

Address to the Annual General Meeting of the Council for Christians and Jews

14th December 2005

I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak to you, the members of the Council for Christians and Jews, at this 2005 AGM, the year in which we mark the 40th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relations of the Church to non-Christian Religions. Naturally, I will want to consider the significance of that Declaration, but I don't want to simply say what the document says and then go through developments since then. I'm sure most of that would be familiar to you. I'd like to reflect, quite briefly and not in a very systematic way, on where we're at, at the moment, and what are the issues and challenges facing us at this time. I want to begin though by making a few comments about the whole notion of dialogue since when we speak of relations between different Christian communions or, between the Catholic Church and Jews, we tend to use the word "dialogue", which is a key word but also problematic at least in the context of some inter-faith relationships. Dialogue is, I suggest, a notion that comes from the Jewish and Christian traditions and is characteristic of both. God enters into dialogue with his people, with Abraham, with Moses, and for Christians much of the New Testament is a dialogue between Jesus and his Father, a dialogue that comes to its crisis point in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the Cross. Christian evangelisation is dialogical: when we proclaim Christ, we don't see our listeners as passive recipients. We look for the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives. And this, I would say, has also shaped Western philosophy and Western culture. Dialogue was strongly affirmed and posited as a key concept of Catholic theology in Pope Paul VI's encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, and it has been the language in which we have both experienced and explored our ecumenical and interfaith work ever since, and, likewise, the way we relate to contemporary culture. And those forms of dialogue are all different. Ecumenical dialogue seeks, whatever the difficulties, to establish unity of faith and therefore organic unity between Christians. Catholic-Jewish dialogue is different from that but also different from dialogue with other religions. It is different from dialogue with Muslims and different again from dialogue with

Eastern religions with whom there is no historical linkage. Dialogue can be problematic because, as I've said, it grows organically out of the Christian and, I would say, Jewish tradition but it will not always find much resonance, say, with Islam or – for different reasons – with the Eastern religions. And there is another issue about dialogue from the Catholic perspective, namely, that the term itself tends to suggest the encounter of two equivalent and opposing positions but in fact that is never quite the case. For example, in ecumenical dialogue, when an agreed statement is produced between the Catholic Church and one of the Protestant Churches, it needs to be ratified in an authoritative way by both sides and in a way that commits the two Churches. At least, that is what the Catholics are looking for. But other Churches do not necessarily have the kind of authority structure that enables them to deliver a concerted authoritative response. Nor will they always see that as necessary or even desirable. Something similar would be the case with Catholic-Jewish dialogue. Positions are not parallel - not equal and opposite. And Judaism is a very different kind of reality from the Catholic Church and our Jewish brothers and sisters would inevitably see the scope and parameters of dialogue differently. For example, with the Jewish people, I think it would be fair to say that the Catholic Church would want to distinguish more sharply between religious and political issues than many Jews would think either realistic or possible.

Now I mention these caveats because it is important to be aware of the problems and limitations of the whole dialogical process. But I don't mention them in order to undermine or diminish dialogue but to inject a necessary touch of realism. Dialogue, however, there is, and must be – using that term fairly broadly. At the recent *Nostra Aetate* conference at Heythrop College I raised the question of dialogue and alluded to the issues I've just mentioned, and some of the speakers said that perhaps the word "encounter" would be better since it doesn't tie down the engagement between religions so much. It doesn't reduce them to a particular model or structure. While agreeing with that to some extent I do think the word "dialogue" suggests a

discipline and a responsibility that matches the seriousness of the enterprise and the hopes that lie behind it.

I mentioned earlier the specific nature of ecumenical dialogue. What about the specificity of Catholic-Jewish dialogue? For Catholics, Catholic-Jewish dialogue is unique because the relationship between Christianity and Judaism is unique. Its context and its dynamics are quite specific to that relationship. We're not seeking unity as ecumenical dialogue does. Nor is it simply a matter of trying to identify common values and beliefs like most interreligious dialogue is. The historical and theological connections between the two religions are unique. I would like, therefore, to sketch in some of the dynamics, achievements, problems and possibilities as they seem to suggest themselves to me at this time. To do that I just want to note some of the key points in *Nostra Aetate* and pick up some of the points in the Dabru Emet document. Of course, they're not parallel documents but looking at them together may highlight some of the issues and dynamics that are in play.

Nostra Aetate acknowledges squarely and perhaps very obviously that the revelation in which Christians believe is the revelation given to "that people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy established the ancient Covenant." But it goes on to say at the end of that same paragraph: "The Church believes that Christ, who is our peace, has through his Cross reconciled Jews and Gentiles and made them one in himself." And here we have immediately a dynamic of Catholic-Jewish dialogue and, I'd say, of all Christian-Jewish dialogue, namely, that there are theological and historical realities that are recognised as being shared, being in common, but which are perceived and interpreted quite differently and in ways that *could* cause disagreement and perhaps offence to the other party. I'll come back to that. It's crucial, however, that *Nostra Aetate* affirms strongly a common spiritual heritage. And the document goes on to speak against any form of discrimination against the Jews.

Now *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent documents from the Holy See have spawned, as you know, a great deal of teaching, reflection and affirmation: the recognition that the Covenant with the Jews has not been superseded, that the Jewish people cannot be held accountable for the death of

Christ, a recognition that Christians must repent for sins against the Jewish people. And that gives rise to a very interesting question for Catholics, and something many are not clear about: how has this been perceived by the Jews and has it been reciprocated? That's why I turn to Dabru Emet, signed by 179 rabbis and scholars from different Jewish traditions. Not, as I've said, a parallel document but one that gives a good indication of what an open, positive perception on the part of Jews looks like.

A key affirmation is that: "through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel." That affirmation is fundamental. We both take similar lessons from the Bible. Jews acknowledge Catholic support and recognition for the State of Israel. The document affirms a common belief in the sanctity of life. It denies that Nazism is an inevitable outcome of Christian teaching. Also – and I think this is a key perspective – there is the well articulated statement that: "The humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture."

That – I think – is a perspective on the whole thing that holds out most promise. It looks to the future, the future as gift, as the work of God. It recognises, as both Christian and Jews recognise, that we await the fulfilment of God's promises. It's right that we should hold onto that perspective but let's struggle a bit more with past and present issues. Both Catholics and Jews have said constructive things, have opened up inclusive perspectives, have spoken affirmingly and reassuringly into areas that for the other are sensitive and indeed intensely painful. This process is difficult and costly.

Let's sketch in a few contributions to the task of developing common perspectives and shared vision. Pope Benedict XVI, as Cardinal Ratzinger, made the important general point that any further reconciliation will only come if we all go deeper into our own faith. This I think is key and is a general principle of all ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. Dialogue only works if we come to the table of dialogue from the vantage point of a deep fidelity to our own faith and not a watered-down version of it. And so it is that in his book, "Many Religions – One Covenant", he does speak about Judaism from the depths of his Christian faith. He says we cannot see the Old Testament and the New

Testament as two separate religions. God has only one will, one saving purpose and, for a Christian, in the death of Jesus the Passover mystery of Israel is brought to its final theological depth. But he also profoundly addresses the question of Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus by making the point that the death of Jesus is a theological event. It brings the incarnation to its fulfilment. Cardinal Ratzinger, in his writings on interreligious dialogue, makes a crucial distinction between what he calls mystical religion and revealed religion. Judaism and Christianity come under the rubric of revealed religion, in sharp contrast to mystical religions that are very characteristic of contemporary and post-modern society. By this he means religion that is primarily about *me*. My choice, my search for meaning, my quest for transcendence. The Judeo-Christian tradition is precisely not about that. It's about our response to God's initiative. Together we look back at what God has done. Together we look forward to God's action in the future. And he makes the crucial point that the figure of Christ both links and separates us. Rabbi David Rosen had, I felt, a helpful Jewish perspective on this in his paper for the *Nostra Aetate* conference in Rome. I was struck by the phrase: "the Biblical ideal is clearly to communicate the Divine universal values to the world while still striving to be 'a Kingdom of priests and a holy nation' living independently in the Biblically mandated land." As a Christian, I would, I think, want to pick that up in terms of the statement of Tony Bayfield in the introduction to the volume "He kissed him and they wept" where he says: "I had been arguing with all the force that I could muster for the importance of Catholics declaring the Covenant with the Jews unbroken and Jews confirming that, by virtue of the New Testament and the events that it describes, Christians stand in covenantal relationship with God as well." That I found both generous and constructive as I also do the recurring idea in that book that God's choice is a dynamic thing, not speaking of the chosen people as a kind of ontological category but of God's *activity* of choosing a people. That perspective seems open-ended and dynamic and draws us together.

So there is much good will and many profound and imaginative perspectives in play but there are questions that remain open and unresolved. The questions that Margaret Shepherd lists in the

same volume: issues of identity and distinctiveness within the framework of God's overall plan for the human race. Our present categories of understanding do not give us the tools for answering these questions. We now need to do two things. To dig deep in our own traditions and, as Pope Benedict said, to seek the core of our religions by a process of purification. And out of that purification we need to look to the future - God's future - with confidence and hope. Seeds have been sown, fruit has been yielded and we already share the promise of the harvest. We've come a long way in forty years.

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