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# ON THE NOSTRA AETATE: A LANDMARK DOCUMENT OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S ENGAGEMENT WITH OTHER RELIGIONS

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## ABSTRACT

50 years ago (Dec 8, 1965), at the conclusion of Vatican II, the greatest event marking the life of the Church in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Roman Catholic Church issued “*Nostra Aetate*.” The declaration has been a landmark for the Church’s relation and appraisal of other religions. It acknowledged the central role religions play in the history of humanity. Humanity has henceforth, been identified as the concrete platform calling for interactions and cross-fertilization among religions. Religions are to be more united in what they are best at: striving for answers to the existential riddles and sufferings of human persons. For those on the path of dialogue, the 50th anniversary of NA is an opportune occasion to acknowledge shared concerns and learn how respective efforts of religious groups pave the road to more cooperation and mutual enrichment.

## Introduction

*Nostra Aetate* or the “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” promulgated on October 28, 1965 is the shortest of the sixteen documents of Vatican II. Still, its significance for the development of relations of the Catholic Church with other religions has been unprecedented. As Ariel Ben Ami says, “it was the first time

that a council had laid down principles in a solemn way concerning non-Christian religions and recognized in these religions positive values that could be appreciated.”<sup>1</sup> This was in fact to have implications for ways Catholics look and interact with followers of other living faith as well their engagement with existing religious traditions. Consequently, it has been one of the referential foundations for Catholic engagement with believers of other religions as well as their faith traditions.

*Nostra Aetate* is still a relevant document for Asia. Asia is the cradle of many religious traditions including Christianity, of which Catholicism is a branch. *Nostra Aetate* strives for a balance between the “general” and the “specific.” It acknowledges a general common ground that religions share in virtue of their essence and the distinctive ways and claims regarding how they achieve their sense of mission. Such a balance entices dialogue and cooperation among religions: religions are called to meet and cooperate in what they hold together, without compromising or denying their respective differences. Respect and mutual appreciation become crucial from the moment believers enter the logic of the balance implied in *Nostra Aetate*. Religions need each other and can complement each other only as far as they are able to recognize their common call and positively nurture their differences. The goal of interreligious dialogue is to enhance mutual understanding, enrichment and cooperation among religions. According to the model instituted in *Nostra Aetate*, in dialogue, on the one hand one needs to recognize truth and goodness in other religious traditions, and on the other hand, to set parameters for a non-compromising interpretation of Catholic beliefs and practices. Dialogue cannot be conceived as a strategy to level down the differences existing among religions.

This paper offers some generalities on *Nostra Aetate*, including its history and significance - as a time marker for inter-religious dialogue. It also ponders on the methods the document fosters and their implication for present praxes of interreligious dialogue in Asia and elsewhere.

## **Generalities on *Nostra Aetate*:**

### **Origin: Connection with the Jewish Question**

NA is one of the three declarations<sup>2</sup> of Vatican II. It is the shortest of all the documents and yet it reflects the ebbing inclusivity in Vatican II in one of the areas where the Church was known to be conservative. For Mgr. Michael L. Fitzgerald, President emeritus of the Pontifical Commission for Interreligious Dialogue, *Nostra Aetate* was as surprise result of Vatican II.<sup>3</sup> The observation arises from the history behind the document. Accordingly, it was not foreseen in the original plan of the Council's documents. There was instead a felt need and a conviction that the Church should officially address pending issues related to the plight of the Jewish people in Europe, known in other words as the Jewish question. Pope John XXIII wanted to issue a statement about the relations of the Church to Judaism in order to counter anti-Semitism.<sup>4</sup> A providential figure in the initial stage was Jules Isaac, a French historian of Jewish origin and a founder of Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne, a study group of Jewish and Christians, based in Paris and which starting from 1947 reflected seriously on the plight of the Jewish people in Europe and other questions related to anti-Semitism. How on earth a Christian Europe, with its historical heritage of education and human values could have sacrificed two third of its Jewish people? Moreover, what could be done to prevent the recurrence of similar situations? Those were the concerns Jules Isaac evoked during his meeting with John XXIII during the first meeting of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity founded on June 5, 1960. To be concrete, Jules Isaac presented the Pope a program indicating steps towards the eradication of anti-Semitism and potential ways to the normalization of Jewish Christian relations. Accordingly, Christians were to rectify their teaching concerning the Jews and revisit the theological interpretation of the scattering of the Jewish people as a divine punishment for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In a particular way, the Catholic Church had to clarify the inaccuracy of a claim that its tradition had proofs for the deicide raised against the Jews. The newly created Secretariat for Christian Unity (05 June 1960), set under the leadership of Cardinal Bea,

took charge of those suggestions. Moreover, the Secretariat had to handle the reactions and oppositions that came along as the Church's interest in the Jewish question became evident.

The task of the Secretariat needed creativity, cautiousness and mostly patience for it was an unprecedented venture exposed to resistance, criticisms and oppositions from within as well as from without. The process needed timely adjustments and solutions.

A basic criticism was regarding the initial decision of Pope John XXIII to assign the Jewish question to the Secretariat of Christian unity. Some Jews were apprehensive of the agenda of the Council. Why would the Catholic Church be interested in the Jewish Question? Moreover, they feared the Pope had not understood that Jews were not Christians, neither could they be interested in any kind of unity thought for Christian believers and within a Christian framework. From within the Catholic Church, a fraction of bishops was concerned by a change of attitude of the Church towards the Jewish people. Would the new approach negate and alter fundamental Church doctrine based on the factuality that Jesus Christ died at the hands of the Jewish people? Moreover, the Council's interest in the Jewish question did not cease to create commotion among Arab governments: they feared the trend would lead to the recognition of the State of Israel. To address these different apprehensions and sensitivities, the final draft on the Jewish question was upgraded to a declaration with inclusive statements referring to other religions.

### **Beyond the Condemnation of Anti-Semitism: a declaration on religions**

With regard to the twists and final achievements of the *Nostra Aetate*, Thomas Stransky recalled a striking metaphor by Cardinal Bea.<sup>5</sup> “The tiny mustard seed of Jules Isaac’s half-hour conversation with Good Pope John grew into the large tree that warmly hosts in its branches so many men and women of “non-Christian religions.”<sup>6</sup> The image concisely depicts the long journey and achievement of *Nostra Aetate*. The concern for Jews shared by John XXIII and Jules Isaac during their meeting inspired

the first draft. Despite the many amendments, the core of the declaration in Chapter four remained. However, the apprehensions, criticisms and reactions positively expanded the spirit of the document creating space for the recognition and inclusion of other religious traditions.<sup>7</sup> As Laurentin noted, “*The difficulties met by the text on the Jews had obliged the Church, in a positive way, to open herself to extremely new horizons.*”<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, the final declaration went beyond the original aim of apologizing for and condemning anti-Semitism. Furthermore, the work produced a paradigm or model for the Church’s engagement with other religions.

### **Concise Content and Significance of *Nostra Aetate***

*Nostra Aetate* has only 41 sentences distributed in five paragraphs, speaking concisely of the considerations the Catholic Church bears with regards to non-Christian religions. Religions explicitly mentioned are Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism. Almost half of the document is dedicated (17 sentences out of 41) to the latter.

In paragraph one, *Nostra Aetate* defined the parameters for engagements and cooperation with other faith communities. Dialogue and cooperation must primarily address shared concerns among human beings. It is an engagement valuing context and pondering seriously on the courses of events marking the time of dialogue. Because it is a religious dialogue, the sharing and cooperation are to enlist the wisdom and guidance of respective religions and faith traditions. In the wordings of the document, dialogue has to consider “*what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship.*” NA 1

To this end, NA made a general or working definition identifying potential dialogue partners. Religions, accordingly, are institutions striving for ultimate meanings. They can also be considered as establishments seeking to provide answers to unsolved riddles of the human condition. “*Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life?*”

*What is moral good, what is sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?"* NA 1. As examples the document cites Hinduism, Buddhism and other unspecified religious traditions. NA 2. In each instance, it offers concise information on each of these religions. The wording is well studied to reflect both the commonalities and specificities of each of those religions, using a terminology that is current to the tradition itself. *"In Hinduism, men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek freedom from the anguish of our human condition either through ascetical practices or profound meditation or a flight to God with love and trust."* NA 2 As for Buddhism, *"in its various forms, [it] realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination."* NA 2

As for the other unspecified religions found everywhere, the document states that they *"try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways," comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites."* NA 2 The document clearly states that the *"The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men."* NA 2. The importance of this statement for interreligious dialogue, as I will mention further, resides in the reference to the *"ray of that Truth."* Though subtle, the mention constitutes the other foundational element for Catholic engagement with other religions. In fact, Catholics have a particular understanding and claims regarding that Truth.

The paragraph concludes with an encouragement calling Christians to dialogue and collaborate with the followers of other religions. Christians are to acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians; they are not to combat other religions nor oppose their religious and cultural expressions. They are instead to seek and appreciate the spiritual and moral values found in them as well as in the cultures they inspire. Moreover, in doing so, Christians are reminded not to forget their own faith. Dialogue with others is to be carried on concomitantly with the witnessing to one's faith. Though in the middle of the document, this paragraph, which summarizes the core of message and the spirit the entire document would like to promote, could also stand as the conclusion of the whole document."

Having spoken of Hinduism, Buddhism and religions in general, the subsequent paragraphs turn back to the monotheistic – Abrahamic religions. NA 3 concisely highlights the commonalities shared with Islam as a monotheistic religion without forfeiting existing dissimilarities. It starts with a surprising affirmation that "The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims." It then refers to elements of Islamic faith and practices using words echoing the language of the Qur'an regarding the attributes of God and the meaning of Islam. "*They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men.... Further they await the Day of Judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead... They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own.*" NA 3. As for the differences, the document refers to the qualified recognition and acceptance of Jesus and Mary: "*Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet, his virgin Mother they also honour, and even at times devoutly invoke.*" Finally, the document mentions the quarrels and dissensions that have marked Christian- Muslim relations for centuries. They are to be forgotten as all parties commit to a new era "*and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together*

*for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom” NA 3.*

Paragraph 4 does not only provide a concise presentation of Judaism but also addresses the original concerns behind the history of the document. It stresses the spiritual ties and patrimony of the Abrahamic covenant, reiterating the Jewish origin of the revelation of the Old Testament, the Jewishness of Jesus, his mother Mary, the first disciples as well as the Jewish roots of the early Church. To enhance mutual understanding and respect, it calls and recommends a review of the interpretation of the Jewish reception of Jesus and his messages through biblical and theological studies as well as fraternal dialogues. It states that God “*does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues to His Chosen People.*” NA 4. It further reminds that though the Jewish authorities of the time opposed Jesus, all Jews cannot be held responsible for his death. Consequently, the Jews are not to be considered an accursed race and no Jew of anytime or any place should be charged of deicide. Last, it decries hatred, persecution and anti-Semitism and recommends that catechesis and preaching be aware of risks of deviations which might unwillingly send wrong messages.

**The last paragraph** strongly enlists the initial anthropological Christian approach of the first paragraph.<sup>9</sup> “*We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God. Man’s relation to God the Father and his relation to men his brothers are so linked together that Scripture says: “He who does not love does not know God” (1 John 4:8).*”

The other pole of the particularities of NA emerges in this paragraph which echoes the inner structure of NA 2. In fact, as a whole, NA is not a blind praise of or exhortation towards other religions. Its dynamic is double: reaching out to the other goes concomitantly with knowing oneself and witnessing to one’s own faith. The document achieves this other dimension through a continuous referral to Catholic theological frameworks. The eschatological unity of all people is one of these. The human condition is the locus of the dialogue to which all religions

are conveyed. Moreover, the content of the dialogue is the respective solutions or answers religions provide to the riddles of the human predicaments. As for the Catholic position, those humans with questions are those whose origin and destiny are mysteriously imbedded in the divine plan, which concretely evolve around Jesus Christ and the Church. Consequently, the dialogue to which Catholics invite other religions is not only a conversation of histories or stories of salvations and search for meanings, it is also primarily a sharing on how the riddles of humanity find specific and unique answers in the Catholic tradition. The novelty of the inclusive attitude consists in the refined recognition of truths present in other religions as rays of the Truth that she proclaims. “Likewise, other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing “ways,” comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions [...] ...they often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” NA 2. Furthermore, “she [the Church] proclaims and ever must proclaim Christ “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.” NA 2.

Finally, NA 5 links the document to the general trend of Vatican II, namely option for openness, concern and dialogue with the world. The language in this paragraph echoes statements expressed elsewhere in the other documents of the Council. For instance, the condemnation of all forms of discrimination on the basis of race, color, condition in life, or religion could be seen as a concretization of general options stipulated in *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Declaration on Religious Freedom (DH). The document offers additional clarifications and statements on the nature of religious freedom, now assumed as endowment for interreligious dialogue. DH states that the Church respects the right and duty of each person to follow his or her conscience with regard to the acceptance or non-acceptance of religious belief. It further emphasizes that an individual “is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with

his conscience, especially in religious matters.”DH 3. Moreover, DH explains that “it is one of the major tenets of Catholic doctrine that an individual’s response to God in faith must be free” DH 3 since, “the act of faith of its very nature is a free act.” DH10.

### **Appraisal of *Nostra Aetate* -**

The first observation we can make about NA is that while it offers a definition of religion, it has none regarding dialogue. Yet, we have reiterated that the document has been set as ground for Catholic engagements with other religions. How could that be possible? *Nostra Aetate* brought to light the silent commitments and efforts of dialogue within the Church. In fact there has always been a prophetic voice for dialogue at the heart of the Church, fostered as a lifestyle, as a philosophy or as a combination of both. Francis of Assisi pioneered Christian - Muslim dialogue, when at the height of the 5th Crusades, he exchanged peace with Ayyubid al-Malik al-Kamil, Sultan of Egypt in 1209.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the sixteenth century has outstanding examples of missionaries who engaged pro-actively the cultures wherein they were immersed. Valignano, Matteo Ricci, Robertode Nobili forged what is now considered as dialogue with cultures. Modern times saw the spiritual ventures of Charles de Foucauld, Louis Massignon, Henri Le Saux, Jules Manchin, Enomiya la Salle, Thomas Merton, Raimon Panikkar and others. Their knowledge and immersions in the religions of the others unveiled to them the unfathomable presence of the Spirit of God at work. Their experiences pioneered the immersion and sharing expected from dialogue of religious experiences. Taken as an ensemble, the people mentioned above were precursors of interreligious dialogue. Their lives featured attitudes called for in dialogue: confidence rooted in the Christian faith, identity and sense of mission sustained in the experience of a lived faith, as well as a positive awareness and respect for the other as source of challenges and enrichment. Endowed with those attitudes, they lived dialogue even prior to its adoption as Church’s praxis.

Besides individual examples, the pioneering commitment to dialogue could also be discerned through institutions established to foster the understanding of the religions of the others. This was the case for instance with the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies founded by the Missionaries of Africa in 1926 and the Dominican Institute of Oriental Studies founded in Cairo in 1945.

The second observation is the contrast between the limited number of religions mentioned and the pretense of being a *magna carta* for Catholic interreligious dialogue. How could this be possible? Any particular consideration on the number of the religious mentioned must take into account the historical development of the document. Furthermore, it must ponder on the positive benefits of the adopted functional definition of religion in identifying other dialogue partners. The definition offers basic criteria affirming the otherness and alterity of other religions as well as the common ground of cooperation and interactions.

The third consideration is a practical consequence of the awareness of the historical background and development of *Nostra Aetate*. The theological reception and interpretation of the document must be looked for elsewhere, namely in the corpus of Vatican II and its Magisterium. For instance, the concept of dialogue tightly connected to the document was a creation of Pope Paul V who in different ways expresses a felt desire for encounter and dialogue with humanity in what he called a “dialogue of salvation” in *Ecclesiam Suam*.<sup>11</sup> Paul VI reiterated that “the Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives: it has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Nostra Aetate in the Corpus of Vatican II**

In relation with the Corpus of Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate* concretizes the dialogic openness of Vatican II. An interesting exercise would consist in searching for traces that paved the road to *Nostra Aetate* throughout the corpus of Vatican II. Liberty/freedom of religion and dialogue are two examples. While religious freedom is specifically addressed in *Dignitatis Humanae*, dialogue is a leitmotiv crossing through several documents.

*Gaudium et Spes* speaks of a dialogue with the world which eventually is the place for other religions. It asserts that the Church must be involved with society. The description of the social mission of the Church is all inclusive, no distinction is made of religions. Presumably, believers of other faiths are embraced in the social concern of the Church's mission. "The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ" GS 1. The Church-World Dialogue is to be all embracing and comprehensive, engaging all people: Catholics, other Christians, other religious believers, people of good will, and even those who oppose and oppress the Church. The goal is to "build up a world in genuine peace." GS 92.

The inspirational impact of *Gaudium et Spes* on *Nostra Aetate* does not merely consist in the open inclusiveness but also in the approach and perspective which highlight the particularities of the Christian faith, precisely Catholicism. GS states that "the Church has always the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" GS 4. Moreover, the paradigmatic model that Christians fostered in that dialogue with humanity is "the mystery of the Word made flesh," in other words, the very person of Christ, or "the Human Face of God." *Gaudium et Spes* states: "in reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of humanity truly becomes clear. Christ ... fully reveals humanity to itself. [...] By his incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each individual." GS 22.

Still, the theological ground of the inclusive openness of *Nostra Aetate* is to be found elsewhere. According to *Lumen Gentium*, good is found sown not only in the hearts of individuals, but also in the rites and customs of peoples (LG 17). *Ad Gentes* goes a step further crediting the inclusive openness in question to the action of the Spirit: "Without doubt the Holy Spirit was at work in the world before Christ was glorified" (AG 4). The inclusive openness found in *Nostra Aetate* emerges from a new awareness and interpretation regarding the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, the Holy Spirit does not only operate in

in individuals but also in the respective religious systems to which those individuals belong. The Holy Spirit operates in different ways and manners only known to God.<sup>13</sup>

Expectedly, the inclusive openness of *Nostra Aetate* should have implications for Christian relations with followers of other religions. As Fitzgerald notes, the “Christian is not someone who has everything, meeting with someone who has nothing. Rather it is the Holy Spirit present in the Christian who is able to meet the same Spirit present in the interlocutor of a different religious tradition.”<sup>14</sup> *Nostra Aetate* calls Christians to discover and practice the wisdom hidden in the folded arms with which Hindus believers greet each other as they say: “Namaste” - the Holy in me sees, recognizes and greets the Holy in you. It is hence in humility that Christians are called to encounter others, for God is bigger than us (Christians) and does more than what we (Christians) know or can grasp. Transposed in theological terms, Christians cannot - in virtue of their faith - claim to have a monopoly on divine things. Though the fullness of revelation is given to them in Jesus Christ, still there should be humility in claims regarding how it is received. Christians should be reminded of the challenges inherent in concepts such as “anonymous Christians,”<sup>15</sup> “unknown Christ”<sup>16</sup> in the concert of interreligious encounters.

### **Room for Improvement: NA not a perfect document...**

As to areas that an updated reading of *Nostra Aetate* should consider, there are two observations to make. The first is with regard to the restricted numbers of religions mentioned. According to Fitzgerald, *Nostra Aetate* does not do full justice to the different religions in the world. So, if the document were to be re-written today, it would have to give more attention to other traditional, tribal and native religions such as those found in parts of India and in other parts of Asia, the Native Religions as in the Americas, or Indigenous Religions as among the Aboriginals of Oceania. It should make room, for instance, for religious realities such as Shintoism, Sikhism, African Religious traditions, Terinkyō, I-Kuantao, the Baha’i, etc.<sup>17</sup>

The second is with regard to the method. The basis of religious interaction prompted by *Nostra Aetate* is highly theoretical, providing a concise presentation of each of the considered religions. On practical ground, the type of interactions fostered is predominantly bilateral, that is, religions can only be engaged in a one to one encounter. In a bilateral dialogue, the presupposition is that dialogue partners have a sufficient knowledge of the religion of the others. Consequently, participants need a solid investment before engaging in dialogue. The danger of reducing or equating a religion to its doctrine is always present. Bilateral dialogues are often an exposition of views on a given theme and in a restricted framework of the two religions involved. A one to one dialogue can indeed foster a deeper understanding of each other. However, in case of tension or misunderstanding, dialogue can be very limited and polemical, as each side goes back to its own basis for reference. From the outlook, multilateral dialogue may sometimes look superficial but it offers a wider view and more references that can in the long process enrich bilateral dialogue. It has great potentials for fostering the spirit of harmony and collaboration across religious boundaries. An updated *Nostra Aetate* ought also to discover ways of multilateral dialogue and explore the benefits of such a practice. Bilateral or multilateral religious dialogue can be compared to a mutual mirroring. It is a demanding task since each side must ensure that it is transparent enough to enable the self-reflection of the partner in dialogue. The mutual mirroring is possible only where there is friendship. In a friendly atmosphere believers set aside hypocrisy and remain courageous enough to let the other spot out the area which needs improvement. Mirroring is an amicable and respectful service religions can render to each other. . . In mutual mirroring, the final responsibility still lies on the subject - aware of his/her limitation, potentials and changes, he or she can make.

### **Impact of *Nostra Aetate* for the Praxes of Religious Dialogue**

*Nostra Aetate* has been a landmark document for religious dialogue for many reasons. It came out as a fruit of discussion, of careful

listening to oneself and to the other. The attentiveness helped the Church walk away from the constraints of past theological frameworks. A Church trapped in a non-contextual interpretation of the “*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*” would not achieve the openness and awareness of *Nostra Aetate*. Moreover, in light of *Nostra Aetate*, previous adages that marked Church policy and dealings with believers of other religions are to be reinterpreted. The image *Nostra Aetate* reflects is that of a Church awakened to the existence of the other, willing to listen carefully to the other and in that process she feels invited to re-visit her identity. There is in other words, an initial identification of an “I” and “You,” a crucial step for launching a process of dialogue.

For scholars in the field of religious studies, *Nostra Aetate* is important for its content. The document is a good resource for its methodological insights. *Nostra Aetate* is interdisciplinary in many ways. It harmoniously fuses arguments and approaches from philosophy, anthropology, theology and politics. It speaks of deep seated questions of humanity and the riddles of men [and women] of our times, of the answers religions provide to those questions, of God, of Christ, of issues of our times, etc. The concise presentation of religion displays the awareness and the attitude one should have while speaking of the religion of the other.

A last point regarding the methodological insights drawn from *Nostra Aetate* is that dialogue needs some definitions and a cadre or a framework establishing what is common and what is particular to each dialogue partner. The methodological ground for interreligious dialogue in other words, is one expanding unity in diversity. For the document, what religions have in common is the call to address the riddles of the human condition, to face the negativities of human experience. The sharing is to be on the respective answers religions offer. When this dynamic is understood, people of different religions have no reason to compete and fight. All they have are opportunities for mutual appraisal and enrichment. The question remains, however, how to address negative experiences rooted in solutions that religious traditions are providing. Was *Nostra Aetate* too idealistic or perhaps naïve regarding the limitations inherent in religions themselves?

## **Significance of *Nostra Aetate* for the Asian Catholics**

Despite its weaknesses and limitations, *Nostra Aetate* has been and still is one of the most inspirational Council documents for Asian Catholics. Asian bishops welcomed it as the official and ecclesial inspiration for interreligious dialogue. The invitation to dialogue found in the document helped Asian bishops to define and formulate a common pastoral and theological vision. As a result, dialogue has been established as a specific characteristic of the Church's life in Asia.<sup>18</sup> Since its creation in 1972, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC), started considering the invitation of *Nostra Aetate*. The vision of dialogue, seen as the way of being church and doing mission in Asia, was already agreed upon at the 1st Plenary Assembly of the FABC, held in Taipei in 1974. The "Triple Dialogue" known as the approach for evangelizing Asia goes back to that period. The three Asian approaches to engage dialogically referred to the socio-economic realities with which Asian people negotiate the rich mosaic of ancient cultures of Asia and the diverse religious traditions of the Asian continent. Facing the "teeming millions" of poor people of Asia, the Catholic Church had to announce to them the Good News of Jesus by way of dialogue. This inspired the vision of the Asian Church as a *Church of the Poor*. Moreover, in recognition of the rich mosaic of ancient cultures of Asia, Catholics were to foster an inculturated Church, which is one in dialogue with Asian cultures. Last, the vision of a Church in dialogue with other religions was due to the fact that Asia is the cradle of many ancient major religions, starting from those mentioned in *Nostra Aetate*. Through dialogue, Christianity, which is one of the religious traditions of Asia, needed to foster ways of mutual and respectful interactions.

The FABC practice of dialogue in the last fifty years have unleashed many insights. First, it has propelled Catholics to a new appreciation of the Holy Spirit as the principal agent of religious dialogue. The spirit blows where he wills and works mysteriously in all cultures and religions. Dialogue hence challenges Catholics to be more appreciative of the dynamism of the Holy Spirit. God's spirit works within and beyond

the confines of the Catholic Church. Second, the Asian praxis is teaching that dialogue has no magic formula. There is no one way, no single approach, no systematic step by step methodology for religious dialogue. What the Church in Asia has accumulated instead are success stories of cooperation in many fields, achievements and peaceful cohabitation among followers of diverse religious traditions, common challenges and sufferings wherever and whenever religions are politicized to serve ideological interests of a few. These stories show that many of the concerns of the local church, of the parishioners and Christian grassroots can be catalysts of interaction with other people. Peace, harmonious co-existence, social development, education, sharing of visions and other basic human concerns do not have religious color. Stories from the Asian praxes of dialogue have been thus inspirational for the systematization of dialogue in four interrelated models: dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange and dialogue of religious experience.<sup>19</sup>

Third, following *Nostra Aetate*, the conception, content and focus of dialogue have been essential. Preference is given to multilateral dialogue for its potentials of holding together unity and diversity. The message is that despite their diversities, religions can offer a common and concerted answer to the riddles of being human in the Asian context. It is not leveling of all religions and denial of specific claims of respective dialogue partners; it is rather an insistence and reiteration of the shared and related mission of religions to help believers answer the riddles of their existence.

Multilateral dialogue allows religions to create a united front against what disfigures the human person and hinders the believers to achieve the goal his or her religion fosters. With the human person at the center, it becomes easier to identify the burning issues that religions in Asia are to address. Religions are to be common responsive forces for justice, peace and development. In contexts where religious freedom is denied, fundamentalism and extremism and religiously motivated terrorism dominate, religions must provide adequate answers through multilateral dialogue. Moreover, religions are to analyze and provide

viable solution to the contemporary riddles which threatened human existence in Asia today. These include new forms of slavery occasioned by the plight of the migrant workers, sex industry, humanitarian crisis resulting from models of economic development not valuing the integrity of the human person, indigenous population whose existence is threatened by marginalizing models of economic development. Other riddles to be answered allude to the ambivalent values of cultural and economic globalization, ecological challenges attested by global warming and climate change. Moreover, the status and treatment of women in religions need to be enlisted among common concerns for all religions. Religions have not always been exemplar in providing positive approaches towards gender sensitivity and equality. The list of concerns is inexhaustible. More can be added depending on one's sensitivity towards the "riddles" of human existence attracting people to turn towards religions. The addition that FABC has been bringing to the picture is that the solutions are to be found in a dialogically multilateral framework.

### **The Reception of *Nostra Aetate* in the Asian Context**

The importance of *Nostra Aetate* for Asia remains relevant. As mentioned earlier in line with the theology of the FABC, it is the document that shaped the reception of Vatican II in Asia. The self-understanding of the Church in Asia as a Church in Dialogue stems from the reading that the Asian Bishops made of *Nostra Aetate*. Moreover, the document must continue serving as referential framework in assessing the achievements of dialogic encounters with Asian realities, cultures and religions as well as in addressing concrete challenges linked to the praxis of dialogue in an Asian context. With this regard, I would enlist three observations.

First, the Asian context benefited from the clear indication NA made regarding the common ground for religious dialogue: Suffering has no religious denomination but intrinsically appends to human nature; the riddles inherent to the human condition are the primary matters religions are required to address. By setting commonality beforehand, *Nostra Aetate* came closer to the Asian common sense according to which

“collectivity,” “the group” precedes the individual. As a matter of fact, Asian religions have been favoring multilateral dialogues rather than bilateral dialogue. On concrete ground, religious multilateral dialogues are gatherings of friends standing for a common cause or a value. Unlike bilateral dialogues, the focus is on commonality, particular claims seemed to be epoché. However, it is not that they are denied but the collective context does not require them to grab the main spot. Would particular claims to be put forward, they should come timely, in a natural way and without offending the harmony and the sensitivity of the collectivity.

The second observation is regarding the reception and implementation of *Nostra Aetate* in Asia. They have often given the impression of forfeiting the particular claims of Christianity. People accustomed to bilateral dialogues are dismayed by the lack of thrust in speaking about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, his role as the only Savior and so on. In bilateral dialogues, the focus is on the identity of the religions. A lack of understanding of the diverse dynamics of those two approaches to dialogue has led to misunderstandings within the Church itself which could have been avoided. The concern that the Asian way of dialogue might lead to relativism or water down the Christian faith has been voiced out in many ways. It is one of the errors *Dialogue and Proclamation* refers to in the list of problems the practice of dialogue has raised. “There are those who would seem to think, erroneously, that in the Church’s mission today dialogue should simply replace proclamation.”<sup>20</sup> Cardinal Ratzinger addressed that fear by calling those involved in the field to uphold to the true teaching stipulated in his *Dominus Iesus*.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Pope Francis reiterated the same concern in an encouraging way at the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*: “From the beginning it was clear that such a dialogue was not meant to relativize the Christian faith, or to set aside the longing that resides in the heart of every disciple, to proclaim to all the joy of encounter with Christ and his universal call.”<sup>22</sup>

The persistent reminders might suggest that there is a malaise or a misunderstanding that should be solved through an inner dialogue between the two approaches the Church leads to encounter other religions.

Each side will benefit from such exchange as it will be led to appreciate deeply the motivations and fittingness of the priorities established.

The third observation is that the on-going reception of *Nostra Aetate* must take into consideration the epistemic world wherein it is being received. In the East, that framework is one shaped by the quest for conciliation and accommodation of a religion which, though of Asian origin, is still looked at as foreign. For this reason, Asian Christians enter or engage in dialogue with preoccupations that are particular to their background. For the most conscious, dialogue, just as being Christian, does not have to be an alienating experience. In fact, the epistemic framework for the dialogue Asia is fostering is one affirming the complexity of their setting. The notion of Christian identity emerging from that epistemic framework should not be dismissed without prior consideration of the context itself. In fact, some of the formulations are tentative efforts of articulating experiences and feelings and learning from the serious considerations of the others. To name a few examples, Gideon Goosen's evocation of "hyphenated Christians,"<sup>23</sup> Peter C. Phan's proposal of "Being religiously interreligiously,"<sup>24</sup> Catherine Cornille's consideration on multiple religious belonging and Christian identity<sup>25</sup> and Felix Wilfred's explanation of his being a Christian relativist<sup>26</sup> are in fact concrete responses developed in awareness of the complexity of their epistemic context. Since at that time, *Nostra Aetate* could not anticipate these responses, it is now timely that they be considered to enhance an intra Church dialogue.

In the West, the understanding and praxis of dialogue in general, and interreligious dialogue in particular, have largely been influenced by a philosophical trend Damian Howard qualifies as Catholic personalism in reference to the impact and contribution of thinkers such as Husserl, Scheler, Ebner, Mounier, Marcel, Bergson, Buber and Levinas to the contemporary Catholic thinking.<sup>27</sup> All these philosophers have helped Catholics ponder on the concept of the human person and on alterity; their ideas have penetrated into the contemporary Church's official discourse on dialogue. Howard summarizes the epistemic framework shaping the Church's discourse on dialogue as follows: "the concept of the person

points towards the intrinsic relationality of the human being and suggests that we find our ultimate fulfillment in a fullness of relationship. Theologically speaking, personhood is expressive of a God who, whilst self-disclosing, always remains a mystery, ever inviting the creature into deeper mutual understanding and trust. Hence, dialogue is a personalist category because it betokens not merely the task of communication but also suggests the cumulative effect of on-going conversation which leads each time beyond prejudice and projection into ever truer knowledge. Indeed, the concept of the person “expresses in its origin the idea of dialogue and the idea of God as the dialogical being.”<sup>28</sup>

Just as the Asian answers to their epistemic context<sup>29</sup> could enrich the dialogic praxis of the Church, so it is for the contribution of Catholic personalism for the Asian context. In fact, some of these thinkers have valuable insights into alterity that once known and put in practice can expand the horizons of dialogue. How can dialogue remain the same after interiorizing insights of thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas as he helps us reflect on how we could go out of ourselves, out of our paths and encounter, think of the other without letting him or her disappear in ourselves? According to Levinas, that could only be possible if we assimilate the other to the unknown land towards which we are headed, and which should keep its foreign, untamed character even after we have reached it. Being strange or foreign should be considered as an irreducible category in our aspiring to know and encounter the reality that surrounds us. Why is the other so important, almost absolute? For Levinas, the other remains infinitely transcendent and a stranger because he unveils to me the Other, the Transcendence, the Trace of the Infinite.” It is that awareness that must dictate my interaction with the other. In other words, every encounter is always a meeting between two absolutes who reveal the Absolute, the Transcendent. When every human interaction is enlightened by such awareness, many of the concerns regarding what has to occur in religious encounters are to be reviewed.<sup>30</sup>

## **Conclusion:**

Religious dialogue can be compared to a mutual mirroring under the impulse of the silent but active presence of the Holy Spirit. The mirroring is a demanding task, for besides attentiveness to the partner, it implies awareness of that silent but active presence. Friendship, which is a good ingredient for dialogue is a work of the Holy Spirit. It enables moving beyond hypocrisy and let the other spot out the area which needs improvement. Mirroring is an amicable and respectful service religions can render to each other. In mutual mirroring, the final responsibility still lies on the subject - aware of his/her limitations, potentials and changes, he or she can make. Though not a perfect document, *Nostra Aetate* has served as the basis for interreligious dialogue within the framework of the Roman Catholic Church. 50 years later, the assessment of the reception of the teaching of *Nostra Aetate* needs to acknowledge the efforts made, the challenges encountered and mostly the directions still unexplored and towards which the Spirit is calling the Church to move with enthusiasm and determination. Fruitful dialogue leads to mutual mirroring and cooperation in addressing the riddles that drive humanity to turn to religions in search of responses. Violence inherent or justified by religions, discriminations rooted in religions, sexism, caste system, etc. are concrete, endemic experiences which call religions to cooperate.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ariel Ben Ami, “The Origins and Development of Nostra Aetate,” <http://www.catholicsforisrael.com/articles/israel-and-the-church/229-the-origins-and-development-of-nostra-aetate> (1 August, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> In terms of importance the Council’s documents are divided into “Constitutions (Dogmatic and Pastoral),” “Decrees” and “Declarations.”

<sup>3</sup> Michael L. Fitzgerald, “Nostra Aetate: a Guide for ongoing dialogue.” <<http://columbanird.org/nostra-aetate-a-guide-for-ongoing-dialogue>> Entered on Nov 15, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> See Michael. L Fitzgerald, *ibid.*; Thomas Stransky, “The Genesis of Nostra Aetate” *America*

<sup>5</sup> Both Thomas Stransky and Cardinal Bea were founding members of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, founded by John XXIII in 1960. The secretariat was entrusted the tasks of approaching separated Christian brothers and sisters and of enhancing a dialogue with the Jewish people. Thomas Stransky, “The Genesis of Nostra Aetate” *America*, October 24, 2005 Issue.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Stransky, “The Genesis of Nostra Aetate” *America*, October 24, 2005 Issue.

<sup>7</sup> According to T. Fransky and LM Fitzgerald, the Council needed to answer divergent voices and suggestions of political and ecclesial significance. Apprehensive of the consequences of a misinterpretation of a statement on the Jews as a support for Israel, and the consequences that such a reading could bear for their Christians, bishops from the Arab world advised that the document also mention Islam. Meanwhile, encouraged by that move, some bishops from Asia and others from Africa requested a broader treatment of religions. Thomas Stransky, “The Genesis of Nostra Aetate” *America*, October 24, 2005 Issue.

<sup>8</sup> Laurentin, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, p.35.

<sup>9</sup> The Christian anthropological framework in question is the divine nature of the unity of origin and destiny of humanity stated in the first paragraph.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Moses, *The Saint and the Sultan: the Crusades, Islam and Francis of Assisi’s Mission of Peace*. New York: Doubleday, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 70

<sup>12</sup> Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 1964, # 65.

<sup>13</sup> Inclusive awareness and openness mentioned above have been broadened and instilled in the prayer of the Church. It is associated with the Holy Spirit, working in mysterious ways known only to God. Most notable expressions of that openness are

found in the Eucharistic prayers for reconciliation and in particular way, in the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer. It speaks of liturgy of the Church, in terms of sacrifice to God and meant for all, a sacrifice acceptable and which brings salvation not only for Catholic believers but to the whole world. The prayer also invokes not only Catholics but also “all who seek You ‘God’ with a sincere heart;” the dead, not only Catholics but “all the dead whose faithfulness is known to you [God] alone.

<sup>14</sup> Fitzgerald, *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> As the theme amounts to the Karl Rahner’s theology of religions, it is important to mention all the publications with this regard. Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions” in *Theological Investigations*, v.5. (London: Longman & Todd, 1966); Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” in *Theological Investigations* v.6 (London: Longman & Todd, 1969), pp. 390-398; Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church” , in *Theological Investigations* v.12 (London: Longman & Todd, 1974), pp. 161-178; Karl Rahner, “Observations on the Problem of the ‘Anonymous Christian’” in *Theological Investigations* v.14 (London: Longman & Todd, 1976, pp. 280-298; Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christianity and Explicit Faith” in *Theological Investigations* v.16 (London: Longman & Todd, 1979), pp. 52-59; Karl Rahner, “Jesus Christ in the Non-Christian Religions,” in *Theological Investigations* v. 17 (London: Longman & Todd, 1981), pp. 39-50; Karl Rahner, “On the Importance of the Non-Christian Religions for Salvation,” in *Theological Investigations* v.18 (London: Longman & Todd, 1984), pp. 288-95.

<sup>16</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981.

<sup>17</sup> Fitzgerald, *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ecclesia in Asia*, #3 [ *EA*, 1999, no. 3].

<sup>19</sup> *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 1991, # 42

<sup>20</sup> Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation of Evangelization, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, (Roma: Bibliotheca Vaticana, 1991), # 4.

<sup>21</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Dominus Iesus*, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> *Pro Dialogo* Bulletin 145 2014/1 - 50 years in the Service of Interreligious Dialogue - The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 1965-2014., p.2.

<sup>23</sup> Gideon Goosen, *Hyphenated Christians: Towards a Better Understanding of Dual Religious Belonging* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002)

<sup>26</sup> Felix Wilfred argues that by “Christian relativism” one should not think of denying the absolute nature of Jesus Christ, or water down some truth of the faith. Christian relativism instead focalizes on the diverse existential relations from which we perceive and experience Jesus as Christ. He is related to the Father, to the believers... “the spirit of Christian relativism is a deeper a reality not to be caricatured as if it were a pusillanimous concession that there is no truth, and if there is, all truths are equal.” Felix Wilfred, “Jesus’ Interpretation in Asia: Some Fragmentary Reflections on Fragments” *Quest*, vol. 5, No. 1 (May 2006), 18-19.

<sup>27</sup> Damian Howard, “Risk and Resistance: Fifty Years of Interreligious Dialogue in the Catholic Church.” *Pro Dialogo Bulletin* 145, (2014/1), 39-40.

<sup>28</sup> Damian Howard, “Risk and Resistance: Fifty Years of Interreligious Dialogue in the Catholic Church.” *Pro Dialogo Bulletin* 145, (2014/1), 40.

<sup>29</sup> hyphenization, double or multiple belonging, “advaita,” cherishing unity while preserving diversity 『求同存異』, searching for correspondence and complementarity 『符合』 rather than choosing, or separating and discriminating.

<sup>30</sup> Levinas “Autrui reste mon maître parce qu’il me révèle l’au-delà, la transcendance, la trace de l’Infini: “Autrui demeure infiniment transcendant, infiniment étranger” Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini*, p. 168).

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