



ICCI Rome Conference 2015

The 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*:  
The Past, Present and Future of the Christian-Jewish Relationship

50° anniversario della Dichiarazione conciliare *Nostra Aetate*:  
passato, presente e futuro delle relazioni ebraico-cristiane

## **CONCLUDING PLENARY**

**WEDNESDAY, JULY 1, 2015 - AUDITORIUM**

### **Cardinal Kurt Koch**

Distinguished participants:

I am glad to have been invited by the “International Council of Christians and Jews” to address you during the concluding session of your gathering. This is the first time that I have had the opportunity to meet with you in person, although I am aware of the varied and fruitful activities of your organization, which is active throughout the world. For exactly five years now—since July 1, 2010—I have been responsible, as the President of the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, for deepening relations with Judaism on an international level, and for promoting Jewish-Catholic dialogue. Over the years, our Commission has maintained regular contacts with the “International Council of Christians and Jews,” and, whenever possible, the Commission’s Secretary has taken part in your annual meetings. Now that you have come here to Rome, I, too, am able to speak to you directly, and I am sincerely grateful to you for this opportunity.

For many years, a fruitful collaboration, and a useful exchange of information, have been taking place between your organization and our Commission. Since the promulgation of the conciliar declaration “*Nostra Aetate*’ (#4), the Holy See has been advancing a dialogue with Judaism on the international level which is *sui generis*. Naturally, Jewish-Catholic dialogue is conducted also, and especially, on the local level, in various countries and on various continents: the Vatican’s main task is to provide continued encouragement, and renewed momentum, for that dialogue and, in doing so, the styles and sensitivities of the various Pontiffs have played a decisive role.

I am also grateful that Christians of every denomination are taking part in your meeting, since ecumenism is the specific mandate that I have been given responsibility for at the Vatican. All Christians have Jewish roots: the identity of every Christian denomination is linked to the stance it adopts regarding Judaism. Therefore, the “sacred responsibility” of all Christians is to acknowledge their “elder brothers” in the faith as such, according to the expression that John Paul II used for the Jewish people, and to enter into dialogue with them, with respect and mutual trust. I am happy, therefore, to be able to celebrate, together with all of you, both Jews and Christians, the fiftieth anniversary of the promulgation of the conciliar declaration “*Nostra Aetate*” (#4). In this regard, it should be recalled that the ideas that formed the foundation of that declaration were already present in the Ten Points of Seelisberg (1947). As a Swiss citizen myself, I am naturally proud that the impetus for such a turning-point was given in my country. Those ten theses are the foundation of your organization and, in a certain sense, make up the backbone of all your activities. The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and the “International Council of Christians and Jews,” therefore, are also bound closely together in terms of their spiritual foundations.

This year, as we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the promulgation of “Nostra Aetate” (#4), it is also an opportune time to reflect on the next fifty years of Jewish-Christian dialogue. But this can only occur if we are solidly grounded in an appraisal of the last fifty years. Truly, it is only in the light of what has taken place that it is possible to understand the present, and to look to the future. If we consider the relationship between Jews and Christians before “Nostra Aetate” (#4), and if we then take into consideration everything that has been accomplished since then, we could speak of it as a small miracle. Indifference and opposition have been transformed into collaboration and kindness. From being enemies and strangers, we have become friends and brothers, as Pope Francis underscored yesterday.

Sometimes we act as if all of this were due to us, as if only the leading figures in the Jewish-Christian dialogue had contributed to this reconciliation—as if the degree of understanding and friendship that has been achieved were simply the result of human efforts. But Psalm 127 says clearly: “If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labour” (Psalm 127:1). As we mark the anniversary of this important event, we should, therefore, direct our thanks, first and foremost, to the Lord, who has guided us on the path of reconciliation, understanding and friendship, and we should pray to him, that he continue to accompany us. And so, when we are speaking of the future of our dialogue, the first thing we should do is to pray. Without the Lord, we are not capable of anything; with him, everything is possible! Our prayer should be in unison with the Lord’s will, which certainly tends toward a deepened friendship and a more intense cooperation between Jews and Christians.

We should also ask ourselves in what way we can become involved in promoting Jewish-Christian dialogue, in the future as well. “Nostra Aetate” (#4) is the first official document that theologically defines the position of the Catholic Church with regard to Judaism. But this declaration is only a beginning, a first step in reflecting theologically on the relationships between Catholics and Jews. I am only aware of a single document on the Jewish side, “Dabru Emet,” which was signed by a large number of rabbis in the United States in September 2000. Deepening the theological dimension of Jewish-Christian dialogue is a fundamental task that all of us must advance with renewed enthusiasm, without limiting ourselves only to social and cultural issues. I am convinced, in fact, that the time is ripe for a deepened theological discussion which can throw more light on the unbreakable bond between Christianity and Judaism. It is clear that the focal point of our dialogue is the ways in which we perceive the figure of Jesus Christ. Naturally, Christians see Christ, not only as a special representative of the Jewish people, but as the Messiah, the Son of God. But the Jewishness of Christ remains a key element which unites Christianity and Judaism, and it constitutes a question whose theological scope has not yet been fully explored. And so, at the centre of future dialogue, there must be the complex question of understanding how one might, in a coherent manner, theologically reconcile the faith-conviction shared by Christians and Jews: that the covenant established by God with his people can never be revoked, and remains forever valid, on account of the unshakeable faithfulness of God to his people, and the Christian faith-conviction which affirms the newness of the new covenant conferred on us in Jesus Christ, in such a way that neither Jews nor Christians feel offended, but know that they are respected in terms of their faith-convictions.

Another starting-point for discussing the future relationships between Judaism and Christianity could come from the Latin dictum: “Verba docent, exempla trahunt”<sup>1</sup>. We cannot remain just on the level of words, meetings, conferences, workshops. The spiritual inheritance common to Jews and Catholics is so broad that it cannot be fully expressed even by well-crafted words, but it should also spur us on to action. Let me give you an example. In 2004, our Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, together with

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<sup>1</sup> “Words instruct, examples lead”.

the “International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations,” organized a meeting in Buenos Aires; then-Archbishop Jorge Maria Bergoglio was one of the participants. The central theme focused on justice and the social/charitable activities linked to it, in both the Jewish and Christian spheres. We didn’t stay only on the level of talking; we managed to gather funding from some international organizations, which were put at the disposal of CARITAS, for projects intended to assist the poor and the needy. At the time, Argentina was in the throes of an economic recession; the first victims of such situations are always those who are on the margins of society. In that context, we visited a soup kitchen for the poor, which had been created, and was being operated, by a young priest and a rabbi. On both the Christian and Jewish sides, there are countless institutions and organizations which help the needy, which in the future could cooperate together in a more intense way. In both the Old and the New Testaments, we find the imperative of assisting the poor, the widow, the foreigner—categories which allude to all those who are vulnerable or marginalized. This represents, therefore, a fruitful area for understanding and collaboration, which Jewish-Christian dialogue must always keep in mind.

A third starting-point for our relations is the subject of the formation of future generations—of young people who ought to be involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue. I know that, from that point of view, the “International Council of Christians and Jews” is very active, and includes a youth organization which holds annual meetings. Since 2009, our Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews has, every second year, organized in collaboration with the “International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations” what are called “Emerging Leadership Conferences” for young people—particularly for students and those who have just concluded their studies. If Jewish-Christian dialogue is to prosper in the future as well, it is essential to get the generations who will come after us interested and enthusiastic.

The fiftieth anniversary of “Nostra Aetate” (#4) is a fertile opportunity for Jewish-Christian dialogue: not only to look back over the past with gratitude, but also, and especially, to draw new momentum for the future and, with courage and determination, to undertake further steps on our shared journey, conscious that it is the Lord who is building the house, that the Lord is at the heart of our dialogue, and must remain there.

(translated by Murray Watson)