

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*.