

**CONFERENCE MARKING THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF *NOSTRA AETATE***  
**May 19-21, 2015**

Over 200 delegates from all over the world, including Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims and Hindus gathered at Catholic University in Washington, DC from May 19-21, 2015 to mark the 50th anniversary of the historic document produced by the Second Vatican Council in 1965, *Nostra Aetate*, In Our Time. The delegation from the National Council of Synagogues was headed by Rabbi David Straus and included Rabbis Gil Rosenthal, Buddy Abramowitz, Jonathan Waxman, Lewis Eron, Wayne Franklin, Harold Berman, Jeff Wohlberg, Dan Polish, Alvin Berkun, Noam Marans, David Sandmel, and Professor Adam Gregerman.

The sessions on May 19 were devoted to discussions and lectures concerning the impact of NA on Catholic relations with Islam. Dr. Sayyid M. Syeed, of the Islamic Society of North America, observed that Muslims welcome NA as a vital step to religious pluralism and as an antidote to rising Islamophobia. Bishop Denis J. Madden of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops stressed that Pope Francis I is avidly building on the culture of dialogue begun at Vatican II because there is much to learn from each other. But he also challenged Dr. Syeed whether Muslims are developing a similar document to NA.

Father Francis X. Clooney of Harvard University presented a fascinating talk on his 40-year study of Hinduism and Buddhism and what we might learn from those ancient traditions. We have much to learn by dialoguing with those faiths which number over one billion in the world. Section 2 of NA takes note for the first time in Catholic history of the rays of insight and truth contained in those ancient faiths.

At the evening session, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, who heads the Vatican's office on Muslim relations, noted that dialogue with Islam did not begin with NA but for the first time, such activities are blessed by Section 2 of that historic document. Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr of George Washington University responded and suggested that initially Muslims were not impressed by NA but they have come to appreciate it and agree that Islam should learn from Christianity how to modernize. Dialogue by its nature can bring about transformation he added.

On May 20, most of the sessions were devoted to the impact of NA on Catholic-Jewish relations. An intimate luncheon was convened at the offices of the USCCB at which ideas about the future of Catholic-Jewish relations and future discussion topics were discussed. Members of the IJCIC delegation joined as guests.

New York's Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan delivered the keynote address stressing the enormous success of NA in America and the resulting candor in confronting challenges (e.g., The Good Friday Prayer, the convent at Auschwitz, etc.) that has blossomed as a result. NA has given us all a structure of friendship that has grown and prospered. He suggested areas in which we might do more together, e.g., intensification of reclaiming God in a world that does not take God seriously, explore together pastoral issues that befuddle both our communities, including how to pass on faith, and religious persecution by extremists confronting both of our communities, viz., the rise of anti-Semitism and Christian persecution, especially in Muslim lands.

Rabbi Noam Marans, Director of interreligious and intergroup relations of the American Jewish Committee, responded, enumerating the great progress made in Catholic-Jewish relations since 1965. Initially, he noted, the response in the Jewish community was tepid but over the years it has become enthusiastic. Unlike other documents that remained dead letters, gathering dust on shelves, NA has been implemented and has become a living, influential force in our communities. He closed by reflecting on his personal journey of "sacred envy"—the experiencing of holy moments from each other's tradition.

A panel discussion consisting of Cardinals Kurt Koch, Tauran and Theodore McCarrick of Washington shared their views of the inspiring developments in interfaith relations since Vatican II. Cardinal Koch stressed that the persecution of the Armenians in 1915 really set the stage for the Shoah and Hitler is recorded to have asked, "Who remembers the Armenians?" Cardinal Tauran expressed his personal disappointment that young people are not looking for meaning but are immersed in materialism. Cardinal McCarrick celebrated the fact that no other country in the world enjoys such a close relationship between Catholics and Jews as America. He has tremendous respect for all the different streams of Jewish life in our country. Baltimore's Bishop Denis Madden added a caveat: there are still undercurrents of anti-Semitism in America today.

Cardinal Koch, who handles the Vatican's relations with the Jewish people, stressed that the goal of dialogue is "fraternity," in the words of Pope Francis I. We must deepen the dialogue but in order to do that we must first fashion a background of friendship. We must include the teachings of NA on local levels, in parishes, and in theological studies and education. He stressed that the relationship the church has with the Jews is different than with other faith communities. Judaism is not extrinsic to the church and what it means to be a Catholic but is intrinsic. The estrangement of the church from the Jewish congregation post 70 C.E. must be understood as intrinsically a family dispute. NA insists on an end to replacement theology and an understanding that we each teach the Tanakh through different but equal lenses. In a sense, we must go back to our origins and remember that Jews are part of God's salvational plan; yet, this remains a mystery how this has occurred without Jesus.

Professor Irving Greenberg, emeritus director of the Jewish Life Network, delivered a profound reply laying out the need to create a theology that acknowledges that both Judaism and Christianity are God's messengers to humanity. Both communities, he urged, must recognize that God has broadened the channels of redemption and that we are partners in spreading Divine teachings and joint witnesses to modernity, adding our input of morality and the ethical to science and democracy.

One of the fascinating sessions on the afternoon of May 20 was devoted to personal reminiscences of the process that produced the landmark documents of Vatican II. Dr. John Borelli, of Georgetown University interviewed Father Thomas F. Stransky, Rector Emeritus of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Israel, who helped draft NA and was an eyewitness to that historic Council. His description of the give and take and spirited debates was enthralling.

The conference concluded on Thursday, May 21 with two presentations: Professor Michael Root of Catholic University spoke on NA and ecumenism, noting that prior to NA, all was binary, i.e., either/or, yes/no. NA introduced scalable thought and teaches that while there are truths in other religions, only through Christ (not necessarily the Catholic Church) can one find the fulness of the religious life. But NA has its limitations: it says nothing about saving elements in other religions and Section 4 seems to lay out a different set of arguments. It remained for John Paul II to flesh it out more clearly. Root wondered, "Is diversity of religion intended by God?"

Professor Wilhelmus Valkenberg, of Catholic University, delivered the final lecture on NA and beyond, with much of his talk focusing on the history of NA.

All agreed, this was a packed and profoundly challenging conference and an appropriate tribute to a landmark document that has changed the face of interfaith relations.