

*IN CELEBRATION OF THE YEAR OF FAITH  
October 11, 2012 – November 24, 2013*

*AT THE CATHEDRAL PARISH OF SAINT RAPHAEL  
in Madison, Wisconsin*

*This Year of Faith occurs on the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. The Year of Faith commemorates that Council, and comes with an invitation to revisit the documents produced by Vatican II so we may better understand the authentic teaching of that Council and put it into practice.*

**DECLARATION ON THE RELATION OF THE CHURCH  
TO NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS  
(*NOSTRA AETATE*)**

**A. The Significance of *Nostra Aetate***

*Nostra Aetate* (“*In our time*”) is the shortest of the sixteen documents of the Second Vatican Council.

I had not initially intended to look at this document in the course of these homilies on the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

What changed my mind was a reference to *Nostra Aetate* that Pope Benedict made in writing about *Gaudium et Spes* – the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

In an introduction he wrote for a new book on the Second Vatican Council, Pope Benedict observes that while *Gaudium et Spes* talks a great deal about the modern world, the distinctive characteristics of modernity are nowhere defined. He goes on to say that some of the critical issues come to the fore in two minor documents of the Council: *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Nostra Aetate*.

Those of you who heard the homilies on *Gaudium et Spes* may remember the main critique that Pope Benedict made of that document, namely, that it does not preserve the historical balance between optimism and pessimism – between positive and negative evaluations of “the world,” both of which are found in Sacred Scripture.

Pope Benedict says that *Dignitatis Humanae* – the Declaration on Religious Freedom – does a good job in representing the more cautionary side of Catholic theology. Not everything is rosy in the relationship between the Church and the world, the Faith and the culture. The world is not always “just waiting” for its perspective on the human situation to be corrected by Christianity.

What does Pope Benedict say about *Nostra Aetate*?

Essentially he says that *Nostra Aetate* reflects the same problem of excessive optimism that we see in *Gaudium et Spes*.

Specifically, Pope Benedict says that in evaluating world religions, *Nostra Aetate* sees only what is positive, and “disregards the sick and distorted forms of religion” which have had very negative consequences in the modern world.

*The second document that was to prove important for the Church’s encounter with the modern age came into being almost by chance and it developed in various phases. I am referring to the Declaration “Nostra Aetate” on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. At the outset the intention was to draft a declaration on relations between the Church and Judaism, a text that had become intrinsically necessary after the horrors of the Shoah. The Council Fathers from Arab countries were not opposed to such a text, but they explained that if there were an intention to speak of Judaism, then there should also be some words on Islam. How right they were, we in the West have only gradually come to understand.*

*In the process of active reception, a weakness of this otherwise extraordinary text has gradually emerged: it speaks of religion solely in a positive way and it disregards the sick and distorted forms of religion which, from the historical and theological viewpoints, are of far-reaching importance; for this reason the Christian faith, from the outset, adopted a critical stance towards religion, both internally and externally.*

## **B. The Content of *Nostra Aetate***

Pope Benedict refers to this omission as “a weakness of this otherwise extraordinary text” [*Nostra Aetate*].

Those words clearly indicate that Pope Benedict sees much that is of value in *Nostra Aetate*. So we should look first at what we can learn from the document.

## 1. Commonality of Human Religiosity

The fundamental point of *Nostra Aetate* is that the variety of religions found in the world should not cause us to forget how much all the members of the human race have in common.

The human race has a great unity as to our origin, our goal and the blessing we all receive from God (who makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust).

*One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men, until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light. (NA, 1)*

The document goes on to say that all humanity is united in confronting the great questions of life. Those questions are spelled out:

*What is man?*

*What is the meaning, the aim of our life?*

*What is moral good, what is sin?*

*[Where does] suffering [come from] and what purpose does it serve?*

*Which is the road to true happiness?*

*What are death, judgment and retribution after death?*

*[What do our lives mean: from where have] we come, and where are we going? [ibid]*

Consistent with a venerable Catholic tradition, *Nostra Aetate* observes that people throughout the world (confronted by these questions) have come to some authentic understanding of the existence and qualities of God. Sometimes this is achieved by an intuition, sometimes by logic.

*From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. (NA, 2)*

This is a very traditional point in Catholic theology: the recognition that the human person is born with an appetite for God, and that we can know His existence and something of His attributes through His works.

That is in St. Paul, for example, in Romans 1:18-21:

*The wrath of God is indeed being revealed from heaven against every impiety and wickedness of those who suppress the truth by their wickedness. For what can be known about God is evident to them, because God made it evident to them. Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made. As a result, they have no excuse; for although they knew God they did not accord him glory as God or give him thanks.*

Again, consistent with our Catholic tradition, *Nostra Aetate* wants to affirm everything that is good in the various non-Christian religions of the world while affirming our belief in Jesus Christ as the fullness of God's self-revelation and the One who has reconciled us to the Father.

*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. Indeed, she 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)*

What *Nostra Aetate* says here – about our common human condition, our common questions, and fundamental insights about God that we share with others – is entirely true, and quite traditional.

But we might note a couple of things that it leaves unsaid.

(1) Nowhere in *Nostra Aetate* do we find the customary statement that we see the elements of truth found in non-Christian religions as a preparation for the Gospel.

That little phrase “preparation for the Gospel” conveys that even as we respect the authentic insights and real virtues that non-Christians possess, we are not content to leave them where they are. We have in mind the missionary work of the Church; we want to bring people to a full knowledge of the True God and to the holiness that is only available through union with Jesus Christ.

The phrase “preparation for the Gospel” is found in *Lumen Gentium* and in another document of Vatican II, the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church. But it is not in *Nostra Aetate*.

(2) While *Nostra Aetate* clearly asserts that the fullness of the truth about God is available in Jesus Christ, there is no explanation offered as to why we believe that.

Certainly, *Nostra Aetate* would not be the place to go into a lengthy apologetical argument for the truth of the Christian Faith.

But I am struck by how effectively and succinctly Pope John Paul II was able to make a crucial distinction between Christianity and the other world religions in a Wednesday Audience talk he gave in 1985.

In that Audience, Pope John Paul offered a synopsis of *Nostra Aetate*, but added this very useful distinction:

*But the various non-christian religions are, above all, the expression of a search on the part of man, while the Christian Faith is based on a Revelation on God's part. And in this consists Christianity's essential difference from other religions, whatever the elements they might have in common. (John Paul II, Audience of 5 June 1985)*

The world religions begin in the sense of God and the search for him that is common to all people. But Christianity (and Judaism too) are different, because they begin with an initiative of God, Who acts to make Himself known.

The Christian Faith is not a human project; it is a response to God's revelation of Himself in the Person of His Son. In my opinion, a distinction like that one (made by Pope John Paul) would have greatly strengthened the text of *Nostra Aetate*.

## **2. Specific Comments on Particular World Religions**

We should look now at the more specific comments made in *Nostra Aetate* about some of the great world religions.

*Nostra Aetate* mentions only four world religions:  
Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism.

They are arranged in that order, in increasing closeness to Christianity:  
Hindus believe in many gods.  
Buddhism moves beyond polytheism, but its divinity is not personal.  
Islam acknowledges one, personal God.  
And Judaism represents a real covenant that the True God entered with  
a Chosen People.

In *Nostra Aetate*, only positive things are said about these four great world religions. The reason for that becomes evident when one knows the history of this document.

It was originally intended to be a document on Judaism, and written as a response to the Holocaust – which was, at that point, only twenty years in the past.

As the document was in preparation, bishops from majority Muslim countries said that if the Council was going to talk about Judaism, it should also talk about Islam . . . and so the scope of the document was broadened, and that's how we got *Nostra Aetate*.

That history makes it very understandable that the document's tone is so entirely positive. The first intention of the document was not to speak about theological differences, but to stress our common humanity and to plead for peaceful and fraternal co-existence among all people living on the face of the earth.

The intention of *Nostra Aetate* was undoubtedly a very noble one.

But it is also a good and necessary thing for Christians to recognize and explain the limitations of other religious traditions. That kind of critique is entirely absent in *Nostra Aetate*, but it has been supplied by subsequent papal teaching.

#### a. Buddhism

In regard to Buddhism, for example, I think of the long interview of Pope John Paul II that was published as the book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* in 1994.

Pope John Paul observes that while Buddhism and Christianity both aim at “salvation,” the meaning of that word is very different in the two traditions.

In trying to free himself and others from suffering, Buddha came to . . .

. . . the conviction that the world is bad, that it is the source of evil and of suffering for man. To liberate oneself from this evil, one must free oneself from this world, necessitating a break with the ties that join us to external reality – ties existing in our human nature, in our psyche, in our bodies. The more we are liberated from these ties, the more we become indifferent to what is in the world, and the more we are freed from suffering, from the evil that has its source in the world. Do we draw near to God in this way? This is not mentioned in the "enlightenment" conveyed by Buddha. . . The [perfection of Buddhist] detachment is not union with God, but what is called nirvana, a state of perfect indifference with regard to the world. *To save oneself* means, above all, to free oneself from evil by becoming *indifferent to the world, which is the source of evil*. This is the culmination of the spiritual process.

In the Christian view of salvation, the reality of the world is not denied. Rather, we look forward to the final victory of Christ when the whole of creation is made new, to enjoy the perfection it was meant to have from the beginning.

In the meantime, we do not deny the reality of suffering. We are called to help others bear their suffering in imitation of Christ who came to bear ours.

As Pope John Paul pointed out in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, the Buddhist view of salvation is far different than that of Christianity. And many practices of Buddhism – including yoga – are incompatible with the Christian Faith. No such critique is found in *Nostra Aetate*.

b. Islam

Likewise *Nostra Aetate* offers no critique offered Islam.

By contrast, the most famous recent papal statements about Islam comes from Pope Benedict's speech at the University of Regensburg in 2006 – and that speech was quite critical.

The speech was made, in fact, on September 12, 2006 – five years and one day after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The point at issue in the speech at Regensburg was the relationship between God and reason.

Pope Benedict cited a fourteenth century dialogue between an Eastern Christian emperor and a Muslim from Persia. Pope Benedict cited with approval the point made by the Emperor – Manuel II Paleologus – that it is unreasonable to spread religion by means of war and violence. This leads to the larger point that the True God always acts in accord with reason.

In Islam, there is an over-riding preoccupation to protect the absolute sovereignty of God. Muslims would say that since God is All-Powerful, He must be absolutely able to do whatever He chooses – even if it is irrational. To say otherwise, according to the Muslims, would mean that Reason is greater than God, since He must obey it.

Of course what the Muslim approach means in practice is that God can command people to do what is irrational – what is cruel, what is criminal – if it serves to accomplish His will.

The Christian says, “No! To act contrary to reason is not an expression of power, but evidence of weakness.

God has revealed Himself to us as the One who is always aligned with what is true and reasonable – not because He is subservient to Reason, but because there is no falsehood in Him.

Thus in the Prologue (opening) of St. John’s Gospel we read, “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God.” “Logos,” translated here as “Word,” can also mean “Reason.”

### **C. Final Caution in *Nostra Aetate***

Again, Pope Benedict’s recent critique of *Nostra Aetate* is essentially this (in his words): The document “speaks of religion solely in a positive way and it disregards the sick and distorted forms of religion which, from the historical and theological viewpoints, are of far-reaching importance.”

Since September 11, 2001, we Americans have been very mindful of the fact that bad theology has consequences.

We were reminded of that again last week as we heard that a Norwegian woman working in Dubai was sentenced to sixteen months in prison for “illegal sexual activity” after she reported that she had been assaulted.

Of course, Christians can also commit horrible sins and crimes. But we do that because we are not living up to the principles of our faith, not because our Faith demands them.

*Nostra Aetate* is not naïve about the existence of malice and evil.

Consistent with its original purpose to condemn the Holocaust, the document concludes with a ringing denunciation of discrimination based on “race, color, condition of life, or religion.”

In the course of that final passage, we read:

*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." (NA, 5)*

The point Pope Benedict wants to make is just that the mistaken theology of non-christian religions can sometimes result in people committing crimes against their brothers and sisters in the very name of those religions.

Hence our duty as Christians is not just to co-exist peacefully with others (though that’s a very good thing to do). We have the further duty to understand and live the True Faith as fully as we possibly can, and to proclaim it to the world as a gift and a treasure.