

Archbishop Lori's Talk - Reflections on Nostra Aetate; Chevrei Tzedek Synagogue

Reflections on Nostra Aetate

Chevrei Tzedek Synagogue

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Warmest thanks for the invitation to speak with you today about Nostra Aetate, a document of the II Vatican Council that sought to address the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church to non-Christian faiths, but in a special way, to its relationship with Judaism. This fifty-three year old document remains a living document that constantly needs to be revisited, prayed over, and implemented. I hope that my remarks today will be a part of that ongoing process.

So I thank you for your kind invitation. I'm also grateful for the role this Synagogue plays in interfaith relationships in the greater Baltimore area. I recall the warm friendship of my predecessor, William Cardinal Keeler with the Jewish community throughout greater Baltimore. In that spirit, I hope my words will be informative and spark reflection but even more so I hope they will deepen our friendship and mutual understanding as we seek to serve the larger community and as we rely on one another's wisdom in facing similar contemporary challenges in both our communities.

My thought is not to attempt a scholarly analysis of this document, brief as it is, but rather to offer you highlights on its history, content, and application, concluding with a few suggestions about continued paths of dialogue and cooperation between us in the years ahead.

I grew up in a small town in Indiana, New Albany, to be exact, in the years just prior to the II Vatican Council (1962-65). My family belonged to a new suburban parish, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and I was among the boys in my class who wanted to

become a priest. My parents encouraged me in this by giving me a prayer book, the St. Andrew Missal, so that I could follow the prayers being said in Latin at the altar.

Around 1962, as I was following the Good Friday service in my prayer book, I came across that infamous phrase, “the perfidious Jews”. At the ripe old age of ten, I didn’t know what the word “perfidious” meant but it didn’t sound like a compliment. I asked a teacher to explain what this meant but to no avail. Little did I know that people a lot more important than me were also concerned by this most unworthy phrase in the Church’s liturgy – people like Pope John XXIII and Cardinal Augustin Bea – as well as many other architects of the II Vatican Council.

In fact, they were already working on plans and initial drafts of the Council document that would guide and foster the Church’s interfaith relations in future years, the document we now know as *Nostra Aetate*, Latin for “In Our Time”, a document that would be very different from documents of the past. In this document the Church would recognize progress already underway in interfaith relations. This includes informal interfaith friendships and kitchen dialogues. For example, my grandpa, Antonio Caradonna, an immigrant from Sicily and the owner of a small business, and his wife Katie, made friends with just about everyone in town. But they had a special friendship with a Jewish family, the Miller’s, who lived next door. The Catholic Caradonna’s and the Jewish Miller’s were very observant but their religious differences posed no obstacle to friendship – in this case a friendship that lasted more than 50 years. They learned to appreciate each other’s background, customs, and faith in the give and take of card games, dinners, and even a few arguments. Bridges, I think, are always built more easily at the grassroots level than not!

But we also need the Key Bridges and large suspension bridges capable of spanning the vast and stormy waters of history. This is one of the ways I like to think of *Nostra Aetate* – it is a large and critically important bridge still in the making. But the pilings for that bridge were put in place long before the 1960’s. Some of them were constructed in the starkest of days, during the Shoah, when as Nuncio to Turkey, Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, the future John XXIII, grasped, at least to some degree, something of the unfolding horror and did what he could to save as many Jews as possible. Perhaps that experience made him especially receptive to the memorandum which the Jewish historian, Jules Isaak, presented to him in June 1960,

urging the development of a new perspective on the relationship of the Catholic Church and Judaism. If nothing else, the Shoah opened the eyes of many to the consequences of centuries of separation between Christians and Jews, and the ungodliness of the prejudice and violence leveled against Jews in history. As Father Dennis McManus said years ago in an address at Georgetown University, “This terrible genocide represents not just a single or discrete event that happened only once and won’t ever be repeated. Instead the Holocaust is really the culmination of a two-thousand year history of strife...” between Christians and Jews. There was, then, a mutual deep desire, born of God’s spirit, for a new and better day.

Every Council document, of course, has its own complicated history that are the stuff of doctoral dissertations – but this is no dissertation! Let me briefly mention three things about the development of the text itself: First, that it’s complicated development was ably shepherded by the Jesuit Cardinal Augustin Bea, head of the Secretariat for Christian Unity; Second, that having consulted bishops all over the world, the Holy See decided that the II Vatican Council would issue a declaration that would treat its unique relationship with Judaism in the context of its relationship with all non-Christian religions, including Islam. Clearly, however, the new document would have a particular focus on the unique relationship between Christians and Jews. Thus, Section IV of *Nostra Aetate*, in time, came to be regarded as a modern-day magna carta for Jewish-Catholic relations. And third, I would note that the text was approved by the Council Fathers on October 28, 1965 with 2221 voting “yes” and only 88 voting “no” – and it was promptly adopted and published by Blessed Pope VI. A young theologian, Fr. Joseph Ratzinger, (later Benedict XVI) in 1966 wrote that “a new page had been turned in the book of [the] mutual relationship [between the Church and Judaism].”

Sticking to my promise not to give you a pedantic tour of this document, I would propose to focus on a few highlights of Section IV, particularly those points in the document that represent turning points, or better yet, points upon which we have built and must continue to build.

A first observation about the document is its theological context. It doesn’t begin by delving into the history of religions but instead takes up a theme found throughout the Council documents, namely, the God-given dignity of the human person. It

begins with our common humanity, our solidarity as a human community, our common search for answers to the riddle of human existence, and appreciation for the answers that have been found in other religions in which the truth of God is reflected in varying ways. In its appreciation for other religions, the Catholic Church commits itself to enter deeper into dialogue with them so as to deepen its understanding of these rays of truth and to find wherever possible common ground, both theological and practical.

A second highlight is the document's recognition of the deep spiritual ties that exist between Christians and Jews. Here I'd like to note St. John Paul II's observation that Judaism is not extrinsic to the Church but indeed, "intrinsic". *Nostra Aetate* provides a foundation for that observation when it cites St. Paul's image of the Church as a wild shoot grafted onto the well-cultivated olive tree of the Ancient Covenant (Rom. 11:17-24). Indeed the Church believes that Jesus came to unite Jews and Gentiles by his mediation, "by the blood of the Cross" (Col. 1:20). Thus the Church can understand herself only in relationship to Judaism, only in light of the Hebrew Scriptures (a point to which I shall return), only in light of the promises made to Abraham and his descendants. Every principal tenet of the Christian faith has deep roots in Judaism. The Paschal Mystery of Jesus cannot be understood apart from the Exodus any more than the Mass can be understood apart from the Passover. Indeed, the very form of Christian liturgical prayer has its roots in the Berakah, the blessing, that always begins by acknowledging God as the source of every blessing, recounting the great and marvelous deeds of salvation, and then proceeds to ask for God's continued blessing upon his people, to which the response of the people is (hopefully) a resounding "Amen".

A further highlight in *Nostra Aetate* is the recognition and reassertion of the truth that God's gift of self in the Ancient Covenant is irrevocable. *Nostra Aetate* cites words of St. Paul, "...theirs (or should I say, 'yours') is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs (yours) are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:4-5). We see ourselves as sharing in your patrimony but we further see that your patrimony is valid in and of itself insofar as God's promise and his gifts are irrevocable. This means that while the Church reads the promises of the Old Testament as being fulfilled in Christ, above all in his death and resurrection, the Church also recognizes

the rabbinic reading of the Hebrew Scriptures as having a permanent validity and importance all its own. In this way the door is opened to heal the breach between Christianity and Judaism that opened up not long after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., a breach that widened in the early centuries of the Church.

Early in that history the injustice of blaming Jews for the death of Christ took root. *Nostra Aetate* clearly repudiates that injustice while recognizing the harm that assertion has done to the Jewish people through the centuries. It does this without denying the role of specific individuals who were actors in the passion and death of Jesus but it rejects the view that the whole of Israel is thereby somehow responsible for it. Indeed, none of the evangelists would have recognized this view as valid, including Matthew, in whose Gospel the following words are found: "his blood be on us and our children." This refers to a small number of people in Pilate's courtyard and cannot be taken as representative of the Jewish people as a whole. The authentic teaching of the Church is that the sins of all humanity, including and especially, the sins of those who are the Lord's own followers are the reason why Jesus suffered, died, and was buried. Indeed, the Catechism of the Council of Trent (Roman Catechism, 1566) teaches that "...we [Christians] profess to know him, and when we deny him by our deeds, we seem in some way to lay violent hands upon him" (1, 5, 11). The widening breach between Christianity and Judaism coupled with unjustly holding the Jews as responsible for the death of Christ, helped to fuel a long and bitter history of anti-Semitism which, sadly, even after the Shoah, is on the rise in many places and it is very much a part of the culture that you and I share. *Nostra Aetate* is clear that the Church's faith itself is not the cause of anti-Semitism yet it cannot be denied that through the centuries, down to our own day, Christians have been complicit in the persecution of Jews, including the Shoah. It is a history for which there must be ongoing repentance. I think of St. John Paul II's efforts in this regard during the year 2000 when he led the Church in a collective repentance known as 'the purification of memory' – not a forgetfulness of history to be sure – but rather an expunging of anti-Semitism and other evils from our hearts so as to embrace our identity as disciples of the Lord. And so, when *Nostra Aetate* condemns anti-Semitism in all its forms, whether on the part of individuals, governments, or movements in society, the Church is not unaware of its members complicity in this grave evil.

A further highlight is that the document sets the stage for our coming to terms as best we can with the Holocaust. This primitive wound in human history claims every conscience and requires that we study it, understand it, pray about it, take responsibility for it, dialogue, work together to prevent such a thing from ever again taking place in the future. This does not mean we are naïve about the human capacity for evil – ‘man’s inhumanity to man’ in the words of the poet, Robert Burns. All the more reason for us to engage in robust dialogue and cooperation in a world that is no less dangerous than it was when the Nazi’s charted their hellish plans to exterminate the Jewish people.

Finally, it should be stressed that *Nostra Aetate* not only strives to face the past by rejecting negative teachings on Jews and Judaism, this document, along with the whole of the Council, seeks to provide a theological and doctrinal foundation a renewed Christian appreciation of Judaism and for mutual dialogue and cooperation, as indeed has happened in these past fifty-three years.

Time does not permit an adequate description of these developments but, again, I would like to offer a few highlights: First, *Nostra Aetate* has spawned Jewish-Christian and interfaith dialogue at all levels: international, national, local, and informal dialogues among congregations. This dialogue has led to deepened friendship and understanding and from the Christian side I can say that it has led to a deepened understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures and much spiritual insight. The international and national dialogues have also produced ground-breaking texts that extend and deepen the teaching of *Nostra Aetate*. It has provided a basis for the Church’s understanding of the relationship of the Jewish People with Israel.

I think of the groundbreaking visit of Bl. Paul VI, St. John Paul II and more recently the visit of Pope Francis – This has led, one hopes, to a strengthening of ties with our Jewish brothers and sisters in the complicated context of the Middle East and in the relationship of the Church and Judaism to Islam.

Nostra Aetate has led to cooperation on the local level. I think of the warm relationship of the Archdiocese with the Associated, and the many ways we stand together on social and educational issues in Annapolis. In a community such as ours, with such deep needs, the more we can cooperate for the common good, the better.

Certainly *Nostra Aetate* figured into liturgical renewal. For example, the Good Friday service has been completely revised. Not only is the offending phrase excised but the revised liturgy has less of a conversional tone. I would also say that *Nostra Aetate* plays an important role in biblical scholarship, in translations and interpretation. Insights gained from dialogue and mutual study have also enriched our understanding of fundamental and systematic theology.

Another area positively affected by *Nostra Aetate* is religious education. In many places, including the Archdiocese of Baltimore, instructional texts include units on the Holocaust and they offer students a positive understanding of the relationship of Christians and Jews.

All this represents much progress but more of a beginning than an end. Continued dialogue challenges our theologians to examine their presuppositions, assumptions, categories, and even vocabulary. (This is way above my pay grade but I applaud the fact that such work is underway!) We also have a long way to go in probing our respective histories, in coming to terms not only with the Shoah but indeed with many other difficult chapters as well, including the Church's role in World War II.

Finally, inspired by *Nostra Aetate*, I'd like to say a word about our local situation. We just concluded one of the most violent years in the Baltimore's history and we are all keenly aware of the heartrending problems that beset our city. Because these problems are so severe - and indeed they must be faced - the narrative about Baltimore is often entirely negative. It is a narrative of hopelessness. As people of faith, we are also people of hope and while facing our problems squarely, we must also offer even Baltimore's most disadvantaged residents reason for hope. This is something best done not only as individual congregations but rather in the unity and friendship of interfaith relations.

In addition, we share similar pastoral problems. It used to be that parents passed the faith on to the next generation and in most of the time "it took" but that's not the case anymore. Young people don't want older people's silver or fine china anymore and sadly, in some cases, they don't bother with the religion of their elders. Consequently we recognize the general decline in religious practice and the particular challenge of engaging the young. Often we don't see them after

Confirmation and you don't see them after Bar Mitzvah! I think we need to pool our prayers and our wisdom as our congregations struggle with this reality.

Part of this challenge is encouraging young people to belong. Our culture is relentlessly individualistic and anti-institutional yet people need community and they need institutions. Belonging, banding together for the common good, a sense of shared identity – all this is essential for our social fabric – and the decline of these things makes cooperation among us not optional but essential.

Finally, our respective religions give us an international perspective so we cannot help but look with concern at religious persecution all over the world, a persecution that includes Islamic minorities, Jews, and Christians. Pope Francis has spoken of an “ecumenism of blood” but I would say this extends beyond Christianity to interfaith relations. We are sister and brother to all those who suffer for their faith.

So let me conclude this talk as I began, with words of thanks – thanks for the opportunity to share these reflections, thanks for the friendship we enjoy, together with fond prayers and hopes that our friendship will deepen in the years that lie ahead.

May God bless us and keep us in his love.