

**A Catholic Reflection on
The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable
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Thank-you for the invitation to be part of this evening. I am here tonight with considerable trepidation, and I feel I need to begin with a caveat and to put what I have to say into some context. I make no pretense to speak as trained theologian nor as a professional expert in Jewish-Catholic dialogue. I come to a reading of the document that we are considering tonight shaped, both consciously and unconsciously by three distinct, but I hope mutually illuminating, perspectives: some thirty-five years of working in academic circles with Jewish scholars in the publication of the Dead Sea scrolls; close to fifteen years of involvement with structured dialogues within Canada; and finally, perhaps in a more intangible way, I have been influenced by my interaction over many years with university students, both Jewish and Catholic. As I read, I found myself asking: what would my students say to this? What is there here that might speak to them? Is this an approach that could find resonance in the generation that will need to take the dialogue forward for the next 50 years? And let me just make one more general comment that might be helpful as we go into the evening: Rabbi Frydman-Kohl and I have not had any previous discussion about the document or nor did we exchange notes on our presentation; so this evening is unscripted, a learning for both of us.

As has already been stated, this evening is devoted to a specific document – and I will try to keep my remarks focused on it – although the sub-title of the document *“A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Nostrae Aetate”* highlights that our conversation is set against the background of everything that has happened over the past five decades. With October 28, 1965 began what has often been termed a “copernian revolution” from a “teaching of contempt” to a new era of respect, dialogue and mutual cooperation.

As when we read any text it is important to be cognizant of what the document itself claims to be, how it presents itself, and whom it is addressing. The paragraph labeled “Preface” states explicitly that this “is not a magisterial document or doctrinal teaching of the Catholic Church.” It is entitled a ‘Reflection’ (perhaps others here with more background on Vatican speakese can comment on how frequently this precise term ‘reflection’ is used in Vatican documents). It was prepared by the Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews, signed by Cardinal Kurt Koch (president), Brian Farrell (vice-president) and Norbert Hoffman (secretary), At the press conference presenting the

document on December 10, Fr. Hoffman was careful to note that it had been read/authorized by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and by the Secretariat of State (this in itself may hint at differing foci of interest, various agendas that may have come into play in producing the document: for example the avoidance of any explicit discussion of the Land and the state of Israel). Fr. Hoffman noted that “two Jewish friends” were involved in the process of preparation (although it is not clear how or to what extent) – and indeed these two friends Dr. Edward Kessler (Woolf Institute in Cambridge) and Rabbi David Rosen (International Director of Religious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee) were present and spoke at the press conference. This itself is a “first,” what Fr. Hoffman called “an eloquent and positive sign.”

The document is relatively long: if you print it off the website, it is fourteen pages, single-spaced. Compare that with section on the Jews in *Nostra Aetate*, a total of fifteen sentences in Latin.

There is no explicit addressee. Fr. Hoffman described it as “a Catholic text, formulated from a Catholic perspective,” aimed primarily at those who are active in the dialogue, though it may be useful to those interested, more generally, in Jewish-Catholic relations. It presents “Catholic reflections,” so that (according to the Preface) “their significance may be deepened for members of both faith traditions.” To that extent, a Jewish audience is assumed and addressed, albeit indirectly. If it had been addressed explicitly to the Jewish community, perhaps/ hopefully certain issues would have framed differently. It is not a joint statement, nor is it expressing the result of ongoing dialogue, much less any sort of consensus or agreement. Nevertheless (and this itself is a reflection of the inter-connectness of our two communities at present) the document generated much interest and was taken seriously by both Jewish and Christian leaders. I cannot help but mention the email that Dr. Victor Goldbloom, this pioneer and formative figure in Canada, whom many in the room knew personally, an email that Victor wrote to Jewish-Christian Dialogue of Montreal, on December 10: he describes getting up at 5:30 am that morning to listen to the news conference in Italian. Victor died two months later, at age of 92, so this is a poignant, bittersweet, memory.

This is not a particularly celebratory document nor a ‘feel good’ document. As we’ll see, it recounts achievements and developments over the past fifty years, but overall it is more concerned to point to the future, to provide as the Preface puts it “a new stimulus for the future” rather than to celebrate the past. Nor is it predominately a practical ‘what to do’ guide As we’ll see in a moment, the document is divided into seven sections – only the last and shortest section gets down to concrete suggestions, and even these are quite general.

As the title states this is “A Reflection on Theological Questions.” The ‘theological aspect’ is repeated over and over: to quote just from the Preface: “it is on current theological questions that have

developed since the Second Vatican Council” ... “it is intended to be a starting point for further theological thought with a view to enriching and intensifying the theological dimension of Jewish-Catholic dialogue.” Although the Preface acknowledges that *Nostra Aetate* itself, some fifty years ago, already presented “the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people in a new theological framework,” this document clearly seeks to go further. There seems to be a recognition, even critique, that much of the dialogue of the past fifty years, has been non-theological, and there is an implicit call / invitation to move to a more theological level. I am sure that Rabbi Frydman-Kohl will have more to say about this. I wonder how this call is heard particularly on the part of Orthodox Judaism, those who look in some way to figures such as Rabbi Jacob Soloveitchik who encouraged dialogue on social justice but were extremely cautious, if not downright negative, about the possibility of theological dialogue per se.

Perhaps here it is helpful to pause and give some overview of the content and structure of the document, even though I will not attempt any full and comprehensive summary. The sub-division titles give a very good sense of what is discussed. The document is, as I have said, made up of seven sections. The first is entitled **A Brief History of the impact of NA (no. 4) over the last 50 years.** The last, the more practical section, is entitled **The Goals of Dialogue with Judaism.** The titles of the intermediate five sections are listed in the Preface as expressing what the authors consider the key theological questions: No 2: **‘The Special Theological Status of Jewish-Catholic Dialogue;** No. 3: **Revelation in History as ‘Word of God’ in Judaism and Christianity;** no. 4: **The Relationship between the Old and New Testament and the Old and New Covenant;** No. 5: **The universality of Salvation in Jesus Christ and God’s Unrevoked Covenant with Israel;** No. 6: **The Church’s Mandate to Evangelize in relation to Judaism.**

I think it is significant that the author begins with “The History of the impact of “*Nostra Aetate*” over 50 years:” three single-spaced pages, 20% of the document. However we are to move forward or take on new questions and directions, our work is to be rooted in *Nostra Aetate* and what has happened in the past fifty years. This section takes us through founding of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews in 1974, and the three major documents that it had previously presented (three documents in fifty years – not exactly prolific). Most of you will be familiar with these: 1974, “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration;” eleven years later, 1985, “Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis;” 1998, “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah.” In his presentation, Cardinal Koch distinguished between these three documents that concern concrete topics, “the practicalities of dialogue” to use his words – and this 2015 document that is for the first time, in a “strictly theological mode.” Mention is made of a few other

documents, particularly that of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 2001, “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Hebrew Bible,” which is praised as the “most significant exegetical and theological document of the Jewish-Catholic dialogue” to this point. This section goes on then to state that “texts and documents, as important as they are, cannot replace personal encounters and face-to-face dialogues.” So we are reminded of key events: the visit of Pope Paul VI to the Holy Land, visits of Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis to Israel; the work of various organizations, major, formal bodies such as IJCIC and ILC (International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations, International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee), the dialogue with the Chief Rabbinate of Israel –and some more informal endeavors that have taken or have not taken hold throughout the world (for example, the “Day of Judaism” is very important in Italy and some European countries, but has never caught on or been developed in North America). There is so much that could be said about this retelling of history (itself an exercise of interpretation), but I will skip over this for the sake of time, except to say that I am struck by what I see to be a note of caution, realism, in the act of remembering. The document celebrates the huge steps that have been made so that we can now be “reliable partners and even good friends” but what being partners and friends means is described as “capable of weathering crises together and negotiating conflicts positively”(2); dealing with differences of opinions and conflicts (10-11); able to “address even controversial subjects together without the danger of permanent damage to the dialogue.” I read this as a direct and explicit acknowledgement that the path has been –and will probably continue to be – rocky and challenging.

Moving now into the core of the document, Sections 2–6, certainly much that is said here is not new and the same points have been made in previous documents and statements and will be quite familiar to anyone who has even a cursory involvement with Jewish-Christian dialogue since Vatican Council. The document assumes and reiterates developments that go beyond the laconic and limited statements of *Nostra Aetate* which confined itself to describing the Jews as “Abraham’s stock” and “dear to God.” It was the statement of Pope John Paul in Mainz, Germany in 1980 that introduced a different vocabulary, and this is quoted directly in paragraph 39, the language of “a covenant has never been revoked;” this is followed by same quotation from the Catechism of the Church in 1993, “The Old Covenant has never been revoked.” Overall I was struck by the way that previous documents and statements are repeatedly drawn in, presumably both to reinforce key points but also to demonstrate that these points are not totally new or original. To give just one example, in taking up how God revealed himself in his Word (the topic of section 3) the document chooses to make its point by an extended quotation of the words of Pope Francis to members of the International Council of Christians and Jews, June 2015, “Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh in the world; for Jews

the Word of God is present above all in the Torah Christians turn to Christ as the fount of new life, and Jews to the teaching of the Torah.” One thing this document will do is to give prominence to certain such formulations that may otherwise have been neglected/passed into oblivion because they were delivered to specific audiences. The document quotes occasionally from classical Jewish texts, really quite infrequently and then sometimes problematically: for instance (par 26) there is a reference to Genesis Rabbab 1:1 “that according to rabbinical tradition the Torah and the name of the Messiah exist already before creation,” but linking this with the pre-existence of Christ as the Word and Son of the Father, is totally a Christian reading of the rabbinic text.

When describing the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, there has been much discussion over the years about the image/metaphor to be used. On this point, the document is eclectic, drawing on traditional language of “roots,” Pope John Paul II’s reference to “elder brothers,” Pope Benedict XVI’s preference for “fathers in faith” (given that the older brother does not always fare well in the biblical narratives). This document also takes up the metaphor of “siblings.” This draws upon a paradigm that comes more from the academic study on Second Temple period that sees both Judaism and Christianity as taking shape at roughly the same time; referring only vaguely to “some recent insights” (para 16) it adopts a much-discussed/disputed scholarly position (associated with scholars such as Daniel Boyarin, Paula Fredricksen and many others) that argues that “the separation of the Church from the Synagogue does not take place abruptly ... and may not have been complete until well into the third or fourth century.” How/ or if these differing – and in some sense contradictory – images (roots, brother, father, siblings) are to be combined is not dealt with in any satisfactory way – and may indeed be a topic for dialogue that will arise out of the document.

Since I cannot talk about everything, let me focus for a moment on Sections 5 and 6 which are one, if not the, central concern of the document. Here again the title of the Section is revealing: “**The Universality of Salvation in Jesus Christ and God’s Unrevoked Covenant with Israel.**” As Cardinal Koch puts it in his presentation remarks: “this section discusses the thorny issue [his words] of how to understand the fact that Jews are saved without explicitly believing in Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Son of God.” The discussion is set entirely within the framework of “one path to salvation,” a phrase that is repeated not only here, but which pops up in virtually every section of the document: “there cannot be different paths or approaches to God’s salvation (35) ‘from the Christian confession that there can be only one path to salvation (36), “Since God has never revoked his covenant with his people Israel, there cannot be different paths or approaches to God’s salvation,” and a very absolute statement “the universal and therefore also exclusive mediation of salvation through Jesus Christ belongs to the core of the Christian faith” – to quote just a few passages. Again, the Commission

quotes from its own 1985 Notes: “The Church and Judaism cannot, then, be seen as two parallel ways of salvation and the Church must witness to Christ as the Redeemer for all.” For those familiar with dialogue over the last decades, it is clear that all of this is cast in rather blunt polemic, against certain other proposals (that of *sonderweg*, two-ways of salvation) and a revisiting of issues from the controversial 2002 document “Reflections on Covenant and Mission” and the 2009 response of American Bishops “Note on Ambiguities Contained in Reflections on Covenant and Mission.” We can also recall changes made in 2009 in the wording of a sentence in the Adult Catechism (section 839) to remove the phrase “the covenant that God made with the Jewish people through Moses remains eternal valid for them,” lest it be understood to imply salvation without the mediation of Christ. The whole controversy over the Good Friday prayer for the Jews in the Tridentine rite is certainly lurking in the background. But if the problem is stated clearly, there is little movement forward towards a “solution,” except to recognize that “how it [salvation] can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery” (36) and this leads into an appeal to the doxology of Rom 11:33: “oh how inscrutable are his ways.” Where does this leave us in terms of Jewish-Christian dialogue? Here, above all, the document has more than fulfilled its mandate to present current Catholic teaching; what is less clear how this presentation will “deepen the significance [of these teachings] for members of both traditions.” Many people involved in dialogue sense, almost inchoately, that there may need to be an alternate paradigm; that the new wine of unrevoked covenant, the recognition that “Jews are not excluded from God’s salvation because they do not believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah” will require new wineskins. Framing the question in terms of paths of salvation may not be the only starting point. If at least some Jewish voices, if some of our Jewish partners find the reiteration of the Catholic theological formulation “somewhere between pointless and offensive” (to quote the unpublished remark of an Israeli dialogue leader), how seriously can/ should their response be taken? Are we, as Catholics, open to the possibility that it may be through sustained and deep dialogue with our Jewish partners that we may glimpse a path forward, that some deeper understanding of the mystery may emerge in ways that none of us can yet envision?

Just one word about closely related Section 6: **The Church’s Mandate to Evangelize in Relation to Judaism.** One sentence here, in par 40, namely “the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews” is what captured media attention and filled the headlines in the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, *Haaretz*: “Vatican Says Catholics Should not try to Convert Jews.” The sentence also generated some rather vitriolic responses from organizations such as Jews for Jesus and the Lausanne Movement that are devoted precisely to the

conversion of Jews. As might be expected, the document is a bit more nuanced than that, and if you'll bear with me I think it is worthwhile to read the entire paragraph 40:

“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. This question also proves to be awkward for Christians, because for them the universal salvific significance of Jesus Christ and consequently the universal mission of the Church are of fundamental importance. 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 towards Jews. While there is a principled rejection of an institutional Jewish mission, Christians are nonetheless called to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews, although they should do so in a humble and sensitive manner, acknowledging that Jews are the bearers of God’s Word, and particularly in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah.” (paragraphs 40-43)

Again, left unresolved is precisely how this emphasis on the task, that is, the duty of individual Christians – and notice that individual Christians (as opposed to the institutional church) are not just invited but *called* to bear witness – how does this fit with other statements such as in paragraph 37 where the focus is on the mystery of God’s work at God’s unknown time? Precisely what is a ‘humble and sensitive manner’ and whether/how this can be experienced as such by our dialogue partners will require much discussion and thought.

Time is getting away from me so let me indicate just two personal reactions that I had as I was reading other sections of the document; these comments are certainly open to discussion and some of you may well want to respond quite differently. Section 2 “**The Special Theological Status of Jewish-Catholic Dialogue**” emphasizes the distinctiveness, *the sui generis* nature of the dialogue with Judaism as opposed to dialogue with other religions. Indeed paragraph 20 says that only “with reservations should it be termed ‘interreligious dialogue,’ and instead the vocabulary of “intra-religious” or “intra-familial” dialogue is suggested. While I acknowledge the sentiment, I would not like to isolate our dialogue totally from dialogue with other religions, the ongoing and ever deepening dialogue with Islam, but also the dialogue with Asian religions. I suspect that Jewish-Christian dialogue still has much to learn from church documents about dialogue more generally– documents that have said much more about the mutually transformative nature of dialogue than anything even hinted at in this document. And we can also to learn from the experience of those involved in other dialogues; here I think especially of

Catholic and Buddhist monks, who have pondered and discussed together over many years how the lived experience of a structured communal life, a vow of celibacy, can be shared and can shape a dialogue that goes beyond texts and documents.

And this brings me to my last point. The final section of the document **The Goals of Dialogue with Judaism** is comprised of some six paragraphs, five of which talk about endeavors and activities that have been ongoing since *Nostra Aetate*: the need for reciprocal education, with a special plea for the training of priests; joint engagement for justice, peace conservation of creation and reconciliation. This is, I think all would agree, the area where the most progress has been made over the past decades; one need only mention the meeting of International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee that concluded in Warsaw last week with a powerful statement on “‘The Other:’ Refugees in Today’s World.” Perhaps one slightly new element is in paragraph 47, which not just a condemnation of anti-Semitism as in *Nostra Aetate*, but a call for joint action in combatting all forms of anti-Semitism. But what is missing, I would argue, in this concluding section is any sustained reflection on the goals of, or the means, the practical steps, to undertake the explicitly theological dialogue that the document as a whole has been advocating. The closest I find to what I am seeking is naming the goal of “adding depth to the reciprocal knowledge of Jews and Christians” especially in terms of sharing our different interpretations of Sacred Scripture. There are two short sentences in this section that are, to me, perhaps the most challenging in the whole document: “one can only learn to love what one has gradually come to know, and one can only know truly and profoundly know what one loves. This profound knowledge is accompanied by a mutual enrichment whereby the dialogue partners become the recipients of gifts.” When reading this, I think of my university students, the generation who will have to take up leadership in dialogue in the decades to come. Many of them are not content, indeed quite dissatisfied, with simply shared social action, even with the common study of texts, but are looking for ways to speak and share on a more personal and more faith-filled level. The language of mutual enrichment and transformation, dialogue as an act of vulnerability, a dialogue that reaches to theological questions, to that which defines and shapes us as Jews and as Christians, may be a path they are more open to pursuing. Whether and to what extent this particular document will help us on that path remains to be seen, but it has pointed out at least a direction to move forward. According to Cardinal Koch, the document is offered to us by the Commission not as a panacea nor as a set of answers, but as a challenge to a new beginning, a stimulus for reflection, conversations and future exchanges. So let us see where it can lead us.