The Declaration Nostra aetate was a turning point in Jewish-Catholic relations. But it was so more in what followed than what was in it. While the Declaration spurred a new era of dialogue and rapprochement between the two communities, it also contained some language that evoked motifs of the past and still gave Jews pause. The language of paragraph 4 sounded far more traditional than the language in paragraph 3, concerning Muslims, which displayed a remarkable sensitivity to Islam. Nothing about living Judaism is in Nostra aetate.

But this was so because, unlike Catholic relations with Muslims, which were largely historical, political, and military, Catholic relations with Jews were deeply rooted in theology, and theology is more difficult to change. This distinction between Jews and Muslims was already acknowledged in 1060 by Pope Alexander II, when he praised Spanish bishops for protecting Jews during the early years of Reconquista, saying that Jews were “protected by the mercy of God…in everlasting penitence;” they
were “damned by the guilt of their ancestors for spilling the blood of the Savior,” and “they live dispersed” around the world. But Pope Alexander wrote, “The situation of the Jews is surely different from that of the Saracens. Against the latter, who persecute Christians and drive them out of their cities and homes, one may properly fight; the former [Jews], however, are prepared to live in servitude.” Though protecting Jews, Pope Alexander’s language was colored by theology that linked Jews with Jesus’ death.

In a post-World War II context, Christian teachings about Jews had to change. And yet, religion does not like ruptures; it relies on tradition and continuity. Indeed, the most effective change is one that is rooted in tradition. And so, when it comes to Jews, *Nostra aetate*, though a milestone, represents in a complex way both continuity and change, which is why to our ears the document does not sound as pivotal as it would prove to be.

*Nostra aetate*, one of the best-remembered documents issued at Vatican II, though the lowest in the rank after four constitutions and nine decrees,¹ became a springboard for new gestures and measures that would turn Jews, to use John Connelly’s words, from “enemies to brothers,”² and polemic to what *Nostra aetate* calls “fraternal dialogue.”³ But the final version of the Declaration reveals a tension between the conciliatory voice of the council and the voice of centuries of traditional Church teachings about Jews, which included a hope for the Jews’ conversion, the motif of Jews as the killers of Christ and enemies of Christianity, and that of Jews as the elder brother. For centuries, these motifs would weigh heavily on Jewish-Christian relations and on the legal status of Jews in Christian Europe, thus leaving wounds in the collective Jewish memory. And though in close reading much of what is in paragraph 4 of *Nostra aetate* about Jews is not new, in the post-World War II context the Declaration did “forge new theological territory,” in re-casting the old language in a new way.⁴
Nostra aetate emphasized the “bond” between “the people of the New Covenant” and “Abraham’s stock.” It noted that though “Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation, nor did the Jews in large number accept the Gospel; indeed not a few opposed its spreading. Nevertheless, God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers.” The motif of the bond between Jews and Christians is one of the oldest in Christian theological and legal writings about Jews. While some early Christians, such as Marcion of Synope, firmly rejected the “bond” between Jews and Christians, between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, they were declared heretics. What prevailed was the theology that emphasized the roots of Christianity in the Hebrew Scriptures, naturally with their Christological interpretation. It was because of this bond that Jews were theologically needed in Christianity.

In one of the first histories of the Church, for example, Eusebius of Caesarea used the Jewish Scriptures to demonstrate “the real antiquity and divine character of Christianity,” so that “no one might think of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, as a novelty because of the date of his ministry in the flesh.” Eusebius thus reaffirmed theological ties between Jewish scriptures and Christianity. And some century later, Augustine too spoke of this bond, setting the tone for Church attitudes for centuries to come:

The Jews who killed him and refused to believe in him ... were dispersed all over the world. ... and thus by the evidence of their own Scriptures they bear witness for us that we have not fabricated the prophecies about Christ. ... It follows that when the Jews do not believe in our Scriptures, their own Scriptures are fulfilled in them, while they read them with blind eyes. ... It is in order to give this testimony which in spite of themselves, they supply for our benefit by their possession and preservation of those books, that they themselves are dispersed among all nations, wherever, the Christian Church spreads. ... Hence the prophecy in the Book of Psalms: ‘Do not slay them, lest at some time they forget our Law; scatter them by your might.’
Though Jews were guilty of Jesus’ death and did not understand the prophecies in their own Scriptures, Jews were not to be killed, Augustine argued, for “they bear witness for us that we have not fabricated the prophecies about Christ.”

Augustine’s view took root, as we have already seen in Pope Alexander II’s letter to the bishops of Spain. The 13th-century Franciscan theologian Alexander of Hales summarized this bond and the view of Jews among Christians succinctly, while arguing, like Augustine, why Jews were to be tolerated in Christendom. Since “testimony taken from adversaries is the very best,” and “the Church takes testimony from the Old Testament, which the Jews observe,” Alexander wrote, “so that that the Catholic Church may have testimony from its enemies, the Jews are to be tolerated. For from the Old Testament, namely from the Law of Moses and the Prophets, testimony is taken concerning Christ which the Jews are unable to negate.”

Perhaps most explicit about the bond between the Jews and Christian faith was Pope Gregory IX in 1236, when he admonished Crusaders against attacking Jews, and reminded them “that proofs for the Christian faith come, as it were, from their archives and that, as the prophets testify, although they should be as the sands of the sea, yet in the end of days a remnant of them shall be saved, because the Lord will not forever spurn His people.” This was a remarkable statement, not only because it condemned violence against Jews but also because it reiterated again that Jews were not rejected by God. But these examples also demonstrate why the phrase in *Nostra aetate* that “God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers” sounds not conciliatory but oblivious of the past language and meaning of this bond—God holds Jews dear not for their own sake but for the sake of their fathers, “the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant,” and whose writings were instrumental for Christianity.
The strong affirmation in *Nostra aetate* of the bond between the Church and Jews, though existing in earlier Christian tradition, was related to another now-uncomfortable Christian doctrine about Jews, that of the rejection of Jews by God as punishment for the Jews’ rejection of Jesus as the Messiah, or Christ, and for their role, as Augustine explicitly stated, in his death. With God’s rejection, Christian writers claimed, it was Christians who had now become the true Israel, *verus Israel*. This can be found in various degrees of explicitness in texts as wide ranging as works of the earliest Christian works by Paul, Melito of Sardis, or Tertullian, to the old Good Friday liturgical hymn *Improperia*. The language of *Nostra aetate* is somewhat different as it states that “the Church is the new people of God,” but this language does hearken back to the language of the Church as *verus Israel*. This was a new, if still controversial, phrasing, for it could be interpreted as both new along with old, as well as in a supersessionist way, as the new replacing the old—like New Testament vs. Old Testament.

Given this long history of Christian teachings about Jews as rejected by God for their rejection of Jesus and their role in his death, the Declaration had to address the painful subject of the Jewish role in “the death of Christ.” And it did, in a way that was quite equivocal. The Declaration noted, “True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ,” adding also that “what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.” The Declaration also reminded the faithful, although not in the same paragraph, that “Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation.” This equivocal tone about the Jews’ role in the death of Jesus was modified in subsequent documents as the 1974 guidelines written to implement *Nostra aetate* section 4 dropped the sentence about the role of Jewish authorities, saying, “With regard to the trial and death of Jesus, the council recalled that ‘what happened
in his passion cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today.”

The paragraph decrying anti-Semitism begins with a condemnation most generally of “every persecution against any man” [my emphasis].” Only later, the text added that because of “the patrimony” which the Church “shares with the Jews, and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel’s spiritual love,” the Church also decried “hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.” Though today, in a world still filled with violence and persecution, the statement carries a tremendous weight and meaning to Jews, just 20 years after World War II this statement seemed weak and perhaps even evasive. And as if reflecting the tensions existing in Nostra aetate between old and new directions, this paragraph on condemning persecution is followed by a statement that it was “the burden of the Church’s preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God’s all-embracing love and as the fountain from which every grace flows.” This is an ambiguous sentence that on the one hand seeks to remind Christians that the Church should promote love and not persecution, while on the other hand it also seems to evoke Church teachings since Pope Gregory IX condemning violence against Jews and encouraging peaceful preaching, aimed of course at the time at converting Jews. This ambiguity, heightened by the phrase about the “Church’s preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ,” seems reinforced by a sentence appearing earlier: “Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross Christ, Our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making both one in Himself.”

There is no question that the relationship between Jews and the Catholic Church has been transformed from a relationship historically “marked by mutual ignorance and frequent confrontation” to a “sound” relationship “between Catholics and their Jewish brothers.” But even the redefinition of the relationship between Jews and Christians as brothers requires us “to forget” the traditional understanding of this brotherhood, for over long centuries Christian scholars developed and used a composite
imagery of Jews and Christians as brothers based on biblical sibling pairs: from Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, even Joseph and his elder brothers. In that interpretation the younger brother became a symbol of Christianity, the elder of the Jews.

This interpretation became fateful to the perception of Jews, with Christians becoming “the children of the promise” like the younger son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jews “the children according to flesh” like Ishmael, the elder son of Abraham “by a slave woman” (Gal 4). The trope of the brothers Jacob and Esau was evoked in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, in which Paul used what would become a fateful phrase—“The elder shall serve the younger”—to define the brothers’ relationship (Rom 9:12, based on Gen 25:23).

A few centuries later, Augustine took the trope of biblical brothers even further, discussing all these pairs in a Christological interpretation. In his “Reply to Faustus the Manichean,” Augustine likened Jews to Cain, and Christ to Abel. “Abel, the younger brother, is killed by the elder brother,” Augustine wrote. “Christ, the head of the younger people, is killed by the elder people of the Jews. Abel dies in the field, Christ dies on Calvary.” Like Cain, Augustine continued, Jews were cursed but were not to be killed, another fateful teaching that resulted in centuries of Church policies protecting Jews despite derogatory attitudes toward them.

Paul’s reference to an elder brother serving a younger brother referred to Jacob and Esau who appear in both Jewish and Christian texts as symbols of Jews and Christians. But for Christians, Jacob, the younger brother, along with the blessing he received from Isaac, was in Augustine’s words “a proclamation of Christ to all nations. It is this which has come to pass, and is now being fulfilled,” and Jews were the elder brother, Esau. For Jews the pair is reversed: Jews are Jacob; and Christians are Esau. But in both traditional Christian and Jewish interpretations the relationship between the brothers is inimical.
“In circumstances deeply affected by the memory of the persecution and massacre of Jews which took place in Europe just before and during the Second World War,” as the 1974 Vatican guidelines stated, and the much needed redefinition of the “fraternal” relationship, the trope of Jacob and Esau, despite its troubled history, became particularly useful. After all, in the end, the brothers reconcile—however half-heartedly.

“Speech has power and few men realize that words do not fade. What starts as a sound ends in a deed,” wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel to Cardinal Augustin Bea in 1962. The words used in Christian texts and the deeds they caused over centuries are difficult to shed but finding precedents from the past helps redirect the conversation. Thus, for example, condemnation of anti-Semitism in Nostra aetate and the subsequent classification of anti-Semitism as sin can be traced at least to the 1928 decree of the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office that affirmed explicitly, if still within the dominant theological framework, that sees Jews as “blind” to the truth of Christianity.

The Catholic Church habitually prays for the Jewish people who were the bearers of the Divine revelation up to the time of Christ; this, despite, indeed, on account of their spiritual blindness. Actuated by this love, the Apostolic See has protected this people against unjust oppression and, just as every kind of envy and jealousy among the nations must be disapproved of, so in an especial manner must be that hatred which is generally termed anti-Semitism” (Acta Apostolicae Sedis 20, 1928).

In its struggle to move in a new conciliatory direction, Nostrae aetate sought to balance and reconcile the two strands present in the history of Christian attitudes toward Jews—the sharply negative, almost rejectionist, and the conciliatory and protective. Though the text of Nostra aetate sounds a bit conservative and jarring to our ears today, the Declaration did allow for a new way to discuss Jews within the Catholic Church, and opened up dialogue rather than polemic with Jews. And though Jews remain, as the Chief Rabbi of Rome Riccardo di Segni
recently remarked in a symposium in Poland, “vigilant” and sensitive to any wording and gestures that may signal return to the past, the decades following Nostra aetate have borne fruit of a friendly dialogue between the two communities and further clarifications of the Church’s teachings. Indeed, much of what was missing from Nostra aetate was later articulated in subsequent documents. For example, an appreciation of living Judaism is found in the 1974 Vatican guidelines: “The history of Judaism did not end with the destruction of Jerusalem, but rather went on to develop a religious tradition. And, although we believe that the importance and meaning of that tradition was deeply affected by the coming of Christ, it is still nonetheless rich in religious values.”

While Nostra aetate sought “to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues,” the 1974 guidelines were more explicit:

Research into the problems bearing on Judaism and Jewish-Christian relations will be encouraged among specialists, particularly in the fields of exegesis, theology, history and sociology. Higher institutions of Catholic research, in association if possible with other similar Christian institutions and experts, are invited to contribute to the solution of such problems. Wherever possible, chairs of Jewish studies will be created, and collaboration with Jewish scholars encouraged.

By encouraging an honest examination of the Jewish-Christian past, the Declaration Nostra aetate and the subsequent documents also helped spur new scholarship that has since borne nuanced studies of Jewish and Christian cultures and of Jewish-Christian relations. Given the centuries of deeply engrained negative attitudes toward Jews, when it came to Jewish-Catholic relations the change, so necessary after World War II, was perhaps successful because many of the elements found in Nostra aetate were already present in Catholic tradition, though they may have been either forgotten or used in an entirely different context in the past. This
continuity and change is exemplified in the new iconography—*Ecclesia et synagoga nostra aetate* (The Church and the Synagogue in our time).

“Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time” by Joshua Koffman was commissioned by Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia to mark the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council declaration *Nostra Aetate*. It depicts Synagogue and Church as study partners as described by Pope Francis, who blessed the sculpture and its message during his visit to the campus: “There exists a rich complementarity between the Church and the Jewish people that allows us to help one another mine the riches of God’s word.”

Photo by Melissa Kelly

*The McGinley Lecture Series wishes to extend its special gratitude to Patricia Allen, Director of Communications at Saint Joseph’s University, for her assistance in obtaining permission to reproduce this image.*
NOTES
6 Augustine, *City of God (De Civitate Dei)*, Book 18 ch. 46; Psalm 59-10.
9 Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration ‘Nostra aetate’ (n. 4),” December 1, 1974: With regard to the trial and death of Jesus, the council recalled that “what happened in his passion cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today” (*Nostra aetate*, 4). Hereafter, this document will be cited as “Guidelines, 1974.”
10 Much like the debate over “Black Lives Matter” vs. “All Lives Matter.”
11 “Guidelines, 1974.”
12 See for example, Augustine’s “Reply to Faustus the Manichean,” and *City of God*, Books XV-XVI, XXXV-XXXVII.
13 Augustine, “Reply to Faustus the Manichean,” also *City of God*, Bk. XV ch. V.
14 Augustine, *City of God*, Bk. XVI, ch. 37 and 42.


18 “Guidelines, 1974.”

19 Ibid.
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