

“The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Romans 11:29)

AN INTRODUCTORY SUMMARY OF THE 2015 VATICAN DOCUMENT ON CATHOLIC-JEWISH RELATIONS

The 2015 document discusses the development of Catholic-Jewish Relations since Vatican II, looking at the theological issues involved and providing guidelines for future dialogue and mutual co-operation.

CATHOLIC-JEWISH RELATIONS SINCE VATICAN II

- 1) *Nostra Aetate 4* created a new relationship between Catholics and Jews. Since Vatican II the Catholic and Jewish communities have gradually become reliable partners and even good friends, capable of weathering crises together and negotiating conflicts positively. (Para. 2)
- 2) In December 1974, the Vatican issued *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing Nostra Aetate 4*. The crucial and new concern of the document was that Catholics should become aware of how Judaism is understood by Jews in the light of their own religious experience. Reference is made to the Jewish roots of Christian liturgy and possibilities were outlined for rapprochement between the two faiths in mutual education and joint social action. (Para. 4)
- 3) A second document, *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis*, issued eleven years later in June 1985, reflected on the relationship of the Old and New Testaments and the Jewish roots of the Christian faith, discussing in detail the manner in which Jews are represented in the Christian Scriptures. The document also invited Catholics to understand the religious attachment of Jews to the Holy Land and the political significance of the State of Israel. (Para. 5)
- 4) In 1998, a third document spoke about the Shoah. Entitled “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah”, it recalled the dark history of Catholic-Jewish Relations and St Pope John Paul II expressed his hope that the document would help heal the wounds of past misunderstanding and injustice, and begin to shape a future in which the unspeakable iniquity of the Shoah would never again be possible. (Para. 6)
- 5) In 2002, a most important document was issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, breaking new ground in calling Catholics to understand and value Jewish understanding of Sacred Scripture. (Para. 7)
- 6) The 2015 document emphasises that however important texts and documents are, they cannot replace personal encounters and face-to-face dialogues. Successive Popes have visited Auschwitz-Birkenau and Yad Vashem, and there have been moving and significant prayerful encounters at the Western Wall in Jerusalem and the synagogue in Rome. (Para. 8)
- 7) Over the past forty years regular conferences of Jewish and Catholic religious leaders have taken place under the auspices of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee. Four decades of fruitful dialogue have created stable bonds of friendship that have gradually enabled even controversial and sensitive matters to be addressed without damaging the new relationship. (Paras. 10-11)

THEOLOGICAL ISSUES ADDRESSED IN THE 2015 DOCUMENT

- 1) The document takes its title from Romans 11:29. “The gifts and the calling of God” refers to the relationship of God and the Jewish people. The gifts named by St Paul in Romans 9:4 include the Covenants God made with Israel. St Pope John Paul II famously stated in Mainz in 1980 that the ‘Old Covenant’ has never been revoked by God. (Paras. 27, 32 and 39)
- 2) At the same time, the document emphasises that for Christian faith there is only one path to salvation and the Church must witness to Christ as universal redeemer. In short, as the 1985 document succinctly put it, the Church and Judaism cannot be represented as two parallel paths to salvation. (Paras. 35 and 37)

- 3) The document addresses the problem in terms of Divine mystery, drawn from Romans 11. It is theologically unquestionable for the authors of the document that the Jews are participants in God's salvation. However, "how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable Divine mystery." (Para. 36)
- 4) The Divine mystery that transcends theological norms in a way known only to God is the ultimate inspiration for different positions taken in the new document. For example, it affirms with *Nostra Aetate 4* that the Church is called the new people of God, and as a community founded on Christ it represents the fulfilment of the promises made to Israel, but at the same time the Church does not replace the people of the God of Israel and Israel, too, remains God's people. (Para. 23)
- 5) Likewise, while Christological exegesis understands the New Testament as the fulfilment of the Old, it must not be seen as a replacement for it. Rather, it is the duty of Jewish-Catholic dialogue to understand the complementarity of the two traditions and, in the words of Pope Francis, to "help one another mine the riches of God's word." (Paras. 30-31)
- 6) The document's understanding of the relation of the Church and the Jewish people as a Divine mystery means that this relationship is sui generis and wholly different from Catholic relationships with other faith communities, however precious and theologically significant these relationships may be. The uniqueness of the Jewish-Christian dialogue is unambiguously and clearly stressed. (Paras. 14, 15, 19 and 20)
- 7) The document emphasises that that the universal salvific significance of Christ must be shared with all peoples and Catholics are called to bear witness to their faith in Christ also to Jews, but the Catholic Church rejects in principle any specific institutional mission directed at Jews, who are already "bearers of God's word", who believe in the one God and remain most dear to God. Discussions with Jews should therefore be conducted in a humble and sensitive manner, particularly in the aftermath of the great tragedy of the Shoah. (Paras. 40-43)

GOALS OF CATHOLIC-JEWISH DIALOGUE

- 1) The first goal for Catholics is to come to know Jews more profoundly. "One can only learn to love what one has gradually come to know, and one can only know truly and profoundly what one has come to love." (Para. 44)
- 2) Dialogue must not be limited to specialists. It is important that educational institutions, *particularly seminaries*, integrate *Nostra Aetate 4* and subsequent documents into their curricula. (Para. 45)
- 3) Catholics and Jews should work together:
 - for justice, peace, environmental concerns and reconciliation throughout the world. (Para. 46)
 - to combat all forms of anti-Semitism. (Para. 47)
 - on practical projects that support the poor, the sick and the disadvantaged. (In 2004 the Holy See worked together with Jewish representatives to organise soup kitchens for the poor and homeless during the financial crisis in Argentina and such acts of goodness are imperative requirements for both our religious traditions.) (Para. 48)

The document concludes with a citation from St Pope John Paul II's speech to a Conference of Rabbis in Mainz in 1980, when he said that "Jews and Christians, as children of Abraham, are called upon to be a blessing to the world.... by committing themselves together to peace and justice for all peoples, with the fullness and depth that God intended... and with the readiness for sacrifice that this goal may demand." (Para. 49)

