

Fifty Years since *Nostra aetate* A Holy Land Perspective

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October 28, 2015 marks fifty years since the publication of the Second Vatican Council's declaration on relations with non-Christian religions. Fifty years after the publication of *Nostra aetate*, a vibrant dialogue between Catholics and Jews, Catholics and Muslims and Catholics and members of other religions exists in a multiplicity of forms, going far beyond what the Second Vatican Council Fathers might have imagined. This is particularly true in Europe and the Americas where Christians are the majority. The dialogue or rather the dialogues are in progress on the Word and on the world, covering almost every aspect of life. What is going on in this respect in the Holy Land?

First, it is important to underline some differences in context between the Church in Europe and the Americas, on the one hand, and the Church in the Holy Land, on the other:

1. Non-Christian context

Those who formulated *Nostra aetate* clearly had in mind the lands where Christians were the majority. There, Christians were invited to realize that much of Christian thought, discourse and behavior had marginalized and excluded Jews (and other non-Christians). However, in the Holy Land, Christians constitute a minority, often marginalized and excluded themselves.

2. Presence of Islam

From the seventh century, Islam has been the dominant religion in the Holy Land. Thus, for most indigenous Christians, dialogue with Muslims is a priority unlike for those who formulated *Nostra aetate*. In the Holy Land, Jewish-Christian dialogue almost always becomes a dialogue because Muslims cannot be ignored.

3. Reversal of power relations

Holy Land Christians live in a situation where the traditional power relations between a Christian majority and a Jewish minority are reversed. The development of an authentic local dialogue must be formulated within a context where the Jews and the Muslims are the dominant, powerful majority and Christians are a small minority.

4. Israel-Palestine conflict as definitive

Whereas for the formulators of *Nostra aetate*, the watershed in Christian-Jewish relations was the Shoah, which provoked an awakening to the prevalence of a Christian teaching of contempt for Jews, from the perspective of many Holy Land Christians, the question of Palestine is at the center of relations with Jews and Muslims. Whereas dialogue from the European perspective often includes a focus on the struggle against anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, the focus on justice and peace is an essential element of any prospective interreligious dialogue within the Holy Land context.

5. Place of the Bible

The shared Biblical heritage is foundational for Christian-Jewish dialogue that has flourished since Vatican II. Jews and Christians discover how much they share and to what extent they can enlighten one another in their readings of these shared Scriptures.

However, the experience of the shared Biblical heritage within the context of the Holy Land is not without its ambiguities. The Bible has been used as a foundational text when it comes to establishing contemporary Jewish claims to the land that Palestinians, Muslims and Christians, see as theirs.

Within this particular context, what are then the prospects for promoting interreligious dialogue in the Holy Land today in the light of *Nostra aetate*?

In 2000, following a five year long Synod, the Catholic Churches of the Holy Land published a *General Pastoral Plan* that included a profound reflection on *Nostra aetate* in a document entitled “Relations with believers of other religions”. It presents a contextualized teaching based on *Nostra aetate* for the Holy Land. The openness to interreligious dialogue represented by *Nostra aetate* is echoed: “Our countries comprise the land of this dialogue *par excellence*, a land that ‘makes dialogue their basic vocation and greatest challenge’”. The Catholic Churches reflected: “Even though Christians are few in number in their societies, this should not be a barrier to dialogue but rather a call to witness to the magnanimous values of the Gospel”.

The Christian Arab and the Muslim Arab, whatever their religious differences might be, live in one society, speak one language and share one culture. Thus, dialogue with Muslims is a priority for the Local Church in a way that is not self-evident elsewhere. In some parts of the Holy Land dioceses it is the dialogue with Muslims that is urgent, for example in Jordan and Gaza (where there are no Jews). It is interesting to note that whereas, in discussing the relationship with Muslims, *Nostra aetate* begins with common religious principles, the Synod document mentions common religious principles in the last place, after stressing the other important levels of commonality: historical experience, social neighborliness, co-existence and civil identity. In very realistic terms (as contrasted with the rather idealistic formulations of *Nostra aetate*), the Synod document describes the positive and negative aspects of contemporary Christian-Muslim co-existence, laying out a program for the development of this co-existence. This program focuses on: the deepening of personal relations, the promotion of mutual respect, the establishment of organizations for dialogue and encounter, the formulation of educational curricula that promote co-existence, formation of religious clerics and a joint struggle against all kinds of discrimination in civil society.

The ongoing dialogue with Muslims continues at every level of Christian life in the Holy Land and is founded not only on the fact that Christians and Muslims form one national, civic, cultural and linguistic community but on the teaching of respect derived from *Nostra aetate*. In a letter of 2003, Latin Patriarch Sabbah expressed it in these terms: “In daily life, even though relations between Christians and Muslims are generally good, we are fully aware that there are certain difficulties and challenges that must be confronted. These include mutual ignorance, an authority vacuum that produces insecurity, discrimination and that trend towards Islamization among certain political movements, which endangers not only Christians but also many Muslims who desire an open society. When Islamization constitutes an infringement on the liberty of the Christian, we must insist that our identity and our religious liberty be respected. This complexity is sometimes exploited for the political end of dividing the society. However, through dialogue and other diverse initiatives, Christians and Muslims are called to collaborate with one another in the

construction of a common society, founded on principles of mutual respect and responsibilities”.¹

Despite the situation of tension and violence that exists between Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews, the Churches courageously seek to implement the teachings of *Nostra aetate*, underlining the positive aspects of relations between Jews and Christians:

1. In addition to the Biblical heritage that Jews and Christians share, the Catholic Churches pointed out that “in our countries, Muslims, Christians and Jews have lived together in fruitful social and cultural interaction, this being evident in the clear traces we find of this interaction in Arab civilization”.
2. The Catholic Churches invite Christians to learn about “Judaism as lived by Jews today and as believed by them within the framework of Jewish history and the context of its reality in the Holy Land today”.
3. The Churches propose a practical relationship with Jews based upon a common search for truth, peace and justice. Holy Land Christians look to “collaboration with movements for justice and peace within Jewish society” and to a common struggle against discrimination.
4. Furthermore, the Churches in the Holy Land affirm that much of the Scriptures are shared by Jews and Christians but call upon Jews to read these Scriptures so that they promote justice and peace rather than exclusion and occupation.

These proposals have taken concrete form in the work of the Commission for Dialogue with the Jews of the Catholic Churches in the Holy Land and the courses in Judaism that have been introduced in the Christian institutions of higher education in the Holy Land.

It would be incomplete to conclude this article without mentioning the development of new Christian non-Arab populations in the Holy Land today, particularly in Israel.² Some of these Christians are of Jewish origin or are connected by family ties to Jews, many others migrate to Israel seeking work or political asylum. They constitute new faces of the Church in the Holy Land. The lives of these Christians, integrated as they are in the Jewish population, open up new perspectives for a dialogue between a Christian minority living at the heart of Jewish society, adapting to this society's culture and language. These new Christians are engaged in a fascinating and new Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Hebrew speaking Israeli Christians within Jewish society have been formulating a Christian faith that not only speaks Hebrew but is at home in Jewish society and culture. This gives a particularly creative and innovative expression to the understanding that Jesus Christ is a Jew and that the roots of the Church are Jewish. Through a Hebrew speaking, Israeli Christianity, Jesus and His Church are reintroduced into a Jewish contemporary matrix. These Christians can also show Jews the face of a Church that is respectful of Jews

¹ PATRIARCH MICHEL SABBAAH AND THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Reflections on the Presence of the Church in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem, 2003). This document is reproduced in the appendix to this article.

² In the State of Israel today, there are 160 000 Christian citizens of whom about three quarters are Palestinian Arabs and one quarter are Christian immigrants who live as part of the Israeli Jewish population. In addition there are about the same number of Christian migrants (migrant workers and asylum seekers) who are long term residents in Israel.

and Judaism and determined to contribute to the building of a society where Christians make their contribution to society in all spheres.

It is significant that in the migrant workers and asylum seekers from Asia and Africa, Jews encounter a Christianity that is not predominantly European and does not immediately raise the specter of a traumatic past in the countries of Europe, where Jews suffered at the hands of Christians. The loving care given by faithful Christian migrant workers, Filipinos, Indians, Sri Lankans and Nigerians, to Israel's elderly, sick and handicapped can also transform the memories Jews have of Christians.

Undoubtedly, Christians in the Holy Land are deeply concerned by the continuing expressions of contempt for Christians and Christianity that emerge from some Jews and Muslims. However, these manifestations of anti-Christian sentiment must increase Christian determination to build relationships with Jews and Muslims in order to repair this broken world, which the residents of the Holy Land are called to share. With courage and determination, the Christians of the Holy Land are called to establish close relations with those of other faiths in order to promote a society built upon the values of justice, peace, reconciliation and pardon.