

Introduction to the first day of the
Nostra Aetate celebrations
at Heythrop College

I would like to welcome everyone to this the first of two days in which we will be marking the fortieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Church's relations with other religions, *Nostra Aetate*. Broadly speaking we could say that the emphasis of this, the first day, here at Heythrop, is more academic and scholarly and that of tomorrow, at Westminster Cathedral Hall, is more cultural and more focussed on the practicalities of interfaith work.

After the Council, the Secretariat for Non-Christians, now the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, was given the mandate of promoting and implementing teaching and provisions of *Nostra Aetate*. The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews was given that mandate specifically in relation to Catholic-Jewish Relations. The fact that these two separate departments were set up indicates the quite specific and unique relationship between the Church and Judaism.

The fulfilling of the mandate has also given rise to a rich and considerable body of developing official teaching, beginning with Paul VI, then taken up most significantly by Pope John Paul II, and now continued by Pope Benedict XVI who was very quick to signal his intention to keep up the momentum set by his predecessors. There has also been a substantial body of teaching by the two offices I have mentioned. And this teaching has developed in the context of a changed and changing relationship between the Church and other religions.

It is important also to observe that *Nostra Aetate* is organically linked to the dogmatic teaching of the Second Vatican Council, most specifically to Chapter II of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. It is important to stress that for two reasons. Firstly to make it clear that *Nostra Aetate* is integral to the whole corpus of teaching of Vatican II. And, secondly, that theological reflection on *Nostra Aetate* is a contribution to the deepening and further exploration of the whole vision of the Council.

But this task of taking forward, promoting, implementing and exploring the teaching of *Nostra Aetate* has been taken up not only by official bodies in the Church but also by theologians who have made, and continue to make, their distinctive contribution to this task. Such are our four speakers today.

I am particularly pleased that these two days have been the occasion of collaboration between Heythrop College and the Committee for Other Faiths of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. Two members of staff at Heythrop are members of the Committee for Other Faiths and the bishops recognise and appreciate the contribution that Heythrop makes to interreligious dialogue. Over the last forty years there have been a great many commentaries on the text. A great deal of work has also been done in exploring the implications of the document. *Nostra Aetate* is a very short text but its significance is out of all proportion to its size. Also, it is a document which opened up new horizons and raised new questions in a way that invites study and reflection. I look forward very much to hearing what our speakers have to say.

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