

Faithfulness through Dialogue

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To my mind, one of the most memorable religious images of recent years is that of an elderly man—wearing his own distinctive yarmulke, stooped and crippled from advancing disease, and praying before the Western Wall of the Temple in Jerusalem. The image was beamed around the globe. The date was March 26th in the year 2000 and the central figure was, of course, Pope John Paul II. Accompanied by Rabbi Michael Melchior, he stood and prayed quietly, then placed his written prayer in the Wall. It read:

God of our Fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants

To bring your name to the nations:

We are deeply saddened by the behaviour of those who in the
course of history

Have caused these children of yours to suffer,

And asking your forgiveness

We wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood

With the people of the covenant.

Such a public expression of sorrow by the Bishop of Rome could hardly have been imagined forty years earlier. Despite the fact that Christian faith had grown from Jewish roots, there has been a long history of discrimination by Catholics and the Catholic Church against the Jewish people. With this shameful past clearly in mind,

Pope John XXIII took the first step toward reconciliation in 1963: he longed for the Second Vatican Council to mark the beginning of a new era in Jewish–Catholic relations. Indeed, the Council was the turning point. John’s hope provided the impetus for the Council’s document “*Nostra Aetate*” and just prior to his death he gave instructions about the content of chapter four on Jewish–Catholic relations. In the final form of that chapter, the Council recognised the spiritual heritage shared by Christians and Jews as well as the common future for which we both wait in hope. The Council’s recognition of a common heritage and future was certainly a world away from the condemnations of the past.

However, it was only under the leadership of Pope John Paul II that the church was able to publicly seek forgiveness for the anti-Semitism of its past. In 1998 the Vatican ‘Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews’ published *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, in which it made an act of repentance for the failure of the Catholic Church and members of the church toward the Jewish people. Two years later, conversion and reconciliation were central themes of the Jubilee Year. John Paul II sought God’s forgiveness several times that year for the sins committed against the people of the covenant: at St Peter’s Basilica, at the Western Wall of the Temple (as I have already pointed out) and at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial also in Jerusalem.

So, since the publication of “*Nostra Aetate*” in November 1965, two aspects of the Church’s effort to develop its relationship with the Jewish people stand out. First, the Council recognised God’s continuing presence and action amongst the people of the

covenant. Second, through John Paul II the Church has expressed sorrow for past sins and sought God's forgiveness.

Yet this threshold moment in the life of the Church held further surprises. "Nostra Aetate" also recognised that Catholics share much with members of other world religions, particularly Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Again, this was a completely new approach. Rather than focus on what separated Christianity from other religions, and condemn in the other what is at variance with Catholic teaching, the Council advocated a way forward through dialogue and collaboration. It noted, for example, that both Catholics and Muslims worship the one God, and that both have a deep devotion to Jesus and Mary, although that devotion means different things to each. The Council's recognition of what is shared with other religions led it to say that: "The catholic church rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these religions. It regards with respect those ways of acting and living and those precepts and teachings which, though often at variance with what it holds and expounds, frequently reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens everyone." (NA, no. 2)

In the intervening years, the Catholic Church's understanding of its relationship with world religions has also developed, and again Pope John Paul II made a significant contribution. Perhaps it was his youthful love of the theatre that enabled him to symbolically express new understandings at critical moments in such a powerful way. His desire to pray with leaders of world religions at Assisi was one such expression and it captured the world's attention. In October 1986, thirty-four leaders of world religions prayed together for peace in the Lower Square of St Francis, in Assisi. They represented Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Shintoism, Sikhism, and the Traditional

Religions of Africa among many others. Their common prayer raised the hopes of millions throughout the world. It was of great significance for John Paul II and the Catholic Church because it formally recognised God's presence and action in the world religions. The pope put it this way: "The inter-religious meeting held at Assisi was meant to confirm my conviction that 'every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart.'" (*Redemptoris Missio*, no. 29.)

There is a further dimension to John Paul II's teaching on this matter. Not only is the Spirit offered to every individual who prays, the Spirit is also offered to "society and history, peoples, cultures and religions." (*RM*, no. 28) If the Catholic Church is to be faithful to God's presence, then, it must be open to the activity of the Spirit in other world religions. The presence and action of the Spirit is integrally related to Christ's presence among us. The pope says:

This is the same Spirit who was at work in the Incarnation and in the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus, and who is at work in the Church. He is therefore not an alternative to Christ, nor does he fill a sort of void which is sometimes suggested as existing between Christ and the Logos. Whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions serves as a preparation for the Gospel and can only be understood in reference to Christ, the Word who took flesh by the power of the Spirit 'so that as perfectly human he would save all human beings and sum up all things'. (*RM*, no. 29)

The relationship that the pope identifies between Word and Spirit has important implications for the life of the Church.

The Church has been charged by the Risen Jesus to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. In its task of proclamation, it cannot ignore the life of the Spirit in other religious traditions. Through attending to the Spirit's presence in them we will not only learn about them; more importantly, we will meet God. Dialogue with other religious traditions is a revelatory event for the church. In his reflection about John Paul II's teaching on this matter, British theologian Gavin D'Costa says: "the discernment of the activity of the Holy Spirit within other religions must also bring the church more truthfully into the presence of the triune God. . . . If the church fails to be receptive, it may be unwittingly practicing cultural and religious idolatry."¹

Both the Second Vatican Council's document "Nostra Aetate" and Pope John Paul II see our relations with other religions as a 'dialogue.' This understanding of the church's place in the world was first brought to the attention of Catholics by Pope Paul VI during the years of the Council. He outlined this view of the church's relationship to the world in his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*. John Paul II has built upon this understanding and teaches us that through dialogue with other religious traditions, we will be more faithful to Christ. This seems counter-intuitive today. There is a tendency in one strand of Western culture to believe that when people sincerely engage in dialogue with others, they must lessen their attachment to their own understanding of the world. Here, however, the pope leads us to see that the opposite is the truth. Openness to the Spirit's presence in other religious traditions will lead us to understand more fully the good news of Jesus Christ.

¹ Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 115.

For these reasons, as members of the Catholic Church, we must be resolute in our commitment to dialogue.

Thank you.