Pope Francis to the Great Synagogue of Rome (January 17, 2016). This was the third visit of a Pope to the Great Synagogue of Rome, and in a way became a tradition that certainly could not have been possible before (or without) *Nostra Aetate*.

¹ Presentation at the AJC/TAU (American Jewish Committee – Tel Aviv University) co-sponsored conference, held Dec.14/15, 2015.

² Published by “Carità Politica” (June 2015).

- *Pope Francis* in his speech said: “Our relationship is very close to my heart... Over time, a spiritual bond has been formed, fostering an authentic relationship of friendship and inspiring a common commitment.”
- *Rabbi Di Segni*, in his welcoming speech, highlighted how “a meeting of peace between different religious communities, as the one that is taking place today, here in Rome, is a very strong sign against the invasion and abuse of religious violence.”

Additionally, selected recent documents of Jewish-Catholic dialogue are included in this portion of the book:

- “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable”³:
This document comes 50 years after *Nostra Aetate*, emphasizes the tight and inescapable link between Christianity and Judaism, and quotes Pope Francis: “A Christian can never be an anti-Semite, especially because of the Jewish roots of Christianity.”
- “Orthodox Rabbinic Statement on Christianity”⁴:
This document formally acknowledges that since the Second Vatican Council, the official teachings of the Catholic Church about Judaism have changed irrevocably.
- “And you should love the Stranger as yourself. Migrants and refugees: Threat or opportunity”⁵:

³ Issued by The Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (December 10, 2015).

⁴ Issued by CJCUC (Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation).

⁵ Joint statement of the Bilateral Commission of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (Jerusalem, December 16/17, 2015).

Upon publishing this statement, the Jewish delegation expressed its appreciation regarding the aforementioned new document issued by The Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.

Finally, two basic documents, the text of *Nostra Aetate* and the text of the Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Holy See (December 1993), are also provided in full.

I hope that this book, a compilation of core texts and documents, explains not only the historic importance of *Nostra Aetate*, but also brings some perspective regarding the progress made thus far, as well as hope for future relations between Jews and Catholics.

I would like to thank all those who contributed to the publication of this book. First and foremost the participants of the conference and the writers who made this book possible. Thank you to the University of Urbaniana, Rector magnificent Prof. Alberto Trevisiol, Don Roberto Cherubini, and the dedicated people at Urbaniana University Press – the Director, Prof. Leonardo Sileo, and Sandro Scalabrin –, and the translator, Heather Walker. Also, Father Norbert Hoffman, Secretary of the Commission of Interreligious Relations with the Jews at the Vatican, for his support. And finally, my assistant Chiara Croce who worked tirelessly to make this project possible.

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