

*50th Anniversary*  
**Nostra Aetate**  
*1965 – 2015*



# Anti-Defamation League 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Nostra Aetate

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*“Nostra Aetate was released shortly after I began to work at the ADL. This remarkable document is emblematic of the remarkable changes in Jewish-Catholic relations that have taken place since the end of the Shoah. Not only is the Catholic Church the largest single religious denomination in the world, it is perhaps the most steadfast Christian friend of the Jewish people. It is therefore most appropriate that we take note of this anniversary...”*

**Abraham H. Foxman**  
**National Director**

## Introduction

The promulgation of the Roman Catholic Church's "Nostra Aetate" on October 28, 1965 is arguably the most important moment in modern Jewish-Christian relations. (See [Nostra Aetate FAQ](#), p. 3) This presents an excellent opportunity for Jews and Catholics, and their institutions, to join together to commemorate and celebrate the anniversary and to reaffirm and deepen relationships. The text of Chapter 4, the section that deals with Jews and Judaism follows below. A link to the full text can be found on p. 5.

## Nostra Aetate, Chapter 4

As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock.

Thus the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. She professes that all who believe in Christ-Abraham's sons according to faith -are included in the same Patriarch's call, and likewise that the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people's exodus from the land of bondage. The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles. Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross Christ, Our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making both one in Himself.

The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: "theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary. She also recalls that the Apostles, the Church's main-stay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ's Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.

As Holy Scripture testifies, Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation, nor did the Jews in large number, accept the Gospel; indeed not a few opposed its spreading. Nevertheless, God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues-such is the witness of the Apostle. In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle, the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and "serve him shoulder to shoulder" (Soph. 3:9).

Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.

Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.

Besides, as the Church has always held and holds now, Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation. It is, therefore, the burden of the Church's preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's all-embracing love and as the fountain from which every grace flows.

## Nostra Aetate FAQ

### What is Nostra Aetate?

“Nostra Aetate” (literally: “in our time”) is one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Promulgated on October 28, 1965, it addresses the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church to non-Christian religions, especially Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism.

### What does Nostra Aetate say about Judaism?

- It repudiates the long standing charge of deicide (that the Jews killed Jesus)
- It affirms the religious bond and spiritual legacy shared by Jews and the Church
- It implies that God and the Jews abide in covenant, a recognition that was made explicit by John Paul II and subsequent popes.
- It deplores “all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism directed at Jews at any time or from any source.”
- It stresses the need for accurate biblical interpretation and religious education so that negative views of Jews and Judaism are not presented as biblically based or as authentic Catholic teaching
- It calls for respectful dialogue and collaborative biblical and theological inquiry between Jews and Catholics
- It expresses no interest in further efforts to baptize Jews. It relegates the resolution of the Jewish and Christian disagreement over Jesus’ significance to the end of history.

### Why is Nostra Aetate significant?

Nostra Aetate, which has been described as a “sea-change,” effectively reversed centuries of the “teaching of contempt for Jews and Judaism,” which held that the Jews were collectively and perpetually accursed for the death of Jesus and that God replaced them with the Church as the new “Israel.” That Nostra Aetate came with very high teaching authority from the Roman Catholic Church, which in size and influence is unequalled in the Christian world, makes it especially important.

### Did Nostra Aetate resolve all the issues between Jews and Catholics?

No. First, there are defining differences in how Jews and Catholics understand and relate to God. Nostra Aetate started a new age of respectful interaction in which distorted and polemical claims about each other's traditions can be corrected while cherishing the distinctive identities and insights of each community. Second, Nostra Aetate did not explicitly discuss certain topics, such as the State of Israel, the Holocaust, and whether Catholics should seek to convert Jews.

## **Has the Catholic Church addressed such remaining issues since Nostra Aetate in 1965?**

The Catholic Church addressed the Holocaust in its 1998 “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah,” as well as through the addresses and visits of Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis to Yad Vashem during their visits to Israel. The Holy See established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1993, though the implementation of the final agreement between the two sovereign states is still being negotiated. The question of whether the Catholic Church should engage in conversionary outreach toward Jews has been answered negatively as can be seen in the fact that it does not allocate any funds or any energy to that pursuit. Theologically, the repeated affirmation of the Jewish covenant and such statements as 2001’s “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible” that “Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain,” as well as Pope Benedict’s affirmation in a 2011 book that “The Church must not concern herself with the conversion of the Jews,” show that converting Jews is not on the Catholic Church’s agenda.

Since Nostra Aetate, the Catholic Church has continued to deepen its theological reflections on Jews and Judaism through official documents, research by Catholic theologians (increasingly done in collaboration with Jewish colleagues), personal writings of popes and other officials, and public gestures, such as Pope John Paul II’s historic visit to Israel, during which he placed a prayer of repentance in the Western Wall. In 2014, Pope Francis placed a wreath on tomb of Theodore Herzl, considered the father of Zionism.

## **Is there still anti-Semitism in the Church?**

Yes. While the official teaching of the church is that anti-Semitism is a sin, it is unrealistic to expect the immediate elimination of a long history of hostility toward Jews among the 1.2 billion Catholics around the world, many in places where there are no viable Jewish communities. Even where there are Jews, many Catholics are unaware of these changes, as are many Jews. Pope Francis, like all his predecessors since Nostra Aetate, regularly and unambiguously denounces anti-Semitism, speaks in the most positive terms about the relations between the Church and the Jews, and stresses that Christianity cannot be understood apart from its relationship to Judaism.

## **What is the state of Jewish-Catholic relations in the United States?**

Relations between American Jews and Catholics are exemplary. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops maintains ongoing dialogues with the Jewish community and there is collaboration on many issues of common concern, such as immigration. In many communities, local dioceses and churches have longstanding positive relations with the Jewish community. Most centers of Jewish-Christian relations are housed in Catholic academic institutions, and courses on Judaism, taught by Jews, are offered at some seminaries.

## **What are the views of Pope Francis today about Jewish-Catholic relations?**

In addition to being the first pope from the Southern Hemisphere, Pope Francis is also the first pope to have experienced sustained theological conversation with close Jewish friends. He has referred to Nostra Aetate as beginning a “journey of friendship” for which Jews and Catholics should thank God. He speaks with admiration for Jewish religious traditions and with understanding about Jewish concerns for Israel. There is every indication that he will sincerely and energetically promote the positive developments begun by Nostra Aetate.

## Resources

[Note: An electronic version of this document, with live links to all the web resources noted below, can be found at [www.adl.org/nostra-aetate-50](http://www.adl.org/nostra-aetate-50)]

One of the most useful sources of information on Nostra Aetate, and for that matter, on Jewish-Christian, relations is [Dialogika](#), maintained by the Council of Centers of Jewish-Christian Relations and the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations of Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. [Dialogika](#) provides a comprehensive cyber-archive of official statements, historic documents, educational resources, and current information. In addition to the resources listed below, there is much more on the website; it well worth exploring.

Dialogika has a [section](#) devoted to the Second Vatican Council and Nostra Aetate, which includes:

- The [full text](#) of Nostra Aetate
- Earlier [drafts](#) of Nostra Aetate and texts of the deliberations leading up to its promulgation
- [Precursors](#) to Nostra Aetate, including essays by Abraham Joshua Heschel, addresses and essays by Catholic theologians, and statements from other churches and religious bodies.

Also available on Dialogika are the texts of subsequent Roman Catholic documents that expand and deepen the Catholic understanding the Church's relation to Jews and Judaism:

- [Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate, No. 4](#) (1974). This document calls for a better understanding of the religious traditions of Judaism and of Jewish self-understanding. It addresses liturgy, teaching and education, and common social action.
- [Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church](#) (1985), which consists of six sections addressing Religious Teaching and Judaism; Relations Between the Old and New Testament; Jewish Roots of Christianity; the Jews in the New Testament; The Liturgy; Judaism and Christianity in History
- [Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel](#) (1993)
- [We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah](#) (1998)
- [The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible](#) (2001). This document, written under the leadership of then Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), asserts Jewish biblical interpretation after the time of Jesus has its own religious value for Catholics
- [Jews and Christians, together as witnesses to the one God](#), written by Fr. Norbert Hofmann, SBD, who has served for many years as Secretary of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.
- A more comprehensive list of [Resources for the 50th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate](#) can also be found on the site.

## Other Useful Websites

[Anti-Defamation League: Interfaith Affairs](#)

[Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews](#)

[Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations](#)

[International Council of Christians and Jews](#)

[Jewish-Christian Relations: Insights and Issues in the ongoing Jewish-Christian Dialogue](#)

[Transforming the Catholic-Jewish Relationship: Looking Back, Looking Ahead \(Nostra Aetate on its 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary\)](#)

## Media

Two documentary films relevant to Nostra Aetate have been produced. One, “I am Joseph Your Brother” (2001), traces the history of Catholic-Jewish Relations into the papacy of John Paul II. The film and a study guide are available from the [Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel](#). The second, “Sister Rose’s Passion,” celebrates the career of Sister Rose Thering, a nun who made the battle against anti-Semitism her life’s work. Sister Rose challenged official church doctrine that blamed the Jews for the death of Jesus. “Sister Rose’s Passion” was nominated for an Oscar in the Best Documentary Short category. It is available from [Storyville Films](#).

A PowerPoint presentation, “Milestones in Modern Catholic-Jewish Relations” has been produced by Scarboro Mission. The presentation can be found [here](#), and on the same page are links to additional information supporting each slide.

## Curriculum

“Walking God’s Paths: Christians and Jews in Candid Conversation” is a six-session process to stimulate candid conversation between Jewish and Christian congregations. Produced by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College on behalf and with the oversight of the National Council of Synagogues and the Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, it is now made available online through special arrangement with the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations. The series consists of 15-minute discussion-starting videos and a detailed online User’s Guide containing dialogue questions and resources. Participants will experience each tradition’s understanding of how it walks God’s path and how the two faith communities could relate to one another in positive ways. The videos and user’s guide are available [here](#).



## Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity

When discussing Nostra Aetate, one question that often comes up is whether the Jewish community has produced a similar document. The answer to that question is a qualified “yes.” On September 10, 2000, a group of four Jewish scholars published “Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity” as a full-page ad in the New York Times and Baltimore Sun. In addition to the authors, Dabru Emet was endorsed by over 200 rabbis and Jewish academics from around the world. Thus 2015, in addition to marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nostra Aetate, is also the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dabru Emet.

The “qualification” is that Dabru Emet differs from Nostra Aetate in one significant way. Nostra Aetate is an authoritative document of the Roman Catholic Church, and therefore can be said to speak for the Church. Dabru Emet has no authority other than the reputations of the authors and those who endorsed it. Nonetheless, its publication was heralded as a significant development in Jewish-Christian relations. Nostra Aetate was meant to be definitive, Dabru Emet, on the other hand, represented only the opinion of its authors and was intended to provoke conversation within the Jewish community.

Dabru Emet consists of a preamble that acknowledges the change in Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism represented by Nostra Aetate and proposes that, in light of those changes, Jews should now consider what they might say about Christians and Christianity. It then lists eight points, each of which is followed by a brief paragraph of explication:

- Jews and Christians worship the same God.
- Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book—the Bible (what Jews call "Tanakh" and Christians call the "Old Testament").
- Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel.
- Jews and Christians accept the moral principles of Torah.
- Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon.
- The humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture.
- A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice.
- Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.

In addition to the statement itself, Dabru Emet was accompanied by two books, *Christianity in Jewish Terms* and *Irreconcilable Differences* (Bibliography, p. 10). The first of these is a scholarly volume of essays by Jewish and Christian theologians on the themes addressed in Dabru Emet. The second is written by Jewish and Christian educators and is targeted at adult congregational learners and advanced high school students.

The full text of Dabru Emet follows on the next page.

## Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity

In recent years, there has been a dramatic and unprecedented shift in Jewish and Christian relations. Throughout the nearly two millennia of Jewish exile, Christians have tended to characterize Judaism as a failed religion or, at best, a religion that prepared the way for, and is completed in, Christianity. In the decades since the Holocaust, however, Christianity has changed dramatically. An increasing number of official Church bodies, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, have made public statements of their remorse about Christian mistreatment of Jews and Judaism. These statements have declared, furthermore, that Christian teaching and preaching can and must be reformed so that they acknowledge God's enduring covenant with the Jewish people and celebrate the contribution of Judaism to world civilization and to Christian faith itself.

We believe these changes merit a thoughtful Jewish response. Speaking only for ourselves -- an interdenominational group of Jewish scholars -- we believe it is time for Jews to learn about the efforts of Christians to honor Judaism. We believe it is time for Jews to reflect on what Judaism may now say about Christianity. As a first step, we offer eight brief statements about how Jews and Christians may relate to one another.

**Jews and Christians worship the same God.** Before the rise of Christianity, Jews were the only worshippers of the God of Israel. But Christians also worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; creator of heaven and earth. While Christian worship is not a viable religious choice for Jews, as Jewish theologians we rejoice that, through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel.

**Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book -- the Bible (what Jews call "Tanakh" and Christians call the "Old Testament").** Turning to it for religious orientation, spiritual enrichment, and communal education, we each take away similar lessons: God created and sustains the universe; God established a covenant with the people Israel, God's revealed word guides Israel to a life of righteousness; and God will ultimately redeem Israel and the whole world. Yet, Jews and Christians interpret the Bible differently on many points. Such differences must always be respected.

**Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel.** The most important event for Jews since the Holocaust has been the reestablishment of a Jewish state in the Promised Land. As members of a biblically based religion, Christians appreciate that Israel was promised -- and given -- to Jews as the physical center of the covenant between them and God. Many Christians support the State of Israel for reasons far more profound than mere politics. As Jews, we applaud this support. We also recognize that Jewish tradition mandates justice for all non-Jews who reside in a Jewish state.

**Jews and Christians accept the moral principles of Torah.** Central to the moral principles of Torah is the inalienable sanctity and dignity of every human being. All of us were created in the image of God. This shared moral emphasis can be the basis of an improved relationship between our two communities. It can also be the basis of a powerful witness to all humanity for improving the lives of our fellow human beings and for standing against the immoralities and idolatries that harm and degrade us. Such witness is especially needed after the unprecedented horrors of the past century.

**Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon.** Without the long history of Christian anti-Judaism and Christian violence against Jews, Nazi ideology could not have taken hold nor could it have been carried out. Too many Christians participated in, or were sympathetic to, Nazi atrocities against Jews. Other Christians did not protest sufficiently against these atrocities. But Nazism itself was not an inevitable

outcome of Christianity. If the Nazi extermination of the Jews had been fully successful, it would have turned its murderous rage more directly to Christians. We recognize with gratitude those Christians who risked or sacrificed their lives to save Jews during the Nazi regime. With that in mind, we encourage the continuation of recent efforts in Christian theology to repudiate unequivocally contempt of Judaism and the Jewish people. We applaud those Christians who reject this teaching of contempt, and we do not blame them for the sins committed by their ancestors.

**The humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture.** Christians know and serve God through Jesus Christ and the Christian tradition. Jews know and serve God through Torah and the Jewish tradition. That difference will not be settled by one community insisting that it has interpreted Scripture more accurately than the other; nor by exercising political power over the other. Jews can respect Christians' faithfulness to their revelation just as we expect Christians to respect our faithfulness to our revelation. Neither Jew nor Christian should be pressed into affirming the teaching of the other community.

**A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice.** An improved relationship will not accelerate the cultural and religious assimilation that Jews rightly fear. It will not change traditional Jewish forms of worship, nor increase intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, nor persuade more Jews to convert to Christianity, nor create a false blending of Judaism and Christianity. We respect Christianity as a faith that originated within Judaism and that still has significant contacts with it. We do not see it as an extension of Judaism. Only if we cherish our own traditions can we pursue this relationship with integrity.

**Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.** Jews and Christians, each in their own way, recognize the unredeemed state of the world as reflected in the persistence of persecution, poverty, and human degradation and misery. Although justice and peace are finally God's, our joint efforts, together with those of other faith communities, will help bring the kingdom of God for which we hope and long. Separately and together, we must work to bring justice and peace to our world. In this enterprise, we are guided by the vision of the prophets of Israel:

It shall come to pass in the end of days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established at the top of the mountains and be exalted above the hills, and the nations shall flow unto it . . . and many peoples shall go and say, "Come ye and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord to the house of the God of Jacob and He will teach us of His ways and we will walk in his paths." (Isaiah 2:2-3)

**Tikva Frymer-Kensky**, University of Chicago

**David Novak**, University of Toronto

**Peter Ochs**, University of Virginia

**Michael Signer**, University of Notre Dame

This text, and a list of the signers, can be found [here](#).

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