



Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relation
of the Church to Non-Christian Religions

60th Anniversary Reflections

**BY THE BISHOPS COMMISSION FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY
AND INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE**

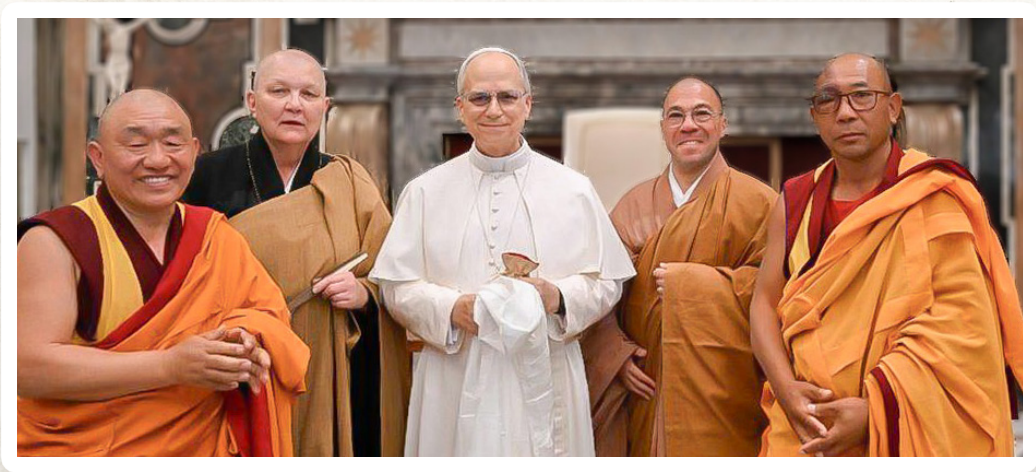


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“Lord Jesus. You, who in diversity are one and look lovingly at every person, help us to recognise ourselves as brothers and sisters, called to live, pray, work, and dream together.”

POPE LEO XIV, OCTOBER 2025

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Introduction

This year marks the 60th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican II's Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.

The Declaration is widely considered a “watershed” for, in a noticeable change of attitude, the Church spoke positively about other religions and their believers. Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI called it the **Magna Carta** of the Church's new attitude and approach to other religions. Pope Francis also took major steps to promote interfaith relations and Pope Leo XIV has already from the

beginning of his papacy indicated his desire to pursue dialogue and build bridges. **Nostra Aetate** continues to inspire and to guide Catholics in forging relationships of mutual respect and collaboration.

The Latin title is taken from the opening lines of the declaration and means “in our time”. The 60th anniversary provides us the opportunity to read the Declaration again, to appreciate its significance, to celebrate its fruits, but most of all, to apply it to the multi-religious reality of Australia and the world “in our time”.

History of the Declaration

Nostra Aetate is part of Vatican II's updating the Catholic Church to bring it into relationship with the modern world. Its genesis was in the mind and heart of Pope John XXIII, who had witnessed first-hand the tribulation of the Jewish people during the Second World War and had used his then office as Apostolic Delegate to Turkey to provide them safe passage. After a meeting with the Jewish historian, Jules Isaac, who presented him with a document showing how Church teaching had contributed to the antisemitism which had helped fuel the Shoah/Holocaust, the good Pope John directed that changing this situation was to be included in the preparations for the Council. Originally it was to be a statement on the Jews only included in the document on the Church.

Cardinal Augustine Bea steered the text through several drafts in the Vatican Council. In the volatile atmosphere of that time, after the establishment of the State of Israel, the bishops of the Middle East cautioned that a statement on the Jews only would be seen as taking political sides and would have negative consequences for the Christian minorities. Accordingly, a section was added on Islam and relations with Muslims. The bishops of Asia then asserted that their very different situation of living as a minority among the believers of the other world religions was overlooked, so further sections were added. In the process, the statement became a separate document in its own right. On 28 October 1965, in the fourth and final session, the Council Fathers approved the final draft with an overwhelming majority of 2221 to 88. This ringing endorsement made **Nostra Aetate** the official Catholic teaching on relations with believers from other religions.

Summary of the Contents

Nostra Aetate consists of five brief sections:

1. A statement on the unity of the human race, our shared origin and destiny, with religions providing answers to our common questions about the meaning of life, suffering, good and evil and what lies beyond death.
2. A description of religion as a response to a hidden power, with reference to the practices and teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism, stating that the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions.
3. A positive treatment of Muslim affinities with Catholic teaching and practice, based on references to some of the Pillars and beliefs of Islam, proposing that past hostilities be put aside in favour of mutual understanding and cooperation for the common good.
4. An account of the spiritual ties between Christians and Jews, which reproves indiscriminate accusations of Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus, affirms the ongoing validity of the Covenant between God and the people of Israel, and repudiates hatred, persecution and antisemitism as contrary to God's universal love.
5. A final affirmation that since we call God "Father", all human beings are brothers and sisters, made in God's image, so there should be no unjust discrimination but Christians should live peaceably with all.

Nostra Aetate must be read in the light of the other fifteen documents of the Vatican Council, especially **Lumen Gentium**, which teaches that the Church is "like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument ... of the unity of the whole human race", with whom we share the pilgrim journey of life; **Gaudium et Spes**,

which describes how Christians share the “joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” of all peoples and contribute to the betterment of society; and **Ad Gentes**, which acknowledges “truth and grace” as “a secret presence of God” in the rites and cultures of people in anticipation of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Definition

The new approach to believers from other religions is called “dialogue”. This term and method had been introduced to the Church by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical, **Ecclesiam Suam** (1964), which had shaped the deliberations of the Council.

Pope Francis, in his Encyclical, **Fratelli Tutti** (2020), emphasises the importance of encounter. He says “I have frequently called for the growth of a culture of encounter capable of transcending our differences and divisions ... a society where differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations. Each of us can learn something from others. No one is useless and no one is expendable.”

Today, the expressions “interreligious relations” and “interfaith relations” are used interchangeably with interreligious dialogue and encounter.

“Each of us can learn something from others. No one is useless and no one is expendable.”

POPE FRANCIS

Implementation



The promulgation of **Nostra Aetate** launched a multitude of activities to implement this new approach. Already in May 1964 Pope Paul VI had established the Secretariat for Non-Christians (re-named the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue by Pope John Paul II in 1998 and re-named by Pope Francis in 2022 as the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue). Study of other religions was undertaken, visits to leaders and sacred places of other religions were arranged, and delegations of representatives of other religions were received at the Vatican. Dioceses, national conferences of bishops and regional bodies set up commissions to educate and form people for dialogue with believers from other religions.

Since the Church’s relationship with the Jews is unique—we have a shared ancestry and a common scripture, such that the more we Christians know





about Jesus as a first century Galilean Jew the better we come to know ourselves—Christian- Jewish relations are treated by the Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews, a special department within the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity.

The Catholic Church in Australia has a strong position on interfaith dialogue. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has a Commission for Christian Unity and Inter-Religious Dialogue. This Commission has four member bishops, focusing on matters relating to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue at a national level.

The Commission is supported by a number of advisory bodies, the Australian Catholic Council for Christian Unity, Religious Relations with Jews and Inter-Religious Dialogue, as well as three expert panels made up of people from across Australia who participate in ecumenical and/or interreligious activities.

Some dioceses in Australia, such as Adelaide, Brisbane, Sydney and Parramatta already have an



ecumenical and/or interfaith Commission working at a local level to foster relations with the leaders and congregations of other religions and promote the Church's teaching in interreligious dialogue and encounter.



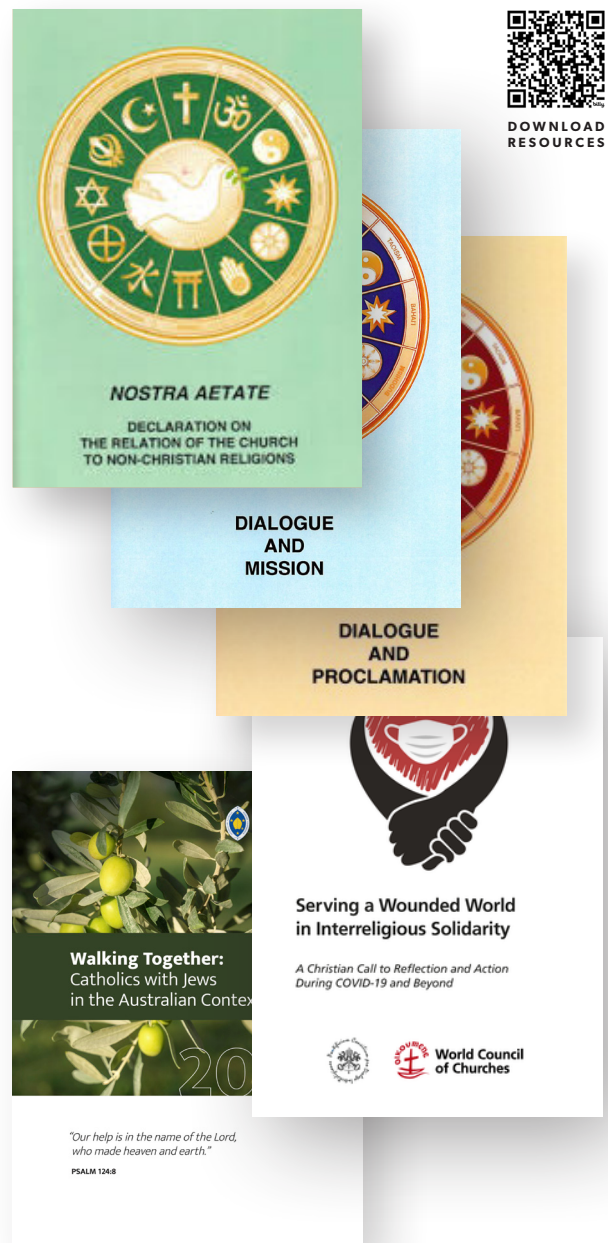
In 2022, the Plenary Council passed with overwhelming support the following two motions:

1. That each diocese and eparchy identify ways of promoting ecumenical and interfaith relationships (e.g., an Ecumenical and Interfaith Officer) that are practical and appropriate for the diocese or eparchy.
2. That the Bishops Commission for Christian Unity and Inter-Religious Dialogue – in collaboration with Catholic tertiary institutions and theological associations – provide guidance, advice and resources to dioceses and eparchies for ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and relationships, and formation for those responsible for ecumenical and interreligious relations.

Teaching Documents

These fledgling attempts at dialogue raised a host of new questions. How do we reach out to others? What have we to say to them? What have we to learn from them? Suspicions had to be overcome. Was dialogue a covert attempt to seek converts? Had dialogue replaced mission? Is dialogue a betrayal of mission? If dialogue is all there is, what remains of the missionary mandate to bring the saving message of Jesus Christ to all nations? The Church has responded to these questions and more through a series of teaching documents, of which we mention only a few:

1. In 1984 the Secretariat for Non-Christians published **The Attitude of the Church toward the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission**, known by the abbreviated title **Dialogue and Mission**. Among other things, this document introduced the four forms of dialogue:
 - Dialogue of life – sharing the events of our daily lives at home, work and play with our neighbours of different faiths.
 - Dialogue of action – based on shared religious and moral values, working together on matters of common social concern for the betterment of society.
 - Dialogue of theological exchange – sharing and discussing our religious beliefs to better understand one another and identify more precisely what we hold in common and where our differences lie.
 - Dialogue of religious experience – sharing about the spiritual practices and fruits of prayer and worship in our respective traditions.
2. In 1991 the Pontifical Council for Interreligious



Dialogue and the Congregation for Evangelisation of Peoples together published **Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ**, known by the abbreviated title, **Dialogue and Proclamation**. This was a five-year collaboration over several drafts and is a sustained reflection on the nature and purpose of dialogue and proclamation and on the relationship between them.

3. In 2014 the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue published **Dialogue in Truth and Charity: Pastoral Orientations for Interreligious Dialogue**, a reflection on the practical implementation of the Church's teaching on interreligious dialogue.
4. **Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity: A Christian Call to Reflection and Action During COVID-19 and Beyond.** A co-publication of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Council of Churches, 2020.
5. On 22 March 2023, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference launched **Walking Together: Catholics and Jews in the Australian Context** to highlight Christianity's unique relationship with Judaism and to celebrate the positive relationship the two faiths enjoy in Australia.

There is also the example and the teaching of the popes. Of special mention is the 26-year pontificate of Pope John Paul II. He regularly met with leaders of other religions on his travels and received them at the Vatican. He treated interreligious dialogue in his many messages, speeches, audiences and encyclicals. He called the religious leaders of the world to come together at Assisi to pray for peace (27 October 1986). He was the first pope to visit the Jewish synagogue in Rome (13 April 1996). He

led a "Day of Pardon" which included asking forgiveness "for the distrustful and hostile attitudes sometimes taken towards the followers of other religions" (12 March 2000). He was the first pope to visit a mosque (Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, 06 May 2001). Pope Benedict XVI reaffirmed the teaching on interreligious dialogue and followed the same practice of meeting leaders of other religions. In Abu Dhabi on 4 February 2019, Pope Francis together with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, signed the **Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together**.

There are also related documents from other Vatican offices which address religious plurality, for example, **Christianity and the World Religions** from the International Theological Commission (1997), **Dominus Iesus** from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2000) and **The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible** by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (2002).

It is important to acknowledge that the development of the teaching and practice of interreligious dialogue is not exclusive to the Catholic Church. Other Christian traditions, the World Council of Churches, ecumenical organisations and other religions have also shown significant initiatives and contributed to the growing body of wisdom and expertise in interfaith relations. Secular organisations too, such as national, state and local governments, and community relations commissions, have proved themselves committed allies in overcoming conflict, promoting civic harmony and combatting violence.



Our responsibility in our time

Over the 60 years since **Nostra Aetate** was published, remarkable progress has been made. In just a few decades, relationships between Catholics and Jews, as well as between Catholics and followers of other world religions, have undergone a radical transformation. This shift—from centuries of animosity to mutual respect—can rightly be called nothing less than a miracle. Yet much work remains.

A glance at today's headlines reveals ongoing hostility between people of different faiths. Ignorance and stereotypes continue to block genuine understanding. Religion is still used, abused, and misused for ulterior purposes, fuelling conflict and violence. Atrocities committed abroad often have repercussions here in Australia, sparking suspicion and raising tensions within and between religious communities. Whether real or imagined, the threat of violence creates fear and anxiety. Incidents of provocation, harassment, and intimidation persist, all of which endanger the stability of our relatively harmonious, multi-religious, and multi-cultural society.

Marking the 60th anniversary of **Nostra Aetate**, we call on all Catholics to build upon its foundations. As subsequent Church teaching has made clear, interreligious dialogue is not simply a prelude to mission—it is an essential part of the Church's mission itself. In our globalised, multi-religious world, as every recent pope has affirmed, such dialogue is the only path to lasting peace and harmony.

✦ WHAT WE ARE DOING

Across Australia's dioceses, interfaith commissions are actively guiding, educating, and leading Catholics in building strong relationships with people of other faiths. Bishops, commission members, and leaders of Catholic organisations meet regularly with imams, rabbis, swamis, and representatives of other religions, issuing joint statements on matters of shared concern.

Multi-faith prayer services have been organised to remember victims of tragedies—whether flood, bushfire, or acts of violent terrorism—both in Australia and abroad. Representatives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam take part in state and national ecumenical dialogues, while a variety of other interfaith events bring people together. At times, believers from different religions have shared meals—an ordinary gesture that becomes a profound act of communion.

School exchanges have also taken place, fostering understanding among younger generations. Graduates of the Young Catholic Women's Interfaith Fellowship are influencing interfaith attitudes and actions in their homes, workplaces, and wider communities.

Still, much remains to be done. This vital work is not reserved for leaders or a select few. Each of us has a role in transforming relationships and strengthening harmony in our multicultural, multi-religious Australian society.

✦ WHAT CAN YOU DO?

In these uncertain times in which we live, the Catholic Church is encouraged by the Jubilee Year of Hope, which calls all members to respond to the call to live as missionary disciples; to reach out to the members of our global family who live as religious believers of many faiths. Here are a few suggestions:



In our Catholic Secondary Schools and Parishes

1. **Introduce the students to the various major feast days**, such as Deepavali (Hindu), Eid al-Fitr (Muslim), Pesach (Jewish) and Vesach (Buddhist). They could write a letter of greetings to offer best wishes for the feast being celebrated.
2. Find out where there are schools of other faiths, e.g. Jewish and Muslim, and **invite students to come to your school** to meet with students for discussion and conversation about the differing faiths.
3. **Visit the place of worship of another religion** to experience their sacred space; some mosques and temples have guides who explain the beliefs and practices of the religion.
4. **Invite a representative from another religion** to visit the school, to engage in conversation and respond to questions asked by the students.
5. Hospitality is a biblical and cultural virtue; **let your parish extend an invitation to people of different faiths for a cup of tea or a meal**, showing sensitivity by observing appropriate dietary restrictions; be open to receive hospitality; sharing an iftar meal to break the fast at the end of the day during Ramadan is a great way to build relations with Muslims.



6. **Pray for believers from other religions**; on special occasions such as feast days, include them in the Universal Prayer of the Church (prayer of the faithful).
7. **Take part in multi-religious events for various occasions**, celebrating national days, praying for peace, showing shared religious solidarity in the face of natural and other disasters.
8. **Engage the parishioners in a formation program which is based on other religions**; invite a representative to attend the program and engage in conversation and respond to questions offered.



Our Personal Social Response

1. **Meet and greet** your neighbours and work colleagues from other religions.
2. **Offer congratulations** for a wedding or a birth, offer condolences on a death; a smile can make a world of difference.
3. A friendly **wave to your neighbours** could be the start of a friendship.
4. **Learn about the faiths of others from a reliable source**; the best way to break down stereotypes is to meet with one of the faithful, so that their religion is not just an idea, but has a face and a name.
5. **Be curious; ask questions**; do not be invasive, but a sincere, respectful enquiry will almost



always allay fears, elicit a genuine response and lead to better mutual understanding.

6. Attend various public services and celebrations of other religions as a show of solidarity and interest in the global family. Standing with others is very important to building trust and respect.
7. Become aware of various initiatives and work together on matters of common social concern, justice and peace issues, anti-discrimination groups, education, child-care, social services, aid to those in need and care for the environment.
8. Learn about and practice The Golden Rule, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12).

The above lists offer a few ideas for you to consider. You may have others you would like to share with your family, school and parish community. There are many other ways of building relations with people of other faiths. In the words of St Paul to the Romans: "Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). May we live from this great love in us.



Conclusion

On this occasion of the 60th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, in response to the opportunities and challenges of religious plurality in our day, we pledge to live and relate with believers from other religions according to the principles and guidelines set out in the Declaration.

We extend to all our sisters and brothers who follow Aboriginal, Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and other religions and spiritualities our respectful greetings. We extend this greeting to those who do not confess any faith and who follow secular and humanist traditions. We commit ourselves to work with all of you towards mutual understanding and collaboration in together building a just, harmonious, multi-religious, multi-cultural Australian society.

We make the concluding words of *Nostra Aetate* our own as we urge "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 people (Romans 12:18) so that they may truly be daughters and sons of the Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:45)."



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