# NOSTRA AETATE: RECALLING THE RADICALITY OF THIS VATICAN II DOCUMENT
# WHERE ARE WE, 60 YEARS LATER?

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The adjective "Perfidious" applied to the Jews for much of Christian history, including in the Solemn Intercessions on Good Friday for more than 1000 years – the dark undertones that term took on over the centuries, which contributed to shaping Christian perceptions of Jews in very negative ways

Pope John XXIII's revision of the Good Friday prayer in 1959 (and subsequently rewritten by Pope Paul VI)

The Pope's surprising call for a new Council (which would become Vatican II, from 1962 to 1965)

The dramatic and transformative impact of "Nostra Aetate" [=NA] over the last 60 years (despite being the Council's shortest document) … and yet it was not originally on the Pope's agenda of topics for the Council

The French Jewish historian Jules Isaac and his 1960 audience with John XXIII to present his research into mistaken Christian ideas about Jews – Pope John's promise to include the topic in the Council's work

The long and winding road to the eventual promulgation of "Nostra Aetate" in October 1965

The expansion of the document from one entirely focussed on Judaism (at the beginning) to one which addresses major world religious, and guiding principles for interreligious dialogue generally

Compromises and edits made in the text, to meet the demands of some more traditional/conservative bishops, who had a hard time reconciling the document's statements with the Church's historical attitudes toward Jews

The little-known role of the Sisters of Sion in educating bishops (especially in France) about the importance of the document, to enable them to vote with greater awareness of the issues involved

The frightening geopolitical tensions and pressures around "Nostra Aetate," especially in a number of Arab countries – threats made to Christian institutions and missionaries if the bishops were too friendly to Israel

Pope John's death in 1963, and the work of other cardinals and bishops to "get it to the finish line"

NA as relatively minimal and restrained – but just the beginning of a tradition of official Catholic teachings on Judaism and the Jewish people, which continues today (all of the following documents are available online)

1973: first post-NA document, from the Catholic bishops of France, stressing the uniqueness of the Catholic-Jewish relationship

1974: "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate No. 4"

1985: "Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Teaching in the Roman Catholic Church"

2002: Pontifical Biblical Commission's document "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible"

2015: "The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable" (will there be a new document this year, for the 60th?)

The dramatic shift in the Church's stance regarding missionary efforts targeting Jewish people

Encouragement of Catholics studying, and learning from, Jewish Biblical interpretation – the ongoing validity of Jewish ways of reading the Bible – Bat Kol as a shining example of what it looks like to implement this!

The seed that was sown in Nostra Aetate 60 years ago has blossomed and expanded in ways that the bishops in 1965 could never have imagined. As friendship and trust have deepened between our two faith communities, we have developed greater confidence in each other, and are able to engage today in more challenging and delicate conversations

Pope John Paul II (at the main Rome synagogue, April 1986): "The Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain way is 'intrinsic' to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers, and in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers."

Nostra Aetate and its teachings still remain largely unknown in many Catholic circles, even 60 years after Vatican II … the need for grassroots educational efforts to share this "good news" with people at a parish and diocesan level

Today, this is a major strand of Catholic Church teaching, embodied by our popes and constantly enriched by official teachings

How do we ensure that these teachings can influence our thinking, praying, singing, and acting at every level in the life of the Church?

What we have slowly come to realize is that teaching accurately and lovingly about Jews and Judaism is not just good for interfaith friendship; it also pertains to the correctness and accuracy of our own faith as Christians, and our proper interpretation of the Bible, especially the Gospels. Renewing our relationship with our Jewish sisters and brothers has actually helped us learn how to be better Christians, to speak about our faith in a more nuanced, gentle, and respectful way. And it has demonstrated to our world that even the most longstanding and seemingly toxic relationships can be transformed, where there is goodwill, patience, and a willingness to listen to "the other" with generosity and openheartedness. It has shown us that healing and reconciliation are possible, even in some of the most seemingly intractable and unsolvable situations. In that sense, modern Jewish-Christian relations has become a sign of hope for our world, even in contexts seemingly unrelated to interreligious dialogue. Conflicts, tensions, and alienation can be overcome, just as the Jewish-Christian relationship has experienced tremendous healing in the 80 years since the Second World War.

The slow, gradual, organic growth that is visible as we look back at each of these successive documents, and the ways they expand and build upon each other, and help to advance the conversation.

Nostra Aetate may have been imperfect. It may have been too timid. It may have been superficial in places. It may have been too short. It may have been a compromise. But out of those limitations came a document that has inspired Catholics, and other Christians, and Jews, and people who are neither Christians nor Jews. It has opened us up to an era of respectful listening and dialogue. And it has helped us to become friends. When we think back to not so long ago, to an era where Jews were always the "perfidious Jews" for Catholics, we realize that that friendship is no small thing.

May our living out of Nostra Aetate help to bring healing and goodness into our world in the radical, prophetic, and counter-cultural ways its drafters intended. Like a good wine, Nostra Aetate has aged very well. May our efforts keep that work flourishing, growing and expanding for the sixty years that lie ahead of us