

Ecclesia Et Synagoga 50 Years Ago and Today

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Fifty years ago this month, on October 29, 1965, a front page story in the New York Times carried this headline: POPE PAUL PROMULGATES FIVE COUNCIL DOCUMENTS, ONE ABSOLVING THE JEWS.

The story began, “Pope Paul VI formally promulgated as church teaching today five documents embodying significant changes in Roman Catholic policies and structures and offering friendship and respect to other world religions.”

One of the documents was a declaration “on the relation of the church to non-Christian religions. The declaration includes the dissociation of the Jewish people in Catholic doctrine from any collective responsibility for the Crucifixion of Christ and an injunction to all Catholics against depiction of the Jews as ‘rejected by God or accursed.’”

I remember that day fifty years ago. I was then starting my second year as a student at Harvard Law School. I lived in Cambridge with two roommates, Jon and Harvey, both of them Jewish. As we left our apartment that morning to walk to class, Jon said, with his usual humor, “I feel so much better. Now I can walk a little taller.”

At some level Jon was kidding. We did not think that Jews living in 1965 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, or for that matter anywhere in the world, had any responsibility for the Romans who crucified Jesus in the First Century.

But Jon also was not kidding. As I learned more about Judaism, and certainly by the time I converted to Judaism about 18 months later, I knew that the ancient libel against all Jews that we killed Jesus resulted in centuries of discrimination and persecution: the Crusades, the Inquisition, pogroms and the Holocaust in Europe and beyond, and even in America restrictive covenants and agreements that excluded Jews from some neighborhoods and jobs and entire professions. So the pronouncements of Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council were in fact a very big deal and would become over time among the most important developments ever in the relations between Jews and Catholics and, indeed, between Jews and all Christians.

The change began three years earlier when Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council. After three years of study, the Council issued the guidelines announced by Pope Paul VI. The central document for our purposes was one entitled *Nostra Aetate*, which means “In Our Time.”

Nostra Aetate states:

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. The Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ. Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.

They say that a picture is worth a thousand words. I have for us two pictures. [At this point in the sermon as delivered I asked two volunteers to distribute the two pictures now appearing on page 5 of this document. I then continued as follows.]

There are two pictures here. The one I want to discuss first is the lower picture.

These two statues stand at the portal of Strasbourg Cathedral. They have been there since the Thirteenth Century. They are called, as a pair, Ecclesia and Synagoga, meaning "Church and Synagogue."

These two figures were displayed throughout Europe as pictorial art and sculptures over a period of five centuries beginning in the Ninth Century. They continue to stand on both sides of the entrances to many cathedrals to this very day.

The two figures are women similar to those depicted in this most famous example. Ecclesia, on the left, is adorned with a crown, chalice and cross-topped staff, looking confidently forward. In contrast, the figure on the right, Synagoga is blindfolded and drooping, carrying a broken lance, possibly an allusion to the Roman lance that reputedly stabbed Jesus on the cross. The Synagoga figure is sometimes also shown with a Torah scroll slipping from her hand.

These medieval figures reflect the Christian belief, sometimes called supersessionism, that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. That Christian view holds that the death of Jesus made Judaism as a religion unnecessary, since the Messiah had arrived. By this view all Jews should convert to Christianity now that it has been established. Synagoga's blindfold reflected the refusal of medieval Jews to "see" this point, which was regarded as stubborn.

The blind covering Synagoga's eyes derived from one of Paul's letters to the Corinthians. The letter states:

We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

Paul is referring to the passage in Exodus, coincidentally in the Parashah we read today, that describes Moses putting on a veil after meeting with God face to face in order to protect the Israelites from the radiance emanating from his face. Paul's letter perverts that text in order to support his supersessionist position.

The sculpted portal figures are generally found on the cathedrals of larger cities in northern Europe that had significant Jewish communities, especially in Germany. They were placed there in part in order to remind Jews of their degraded place in a Christian society.

Nostra Aetate, the 1965 decreeing absolving the Jews, was intended to change that relationship between Christians and Jews. And so it has done over the last fifty years, though progress has varied from time to time and place to place.

I have had experience with one Catholic priest who took the teaching of Nostra Aetate to heart. He made significant advances in understanding between Christians and Jews. His name is Father Walter Cuenin.

Almost twenty years ago some of the members of Father Cuenin's church in Newton, Our Lady of Help of Christians Church, entered into formal interfaith study with members of my synagogue, Temple Emanuel in Newton. Father Cuenin and our rabbi and the congregants of both communities were active participants in those sessions. We alternated meeting at the Our Lady church and in our synagogue. The active and vibrant interfaith dialogue and understanding that resulted were the results that Nostra Aetate was promulgated to achieve.

Father Cuenin also took the initiative to reach out to Jews in other ways. Shortly before we began those discussions there was an incident of anti-Semitic vandalism at a synagogue, The Adams Street Shul, near his church. Father Cuenin already had a relationship with the shul. For years he had been sending Sunday school children from Our Lady to visit the shul to learn about Jews and Judaism directly.

When the shul was desecrated by a swastika and other anti-Semitic graffiti in 1997, Father Cuenin led his entire congregation out of Sunday mass, about five hundred people. He led them in a march down Adams Street to show support for their Jewish neighbors.

Some years after our dialogues I met Father Cuenin again at a conference on interfaith marriage. I will never forget his description of advice he gives to couples who consult him in cases of a Jew and a Catholic who plan to marry. He tells them he understands that interfaith marriage happens. He does not oppose their marriage. He tells them, though, that it's important for them to decide on a single religion in which to raise the children. Then, in the most remarkable comment I've ever heard on this topic, he says to them, "And the religion you should pick for your children in Judaism." He explains, "There are only about 15 million Jews in the world and about one billion Christians. So, when you marry, it's important that you raise your children as Jews. The world needs more Jews.

The other Catholic leader I want to discuss this morning is, of course Pope Francis.

Nearly 50 years after the Vatican officially proclaimed Jews free of guilt in the killing of Jesus, Pope Francis made a surprise change to his schedule on the final day of his U.S. tour to convey his own message of respect for the Jewish people. In an unannounced event, the pontiff stopped Sunday to bless a sculpture commissioned by the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia.

Please turn again to the pictures. The sculpture blessed by Pope Francis is depicted in the top picture. It is called "Ecclesia and Synagoga In Our Time." As I explained before, the phrase "In Our Time" is the English translation of the Latin "Nostra Aetate."

The sculpture, finished just this year, was created to counter centuries of anti-Semitic imagery in Catholic art. As you see, the figures of Ecclesia and Synagoga hold their respective sacred scriptures, and each looks at the other's book. The two figures are shown as respectful equals

The sculpture repudiates the centuries-old anti-Semitic image you see at the bottom of the page. When the Pope blessed the statue, he stood with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, his good friend and literary collaborator, who had flown in from Buenos Aires, to be the keynote speaker at the dedication of the work.

The Pope and the rabbi had cooked up the idea of this event. They have done a lot of plotting together since they forged a bond some 16 years ago in their hometown of Buenos Aires.

Countering centuries of anti-Semitism has been a priority for the pontiff and Rabbi Skorka. One of Pope Francis's early interviews was with an Israeli news crew. Rabbi Skorka helped set it up. The Pope's first trip abroad as pontiff was to Israel. Rabbi Skorka, who is Rector of the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano in Buenos Aires, accompanied him.

Rabbi Skorka called these gestures by Pope Francis, “a sign of his commitment to the Jewish people and to Israel.”

“Having me in many opportunities with him is a message for the Jews and for Christians as well,” says Rabbi Skorka. “Our friendship is a paradigm of what has to be the great relationship between Jews and Christians.”

The pedestal of the new sculpture bears a quote from Pope Francis: “There exists a rich complementarity between the Church and the Jewish people that allows us to help one another mine the riches of God’s word.”

When Jon and I walked out of our apartment that day in October, 1965, we had no idea how much progress was going to be made in the subsequent fifty years. May that progress only continue.

And let us say, Amen.



Synagoga et Ecclesia In Our Time 2015



Ecclesia et Synagoga 13<sup>th</sup> Century to Present, Strasbourg Cathedral