

Monastic Scribe XCVIII: December 5, 2025

SHALOM, MY FRIENDS!

Seventy years ago this very month, the Second Vatican Council came to a close. Four years of deliberations brought forth thirteen documents that expressed both the nature of the Church and its new needs in the current world. One of the final documents of the Council, actually finished and promulgated on October 28th of that year, was the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, known by its opening words in Latin, "Nostra Aetate", i.e. "in our time". The Contents of the declaration were not on the original agenda of the Council. While it is a short piece of only six pages, it has had a revolutionary impact, especially on our relation to Jews and Muslims. I will consider here specifically on Catholics and the Jewish people.

The twentieth century Holocaust (known as the "Shoah") had been the latest in a long list of discriminatory actions against Jews over hundreds of years. Recently I encountered a book on the fourteenth century Black Plague which wiped out half of Europe. In looking for a reason for such devastation, many Christians at the time blamed Jews, e.g. for poisoning the wells of Christian villages. There was a lot of precedence for such acrimonious feelings. Jews had been blamed for the crucifixion as "Christ killers". They were blamed, exiled, put to death in various countries over the centuries.

There were Christians who realized the real truth. Pope Pius XI (died 1939) recognized the anti-Semitism of Adolf Hitler. He urged Christians to realize that we are all "spiritually Semites". In the years ahead Angelo Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII in his posts in Bulgaria and France, was able to rescue and smuggle many Jews from Hitler's grasp. When he became Pope, John very soon amended the Good Friday liturgy to omit the reference to "perfidious Jews". He was friendly with Rabbi Joshua Heschel and other Jewish leaders. It was the German Cardinal Bea, who John had placed as head of a new office of interfaith dialogue, who pushed the Council declaration to its conclusion. This was a new beginning.

Pope John Paul II, son of a largely anti-Semitic Poland, played a large hand in changing relationships. He was the first Pope to visit a Jewish Synagogue in Rome. He went to Jerusalem (as Pope Paul VI had done in 1965) and prayed at the Wailing Wall. He called Jews our elder brothers. He declared that Catholics could and should understand Judaism as "Intrinsic" to Catholicism. He spoke often and

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clearly about the need for Christians to atone and accept their Jewish siblings. Popes Benedict and Francis took up the same banner. Many Bishops followed this teaching, such as Cardinal Francis George of Chicago who said that, for the Catholic Church, friendship with the Jewish people is doctrinal.

On the night of his election, Pope Leo XIV called a Jewish friend to assure him that this friendly Jewish attitude would continue. On October 28th, the sixtieth anniversary of "Nostra Aetate", he met with many Jewish leaders to enforce the teachings and attitudes of Catholics toward Jews. He said that the theme of their meeting was "Walking Together in Hope."

I have emphasized our recent Popes to make clear the official church teaching. It is also obvious that not all Christians have accepted this teaching. This has been seen, not only in individuals, but in groups as well. Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre broke from the church and formed the Society of Saint Pius Tenth. They have become known for rejection of the liturgical changes of the Council including the New Order of Mass. But they have also rejected the teachings of the Council, including the declaration on the Jews. There have been leaders of this group who explicitly rejected the acceptance of the Jews as taught in "Nostra Aetate". Some other groups are known as "sedevacantists" which means the seat (sedes) of the papacy has been vacant since Pope Pius XII. The United States seems to be full of these kinds of anti-Pope and anti-Council groups.

It has to be recognized that there are still problems to be faced in Jewish-Catholic relations. Some of the scriptures we Catholics use in our worship have, at least, anti-Semitic overtones and sometime direct accusations. The Gospel of John, so beautiful in many ways, whose passion account is read on Good Friday, is a good example. Our American Bishops have instructed that an explanatory note be attached to the reading but this is not always obvious. Another current problem is the recurrence of anti-Semitism that has increased due to the Israeli-Palestinian war. Understanding of Judaism, the Israeli state, the Netanyahu government all enter into the discussion. And scholars will point out that there are real theological issues in the understanding of Hamas and Hezbollah, Iran, and Israel. Finally, some Christians have not accepted the Conciliar declaration, as well as the historical understanding, of how Jews and Christians have disagreed over the centuries. The fear of the "other", such as immigrants in our country, also effects people of different religions and ethnic groups, and the Jews seem prime targets at times. "Christian nationalism" is not really Christian.

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I am grateful to the Jews. I am grateful to the Jews as a people who have suffered, struggled, remained faithful. I am grateful to the Jews for their wonderful scriptures. Without them I could not understand Jesus Christ, a Jew as was his mother, Mary, the apostles, the early church. I am grateful to the Jews for the Pharisee, Saul who became the apostle Paul and gloated in his being a Jew, asserting that God has not forsaken his people nor has Christianity replaced them as God's chosen people. I am most grateful to Jesus Christ, himself a Jew, who was a prophet in the Hebrew tradition.

Western civilization has largely been based on Roman law and Greek philosophy. The loss of the Semitic imagination has meant we have missed a lot of what God says in the Word of God. I am grateful for the Jews today who keep that imagination alive. Through the prophets and the psalms, the Torah and the wisdom sayings, I continue to learn and am grateful for the Jews of the past and the Jews I know. Shalom, my friends, Shalom! You can find me at:

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.