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## "Gaudium et Spes, Nostra Aetate, Dignitatis Humanae", and the Opening of the Catholic Church to Other Religious Traditions

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# *Gaudium et Spes, Nostra Aetate, Dignitatis Humanae, and the Opening of the Catholic Church to Other Religious Traditions*

**Abstract:** In three closely related documents, *Gaudium et Spes, Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions), and *Dignitatis Humanae* (Declaration on Religious Freedom), the Second Vatican Council called Catholics to dialogue and cooperation with all people of good will, including followers of other religious traditions. While the Catholic Church had always been concerned about the well-being of all humans, the Second Vatican Council launched a new era in Catholic relations with other religious traditions and with the entire human community. No earlier council had taken such dramatic steps to address all people of good will, to seek healing for past conflicts, to speak in positive tones about other religions, to affirm the religious liberty of all humans, and to move forward in collaboration with the entire human community. This essay explores this transformation.

**Keywords:** *Gaudium et Spes, Nostra Aetate, Dignitatis Humanae, Lumen Gentium*, Second Vatican Council, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Religious liberty, Pope Gregory XVI, Sikhs, Daoists, Jains, French Revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte, Pope Pius VI, Pope Pius IX, Pope Leo XII, *Mirari Vos*, Pope John XXIII, Jules Isaac, *Humanae Salutis, Pacem in Terris*, Leo Jozef Cardinal Suenens, Shoah, Pope Gregory VII, Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II, King Hassan II of Morocco, purification of memory, Pope Benedict XVI, Augustin Cardinal Bea, Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium, Laudato Si'*

## Introduction

“The joys and hopes and the sorrows and anxieties of people today, especially of those who are poor and afflicted, are also the joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties of the disciples of Christ, and there is nothing truly human which does not also affect them.”<sup>1</sup> Thus begins the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, issued by Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council on December 7, 1965, often referred to by its first Latin words as *Gaudium et Spes*. Joy and hope are both basic human experiences and also theological terms referring to gifts from God. There is nothing in the history of Catholic Church Councils that is quite like *Gaudium et Spes*. Earlier councils had condemned heresies, clarified church teaching, and issued disciplinary rules for the order of the church. But no Council had issued a document like this one, devoted to “examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel.”<sup>2</sup> The Council described humanity as being in “a new stage of its history in which fundamental and rapid changes are gradually extending to the whole globe.”<sup>3</sup> The Second Vatican council was acutely aware that its age was different from earlier ages and it sought to make sense of this situation in dialogue with all persons of good will. After reflecting on the challenging contemporary situation of humanity, the constitution closes with a moving appeal to Catholics to work with all humans to shape a better world: “Since God our Father is the origin and destiny of all things, we are all called to be sisters and brothers. Therefore, in our common human and divine vocation we can and should work together without violence and deceit, and in true peace, to build the world.”<sup>4</sup>

In three closely related documents, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Church’s Relation to Non-Christian Religions), and *Dignitatis Humanae* (Declaration on Religious Freedom), the Second Vatican Council called Catholics to dialogue and cooperation with all people of good will, including followers of other religious traditions. While the Catholic Church had always been concerned about the well-being of all humans, the Second Vatican Council launched a new era in Catholic relations with other religious traditions and with the entire human community. *Gaudium et Spes*, *Nostra Aetate*, and *Dignitatis Humanae* are without precedent in the history of Catholic ecumenical councils. No earlier council had taken such dramatic steps to address all people of good

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (London: Sheed & Ward/Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 1069. All quotations from the Second Vatican Council will be from this collection.

<sup>2</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 92.

will, to seek healing for past conflicts, to speak in positive tones about other religions, to affirm the religious liberty of all humans, and to move forward in collaboration with the entire human community. This essay will explore some aspects of this transformation.

## Earlier Catholic Attitudes to Modernity and Other Religious Traditions

To appreciate the significance of these developments, it is important to recall that prior to the Second Vatican Council, Catholic attitudes toward other religious traditions and the modern world had frequently been hostile and conflicted. The Catholic Church has traditionally had a tragic and violent relationship to all of the world's religious traditions, and this was particularly true of those religions with whom it is most closely bound in history and belief: Judaism and Islam. These three religions share many important beliefs and values, but for centuries Catholics repeatedly vilified and demonized Jews and Muslims as allies of the Antichrist.

In periods when increasing numbers of Catholics came into contact with Buddhists, Hindus, Daoists, Sikhs, Jains, and followers of indigenous traditions around the world, all too often Catholics repeated the age-old patterns of intolerance, defamation, and violence in new contexts. There were some Catholics who seriously studied other religious traditions prior to the Second Vatican Council and who undertook bold initiatives to improve Catholic relations with their followers, but for the most part these efforts did not enjoy widespread publicity or the support of the highest levels of Catholic leadership.

The Catholic Church had a troubled relationship with the modern world for historic reasons. The French Revolution and the self-proclaimed Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte posed a profoundly traumatic challenge to the Catholic Church on every level, from popes to bishops to priests to religious communities to lay Catholics. Many were killed; many were uprooted; many were dispossessed. Napoleon deliberately humiliated Pope Pius VI, who served as pontiff from 1775 to 1799, one of the most difficult periods in the entire history of the papacy. Pope Pius VI saw the French Revolution as a revolt against the order sanctioned by God, as a conspiracy against the Catholic Church, given that Catholic bishops, priests, and sisters were killed. Church property was confiscated. After Napoleon had conquered the papal states, French general Louis Berthier deposed Pius VI as head of the papal states and forced him to move to Siena and then to Florence under house arrest. Then the French were afraid that other troops might

rescue him, so they took Pope Pius to Northern Italy and then to France. Some in the French government aimed to destroy both the temporal and the spiritual power of the papacy. Through the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, the memories of the French Revolution and other attacks on Catholic persons and institutions shaped the mentality of many Catholic leaders. To the degree that the French Revolution represented the forces of modern Western culture, it was seen as a direct threat to Catholic identity.

In the wake of the French Revolution, the relationship of the Catholic Church and the modern world was often sharply conflicted. Pope Leo XII, who reigned as pope from 1823–29, was very conservative: “He condemned religious toleration, reinforced the Index of Forbidden Books and the Holy Office (formerly the Inquisition), reestablished the feudal aristocracy in the Papal States, and confined Jews once again to ghettos.”<sup>5</sup> He confiscated the property of the Jews. In the Syllabus of Errors, issued in 1864, Pope Pius IX famously condemned the notion that the pope should reconcile himself with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization. What Pius meant by “modern civilization” was the separation of Church and state, freedom of conscience in religion, rebellion against legitimate princes, “the dissolving of monasteries, the institution of civil marriage, and the destruction of the social influence of the Church.”<sup>6</sup> But the statement was widely taken out of context as symbolic of a fundamentally antagonistic relationship between the Catholic Church and modern Western culture. To be sure, there were many aspects to Catholic relations with modern culture, but overall the dominant tendencies were inimical.

Exacerbating relationships with other religions and with modern Western culture was the traditional Catholic condemnation of religious liberty. For centuries the Catholic Church had insisted on the right of religious freedom for its followers when they were in a minority situation. However, it denied in principle any right to religious freedom for others because it traditionally believed that error has no rights. In 1832, Pope Gregory XVI sharply condemned “indifferentism” in his encyclical *Mirari Vos*: “This perverse opinion is spread on all sides by the fraud of the wicked who claim that it is possible to obtain the eternal salvation of the soul by the profession of any kind of religion, as long as morality is maintained.”<sup>7</sup> In light of this perspective, Pope Gregory condemned the notion of liberty of conscience in religion: “This shameful font of indifferentism gives rise to that absurd and erroneous proposition which claims that liberty of conscience

<sup>5</sup> Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the Popes: The Pontiffs from St. Peter to John Paul II* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Owen Chadwick, *A History of the Popes 1830–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 174.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Gregory XVI, “*Mirari Vos*: On Liberalism and Religious Indifferentism, Encyclical,” <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Greg16/g16mirar.htm#par13>, accessed January 9, 2016. See also Chadwick, 23–25.

must be maintained for everyone.”<sup>8</sup> Non-Catholic Christians and followers of other religious traditions saw this position of claiming religious freedom for Catholics and denying it to others as inconsistent, even hypocritical. This policy was a long-standing barrier to ecumenical and interreligious relations.

## Pope John XXIII

After the death of Pope Pius XII, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli (1881–1963), was elected as Pope John XXIII on October 28, 1958. Earlier in his career Roncalli had become familiar with Byzantine Orthodox Christians and Muslims when he was the Apostolic Visitor, the pope’s diplomatic representative, in Sofia, Bulgaria from 1926 to 1936. Then he served as the Apostolic Delegate to Turkey and Greece, living in Istanbul from 1936 to 1944 and deepening his familiarity with Orthodox Christian leaders and Muslims. Throughout his life, Roncalli had a deep respect for persons of differing backgrounds, including persons of other religious traditions.

Pope John XXIII powerfully prepared the way and set the tone for the developments at the Second Vatican Council. When on January 25, 1959, Pope John proposed the calling of an ecumenical council, he mentioned hopes for Christian ecumenical relations, but he did not originally intend to address interreligious relations. His mind was changed when he met the French Jewish historian, Jules Isaac, on June 13, 1960. Isaac had done an extensive study of the history of Christian contempt for Jews, and he told Pope John that the Jewish people knew his goodness and had great hopes from him.<sup>9</sup> Isaac presented Pope John with a request that the upcoming ecumenical council reverse the traditional negative teaching of the Catholic Church about the Jews, especially the charge that they were guilty of the death of Jesus Christ. This request moved Pope John to set in motion a process for a statement on Catholic relations with Jews. As discussions proceeded, the scope of the statement was expanded to include all other religions as well.

On December 25, 1961, Pope issued the apostolic constitution, *Humanae Salutis*, which officially convoked the Second Vatican Council to begin on October 11, 1962. Pope John placed his call for an ecumenical council as a response to what he called “a crisis underway within society”: “It is a question in fact of bringing the perennial life-giving energies of the Gospel to the modern world,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*, ed. Claire Huchet-Bishop (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

a world that boasts of its technical and scientific conquests but also bears the effects of a temporal order that some have wanted to reorganize by excluding God.”<sup>10</sup> Pope John was concerned about the threat of devastation from possible nuclear conflict, the danger from atheistic materialism in the Communist world, as well as the challenge of affluent hedonism in the industrialized West stifling the Gospel. John hoped that the upcoming council could help all humans address these problems: “And finally, to a world which is lost, confused, and anxious because of the constant threat of new frightful conflicts, the forthcoming Council is called to offer a possibility for all men of good will to turn their thoughts and proposals toward peace, a peace which can and must come above all from spiritual and supernatural realities.”<sup>11</sup>

John wanted to link the perennial religious mission of the Church to the concrete situation of the contemporary world, seeking to be helpful in practical ways to all humans. Of course, Pope John did not want to reduce the Church to simply a pragmatic, political reality; he wanted to bring the supernatural dimension of the Church to bear on the concrete problems and crises of the human community, trusting that the light of Christ can illumine all human situations. Pope John renewed this hope in his opening address to the Council, delivered on October 11. When the Council opened, the Council Fathers sent a Message to Humanity on October 20, 1962, which explicitly accepted the agenda of Pope John, focusing especially on the challenge of building peace.

Pope John also made a major contribution in the area of religious freedom, which is integrally related to Catholic interreligious relations. In his final encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, which was issued early in 1963, Pope John reversed earlier Catholic teaching and clearly affirmed the right to religious freedom, making a crucial distinction between error and persons who are in error: “It is always perfectly justifiable to distinguish between error as such and the person who falls into error—even in the case of men who err regarding the truth or are led astray as a result of their inadequate knowledge, in matters of religion or of the highest ethical standards. A man who has fallen into error does not cease to be a man. He never forfeits his personal dignity.”<sup>12</sup> This principle prepared the way for Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council to affirm the right of all humans to religious freedom in *Dignitatis Humanae*.

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<sup>10</sup> John XXIII, *Humanae Salutis*, <https://jakomonchak.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/humanae-salutis.pdf>, accessed December 14, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, n. 158, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_11041963\\_pacem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html), accessed January 9, 2016.

## *Gaudium et Spes*

In the initial planning for the Council, there was no document that covered the topic of the Church and the modern world directly; indeed, there was no direct precedent such as statement in the history of Catholic ecumenical councils. Traditionally, councils had ruled on questions of doctrine and had established rules for Church order, but they had not interpreted their age at length and sought a dialogue and collaboration with all people of good will. The Catholic Church councils had never before admitted that the Church had made mistakes or been partly responsible for misunderstandings. The Catholic Church had never openly stated that it could learn from the world. Councils had not directly addressed issues such as poverty, social justice, and the development of many cultures.

In the opening session in 1962, Cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens proposed a two-fold mission for the Council regarding the Church *ad intra* and the Church *ad extra*; this developed into a document on the Church in the Modern World to be issued. The method underlying the document is among its most important contributions to the Church's self-understanding. The Second Vatican Council accepted historical consciousness, the awareness that all of human life is in a constant process of development and change, including the Church and the understanding of the Gospel. This recognition opened the way to historical and literary critical studies of the Bible, to more nuanced discussions of the history of Church teaching, and to the need for interpreting the signs of the times in the present day. The Second Vatican Council changed the way the Church understands itself concretely in the world and the way the Church communicates with the world.

*Gaudium et Spes* looks at the entire human community in relation to Christian revelation. Revelation fosters community and helps to deepen social life. Revelation teaches humans our common origin and destiny and the command to love our neighbor; these principles support efforts to realize the unity and interdependence of the human race.<sup>13</sup> The norm for all institutions is the development of the person. However, the Council is very aware that in many settings social conditions prevent people from exercising their proper place in life.<sup>14</sup> It stresses the importance of respect and love, especially for those who are different from us, including even our "enemies."<sup>15</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* calls for understanding and dialogue and accepts the distinction that Pope John XXIII had made: where the earlier Catholic position stressed that error has no rights, *Gaudium et Spes*, like

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<sup>13</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 24.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 28.



Pope John, affirms people in error do.<sup>16</sup> On this basis, the Council condemns every form of discrimination, including those based on religious difference.<sup>17</sup> These affirmations powerfully paved the way for better relations with followers of other religious traditions.

## *Nostra Aetate* and Interreligious Relations

In 1960, after Pope John XXIII had announced that there would be an ecumenical council at the Vatican, Jules Isaac, a French Jewish historian who had studied the history of Catholic teaching on the Jews, obtained an audience with the pontiff on June 13, 1960. During World War II, the future pope, then Archbishop Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli in Istanbul, had worked to save Jews during the Shoah, Isaac presented to the pope a dossier containing a request that the upcoming council correct the false and unjust statements about the Jewish people in traditional Catholic teaching. Isaac referred in particular to the claim that the scattering of Israel was a punishment inflicted by God on the people of Israel for the crucifixion of Jesus. He also quoted the Catechism of the Catholic Church issued after the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, which taught that the guilt of all human beings was the fundamental cause of Jesus's death on the cross. Isaac argued that this teaching contradicted the false accusation that the Jewish people in particular were collectively guilty of deicide, the crime of killing God. At the end of the audience, Pope John assured Isaac that he had reason for hope.

A few months later, in September 1960, Pope John commissioned Augustin Cardinal Bea, president of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, to prepare a draft of a declaration on the relationship between the Catholic Church and the people of Israel. During the often heated debates over the declaration at Vatican II, some bishops argued the church could not change its traditional teaching that Jews had completely broken off the covenant with God by rejecting Jesus and that their only hope for salvation lay in conversion to the Catholic Church. Despite the weight of traditional teachings, after the horrors of the Shoah the large majority of bishops at Vatican II believed that it was imperative that the Catholic Church express a new attitude toward the Jewish community. The painful awareness of massive, unjust suffering in the Shoah and the difficult recognition that centuries of Catholic anti-Jewish teaching and practice had fostered animosity and hatred toward the Jews motivated the search for new

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., n. 29.

theological perspectives. In response to strong opposition, many bishops, especially from Germany and the United States, insisted on the need for a new statement of the relation of the Catholic Church to the Jews and a clear condemnation of anti-Semitism and all forms of religious discrimination, from whatever source. Turning to the Jewish people, *Nostra Aetate* notes the roots of the Catholic Church in the religion of ancient Israel. Implicitly rejecting the long history of anti-Jewish teaching, the Council recalls the apostle Paul's teaching that "the Jews still remain very dear to God, whose gift and call are without regret."<sup>18</sup> The council rejects the charge that all Jews alive at the time of Jesus were responsible for his death, let alone Jews of later generations. The Declaration also states that the Catholic Church "deplores feelings of hatred, persecutions and demonstrations of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at whatever time and by whomsoever."<sup>19</sup>

As discussions of the church's relationship with the Jewish people progressed, some Council fathers proposed broadening the scope of the document to include Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists as well. The new attitude toward the Jewish community had profound implications for the church's stance toward every other religious tradition. The final text of Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* acknowledges that in the present age the human community's ever closer contacts among nations call for new attention to other religions, especially "to what human beings have in common and what things tend to bring them together."<sup>20</sup>

The opening words in Latin, "Nostra Aetate," mean "in our age." They proclaim awareness that the present age is distinctive in its responsibilities to foster harmonious relations among religions. The council notes that there is a nearly universal religious sense of an unseen power at work in the universe and human life. Since all creation comes from God, is guided by God's providence, and returns to God, the council looks in hope for a fundamental unity among the peoples of the world and calls for dialogue and collaboration to "recognize, preserve and promote those spiritual and moral good things as well as the socio-cultural values which are to be found among them."<sup>21</sup>

The Council noted various aspects of religious experience, mentioning Hinduism and Buddhism in particular, and set forth the fundamental principle: "the church rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these religions."<sup>22</sup> By acknowledging truth and holiness in other traditions, the council opened the door to viewing other religious traditions as recipients of divine manifestation and grace. *Gaudium et Spes* clearly teaches that the Spirit of God

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<sup>18</sup> *Nostra Aetate*, n. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

is active throughout all human life, offering grace and salvation to all humans, whether they have explicitly followed the path of Jesus Christ or not.<sup>23</sup>

For Catholics, the Second Vatican Council marked the decisive turning point in attitudes toward Muslims. In 1964, one year before *Nostra Aetate*, *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), explicitly included Muslims in God's salvific plan, affirming that "the plan of salvation also embraces those who acknowledge the Creator, and among these the Moslems are first; they profess to hold the faith of Abraham and along with us they worship the one merciful God who will judge humanity on the last day."<sup>24</sup> The following year *Nostra Aetate* also reached out to Muslims. Aware of the centuries of conflict between Muslims and Catholics, the Council expressed its respect for Muslims and praised their worship of the one God, their veneration of Abraham, Jesus, and Mary, their expectation of a day of judgment, and their practice of morality, prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. Passing over most earlier papal statements in silence, the declaration cites a cordial letter from Pope Gregory VII to Al-Nasir, the Muslim ruler of Bijaya, in present-day Algeria in 1076.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to most conciliar documents that cite numerous earlier magisterial statements, *Nostra Aetate* refers to only this papal letter from the eleventh century, passing over other traditional teachings in silence. While aware of the history of past hostilities, the Declaration does not want to be imprisoned in a cycle of recriminations but rather urges Muslims and Catholics alike "that, forgetting past things, they train themselves towards sincere mutual understanding and together maintain and promote social justice and moral values as well as peace and freedom for all people."<sup>26</sup> While *Nostra Aetate* is very brief, it had a tremendous impact not only on Catholic relations with other religions, but also on other Christian communions who went through similar discernment in these years.

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<sup>23</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22.

<sup>24</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, n. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory VII wrote: "Almighty God, who wishes that all should be saved and none lost, approves nothing in us so much as that after loving him one should love his fellow man, and that one should not do to others, what one does not want done to oneself. You and we owe this charity to ourselves especially because we believe in and confess one God, admittedly in a different way, and daily praise and venerate him, the Creator of the world and ruler of this world." Quoted by Pope John Paul II in his "Message to the Faithful of Islam at the End of the Month of Ramadan, April 3, 1991, in *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Byron L. Sherwin and Harold Kasimow (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 66.

<sup>26</sup> *Nostra Aetate*, n. 3.

## *Dignitatis Humanae* and Religious Freedom

Both *Gaudium et Spes* and *Nostra Aetate* affirm the right of all humans to religious freedom, to worship God in accordance with their conscience. *Dignitatis Humanae* developed this position at greater length. It repeated the traditional teaching that all humans have an obligation in conscience to seek the truth to the best of their ability. It followed in the line of Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* by affirming that even people whom the Catholic Church views as being objectively in error nonetheless retain the right to pursue their conscience in religious matters. *Dignitatis Humanae* rejects any use of force in communicating the truth, teaching that the human person has a right to religious freedom. Such freedom consists in this, that all should have such immunity from coercion by individuals, or by groups, or by any human power, that no one should be forced to act against his conscience in religious matters, nor prevented from acting according to his conscience, whether in private or in public, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.<sup>27</sup>

The Declaration drew the further conclusion from this principle “that it is wrong for a civil power to use force or fear or other means to impose the acceptance or rejection of any religion, or to prevent anyone from entering or leaving a religious body.”<sup>28</sup> Like *Nostra Aetate*, *Dignitatis Humanae* is a very short declaration, but it had a tremendous impact on improving Catholic relations with other religious traditions.

## Pope John Paul II

Since the Second Vatican Council, there have been countless dialogues of Catholics with persons of other religious traditions. Some of the most important developments have been with Muslims. The Holy Qur'an challenges Muslims to compete in virtue with followers of other religious paths: “So let your goals be everything good. Your destiny, everyone, is to God, Who will tell you about that wherein you differed” (Q 5:48).<sup>29</sup> In this spirit King Hassan II of Morocco invited Pope John Paul II to come and address thousands of young Muslims in Casablanca, Morocco on August 19, 1985. Pope John Paul accepted the invitation and told the young Muslims:

<sup>27</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 6.

<sup>29</sup> *The Qur'an: A New Translation* by Thomas Cleary (Starlatch Press, 2004), 55.

The Catholic Church regards with respect and *recognizes the quality of your religious progress*, the richness of your spiritual tradition. [...] Christians and Muslims, in general we have badly understood each other, and, sometimes, in the past, we have opposed and even exhausted each other in polemics and in wars. I believe that, today, God invites us *to change our old practices*. We must respect each other, and also we must stimulate each other in good works on the path of God. [...] Dear young people, I wish that you may be able to help in thus building a world where God may have first place in order to aid and to save humankind. On this path, you are assured of the esteem and the collaboration of your Catholic brothers and sisters whom I represent among you this evening.<sup>30</sup>

No Muslim ruler in history had issued this type of invitation to a pope and had it accepted. Both the invitation and its acceptance are difficult to imagine apart from the transformation that Popes John XXIII and Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council had initiated in Catholic interreligious.

Another dramatic encounter occurred the following year, in October 1986, at a time when the tensions of the Cold War were still acute. Pope John Paul II invited religious leaders from a wide range of traditions to come to Assisi to pray for world peace. Jews and Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Hindus, representatives of traditional African and Native American religions, Shintoists and Jains all participated. The pope noted that such diverse traditions could not make a common prayer together and added “but we can be present while others pray.” In his remarks to the assembled leaders Pope John Paul stressed both respect for the differences among religious traditions and also the importance of affirming a common ground whence “to operate together in the solution of this dramatic challenge of our age: true peace or catastrophic war.”<sup>31</sup>

*Gaudium et Spes* acknowledges that Catholics have not always been exemplary witnesses to the Catholic faith.<sup>32</sup> In 1994 Pope John Paul II challenged Catholics to celebrate the third millennium of Christian faith by undertaking a critical reexamination of the tradition with attention to the ways in which Catholics have betrayed the Gospel through violence and intolerance and pass through a “purification of memory,” acknowledging the sins committed in the name of Jesus Christ by earlier generations. In the season of Lent in the year 2000, a time when Catholics seek God’s forgiveness for their sins, Pope John Paul II led a prayer service at the Vatican during which Cardinals acknowledge past sins of Catholics against followers of other religions and prayed for recon-

<sup>30</sup> “Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Young Muslims,” n. 10, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19850819\\_giovanistadio-casablanca\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850819_giovanistadio-casablanca_en.html).

<sup>31</sup> Pope John Paul II, “The Challenge and the Possibility of Peace,” *Origins* 16/21 (Nov. 6, 1986): 370.

<sup>32</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 19.

ciliation and healing. Later that spring Pope John Paul journeyed to Jerusalem, where he placed in the Western Wall a piece of paper containing the prayer seeking forgiveness for sins against the Jewish people. Many Jews and Catholics acknowledged that this was one of the most moving moments in the entire history of Catholic-Jewish relations.

God of our fathers,  
you chose Abraham and his descendants  
to bring your Name to the Nations:  
we are deeply saddened by the behaviour of those  
who in the course of history  
have caused these children of yours to suffer,  
and asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves  
to genuine brotherhood  
with the people of the Covenant.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.<sup>33</sup>

R. Amen

The relationship between Catholics and Muslims involves special challenges because of the conflicts raging in some areas today. Pope John Paul II clearly distinguished authentic Islam from the actions of the terrorists and was a leader in developing relations with Muslims. On May 6, 2001, he became the first pope ever recorded to visit a mosque—the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, which was built on an earlier Byzantine Christian church honoring the grave of St. John the Baptist. He commented:

It is my ardent hope that Muslim and Christian religious leaders and teachers will present our two great religious communities as communities in respectful dialogue, never more as communities in conflict. It is crucial for the young to be taught the ways of respect and understanding, so that they will not be led to misuse religion itself to promote or justify hatred and violence. [...] In Syria, Christians and Muslims have lived side by side for centuries, and a rich dialogue of life has gone on unceasingly. [...] For all the times that Muslims and Christians have offended one another, we need to seek forgiveness from the Almighty and offer each other forgiveness.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/jp.html>, accessed January 9, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> “Address of the Holy Father,” Meeting with the Muslims Leaders, Omayyad Great Mosque, Damascus, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/may/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20010506\\_omayyadi.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20010506_omayyadi.html), accessed January 9, 2016.

## Popes Benedict XVI and Francis

More recent popes have continued the interreligious outreach initiated by the Council. In his first trip to Germany since becoming pope, Pope Benedict XVI entered the synagogue in Cologne to meet the Jewish community, and he also spoke to Muslims, expressing his respect and esteem for both communities and the importance of working together to reject all forms of intolerance and shape a peaceful world. In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis has continued the call of the Second Vatican Council to reach out to followers of all religious paths. He strongly supports interreligious initiatives in the context of seeking peace and the flourishing of life for all: “An attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions. [...] Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities.”<sup>35</sup> In the exhortation Francis explains the hoped-for result of such an attitude of openness: “In this way we learn to accept others and their different ways of living, thinking and speaking. We can then join one another in taking up the duty of serving justice and peace, which should become a basic principle of all our exchanges. A dialogue which seeks social peace and justice is in itself, beyond all merely practical considerations, an ethical commitment which brings about a new social situation.”<sup>36</sup>

Pope Francis has developed the call of the Second Vatican Council to address the current ecological challenge. In his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Francis believes that such a revolution must be informed by religious and ethical principles that go beyond the domain of empirical science. “Any technical solution which science claims to offer will be powerless to solve the serious problems of our world if humanity loses its compass, if we lose sight of the great motivations which make it possible for us to live in harmony, to make sacrifices and to treat others well.”<sup>37</sup> Francis acknowledges that believers have not always been “faithful to the treasures of wisdom which we have been called to protect and preserve,” but nonetheless he calls for a return to the sources of religious traditions in order to respond to current needs.<sup>38</sup> In this context, he calls for renewed interreligious dialogue on ecological issues.

Shaping all of Pope Francis’s papal ministry is his commitment to building a culture of encounter based upon dialogue and the recognition of the goodness

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<sup>35</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 250, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html), accessed January 9, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Laudato Si'*, n. 200.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

of diversity. On his trip to Paraguay in July 2015, Pope Francis set forth this vision:

Moreover, dialogue presupposes and demands that we seek a culture of encounter; an encounter which acknowledges that diversity is not only good, it is necessary. Uniformity nullifies us, it makes us robots. The richness of life is in diversity. For this reason, the point of departure cannot be, ‘I’m going to dialogue but he’s wrong.’ No, no, we must not presume that the other person is wrong. I dialogue with my identity but I’m going to listen to what the other person has to say, how I can be enriched by the other, who makes me realize my mistakes and see the contribution I can offer. It is a going out and a coming back, always with an open heart. If I presume that the other person is wrong, it’s better to go home and not dialogue, would you not agree? Dialogue is for the common good and the common good is sought by starting from our differences, constantly leaving room for new alternatives. [...] Dialogue is about seeking the common good. Discuss, think, and discover together a better solution for everybody.<sup>39</sup>

In January 2016, Pope Francis released a video request for prayers on YouTube that noted the religious diversity of humans and ended with the hope: “That sincere dialogue among men and women of different faiths may produce fruits of peace and justice.”<sup>40</sup> The impact of the Second Vatican Council’s invitation to Catholics to collaborate with all humans in building a world of respect, justice, and peace has been dramatic; this challenge echoes still.

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<sup>39</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150711\\_paraguay-societa-civile.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150711_paraguay-societa-civile.html), accessed January 9, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6FfTxwTX34&feature=youtu.be&a>, accessed January 9, 2016.



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Leo D. Lefebure

## *Gaudium et Spes, Nostra Aetate, Dignitatis Humanae* et l'ouverture de l'Église catholique à d'autres traditions religieuses

### Résumé

Dans les trois documents, étroitement liés les uns aux autres, *Gaudium et Spes* (Constitution pastorale sur l'Église dans le monde de ce temps), *Nostra Aetate* (Déclaration sur les relations de l'Église avec les religions non chrétiennes) et *Dignitatis Humanae* (Déclaration sur la liberté religieuse), le Concile Vatican II a convié les catholiques au dialogue et à la coopération avec les gens de bonne volonté, sans exclure pour autant les adeptes d'autres traditions religieuses. Encore que l'Église catholique ait toujours été soucieuse du bien de l'humanité tout entière, c'est bel et bien le Concile Vatican II qui est devenu le nouveau commencement dans les relations des catholiques avec d'autres traditions religieuses et avec la communauté humaine tout entière. Jamais auparavant aucun concile n'a fait une démarche tellement radicale pour s'adresser aux gens de bonne volonté, pour chercher le relèvement des conflits du passé, pour confirmer la liberté religieuse de tout être humain et pour avancer dans la coopération avec la communauté humaine tout entière. Le présent essai a pour objectif d'examiner cette transformation.

Mots clés: *Gaudium et Spes* (Constitution pastorale sur l'Église dans le monde de ce temps), *Nostra Aetate* (Déclaration sur les relations de l'Église avec les religions non chrétiennes) et *Dignitatis Humanae* (Déclaration sur la liberté religieuse), relations entre différentes religions, liberté religieuse

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*Gaudium et Spes, Nostra Aetate, Dignitatis Humanae* e l'apertura della Chiesa Cattolica alle altre tradizioni religiose

Sommario

Nei tre documenti strettamente correlati *Gaudium et Spes* (Costituzione Pastorale sulla Chiesa nel mondo contemporaneo), *Nostra Aetate* (Dichiarazione sulle relazioni della Chiesa con le religioni non cristiane) e *Dignitatis Humanae* (Dichiarazione sulla libertà religiosa), il Concilio Vaticano II ha invitato i cattolici al dialogo ed alla collaborazione con gli uomini di buona volontà, non escludendo i seguaci di altre tradizioni religiose. Sebbene la Chiesa Cattolica si sia sempre curata del bene di tutta l'umanità, fu il Concilio Vaticano II a diventare il nuovo inizio nelle relazioni dei cattolici con le altre tradizioni religiose e con tutta la società umana. Nessun concilio aveva mai fatto in precedenza un passo così radicale per rivolgersi agli uomini di buona volontà, per cercare il risanamento dei conflitti del passato, per confermare la libertà religiosa di ciascuna persona e per progredire nella collaborazione con tutta la comunità umana. Il saggio presentato studia questa trasformazione.

Parole chiave: *Gaudium et Spes* (Costituzione Pastorale sulla Chiesa nel mondo contemporaneo), *Nostra Aetate* (Dichiarazione sulle relazioni della Chiesa con le religioni non cristiane) e *Dignitatis Humanae* (Dichiarazione sulla libertà religiosa), rapporti interreligiosi, libertà religiosa