

In Our Time

AJC AND *NOSTRA AETATE*:
A REFLECTION AFTER 50 YEARS



COVER

**POPE FRANCIS WITH
AJC DELEGATION**

Pope Francis receives a 50-person AJC Leadership Delegation in a private audience at the Vatican, Feb. 13, 2014.

"I am very grateful to you for the distinguished contribution you have made to dialogue and fraternity between Jews and Catholics," Pope Francis told AJC.

Foreword

THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF *NOSTRA AETATE* IS A MOMENT FOR CELEBRATION. This revolutionary document of the Second Vatican Council marked an unprecedented turnaround in interreligious relations. In a post-Holocaust self-reflection, the Catholic Church, whose antipathy toward Jews and Judaism had contributed to hate and violence directed at Jews, rejected two millennia of anti-Jewish sentiment and promulgated a new way.

Nostra Aetate teaches that Jews are not collectively responsible for the death of Jesus. Jews are not to be portrayed as accursed. Anti-Semitism is unequivocally forbidden. God's Covenant with the Jewish people is eternal. The roots of Christianity are in Judaism.

Nostra Aetate, though issued at one particular moment in history, was imbued with ongoing vitality as influential Catholics and Jews set in place a framework and structure for its implementation and refinement. Catholic-Jewish relations have reached a previously unimaginable Golden Age that could not possibly have happened without the follow-up of successive post-*Nostra Aetate* generations. The Catholic Church expanded upon *Nostra Aetate* with pronouncements, guidelines, and the establishment of departments and human resources to expand the sentiments of *Nostra Aetate* into a living reality. AJC, other Jewish organizations, and the Jewish people readily responded to the extended hand of the Catholic Church and created vehicles for guaranteeing the accomplishments of *Nostra Aetate*. Together, Catholics and Jews developed and sustained academic institutions of inquiry and interreligious dialogue to ensure the permanence of the Catholic-Jewish transformation internationally, nationally, and regionally.

Above all, the gestures of successive popes demonstrated the loftiness of *Nostra Aetate*'s aspirations. Following the vision of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, who called for and promulgated the change, Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis kept the momentum going with dramatic visuals, profound declarations, synagogue visits, Holocaust site pilgrimages, and state visits to Israel. The latter followed the historic establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Israel in 1993. The three most recent popes kept faith with John Paul II's description of the Jewish people as "our elder brothers of the ancient Covenant never broken by God and never to be broken."

Catholics and Jews, from the pews to the corridors of leadership, engage deeply with each other. AJC meets regularly with popes, cardinals, bishops, priests, and nuns in an atmosphere of mutual respect. These long-standing relationships have allowed the two communities to overcome historic barriers and intermittent moments of contention in a spirit of dialogue and fraternity.

It is especially gratifying to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* during Pope Francis's pontificate. Francis is truly a product of the *Nostra Aetate* spirit. Francis lived out *Nostra Aetate* in his close relationship with the Argentinian Jewish community, and has elevated his comfort level with Jews and Judaism to the world stage. Francis's papacy presents an opportunity for Catholic-Jewish relations: to educate younger generations who perhaps take the accomplishments of *Nostra Aetate* for granted, and to reach beyond Europe and the United States in transmitting the teachings of this transformative document. May we be equal to the task.

AJC is proud of the singular role it has played for generations in fashioning a new and better reality for Catholics and Jews. Fulfilling the vision of Stanley Bergman and David Harris, AJC's president and executive director, as well as their predecessors, AJC is a leader in interreligious relations, as best exemplified by AJC's embrace of Catholic-Jewish relations. David Inlander, chair of AJC's Interreligious Affairs Commission, and Ayesha Bulchandani-Mathrani, honorary chair, AJC Celebrates *Nostra Aetate*'s 50th, have been true partners with us in this celebratory anniversary. Our colleague, Emily Soloff, AJC's associate director of Interreligious and Intergroup Relations, with the able assistance of the AJC Archives team of Charlotte Bonelli and Desiree Guillermo, culled the sources explaining AJC's role in furthering Catholic-Jewish relations before, during, and after *Nostra Aetate*'s promulgation. We are grateful to them for their contributions and encouragement.

RABBI DAVID ROSEN

Director
International Interreligious Affairs

RABBI NOAM MARANS

Director
Interreligious and Intergroup Relations

In Our Time

AJC AND *NOSTRA AETATE*: A REFLECTION AFTER 50 YEARS

On October 28, 1965, Pope Paul VI issued a document that transformed Jewish-Christian relations. It stated, on the basis of Christian scriptures, that Jews cannot be held collectively responsible for the death of Jesus; that God’s covenant with the Jewish people continues; and that anti-Semitism violates Church teaching. The document, called *Nostra Aetate*, Latin for “In Our Time,” marked a fresh beginning for Catholics and Jews.

AJC’s engagement with the Catholic Church began fifty years earlier and continues today. AJC’s search for justice for the Jewish people benefits from the rich relationships it has built with ordinary Catholics, Catholic religious leaders, and institutions of the Church at the highest level. Almost from its inception AJC has been a leader in Catholic-Jewish relations. As early as 1915, in response to the devastating conditions in Eastern Europe, AJC called on the pope to exercise his influence on behalf of beleaguered Jews in Poland and Russia, reminding Pope Benedict XV that many of his predecessors “extended protection to those of the Jewish faith, in the interest of right and justice.” Right and justice have ever since been guiding themes of AJC’s efforts to change how Catholics, and all Christians, view Judaism and Jews.

Operating on the principle that violation of the rights of any minority endangers the rights of all, AJC filed its first *amicus*

brief with the U.S. Supreme Court in 1924 (*Pierce vs. the Society of Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary*), supporting the right of Catholic parents to send their children to religious schools without penalty.

Throughout the 1930s, AJC fought against the prejudice spewed by the likes of Fr. Charles Coughlin, a Catholic priest whose weekly radio program and newspaper, filled with anti-Semitic harangues, attracted millions of listeners and readers. Working with other Jewish organizations, AJC produced a 59-page book debunking Fr. Coughlin's specious and inflammatory claims. The book included Cardinal George Mundelein's unequivocal statement that Coughlin neither spoke for nor represented the Catholic Church.

In 1932, AJC initiated a pioneering program with Drew Theological Seminary aimed at removing anti-Jewish teachings from religious textbooks. AJC also supported the preparation of two content analyses, one of Protestant Christian educational material, conducted by Yale Divinity School, and the other of Catholic material, prepared by St. Louis Divinity School. These studies helped identify problems and point out possible solutions. AJC recognized that in the education of young children the attitudes of teachers are as important as the curricular materials used.

With the rise of fascism in Europe, AJC continued to monitor and challenge religious institutions that refused to condemn prejudice. After AJC protested a story linking Jews to communism that appeared in a Catholic publication, the editor issued a retraction.

In 1952, AJC reached out to Fr. Louis Hartman, general secretary of the Catholic Biblical Association, seeking an authoritative response to the so-called "deicide" charge that claimed Jews were collectively responsible for the death of Jesus. In a letter, Fr. Hartman stated, "Historically speaking...

there is no basis for the claim that the Jews as a people were guilty of the death of Christ, and obviously there is not the slightest reason for bringing this accusation against their descendants.”

AJC Executive Committee member James N. Rosenberg was invited to an institute sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews on “Unifying Influences in a Democracy.” Rosenberg’s address, “Group Defamation and Freedom of Speech,” emphasized the importance of positive interreligious relations “to awaken comprehension of the fact that anti-Semitism is only a spearhead for attacks on all religion.”

In 1957, an AJC delegation was the first Jewish group to hold a private audience with Pope Pius XII. In a formal statement following the meeting, the Pope recognized the importance of AJC’s work, condemned discrimination of all kinds—including anti-Semitism—and urged the countries of the world to provide safe haven to victims of persecution.

Two years later, Pope John XXIII, a few months into his papacy, called for a council to address relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the modern world. He believed that for the Church to serve the world, it must be in dialogue with it and with all people, whether Catholic or not.

An ecumenical council is a global meeting of Church leaders to discuss matters of doctrine and practice. The documents that emerge from it have the highest authority and are considered binding for the universal Church. More than twenty such councils have been held in different locations over the centuries. This was the second ecumenical council held in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, hence it is known as Vatican II.

As a papal delegate in Istanbul during World War II, Pope John XXIII had been deeply affected by his experience saving Jews during the Holocaust. He had also met with French-Jewish historian Jules Isaac, whose wife and daughter were killed at

Auschwitz and whose writings focused on links between anti-Semitism and Christianity.

Despite the skepticism of some Catholic leaders about the need for such a council, Pope John XXIII established several commissions and secretariats to formulate proposals and principles for discussion. German biblical scholar Augustin Cardinal Bea was appointed head of the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity. He was also tasked with preparing a statement on Judaism and the Jewish people.

Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, AJC's Director of Interreligious Affairs, recognized that "the central issue for us... was that the Vatican Council for the first time in our lifetime was going to bring together all of the leadership of the Catholic Church from throughout the inhabited world. There were going to be some 2,500 cardinals, bishops... theological experts, who were to face all these issues and, in particular, to face literally for the first time in 1900 years, the attitude of the Catholic Church to anti-Semitism, [and] the responsibility of the role of Christian teaching in disseminating anti-Semitism."

The "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (also known as *Nostra Aetate*) places the Church's relation to Jews in the context of its relations to other world religions, including Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The Church's relationship with Jews is described in item number four of the declaration. While the final vote was overwhelmingly in favor, early resistance to the idea suggested that passage of a positive statement about Jews and Judaism could not be taken for granted.

In 1961, Cardinal Bea met with AJC representatives in Rome and invited AJC to submit a memorandum on anti-Jewish elements in Catholic textbooks and liturgy, based on the scholarly studies AJC had produced earlier. At Cardinal Bea's request, AJC wrote another memorandum on negative and

hostile depictions of Jews in Catholic teaching material in Europe and South America, demonstrating that the problem was widespread.

AJC believed these critical documents, “The Image of the Jew in Catholic Teaching” and “Anti-Jewish Elements in Catholic Liturgy,” should be supplemented with proposals for improving Catholic-Jewish understanding. Cardinal Bea welcomed AJC’s suggestion that a leading Jewish theologian provide such a document.

AJC introduced Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel to Cardinal Bea to discuss the possibility of including in the emerging statement positive elements about Judaism and affirming its enduring validity. Thus in this third memorandum, “On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations,” Heschel suggested that in addition to explicitly rejecting the deicide charge and condemning anti-Semitism, the declaration recognize the “integrity and permanent preciousness” of the Jews as Jews, rather than as potential converts.

The memorandum also proposed creation of a permanent high-level commission at the Vatican to monitor Catholic-Jewish relations and combat prejudice. Heschel’s engagement in the process leading to *Nostra Aetate* is described more fully in AJC’s companion volume, *Wide Horizons: Abraham Joshua Heschel, AJC and the Spirit of Nostra Aetate*.

Throughout 1962, AJC worked to advance public interest in Jewish-Christian relations. To stimulate dialogue, *Evidences*, AJC’s French-language magazine, devoted parts of several issues to a symposium featuring the views of several European Catholic and Protestant clergy and scholars on Christian teachings about Jews. It was the first such effort in Europe.

AJC also participated in interreligious activity sponsored by Pro Deo University in Rome, including a series of fraternal banquets devoted to conversation among lay people and clergy

of different faith communities. AJC was the only American Jewish organization invited to address one of these banquets that featured Vatican leaders.

Not everyone embraced the goal of revolutionizing Catholic-Jewish relations. For some Catholics, the theological discussions challenged their traditional understanding of the relationship of the Church to the Jewish people. Middle Eastern Christians especially were under pressure from Arab governments, which feared that any positive statement about Jews would increase support for Israel. This antagonism toward a potential statement about the Jews was expressed in an 800-page book, *The Plot Against the Church*, subsidized by the government of Egypt and filled with anti-Semitic canards.

“As the first declaration began to be drafted in 1962 and 1963, it became clear that that which was intended from the very outset as essentially a historic, religious, cultural phenomenon was perceived in the Arab world and among some professional anti-Semites as having political... consequences,” recalled Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum.

In 1963, AJC delegations met several times with Cardinal Bea in Rome. In March, Cardinal Bea came to the U.S. AJC hosted a private meeting for him with prominent Jewish religious and communal leaders to consider issues linked with the proposed decree. AJC also helped arrange a high-level civic and interfaith dinner where Cardinal Bea was the guest of honor.

For the private meeting, AJC submitted questions in advance, seeking Cardinal Bea’s reaction. They elicited his views on the significance of the deicide charge; on the urgent need to combat anti-Semitism among Catholics; on the importance of official rejection of prejudicial teaching; and on the desirability of interreligious cooperation.

Cardinal Bea offered several possible theological arguments to refute the deicide accusation, and assured the

gathered dignitaries that the Secretariat's work on a draft document included recognition of Judaism as a living religion in its own right, and of Christianity's roots in the Old Testament.

Over the next two years, the original statement relating to Jews underwent four revisions. Those opposed to adjusting the Church's teaching on the Jews sought to eliminate or at least weaken any statement. In November 1963 they succeeded in delaying the Council's consideration of a draft that had been warmly endorsed by many in the Church, particularly American bishops.

The challenges and changes to the draft declaration evoked disappointment and even cynicism among some Jews and Catholics. U.S. bishops, recognizing the need for a full and honest confrontation with the issue of anti-Semitism, led the effort to adopt a strong, explicit text.

AJC's Jacob Blaustein, a past president and member of the executive committee, met several times with his friend Lawrence Cardinal Shehan of Baltimore, who would prove to be an important voice among the cardinals. In April 1964, Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York, dean of American cardinals, addressed the AJC Annual Meeting and issued a landmark statement on Catholic-Jewish relations that was widely disseminated and discussed in the U.S., Europe, and South America.

In his speech, Spellman rejected anti-Semitism as incompatible with Christianity, and said the Church recognized its origins in Judaism and the ties between the two traditions. AJC printed more than 10,000 copies of the speech, which were distributed to Catholic educators, leaders, and publications. A comparable number were translated and distributed in Europe and Latin America.

AJC continued to play an important role in helping shape public opinion in support of the final document. Apprehensive

that rejection of the deicide charge might be taken out of the statement, AJC sent a high-level delegation to Rome in May 1964 to meet with Pope Paul VI, who succeeded Pope John XXIII after his death in 1963. In a prepared statement, the new pope commended AJC's determination "to safeguard the religious and cultural freedom of all people." He also spoke against hostility toward Jews and acknowledged the links between Judaism and Christianity. When asked about the deicide charge, the pope told the group that he had read Cardinal Spellman's speech, "and Cardinal Spellman spoke my sentiments."

Despite dissemination of the pope's words, the draft declaration was in trouble. *The New York Times* published a story in June 1964 indicating that persons at the highest level of the Church, acting for political as well as theological reasons, had introduced changes weakening the declaration. Even worse, it was possible that the decree might not even be presented at the Council's third session.

AJC expressed concern to 400 editors of Catholic publications who were meeting in Pittsburgh, and as a result, editorials appeared in every major diocesan paper insisting that a definitive declaration on the Jews was needed.

AJC delegations also met with prelates in Brazil, Argentina, and other Latin American countries.

In September 1964, Council members challenged the weaker draft as 170 of the 240 American bishops called for a return to the original document. Further discussion on the floor of the Council demonstrated a strong desire for a strengthened statement. The draft was returned to Cardinal Bea with a mandate to restore its original intent before it was submitted for a vote.

Arab diplomats continued to pressure Middle Eastern bishops to object to any positive statement on Jews or Judaism.

On October 14, 1965, the declaration was placed before the

Council. Cardinal Bea called for adoption and defended revisions that had been made, among them elimination of the term “decide” and the limitation of responsibility for the death of Jesus to the then Jewish leadership, with scriptural references to back this up. The injunction to Catholics against teaching “anything that does not conform with the truth of the Gospel” remained.

After several votes were taken on the various changes, “*Nostra Aetate*, a Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” came to a final vote on October 28, 1965. It was 2,221 in favor, 88 opposed. It was promulgated by Pope Paul VI that very day, becoming official Catholic teaching, binding on every member of the Church throughout the world.

In item four, the declaration acknowledges “the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Testament to Abraham’s stock,” and affirms the Jewish origins of Jesus, Mary, and the Apostles. It rejects anti-Semitism and repudiates the age-old claim that all Jews are responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. The document also positively links Christianity to Judaism. It affirms that God’s eternal covenant with Judaism continues, and was not superseded by the new covenant with Christianity. The declaration further recommends the fostering of mutual knowledge and respect through theological studies and fraternal dialogues.

AJC gave *Nostra Aetate* mixed reviews. It issued a statement saying, “We view the adoption of the Declaration, especially its repudiation of the invidious charge of the collective guilt of Jews for the death of Jesus and its rejection of anti-Semitism, as an act of justice long overdue.” But it also said, “We regret keenly some of the assertions in the Declaration, especially those that might give rise to misunderstandings.” Despite those concerns, AJC was optimistic that *Nostra Aetate* would “open the door to an era of vastly improved relationships

between Catholics and Jews.”

Nostra Aetate has sparked a wide reappraisal of Christianity’s role in the modern world that continues today. Its promulgation also encouraged other Christian denominations to examine their relations with Judaism and the Jewish people.

Many significant documents from the Catholic Church followed *Nostra Aetate*, including “Guidelines for Implementing the Councilor Declaration *Nostra Aetate*” (1974), “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis” (1985), “God’s Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching” (1988), and “We Remember: A Reflection on the *Shoah*” (1998). Equally important were the visits of John Paul II to the Great Synagogue in Rome (1986)—the first papal visit to a synagogue in two millennia—and his state visit to Israel (2000), which set the stage for his successor, Pope Benedict XVI, to visit Israel in 2009, and Pope Francis in 2014.

The commemoration of the Holocaust and the appreciation of its lessons for Christian-Jewish relations have been significant elements of these post-*Nostra Aetate* pontificates, including visits to Auschwitz and other sites.

AJC worked tirelessly throughout the 1960s organizing seminars, colloquia, and institutes for Catholics and Jews to better understand each other. In 1966, AJC published its first “Guide to Interreligious Dialogue” to help lay leaders conduct interreligious encounters.

AJC is a founding member of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC), the umbrella group for the Jewish community in its dealings with world religious bodies, including the Vatican and the World Council of Churches.

AJC remains the preeminent Jewish organization in global Catholic-Jewish relations, and continues to hold

leadership positions within IJCIC and the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ).

AJC celebrated the 10th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* with commemorations around the U.S. highlighting the transformation in Catholic-Jewish relations. AJC published a groundbreaking work on anti-Semitism in the world famous Oberammergau Passion Play. In 1978, at the invitation of the German government, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum led an interreligious delegation to Germany for the first of several AJC efforts to remove anti-Semitic content from that production.

For the 20th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, AJC organized “pew-to-pew” encounters between Catholic churches and neighboring synagogues around the country. Some of the encounters have led to joint activities that continue today. At the first of five private meetings that AJC leaders would hold with Pope John Paul II over his long pontificate, AJC President Howard I. Friedman spoke of AJC’s close cooperation with Catholic Relief Services in seeking to ameliorate the suffering of millions in Africa.

A deep rift developed between some Christians and Jews following Israel’s victory against Arab aggression in 1967. AJC recognized the need to educate Catholics and other Christians through interreligious dialogue about the meaning of Jewish peoplehood and the relationship between Jewry and the Land of Israel.

Behind the scenes, AJC raised the issue of recognition of the State of Israel by the Holy See, the governmental and diplomatic arm of the Church. Rabbi David Rosen, now AJC’s director of International Interreligious Affairs, played a significant role in the negotiations as a member of the Permanent Bilateral Commission of the State of Israel and the Holy See. The commission concluded its work at the end of 1993 with the signing of a Fundamental Agreement, setting the stage for the

establishment of full diplomatic relations between Israel and the Vatican in 1994.

Even as AJC's work continued with Catholic seminarians, AJC recognized the need to reach younger Catholics as well. Under the direction of Rabbi A. James Rudin, who became AJC's director of Interreligious Affairs in 1988, AJC launched the Catholic/Jewish Education Enrichment Program (C/JEEP) in six cities, underwritten by funding from the Steven Spielberg Righteous Persons Foundation. The program brought rabbis into Catholic high schools to teach Judaism, and Catholic priests and educators into Jewish schools to teach about Christianity. Through C/JEEP, Catholic and Jewish students learned about the religion of the other from authentic sources.

Recognizing the urgency of positive interfaith encounters on a global scale, AJC established the Harriet and Robert Heilbrunn Institute for International Interreligious Understanding in 1997. The institute encourages dialogue between faith groups through exchanges among seminaries, colleges, universities, and learned societies around the world.

In recognition of AJC's pioneering work with the Roman Catholic Bishops Conference of Poland, Rabbi Rudin received the Figure of Reconciliation Award from the Polish Council of Christians and Jews in Warsaw.

At AJC's 1998 Annual Meeting, Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, explained that the objective of the Vatican document "We Remember: Reflections on the *Shoah* (Holocaust)" was to promote "an awareness of past injustices by Christians to the Jewish people" among "Catholics in those countries that were far removed by geography and history from the scene of the Shoah, and encourage their participation in the present efforts of the Holy See to promote throughout the Church, a new spirit in Catholic-Jewish relations."

Responding to the cardinal's remarks, Martin Kaplan, chair of the AJC Interreligious Affairs Commission, affirmed that AJC is "committed to working with Roman Catholic leaders to achieve mutual respect and understanding. Such a goal represents the highest and best teachings of both of our religions."

In 1999, AJC leaders met with Cardinal John O'Connor, Archbishop of New York, and made a \$100,000 contribution to Catholic Relief Services. Cardinal O'Connor said, "No organization I know in this city, in this country, in this world, has done more to improve Christian-Jewish relations than the American Jewish Committee." ■

EXCERPT FROM **DECLARATION ON THE
RELATION OF THE CHURCH TO NON-CHRISTIAN
RELIGIONS *NOSTRA AETATE***
PROCLAIMED BY HIS HOLINESS POPE PAUL VI
ON OCTOBER 28, 1965

“In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship.”



**CARDINAL AUGUSTIN BEA
WITH RABBI ABRAHAM
JOSHUA HESCHEL**

Cardinal Augustin Bea (right) with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel at a press conference in April, 1963, following a dinner with 400 Catholic, Protestant and Jewish lay and clerical figures, organized by AJC.



POPE PAUL VI WITH AJC DELEGATION IN 1964

Pope Paul VI met privately with an AJC delegation in 1964. From left, Ralph Friedman, chairman, AJC Executive Board, Mrs. Leonard (Rose) M. Sperry, Los Angeles chapter member, Morris B. Abram, AJC president, Pope Paul VI, Philip Hoffman, AJC New Jersey chapter vice president, John Slawson, AJC executive vice president, Zachariah Shuster, director, AJC European Office.



**POPE JOHN PAUL II WITH
AJC DELEGATION IN 1985**

In February 1985, an AJC leadership delegation met with Pope John Paul II. From left, Howard I. Friedman, AJC president, John Paul II, Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, director of AJC's Interreligious Affairs Department.



**RABBI A. JAMES RUDIN,
CARDINAL WILLIAM KEELER
AND POPE JOHN PAUL II**

In 1998, Rabbi A. James Rudin (center), AJC director of Interreligious Affairs and Cardinal William Keeler (right) of Baltimore, led an interreligious trip to meet with Pope John Paul II.



**AJC PRESIDENT E. ROBERT
GOODKIND AND POPE
BENEDICT XVI**

In 2006 AJC is the first American Jewish organization to receive a papal audience with Pope Benedict XVI. The delegation is led by AJC President E. Robert Goodkind (center) and Barbara Goodkind.



RABBI DAVID ROSEN, RABBI NOAM MARANS, DAVID INLANDER AND POPE FRANCIS

An AJC senior leadership delegation gave Pope Francis a historic AJC photo at his first audience with Jewish leaders, representatives of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC), on June 24, 2013. AJC is a founding member of IJCIC, world Jewry's dialogue partner with the Vatican. (From left) Rabbi David Rosen, AJC's director of International Interreligious Affairs, Rabbi Noam Marans, AJC director of Interreligious and Intergroup Relations, David Inlander, chair of AJC's Interreligious Affairs Commission.

HIGHLIGHTS OF AJC'S GLOBAL INTERRELIGIOUS ACTIVITY

Recognizing the growing interest on the part of academic institutions in creating centers devoted to Christian-Jewish relations, AJC hosted the first national meeting of Christian-Jewish centers in 2001, laying the groundwork for the formation of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations (CCJR). The Council serves as an umbrella organization that coordinates efforts of dozens of member institutions and organizations in North America, Europe, and Israel devoted to Christian-Jewish relations.

AJC's impact in Israel increased when the Chief Rabbinate of Israel invited Rabbi David Rosen to join the rabbinate's official delegation for interreligious dialogue with the Holy See.

In February 2004, AJC met again with Pope John Paul II. In his remarks, then AJC President Harold Tanner expressed appreciation for the pope's leadership in encouraging Catholic-Jewish relations. "I believe it true to say that no Jewish community at any time and in any place has enjoyed the degree of warm friendship and collegial cooperation that we have enjoyed with the Catholic Church in America," Tanner said.

It was due, in part, to that positive relationship that AJC was able to take a leading role with Catholic theologians in rebuffing the retrograde presentation of the crucifixion of Jesus by Mel Gibson. In advance of the release of his movie, "The Passion of

the Christ,” AJC published a resource manual on the film and disseminated it nationally. As fears rose of an anti-Semitic backlash to the brutality depicted in the film, AJC Executive Director David Harris praised “the resolve of those Jews and Christians committed to a brighter future for interreligious harmony and collaboration.”

For the 40th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, AJC and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops held a high-level conference at the Pope John Paul II Center in Washington, D.C. AJC’s Institute of Latino and Latin American Affairs and Tribuna Israelita, the political affairs agency of the Mexican Jewish Community, co-sponsored a visit by a delegation of Mexican and Latino Bishops to Poland and Israel. Participants met with delegates of the Bilateral Commission for Dialogue between the Holy See and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel for an evening program.

AJC also co-sponsored a conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ), where Rabbi David Rosen, both in his AJC capacity and as president of the ICCJ, opened the proceedings together with Dr. Sam Kobia, secretary-general of the World Council of Churches. The conference was attended by delegates from more than twenty countries.

In 2006, AJC became the first American Jewish organization to receive a papal audience with Pope Benedict XVI. The delegation was led by AJC President E. Robert Goodkind. Later that year, AJC facilitated a meeting of the International Jewish-Catholic Liaison Committee (ILC) in Cape Town, South Africa. This momentous meeting of world Jewish and Catholic leaders discussed ways of addressing the challenges of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The meeting also explored how to reach out to and strengthen moderate voices within Muslim communities.

Responding to the growth of the Latino community in the U.S., AJC, together with Catholic Theological Union (CTU), co-sponsored a five-day seminar, *Comunidades y Convivencia*:

A Seminar on Catholic-Jewish Relations for Latino and Latina Catholics in Ministry, at the Cardinal Joseph Bernardin Center of CTU. This special seminar aimed to broaden mutual understanding of Catholic-Jewish relations and enhance contemporary Latino-Jewish relations. “Strengthening ties between our two communities, Jewish and Latino, is mutually beneficial on many levels,” said Rabbi Gary Greenebaum, AJC’s U.S. Director of Interreligious Affairs. Seminar faculty and facilitators included leading Jewish and Catholic religious scholars, Latino theologians, and interreligious leaders committed to advancing Jewish-Christian and Latino-Jewish understanding.

In 2008, AJC partnered with the Shalom Hartman Institute (SHI) in Israel to inaugurate the unprecedented thirteen-month Christian Leadership Initiative fellowship, which provides Christian denominational leaders and seminary, and faith-based university faculty an opportunity to gain a more profound understanding of Judaism, Israel, and the Jewish people. The highly selective program provides two ten-day summer study opportunities in Jerusalem at SHI, as well as distance learning and ongoing education and resources to alumni. As of 2015, nearly 60 fellows had participated.

In 2010, Rabbi Noam Marans, then associate director and now director of AJC Interreligious and Intergroup Relations, led another round of AJC engagement with the controversial Oberammergau Passion Play. During several visits to Bavaria, AJC engaged the new generation of local leadership in an effort to mitigate lingering anti-Jewish tropes within the play, and brought young American Jews to Oberammergau to participate in German Catholic-American Jewish dialogue. After viewing the play together with AJC, Rev. Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York and a future cardinal and president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the play “is a paradigm for

the friendship of Jews and Catholics; it has shown low points in their relations in the past, but now it has also become a sign of great progress.”

A year after his election, Pope Francis received a delegation of nearly 50 AJC leaders in a private audience at the Vatican. “I am very grateful to you for the distinguished contribution you have made to dialogue and fraternity between Jews and Catholics,” Pope Francis told AJC leaders. Looking ahead to the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, Pope Francis added, “It is important that we dedicate ourselves to transmitting to new generations the heritage of our mutual knowledge, esteem and friendship which has, thanks to the commitment of associations like yours, grown over these years.”

AJC President Stanley Bergman recalled the Holy See’s “categorical repudiation” of anti-Semitism, and praised Pope Francis for his lifelong engagement with Argentina’s Jewish community.

“We come here feeling deeply that you are our true friend and we feel that we are yours,” Bergman added. “We are profoundly grateful for your commitment to the Catholic-Jewish relationship.” ■

Conclusion

FIFTY YEARS AFTER ITS PROMULGATION, *NOSTRA AETATE* HAS INDEED HAD A TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECT ON RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE. Yet the work of reconciliation must continue as each new generation of Catholics and Jews strives to understand what it means to be in relationship. AJC will continue this work with the support of our engaged lay leaders and staff. As Rabbi Tarfon enjoined, “It is not your obligation to complete the task, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it.” (Pirkei Avot 2:16 – Ethics of Our Fathers).

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RELATION OF THE CHURCH TO NON-CHRISTIAN
RELIGIONS *NOSTRA AETATE***
PROCLAIMED BY HIS HOLINESS POPE PAUL VI
ON OCTOBER 28, 1965

“The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion. On the contrary, following in the footsteps of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, this sacred synod ardently ‘implores the Christian faithful to “maintain good fellowship among the nations” (1 Peter 2:12), and, if possible, to live for their part in peace with all men, so that they may truly be sons of the Father who is in heaven.”

