

ILAN MOR

The Standpoint of the State of Israel Regarding the Encyclic *Nostra Aetate* and the Vatican Document Published on 10 December 2015 on the Occasions of its 50th Anniversary; the Relationship between the State of Israel and the Vatican

Dear Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen!

The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council convened by Pope John XXIII almost fifty years ago embodied a unique and transformative moment in the history of the Catholic Church; but it heralded an absolute revolution in terms of Catholic-Jewish relations.

Among the fruits of the Council was the declaration known as *Nostra Aetate*, only promulgated in 1965.

„*In this age of ours, when people are drawing more closely together.*” These are the opening words of the Declaration.

Section 4 of this document addresses the *teaching* of the Church in relation to Judaism and the Jews, past and present. Pope John Paul described it as „an expression of Faith and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as a word of Divine Wisdom”.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In order to understand the significance of this document, we must have some historical perspective, which includes remembering a *tragic past* which is often forgotten or unknown to younger generations and thus the significance of the transformation is not fully grasped.

Rabbi David Rosen, former Chief Rabbi of Ireland, and the International Director of Interreligious Affairs of AJC and Director of its Heilbrunn Institute for International Interreligious Understanding states that, and I quote:

„...The leitmotif of the Jews being of the devil and in league with the devil was to be a recurrent theme throughout almost two millennia. It was the decide charge that was used most of all to justify the most terrible actions against Jews. Accordingly Jews were overwhelmingly viewed as the enemy of God and as a diabolical force of evil. This led to the horrendous and preposterous defamations and accusations such as the blood libels. It also led to blaming the Jews for the Black Death and various other plagues and disasters, providing »justification« for pillaging and

destroying Jewish communities and burning synagogues. Such was the case especially during the Crusades when the call »kill a Jew and save your soul« rang out throughout Europe... We defiantly must think about the long path we have traveled, Christians and Jews in the last 2,000 years – from rejection and denial, just over 100 years ago, to recognition, dialogue, and friendship of today...”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As mentioned before, the *Nostra Aetate* document embodies a unique and transformative moment in the history of the relations between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people.

This moment of transformation can be described as follows:

„A people formally viewed at best as a fossil but more often as cursed and condemned to wander and to suffer – was now officially portrayed as beloved by GOD and as someone very much still part of the Divine plan for humankind.”

It had transformed the Catholic Church’s teaching concerning Jews and Judaism – *exonerating the Jewish People from the collective blame of Jesus’ death*, an accusation that has been one of the main sources of anti-Semitism throughout history.

It went much further and *positively affirmed the unbroken Covenant between God and the Jewish people* and in so doing, eliminated any *theological* objections to the idea of the return of the Jewish people to their ancestral homeland and to sovereignty within it.

Furthermore, *Nostra Aetate* pointedly acknowledges the Church’s debt to Judaism, declaring that in Judaism „the beginnings of (the Church’s) faith and her election are already found”.

As opposed to the idea of having replaced the Jewish People, Christians are described as „included in the Patriarch (Abraham’s) call”.

Moreover, *Nostra Aetate* affirms, in the present tense, that the Church „cannot forget that she draws sustenance from the root of the good olive tree”.

In addition, *Nostra Aetate* *categorically condemned anti-Semitism* and also *called for „fraternal dialogue and biblical studies” between Christians and Jews*.

Nostra Aetate was born out of revulsion to discrimination and hatred against the Jews.

There is no doubt that the *Nostra Aetate* document was profoundly influenced, by the impact of the Shoah.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Forty-six years after the establishment of the State of Israel, and only twenty years ago, Israel and the Holy See signed the Fundamental Agreement, which established full diplomatic relations and exchange of ambassadors between the two entities.

The agreement, which was the result of a long process, was an historic milestone not only in terms of the relations between Israel and the Holy See, but also those between the Catholic Church and the Jewish People.

A century earlier, in 1904, Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism met Pope Pius X and asked for his support of the establishment of a Jewish State.

The Pope rejected the idea categorically and the Holy See objected to the UN Partition Plan of 1947 on the basis of theological reasons and practical interests.

From 1948 to 1967, and especially during its first years of statehood, Israel's approach toward the Catholic Church was dictated not only by considerations of realpolitik, but also by the burden of history – not always simple.

In 1964, during his 11-hour-visit to Israel, Pope Paul VI did not mention the name „Israel”, and when he returned to Rome he sent a thank you telegram addressed to „President Shazar, Tel Aviv”, mentioning neither Israel nor Jerusalem.

But only one year later, in 1965, after Pope John XXIII's death, a historical and theological change took place: the adoption of the document „*Nostra Aetate*” by the Catholic Church.

After the Six-Day-War, and in light of the new reality of Israel's control over all of Jerusalem and the Christian Holy Sites, the Holy See adopted a more pragmatic approach to the dialogue with Israel.

In 1984, for the first time, the „State of Israel” was mentioned in a signed Papal document and the historic religious bond between the Jewish people and Israel was recognized.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

John Paul II's personal history contributed extensively to this transformation in the relations between the Christians and the Jews introduced by *Nostra Aetate*.

This was evident first and foremost with his visit to the Great Synagogue in Rome in 1986 when he described the Jewish people as „*the dearly beloved elder brothers of the Church*”.

The Fundamental Agreement of 1993 was the next milestone.

Even though it was a political agreement between two states, we all know that it was also a historic agreement of reconciliation between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people.

The agreement is based on four fundamental points of mutual interest:

- ◆ The establishment of diplomatic relations,
- ◆ The commitment to cooperate in combating anti-Semitism,
- ◆ The promotion of cultural and academic exchanges,
- ◆ And cooperation in encouraging Christian pilgrimages.

In the last 20 years, relations between Israel and the Holy See knew periods of understanding and progress, but also of difficulties. Nevertheless, an open dialogue always continued.

Today's relations between the State of Israel and the Holy See are based on mutual respect and dialogue, and although challenges remain, we have made significant progress over the past 20 years of cooperation and growing understanding.

On this positive background, I must mention that Israel has regretted the Vatican's decision (26.6.2015) to officially recognize the Palestinian Authority as a state. We also regret the one sided texts in the agreement signed, which ignore the historic rights of the Jewish people in the land of Israel and to the places holy to Judaism in Jerusalem. We believe that this step damages the prospects of advancing Peace in the Middle East and harms the international effort to convince the PA to return to direct negotiations with Israel.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It was probably the Papal pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the year 2000 that provided the ultimate testimony to the extent of the transformation in Christian-Jewish relations.

The images of the Pope standing in tearful solidarity with Jewish suffering at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, and in prayerful respect for Jewish tradition at the Western Wall, placing within the cracks the text of the prayer he had composed for a service of repentance in the Vatican, asking Divine forgiveness for sins perpetrated against Jews down the ages; these had an enormous impact on the Jewish world and on the Christian world as well.

Yes. A new era was ushered in by *Nostra Aetate*. But its message of a healing process and the stunning transformation in Catholic-Jewish relations *has not yet been internalized universally*.

This process cannot be achieved overnight, and indeed in historical terms it has only just begun and will take generations to bring to the fullest fruition.

But – there is still significant work to be done and a long road to be traveled until we can clarify the full theological meaning and other implications of *Nostra Aetate*.

The inspiring fruit of *Nostra Aetate's* historic transformation call on us to work together for the betterment of our world at large.

It is here, Ladies and Gentlemen, that the role of education is so important.

Only through education can we continue our common mission of planting the seeds of tolerance and uprooting the weeds of fanaticism.

*Among the challenges we all face is the challenge to achieve stronger cooperation in combating Anti-Semitism and the threats of the radical Islam, by creating a realistic, universal program of education, supported not only by the Catholic and Jewish communities, but also by Governments, focusing on the spirit and the message of *Nostra Aetate*, on the unique importance of the State of Israel in Jewish identity, on modern Israel beyond the Holy sites and the middle-east conflict.*

It is also important to educate Jewish people on the new approach of the Catholic Church towards Judaism.

There are no doubts in my mind, that this conference today is an important step in the right direction.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the 26.11.2013, his widely anticipated first Apostolic Exhortation was released by Pope Francis, which included a strong *reaffirmation of dialogue with the Jewish people and an expression of regret for past anti-Semitism*.

Pope Francis wrote in the document the following: „...We [the Catholic Church] hold the Jewish people in special regard because their covenant with God has never been revoked...” and added: „Dialogue and friendship with the children of Israel are part of the life of Jesus’ disciples. The friendship which has grown between us, makes us bitterly and sincerely regret the terrible persecutions which they have endured, and continue to endure, especially those that have involved Christians.”

Addressing (24.6.2013) a 30 strong delegation from the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) who gathered in the Apostolic Palace’s Hall of the Popes for a private audience today, Pope Francis *recalled the Second Vatican Council declaration Nostra Aetate, which he described as a „key point of reference for relations with the Jewish people”*.

The declaration stresses the religious bond shared by Jews and Catholics, reaffirms the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people, and calls for a halt to attempts to convert Jews.

Pope Francis said:

„The fundamental principles expressed by the Declaration have marked the path of greater awareness and mutual understanding trodden these last decades by Jews and Catholics – a path supported by his predecessors...”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by again quoting Rabbi Rosen:

„...a new era was ushered in by Nostra Aetate, not only overcoming the tragic past and paving the way for a rediscovery of brotherhood; but even opening up the way for us to view each other in a new way theologically, as part and parcel of the Divine blessing for humanity that we are called to be. Today more and more, Jews and Catholics are coming together to affirm the sacred values we share, while respecting the profound differences that make us each who we are. But our commitment to those shared messages, especially regarding human dignity that flows from each and every person being created in the Divine Image, *is the fruit of our historic reconciliation facilitated by Nostra Aetate...*”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To this very clear message, one should add Pope Francis’ strong words against anti-Semitism – „*because of our common roots, a Christian cannot be anti-Semitic*”.

These two messages should be spread to the furthest corners of Hungary. It should be echoed and not less important, be learnt and discussed in schools and

at universities, in the churches at Sunday's sermons, during family gatherings and by politicians.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On 10 December 2015, the Vatican published a paper reviewing Catholic-Jewish relations from the „new theological framework” that followed the Second Vatican Council.

The document coincided with the 50th anniversary of a revolutionary Vatican statement, the Second Vatican Council declaration *Nostra Aetate* that repudiated the concept of collective Jewish guilt for Jesus' death and launched a theological dialogue that traditionalists have rejected.

This new document titled „THE GIFTS AND THE CALLING OF GOD ARE IR-REVOCAABLE” (Rom 11:29), issued by the commission for religious relations with the Jews.

The preface of the new document states, inter alia, that „...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...”

The document includes also the following principals:

- ◆ Catholics should not try to convert Jews. The Catholic Church neither conducts nor support any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews and there was a „principle rejection of an institutional Jewish mission”. It was the first time a repudiation of active conversion of Jews was so clearly stated in a Vatican document.
- ◆ Catholics should work with the Jews to fight anti-Semitism.
- ◆ Christianity and Judaism are intertwined and God never annulled his covenant with the Jewish people. „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 worldviews...”
- ◆ Catholics should be particularly sensitive to the significance to Jews of the Shoah and pledged „to do all that is possible with our Jewish friends to repel anti-Semitic tendencies”: „A Christian can never be an anti-Semite, especially because of the Jewish roots of Christianity”, it said.
- ◆ Catholics should „bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews” but that they should do so in „a humble and sensitive manner, acknowledging that Jews are bearers of God's word...”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is no doubt in my mind that these steps, taken by the Catholic Church toward the Jewish People, are in the right direction and enriching and intensifying the theological dimension of Jewish-Catholic dialogue. Let us hope that the *Nostra Aetate* continuous to plant seeds of tolerance and uprooting the weeds of fanaticism.

Shalom and GOD bless you!