

# **Nostra Aetate: Forty Years On**

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On 28 October 2005, we will mark the fortieth anniversary of the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relations of the Church to non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate*. In anticipation of that anniversary, the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue will be reflecting on forty years of inter-religious dialogue at its plenary meeting in Rome in May 2004.

*Nostra Aetate* is a very short document but its implications and repercussions have been enormous. It has to be seen in the context of the overall renewal of Vatican II since it focuses and symbolises the spirit and the direction of that renewal. It was and remains a controversial text. For those who are unhappy with the direction the Church took at Vatican II, this text and the Decree on Ecumenism are the texts that cause the most serious difficulty: they are more problematic than the liturgical changes that Vatican II brought in its wake. That was certainly the view of Archbishop Lefebvre. For him and his followers – and, indeed, for some who remain within the Catholic Church – these texts fatally undermined the Church's doctrinal self-understanding and have seriously damaged the Church's self-confidence. Yet *Nostra Aetate* is integral to the whole direction of conciliar teaching. Crucially it is organically linked to the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, and is very specifically related to the Declaration on Religious Liberty.

*Lumen Gentium* provided a new articulation of the Church's self-understanding, one that is in some way inclusive of other Christians, of other religions and of all people of good will. The most significant development was the way the Church expressed its relationship with the Jewish people. But what is said of other religions was remarkable too. *Lumen Gentium* spoke of Islam as part of the "*propositum salutis*" or plan of salvation and spoke in a positive way

about other religions. *Nostra Aetate* built on these dogmatic principles of *Lumen Gentium*, and in order to implement this body of teaching, Pope Paul VI set up the body which is now called the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue. And there has been nothing taken about the mandate and the responsibility given to this department. Moreover, the present Pope has given this office his full support. His initiatives and his developing teaching in this area have been among the most remarkable features of this papacy. Indeed the very profile of the papacy has changed through these initiatives. Archbishop Runcie, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, said that only one Church and only one Church leader could have convened the historic gathering of religious leaders in Assisi in 1986. So the Church can be justly proud of what it has achieved over the last forty years.

Now there are many things to be said about this important development and I would just like to touch on two of them. One concerns our relationship with other religions and the other concerns the Catholic Church itself. In relation to other religions, it has been said that the idea of dialogue, which is so central to inter-religious relations, is very much a Western one. Certainly it is a concept that has found significant development and usage within the Catholic Church. The encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* of Pope Paul VI explained how dialogue is integral to the very nature of Christianity. God calls men and women in freedom and they respond in freedom. When we preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ we seek a free response that will issue from the action of the Holy Spirit in people's lives. We respect all people of good will and we acknowledge the signs of God's action in their lives. Now this way of understanding religion is specifically Trinitarian and hence specifically Christian. For the most part, other religions do not see their religion as a personal relationship. They will not see it as dialogical in the sense that we do. Yet the way of understanding our faith defines and shapes the way we relate to other faiths. It should not surprise us, therefore, that when we reach out to other religions in dialogue our overtures may not be understood and may not be reciprocated. Dialogue, however, is not something that Christians want to "impose" on other religions. Christians offer it as a

language and a method of *rapprochement* between the different religions in our globalised “multi-faith” and “multi-cultural” society. It is a framework that respects other religions inasmuch as it acknowledges the action of the Holy Spirit among the adherents of those religions. A culture of dialogue is something that Christians can contribute to inter-faith work.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the need for a tool for enabling different religions to engage with one another has seemed ever more acute. The importance of inter-religious dialogue has become much clearer to political leaders. It has become evident that constructing and developing relations between the religions is important for social cohesion and international security. Only a spirit and an attitude of dialogue can create the environment in which different religions can relate to one another in a spirit of mutual respect.

The other issue concerns the Church “*ad intra*”. The forty years since the publication of *Nostra Aetate* have seen serious problems within the Catholic Church. This is not the place to go into them in detail but I wish to note the fact that there has been a major problem about the effective transmission of the Catholic faith during this period. The publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church was, in part, a response to this crisis. It is an authoritative reference point for Catholic teaching. But it remains the case that the teachings of the Second Vatican Council did not translate themselves into an agreed body of catechetical teaching organically rooted in the Catholic tradition and renewed by the Council’s teaching. There has been great fragmentation. There have been significant initiatives and very good catechetical programmes but they have themselves been the subject of conflict and disagreement.

This has all taken place in the context of massive secularisation in Western society from which the Church has by no means been immune. Some would say that the Church has been prey to the influences of secularisation precisely because of the weakening of its own sense of identity which has inevitably accompanied its teaching on ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. Some parents with children in Catholic schools complain that their children seem to learn more about other religions than about Christianity. This I am sure is unfair but it may say

something about the way we teach the faith. The loss of Latin in the Mass was symbolic of a loss of rootedness in the Catholic tradition. The Church is a living organism that evolves in continuity with its past. It is vitally important that our young people identify with the Catholic Church and see Tradition as an inexhaustible source of teaching, spirituality and moral wisdom. We must seek to heal the disjunction between what has been handed on in the Church and the experience of young people in the modern world. This is a colossal task but one that we must face.

Sometimes the present crisis is perceived too narrowly as being an issue to do with catechetical methodology or the language in which we celebrate Mass. It is more than this and can perhaps be exemplified by considering art, which focuses and expresses the whole range and depth of human experience. In the year 2000 the National Gallery put on an exhibition entitled *Seeing Salvation* in which they put together some key artistic representations of the person of Christ. This, of course, was a way of marking the second millennium and in the book that accompanied the exhibition Neil Macgregor, then curator of the National Gallery, reflected on the importance of these works of art for our culture. He suggested that with loss of faith, people in the West had no language and no symbols in which to express the fundamental human realities of repentance, suffering, death, or of hope and redemption. The great artists of the Christian tradition explored and articulated these realities but because of loss of faith, our relationship with these works of art is uneasy. When I visited the exhibition I could see that unease in the faces of other people with whom I was jostling to see the pictures. More recently, I have been intrigued by the reviews of the excellent *El Greco* exhibition at the National Gallery. I think *El Greco* is a unique painter in that the iconic tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy finds expression in the Western tradition of painting. Several reviewers seemed to me to be expressing frustration that they were unable to engage with these paintings at the profound spiritual level at which they were created. As a culture we have lost touch with our roots and our spiritual identity.

In our teaching of the Catholic faith we must enable our young people to find their roots in the Catholic tradition and to do so with confidence and pride. Most importantly, of course, they must discover Jesus Christ as their personal saviour. As Pope John Paul often says: we must contemplate the face of Christ. My reason for making this point here, of course, is that unless they do this, they will not be equipped to make a serious contribution to inter-religious dialogue. Muslim children go to special classes in the Koran after they have finished school. In this way they become firmly rooted in their tradition. Unless our young people are equivalently rooted in the Catholic tradition, they will not be able to contribute to inter-religious dialogue and so will be unable to make any profound contribution to social cohesion in our communities.

The globalised multi-faith and multi-cultural world in which we live forty years after *Nostra Aetate* should be a stimulus both to pursuing dialogue and to ensuring that future generations will be equipped to engage in it effectively.