

## The Church and Anti-Semitism

In recent years, we have seen violent expressions of anti-Semitism, from the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh to Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia. The World Jewish Congress notes that more than half of American Jews have experienced some form of anti-Semitism and that 1 in 7 says they have plans in place to flee the country if it becomes necessary.

Over the course of history, Jews have been the object of derision, maltreatment, persecution and forced conversion. They endured the Exodus experience with Moses, the Babylonian Exile, subjugation under Greek and Roman rulers, the European ghettos, the Spanish Inquisition, and the horrendous Holocaust under the Nazis.

In some cases, these indignities were even sanctioned by the practices of the Church. In both disciplinary laws, such as four canons of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, and liturgical practices, such as the Good Friday prayer for the Jews. Revision of that prayer – which used such terms as faithless, blindness and darkness in reference to the Jews – was worked on by Popes Pius XI, Pius XII and John XXIII before a total revision was completed under Paul VI in 1970.

The Church made clear more than 50 years ago that no one should try to use any part of that history to justify anti-Semitism today. In the *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)* – Vatican II's shortest, but still quite powerful document – the Council Fathers acknowledged the common spiritual heritage which Christians and Jews share. God's self-revelation began with His chosen people and was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, himself a Jew, as were the Apostles, the Church's foundation stones, as well as the early disciples. Christ's passion cannot be blamed on all the Jewish leaders of his time or their followers, and certainly not on all the Jewish people, either then or now. "Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as repudiated or cursed by God, as if such views followed from the holy Scriptures." The document then clearly and strongly states:

*The Church repudiates all persecutions against any man. Moreover, mindful of her common patrimony with the Jews, and motivated by the gospel's spiritual love and by no political considerations, she deplores the hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any source. (Nostra Aetate, #4)*

With the last seven words, the Council Fathers rejected the anti-Semitic actions even of the Church in the preceding centuries. Whereas earlier statements were directed at the daily actions of its members or leaders, or the Church's prayer formulas, this document makes a doctrinal statement, not subject to change, rejecting anti-Semitism.

After recalling our duty to love our brother humans under God's fatherhood, it adds:

*The ground is therefore removed from every theory or practice which leads to a distinction between men or peoples in the matter of human dignity and the rights which flow from it. ... As a consequence, the Church rejects, 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. (Nostra Aetate, #5)*

Every pope since Vatican II (except John Paul I, who lived only 33 days) has rejected anti-Semitism, often with reference to *Nostra Aetate*. A sampling:

*We dare to think that the recent solemn reaffirmation of rejection by the Catholic Church of every form of anti-Semitism and the invitation that we have extended to all the faithful of the Catholic Church to pay heed in order "to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience" may, on the Catholic side, provide the conditions for beneficial development. – Pope Paul VI, to the Liaison Committee between the Church and World Judaism, 10 Jan. 1975*

*Once again, through myself, the Church, in the words of the well-known Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (No. 4), "deplores the hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and by anyone"; I repeat: "by anyone." – Pope John Paul II, during his visit to the Rome synagogue, 13 Apr. 1986*

*As we now approach the fortieth anniversary of this historic document (*Nostra Aetate*), there is regrettably a great need to repeat our utter condemnation of racism and anti-Semitism. Violence in the name of religion is always a desecration to religion. – Pope John Paul II, addressing a delegation of the American Jewish Committee, 5 Feb. 2004*

*Sadly, anti-Semitism continues to rear its ugly head in many parts of the world. This is totally unacceptable. Every effort must be made to combat anti-Semitism wherever it is found, and to promote respect and esteem for the members of every people, tribe, language and nation across the globe. – Pope Benedict XVI, Address upon arrival in Israel, 11 May 2009*

*The Council, with the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, has indicated the way: "yes" to rediscovering Christianity's Jewish roots; "no" to every form of anti-Semitism and blame for every wrong, discrimination and persecution deriving from it. – Pope Francis, Interreligious General Audience, 28 Oct. 2015*

*All my predecessors have condemned anti-Semitism with clear words. And so I too confirm that the Church does not tolerate anti-Semitism and fights against it, on the basis of the Gospel itself. -- Pope Leo XIV, General Audience of 25 Oct. 2025*