What Changed at Vatican II: Past, Present and Future Perspectives on Catholic-Jewish Relations

John W. Crossin, OSFS, Ph.D.

As we approach the 50th Anniversary of the document Nostra Aetate, we do well to consider some of the developments of the past fifty years before we look forward to the next fifty years of our relationship(s). What I am suggesting tonight is that a new and coherent way of Catholic-Jewish self-understanding and acting will continue to emerge in this post-modern period.

The Bernardin Lectures have made a significant contribution to the dialogue initiated at the Second Vatican Council. Father Thomas A. Baima has given us a fine overview of the first decade of the lectures in the Preface and the Introduction to his recent book A Legacy of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue: The Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Jerusalem Lectures.

I would note in particular that in his initial lecture on anti-Semitism Cardinal Bernardin

[Called] for renewal of Catholic teaching material on anti-Semitism, expansion of awareness of Vatican II’s rejection of anti-Jewish theology. The Cardinal [called] for Jewish educators also to rethink the Jewish community’s understanding of its relationships with the Church. In these and other ways, Jews and Christians can, together, build a new relationship for the future.

In an oft-cited quote Professor Emil Fackenheim in the first of the Jerusalem lecture series said perhaps with some irony:

Christians must begin again at the beginning, with the first two questions of the Bible: “Where are you, Man?” and “Where is your brother?” Christian anti-Judaism will never end until Christians relate positively to Jews, not despite their non-acceptance of [Jesus] Christ, but because of it.

He goes on to say that Christians and Jews must seek the historical truth including that of the Holocaust with “brutal honesty.” I think that while such honesty will be difficult because the

---

3 Ibid., xvi.
4 Ibid., xvii.
human tendency to denial can be quite strong, honesty is most necessary as we move together into the next fifty years.

In analyzing the first ten lectures Father Baima mentions two key points: (1) for Jewish partners a key question is what Christians think of Israel and (2) a key point made in the historical lectures “is that in addition to competing and mutually exclusive claims, the two religions have areas of significant commonality”\(^5\) in their self-identities.

**Nostra Aetate**

The genesis of Chapter Four of *Nostra Aetate* is a fascinating story. Father Thomas F. Stransky, CSP gave his personal witness of an insider in a recent public lecture at Seton Hall University.\(^6\) The recent volume *The Ecumenical Legacy of Johannes Cardinal Willebrands* (1909-2006)\(^7\) offers four essays on his contributions to the relationship with the Jewish community including his important role in securing the passage of *Nostra Aetate*. A substantive chapter in Stjepan Schmidt SJ’s authoritative biography of Augustin Cardinal Bea details his role in the “Development of the Church’s Relations with the Jewish People.”\(^8\) None of these detailed accounts of the people and events at and around the Second Vatican Council [1962-65] can be explored in detail here.

Chapter Four of NA is only 1,100 words but is has had a powerful effect. In the 2006 Bernardin Lecture Father John Pawlikowski, OSM said “...I think that in those 1,100 words, it profoundly changed nearly 2,000 years of Catholic and even wider Christian thinking about how Jews and Judaism ought to be perceived by people who claim to follow the Gospel of Jesus.”\(^9\) Similar sentiments are found in many Catholic and Jewish writers.

Cardinal Kurt Koch-- current president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) -- made a significant point in his 2012 address to the Plenary Assembly of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. He noted that NA cannot be separated from the other documents of the Second Vatican Council.

In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church “Lumen Gentium” 9 and 10, and in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation “Dei verbum” 14-16 for example, we find fundamental theological statements which correspond with statements in “Nostra Aetate” 4 and are taken up again there. To that extent “Nostra Aetate” does not

---

\(^5\) Ibid., xx.

\(^6\) October 29, 2013

\(^7\) Eds. Adelbert Denaux and Peter De Mey with Maria Ter Steeg and Lorelei Fuchs (Leuven: Peeters, 2012).


represent an isolated meteorite among the conciliar texts, as though it had fallen directly from heaven without containing cross references to other conciliar texts.\textsuperscript{10}

Cardinal Koch goes on to say that NA is the foundational document for current dialogues. He summarizes:

The Declaration begins with a reflection on the mystery and the soteriological mission of the Church, and recalls the deep bond which links the people of the New Covenant in a spiritual manner with the tribe of Abraham. It affirms emphatically that disdain, disparagement and contempt of Judaism must be avoided at all costs and the Jewish roots of Christianity are therefore explicitly given prominence. At the same time it rejects the sweeping accusation, which has unfortunately survived over centuries in various places, that the Jews are “deicides.”\textsuperscript{11}

For Cardinal Koch as for others, Judaism is not ‘extrinsic’ but ‘intrinsic’ to Christianity. He goes on to note that the teaching of NA has been ‘received’ and caused a fundamental reorientation in Catholic thinking and action.\textsuperscript{12}

**Developments to the Present**

Fr. Pawlikowski in his Jerusalem lecture notes several phases of development in Catholic-Jewish relations since Vatican II.

- Phase one can best be described as a cleansing phase. It really concerned first and foremost the rewriting of Catholic educational materials. And in fact the Catholic studies on education materials, particularly the religion texts, undertaken by Sr. Rose Thering, OP at St. Louis University, served as important resources for convincing the bishops at Vatican II that a statement concerning the Church and the Jewish people was very necessary.
- The second phase has to do with the rethinking of the relationship within the world of biblical scholarship. He also notes that there has been a theological impact as well.
- We are also moving into a third phase of trying to image a new relationship. We have not been able to assimilate all that we have learned in our dialogues thus far.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid. In his chapter “The Road Behind and the Road Ahead: Catholicism and Judaism,” in *Catholicism and Interreligious Dialogue*, edited by James L. Heft, SM (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 25-32, Philip Cunningham details what he calls the ‘Dramatic Transformation’ that has occurred with the adoption of NA by the large majority of bishops at Vatican II.
\textsuperscript{13}Pawlikowski and Sandmel, pp. 7-8.
In a recent article, Dr. Phillip Cunningham attempts to summarize developments in Christian-Jewish relations in the last fifty years. He cites the work of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI as well as the statements of National Bishops Conferences. He gives ten points summarizing their most important teachings.

These include:

2. Anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism are sins against God.

4. There exists a divinely willed ongoing relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Judaism has its own distinctive “vocation” in the divine plan that goes beyond the preparation for Christianity.

6. Christians must respect Jewish self-understanding of their own religious experience. This includes a respect for Jewish attachment to Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel).\(^{14}\)

Cunningham goes on to cite Cardinal Kasper, former president of the PCPCU to the effect that we are only at the ‘beginning of the beginning’ of developing a coherent Catholic theology of Judaism. Here it is important to mention Cunningham’s citation of Rabbi Abraham Joseph Heschel to the fact that our two traditions “have been shaping each other – for good or for ill—throughout the past two millennia.”\(^{15}\)

One who has had a cordial and deep relationship with the Jewish community is Pope Francis. In his recent Apostolic Exhortation entitled the Joy of the Gospel he has this to say about interrelationship:

Dialogue and friendship with the children of Israel are part of the life of Jesus’ disciples...

God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant and to bring forth treasures of wisdom which flow from their encounters with his word. For this reason, the Church also is enriched when she receives the values of Judaism. ...While it is true that certain Christian beliefs are unacceptable to Judaism... there exists as well a rich complementarity which allows us to read the text of the Hebrew Scriptures together and to help one another to mine the riches of God’s work.\(^{16}\)

In a recent address to representatives of the American Jewish Committee visiting in Rome, Pope Francis not only reiterated his desire that we work together for a more just world but also indicated a concern that the knowledge and friendship experienced now be passed on to future...

\(^{14}\) Cunningham, 33. See appendix for all of the ten points.

\(^{15}\) Cunningham, 36.

generations. I have shared this concern of Pope Francis for several years. He notes especially that Catholic seminaries and centers of formation for laity need to pass on this heritage.\textsuperscript{17}

What Pope Francis sounds here is a common theme. Rabbi Elliott N. Dorff, for example, in his succinct response to Philip Cunningham’s essay, notes that the Jewish community needs to do more teaching of Jewish young adults and seminary students about developments in Jewish-Catholic relations. Rabbi David Sandmel confirms these thoughts and notes that Jews generally are ignorant of NA but aware of “symbolic events” such as Pope John Paul’s visit to the Western Wall in 2000.\textsuperscript{18} In his 1997 Bernardin lecture, Cardinal Cassidy, then president of the PCPCU, expressed the same concern about both his Catholic and Jewish audiences’ knowledge of contemporary Jewish-Catholic relations.

Cardinal Cassidy goes on to speak about our ongoing dialogue. He notes that in our Catholic and Jewish popular publications, members of the other faith might not recognize the description of themselves. He implies that knowledge of one another in our communities might not be that widespread or that deep.\textsuperscript{19}

**Listening and Understanding**

I believe that we have to continue to encourage national, regional and local relationships that support mutual understanding. People are at different points in building the relationships that support dialogue. As Father Remi Hoeckman noted almost two decades ago, we have to spend enough time together

> In order to begin to understand a bit more of each other’s experiences, perceptions and expectations, so that the way they view one another, and the way they could view themselves through the eyes of one another, may start to change, truthfully and profoundly, without fear of “losing something to the other side”

> A first difficulty, which is at the frontiers of Jewish-Christian dialogue and yet at the same time also at its center, is our reluctance to change.\textsuperscript{20}

The underlying issue is not so much change, which is common in American culture as we can see with a glance at our phones, but the question of loss or fear of possible loss as we seek the

\textsuperscript{17} Address to members of the American Jewish Committee (Rome, February 13, 2014).

\textsuperscript{18} Pawlikowski and Sandmel, p. 18.

\textsuperscript{19} See his Jerusalem Lecture reprinted in *A Legacy of Jewish-Christian Dialogue* especially pages 45-49.

truth together. Yet we have been tremendously enriched as we have overcome our fears and embraced the possibilities of our life together.

As we work through our fears we can still have obstacles to our mutual understanding. One would be our tendency to view people not as individuals but in categories. The person is viewed as Christian rather than as Father Harry who is a Catholic Christian and feels a special call to work for social justice. Or this person is a non-Catholic rather than Rabbi Gil is well-known for his interest and skill in marital counseling and he roots for the Cubs.

My point is that there is a developmental aspect to dialogue that should not be ignored. Initial issues of uncertainty or fear and a need for deeper reconciliation might give way to questions of adjusting our internal frameworks for understanding as we get to know one another more personally.

As the participants in dialogue change and the next generation of dialogue participants gradually appears we might find that we participants are at different points in our quest for mutual understanding. This could mean that those who have been engaged in dialogue for a long time can help new dialogue partners to work through difficulties in order to come to a greater depth and ability to learn.

Pope Francis provides a helpful insight when in discussing the Common Good and Peace in Society he discusses the principle that **Time is Greater Than Space**.

This principle enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans. It invites us to accept the tension between fullness and limitation, and give priority to time. One of the faults which we occasionally observe in sociopolitical activity is that spaces and power are preferred to time and processes. Giving priority to space means madly attempting to keep everything together in the present, trying to possess all the spaces of power and self-assertion….Giving priority to time means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces. Time governs spaces, illumines them and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of return. What we need, then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events.  

---

21 *Apostolic Exhortation*, # 222-224
Looking to the Future: A Blessing for One Another and the World

In his 1997 Jerusalem lecture, Cardinal Cassidy quotes Cardinal Bernardin when Bernardin says that we must go beyond teaching about the failures of the past and make the next generation aware of the developments in mutual understanding and reconciliation that have occurred. Cassidy concludes by quoting Blessed Pope John Paul II:

As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing for the world (cf. Genesis 12:2ff). This is a common task awaiting us. It is therefore necessary for us, Christians and Jews to be first a blessing to one another.\(^\text{22}\)

So how might we be a blessing to one another and the world as we move forward?

Cardinal George in his Jerusalem lecture says that the development of Jewish-Catholic relations over the last fifty years have been guided by the Providence of God.\(^\text{23}\) I believe that we need to continually ask for God’s guidance as we walk together during these next fifty years.

A New Narrative

Having ever so succinctly presented central points from NA and some of the history of our dialogues, and having given a few suggestions for the future, let me now offer some further thoughts.

Cardinal George notes in his lecture that he has spent many years studying the intersection of faith and culture. He believes that we have a new dialogue partner: secularism.\(^\text{24}\) And thus we are in a trialogue in some ways. He discusses secularism at some length noting for example:

Now that secularism has assumed something akin to the role of an established religion, we see the state intervening to protect its citizens from religions rather than to promote the free exercise of religion.\(^\text{25}\)

He articulates four measures for authenticity in dialogue:

1. Participants’ faith commitments must guide and govern their lives and their speech even in dialogue.\(^\text{26}\)

\(^{22}\) A Legacy of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue, 54.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 184.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 191.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., 194.
2. **Commitment to the common:** I am calling for a personal religious commitment to what is at least analogously common between two traditions. …As a Catholic, I must both respect the truth in Judaism and preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods of Jewish faith and the values of Jewish culture and society.

3. **The third rule in religious dialogue is commitment to the truth.**

4. **The fourth rule of dialogue is commitment to action [in Chicago].**

He goes on to mention two themes for dialogue which would also engage secularists: “(1) the relation between freedom and desire; and (2) the relation between individual and community.”

I myself would note that according to many of today’s thinkers we have entered the post-modern era. This is the era beyond Enlightenment rationalism. How might we construct together during the next fifty years a **new narrative for this new era of Jewish-Catholic relations**?

We have much to build on and this has already been acknowledged in the discussion above. For example, we have been and will be both (a) engaged in sustained and fruitful dialogue and (b) working together for the good of the community both here in Chicago-land and across the county.

Let me add five points for reflection as we consider our common future:

1. **Moving forward in our dialogue,** we could, building on Dr. Hertzberg’s Jerusalem Lecture and the work of other scholars, begin to sort out what we have learned from the Enlightenment. We could take forward with us many good things, as for example, the rise of modern science and the recognition of religious liberty. Other things might be left behind.

2. **Cardinal George has discussed in detail our relationship with contemporary culture.** It would be helpful if, adding to his analysis, we might look at the formative nature of our economic system with its consumer culture that shapes a view of human flourishing that emphasizes material goods above all. We could look at the shaping of our desires by advertising and by the use of technology. We could spend some time together discussing the shaping power of our economic system on the practices of our faiths.

---

27 Ibid., 201-02.
28 Ibid. 203
Catholics and Jews hold many key positions in our economic system. Our immigrant Catholic and Jewish communities of a century ago have prospered in many ways in America. We have things to contribute together to an ethical economy.

In the encounter with the poor, an encounter recommended to us by Pope Francis, we meet those who have not prospered in the current economic system. The poor point to the limits of the economic system. Our dialogue—as well as our continuing mutual concern and work together for those in need—can contribute to understanding and even improving our culture and our economy.

3. In discussing the individual and the community as Cardinal George suggests, we might look at human interdependence. Interdependence is a fact of life somewhat in contrast to the contemporary American emphasis on human autonomy but in line with our religious emphases on the importance of relationships and of the community. That is, we might develop together elements of a renewed and rebalanced religious anthropology.

4. A new narrative, a new synthesis of Christian-Jewish relations, can emerge in the next fifty years. This might include some of the elements I have mentioned in this paper.29

A new narrative might need to deal with Christian unity. I hope and pray that God will give Christians some success in reuniting and thus the landscape on the Christian side might change and provide a reconstituted partner.

Our search together for the truth might yield interesting convergences as well as the expected divergences. We might see more clearly how we have influenced one another in the past and how we continue to influence each other—especially in this country. These insights too might become part of a new narrative of Christian-Jewish relations.

5. At some point in the future we should work together on a common history based on solid scholarship. This would be forthright about our troubled history—large parts of which would be embarrassing for Catholics but call us to the humility of the truth. A common history also would acknowledge the moments of light in the past centuries when mutual respect appeared if only relatively briefly.

A full history would also include the changes initiated with Nostra Aetate and a new narrative of Christian-Jewish relations.30

29 Englund and Connelly believe that Catholic theology still needs to fully digest NA, p. 14.
A common history written in accessible language could be used to educate all members of both our communities about the changes that have occurred and the need to work together, learn from one another and become friends.

What I am suggesting is that a new and coherent way of Catholic-Jewish self-understanding and acting is emerging in this post-modern period. We might be developing a common-- or perhaps better an overlapping-- frame of reference [or even worldview] for studying our common texts, sharing our religious concerns and aiding those in need.

The presupposition and foundation for this suggestion is that we will continue to walk and talk together as colleagues and as friends.

**Appendix**

1. Jews remain in covenantal relationship with God. The church’s “new covenant” did not replace Israel’s covenantal life with lived through the Torah.
2. Anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism are sins against God.
3. Christian preaching and teaching have contributed to anti-Semitism. Certain New Testament texts have regularly been misinterpreted and so have promoted hostility.
4. There exists a divinely willed ongoing relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Judaism has its own distinctive “vocation” in the divine plan that goes beyond the preparation for Christianity.
5. Jesus was and always remained a Galilean Jew “an authentic son of Israel,” as Pope John Paul II put it. He was not opposed to the Torah or the Judaism of his day.
6. Christians must respect Jewish self-understanding of their own religious experience. This includes a respect for Jewish attachment to *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel).
7. Christians can learn more about God and relationship with God (and about Christianity) from the traditions of Judaism over the centuries and from the living faith of contemporary Jews.
8. The Hebrew Scriptures (*TaNaK*) have spiritual value as revelatory texts irrespective of the church’s Christological reading of them.

---


10. Jews and Christian both have the covenental duty to prepare for the Age to Come.³¹

¹ I want to thank the Organizing Committee for the Invitation to give this address. In particular I would like to thank the supporting organizations—The Archdiocese of Chicago, The American Jewish Committee, The Chicago Board of Rabbis, the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, The Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership and this year’s sponsors Temple Shalom and the Aaron M. Petuchowski Fund for Excellence. I also wish to thank Rev. Dennis McManus and Rev. Peter Ryan SJ for their suggestions for this essay—though I take full responsibility for its content. I am most grateful to Father Thomas Baima for extending the invitation to speak and for his most cordial hospitality at Mundelein Seminary while I have been here in Chicago.

³¹ Cunningham, p. 32-33.