



AUSTRALIAN  
CATHOLIC BISHOPS  
CONFERENCE

# Walking Together: Catholics with Jews in the Australian Context

# 2023

*“Our help is in the name of the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.”*

**PSALM 124:8**

# Introduction

Catholic identity is intimately linked to the faith of Israel. Christianity's relationship to Judaism is unique. It is unlike our relationship to any other faith tradition. Jesus was Jewish and our Christian tradition grew from within First Century CE Judaism. Pope Francis, in his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, affirmed this.

The Church ... looks upon the people of the covenant and their faith as one of the sacred roots of her own Christian identity ... Dialogue and friendship with the children of Israel are part of the life of Jesus' disciples ... God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant and bring forth treasures of wisdom which flow from their encounter with his word. For this reason, the Church also is enriched when she receives the values of Judaism. (# 247, 248, 249)

Pope Francis' appreciation of Judaism draws upon the teaching and actions of his recent predecessors, especially Popes John XXIII, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. The deep respect these popes had for Judaism is grounded in the life of Jesus as a faithful Jew. The teaching of each pope marked a further stage in the reception of *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council's "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions".

Three affirmations clearly emerged in *Nostra Aetate*. First, an acknowledgement of the Church's unique and permanent bond with Jews, the "stock of Abraham". Second, the Church's recognition of God's enduring love for and fidelity to the Jewish people—an insight later developed and expressed by Pope John Paul II as the "irrevocable" covenant between God and Israel. Finally, the Church's condemnation of antisemitism. In his 1986 address in Rome's synagogue, Pope John Paul II spoke of Jews as his "elder" siblings. This expression captures the heart of Catholic teaching about Jewish-Christian relations.

In 1992, the Australian Catholic Bishops published a



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set of guidelines and recommendations to enhance Catholic-Jewish relations. They wrote in the light of new developments within the Church and the world. Now, thirty years later, it is timely to issue a fresh document especially in the light of global developments since that earlier publication.

We wish to encourage all people of goodwill, and especially Australia's Catholics, to deepen their understanding of the Church's relationship to Judaism by better appreciating the Jewishness of Jesus and of the first generation of Jesus' disciples. We also offer some guidelines about how we can enhance our relationships with our Jewish sisters and brothers now and in the future, so that together we may contribute to the flourishing of our society.

These guidelines reflect our belief in the sacredness of each person, made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27). This belief invites us to dialogue with people whatever their convictions, especially with the Jewish people. Our society will only be strong when we acknowledge and honour each person and their right to help build our society. This belief impels us to work against racism and anti-Judaism. It invites us to be instruments of peace.



# Walking Together...

## ...with All People of Faith

We see evidence of increased interreligious collaboration and support throughout our country. The present era has deepened the desire to affirm the contribution which people from different perspectives of faith can make to the spirit of harmony and the common good. This is especially true in the growth in understanding and cooperation between Jews and Christians. The gifts and challenges of Australia's increasingly religiously diverse society have led to increased Catholic interreligious initiatives: for example, Abrahamic dialogues; curriculum-based learnings about world religions; promotion of principles of dialogue and justice; outreach to First Nations people in the spirit of the 2017 *Uluru Statement from the Heart*; advocacy on behalf of refugees and minority groups; and shared concern about the environment and climate change. In these activities Catholics work alongside Jews to deepen social harmony and seek the common good.

## ...with the Jewish People

Our relationship with Judaism is like no other. St Paul reminds us that we are grafted onto the root of Judaism (Romans 11). Jesus, his mother Miriam (Mary) and his followers were Jewish. Judaism is the root from which Jesus sprang (Matthew 1:1-17). Our faith is centred on the incarnation of Jesus as a first-century Jew and on him as the risen Christ who is universal and timeless. Thus, the bishops at the Second Vatican Council declared,

“[T]he Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets.”  
(*Nostra Aetate*, 4)

Because of this close bond, the Church's own self-understanding has a permanent, intrinsic reference to Judaism. Christians, therefore, are to be naturally attentive to Jewish experience and willing to cooperate with Jews to bring about God's reign.

We recognise God's enduring covenant with the Jews. We know that God is faithful and that God's covenant

with the Jews has never been revoked, and that therefore Catholics avoid any approach towards Jews that suggest they are bereft of a saving relationship with God.

Further, these common bonds will enhance our local church's decision to walk a synodal path in her pastoral decision-making.

## ...Shaped by our Common Scriptures

Our bonds are radically biblical, grounded in the Torah. These attitudes shape Christian listening to the Holy Spirit's presence in the world. This listening is important as Christians turn to their Scriptures mindful of the Jewish people, the first to hear the Word of God.

We receive the First Testament from First Century Judaism. Even the books which are not included in the Jewish Bible come from a Jewish and Jewish-Greek context. We know too that many New Testament texts come from the context of Judaism within the Greco-Roman world. Christians and Jews consider the Scriptures they share as God's revealed word. These shared Scriptures can nourish and form us as God's people. Both Christians and Jews have their own tradition of interpretation and application. But we can learn much from each other's traditions. The Church has recognised that Catholics need to cultivate “a new respect for the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament” and “that Christians can learn a great deal from a Jewish exegesis practiced for more than 2000 years” (Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible”, 2001, #21). We affirm the mutual quest to understand and learn from each other's interpretation of the Bible. We acknowledge that what we call the Old Testament was the only Sacred Scripture Jesus knew. It is a shared patrimony.

# Repairing Fractures on the Way...

The Catholic Church in Australia seeks to journey with people of faith and especially with our Jewish sisters and brothers. This journey has not always been easy. There have been fractures on this journey. The Holocaust stands out as the most significant, fed by antisemitism, supersessionism, a proselytising attitude and a failure to recognise our roots in Judaism and the Jewishness of Jesus.

## 1. Antisemitism

The Shoah is a devastating fact of history and a product of a long history of antisemitism.

Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews... their property...community institutions and religious facilities. (*Working Definition of Antisemitism, International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, 2019, p. 6*)

Antisemitism has rhetorical and physical manifestations. Its terror lingers amongst Jews. Our Christian theology has been reshaped in light of the Holocaust, the “Shoah”. Although today’s Jews in Australia live in relative peace and safety compared to other parts of the world, they have not escaped the impact of antisemitic attitudes and actions. Antisemitism within Australia has been exacerbated by political tensions in other parts of the world.

We are further concerned about increasing levels of ignorance and even denial of the Holocaust. Large numbers of Jewish Holocaust survivors immigrated to Australia after World War II, some of whom are still with us. That they and their descendants still find themselves exposed to denials and minimisation of the terrible crimes committed by the Nazi Regime is a violation of their human dignity. This anti-Jewish sentiment has been fuelled by two thousand years of a troubled

relationship. However, as Pope Francis reminds us in his 2020 social encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, “every human being possesses an inalienable dignity...all people are my brothers and sisters” (#125).

We bishops will continue to work for justice for all, especially those marginalised by radical, strident voices that propagate antisemitism, misinformation and warped interpretations of history.

A theological expression of antisemitism is supersessionism. This theological construct envisions Judaism as being replaced by the teachings of Jesus and of the Church. It comes from a false understanding of the New Testament and a lack of appreciation of the Jewishness of Jesus. The Catholic Church no longer teaches or even suggests that Israel has been superseded by the Church; it acknowledges the continuation of the vibrant life of Judaism today and recognises that God’s covenant with Israel continues to be strong and life-giving.

## 2. Evangelisation not Proselytism

In general, evangelisation is the proclamation of the good news about Jesus and is the mission given by him to his Church. Pope Francis addressed this proclamation in *Evangelii Gaudium*, in the first place to those who already identify as Christians. He also proposed it to the whole world, especially to those cultures that have forgotten God; but always with respect for the dignity of human consciences. Any attempt to impose, induce or even coerce would be a contradiction of true evangelisation. Such activities, sometimes described as “proselytising”, have marred Christian history in the past and we reject them.

As we have indicated earlier in this document, our unique relationship with the Jewish people requires us to further clarify our approach. As the Vatican’s Commission for Relations with the Jews states,

The Church is...obliged to view evangelisation to Jews, who believe in the one God, in a different manner from that to people of other religions and world views. In concrete terms this means that the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews. (*The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable*, para. 40)

### 3. Jesus' Relationship with Judaism and the Pharisees

Jesus was Jewish. He was formed by his Jewish faith. The Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews reminds us that,

Jesus was a Jew, was at home in the Jewish tradition of his time, and was decisively shaped by this religious milieu. (*The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable*, para. 14)

The writings of the Old Testament were Jesus' Scriptures, and the Book of Psalms was his prayer book. Moreover, his intimate relationship with God, whom he called "Abba", shaped his way of viewing his world and the people in it. In word and deed Jesus proclaimed God's presence and communion with all. Jesus' concern was to renew the Jewish faith of his people, especially their belovedness by the God revealed in the Torah.

This conviction also aligned him with the Pharisees, a movement of religious renewal centred on the spiritual life of the family. Later portraits of the Pharisees by the Gospel evangelists are not historically accurate. In the Gospels, the Pharisees are depicted as Jesus' antagonists who resist his teaching. Jesus criticises them. In John's Gospel, he says that their father is the devil (Jn 8:44). This negative Gospel portrait of the Pharisees does not reflect their actual situation in the time of Jesus. The Pontifical Biblical Commission recognised that,

the presentation of the Pharisees in the Gospels was influenced in part by subsequent polemics between Christians and Jews. At the time of Jesus, there was no doubt that Pharisees taught an ethic worthy of approval. (*The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, para. 67)

Jesus and the Pharisees were committed to renewing the Jewish people in their relationship with God.

## Walking Together: The Road Ahead

With faith in the one God and Creator of all, Catholics and Jews can walk together and work together to strengthen mutual bonds of friendship and enrich the social fabric of our nation. To realise this, we suggest a number of important elements and attitudes needing cultivation:

1. That we affirm interreligious relations. Whereas Catholics and Jews do this regularly and publicly at major commemorative events, it is also important that these relations be affirmed where and when Catholics and Jews meet, converse and cooperate in the course of everyday activities—in neighbourly circumstances, shopping centres, sporting fields, workplace settings, and elsewhere.

2. That we jointly commit to social action. Jews and Catholics share a commitment to justice as we walk together for peace and harmony in society. We can actively cooperate to combat all forms of antisemitism, religious hatred and discrimination against religions. We can also continue working, shoulder to shoulder, in supporting government policies which enhance the lives of all people and help make Australia an open and welcoming society. Jews and Catholics arrived on the First Fleet. The memory of this common history encourages us to work together for justice for First Nation Peoples who trace their history back 60,000 years. We also, as believers in God's creative acts, share a desire to preserve and care for this endangered planet.

3. That Jews and Catholics study Scripture together, where this is possible. It is a wonderful opportunity to widen and deepen knowledge of the Scriptures and to become friends. It can also help Catholics become aware of where our catechetical texts and liturgical celebrations can avoid negative attitudes towards Jews and Judaism.

4. That Jews and Catholics honour the dignity of their respective differences. The two traditions need to be respected in their own right. An example is the

difference between the Eucharist and Jewish Seder. Both are sacred events; but the two should not be confused. Points of difference are moments of education for Catholics regarding Jewish feasts and ritual practices.

5. That Catholic liturgical celebrations avoid negative stereotypes of Jews and Judaism. Liturgy offers worship to God and forms us as a community. It is not the place to offer negative comments or comparisons about our elder brothers and sisters, the Jewish people, or the Pharisees, the forebears of Rabbinic Judaism. We have asked our Commission for Liturgy to develop materials to guide those who preach in, preside at or prepare worship in our churches to better understanding and sensitivity.

6. That Catholic catechetical texts and other media be constantly updated in light of the latest biblical and historical scholarship. For example, Christians have often translated Torah as Law but it is better understood as teaching. Another example would be correcting supersessionist theology.

7. That pastoral care be offered with great respect and in a well-informed manner to interreligious couples from both traditions. Couples need to consider how they will raise their children with an appreciation of two traditions. Further, appropriate education and resources need to be made available to Jewish and Catholic marriage celebrants.

## Conclusion

To this we are driven, Jews and Christians, by the command to love our neighbour, by a common hope for the Kingdom of God and by the great heritage of the Prophets. (*Notes on the Correct Way to present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechism in the Roman Catholic Church*, para. 11)

The history of relations between Jews and Catholics in Australia has mostly been a positive one. Two examples may suffice. Jews were alongside Catholics as convicts and the first settlers that came to Australian shores in the eighteenth century. St Mary of the Cross MacKillop was supported by Jews in her ministry especially during the time of her excommunication in 1871. In this document we seek to continue that history of cooperation, mutual support and deepening religious engagement and dialogue. The comment of Pope Benedict XVI is particularly relevant. He reflects on St Paul's letter to the Romans:

Saint Paul also uses the lovely image of the olive tree to describe the very close relationship between Christians and Jews: the Church of the Gentiles is like a wild olive shoot, grafted onto the good olive tree that is the people of the Covenant (cf. Rom 11:17-24). In other words, we draw our nourishment from the same spiritual

roots. We encounter one another as brothers and sisters who at certain moments in their history have had a tense relationship, but are now firmly committed to building bridges of lasting friendship." (*Verbum Domini*, 43)

Equally pertinent are the following words from *The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable* as we conclude our reflections on enhancing Jewish-Catholic relations in Australia:

The first goal of the dialogue is to add depth to the reciprocal knowledge of Jews and Christians. One can only learn to love what one has gradually come to know, and one can only know truly and profoundly what one loves. This profound knowledge is accompanied by a mutual enrichment whereby the dialogue partners become the recipients of gifts. The Conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate* (No.4) speaks of the rich spiritual patrimony that should be further discovered step by step through biblical and theological studies and through dialogue. (*The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable*, para 44)

Faithful to the journey begun by *Nostra Aetate* and the many positive developments in Jewish-Catholic relations in Australia since colonisation and especially over the past half a century, we hope that this fresh statement will offer new impetus to Catholic-Jewish dialogue and cooperation on many fronts, for the betterment of Australian society.

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