

Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 14 in a series

August 5, 2012

This year, 2012, marks the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, which began on October 11, 1962, and closed on December 8, 1965. Throughout the year, we celebrate the Council, and explore its teachings through bulletin inserts, lectures, and a variety of special events. You'll find the entire series at the Cathedral website, www.stjames-cathedral.org.

In our Times: The Council and non-Christian Religions

The Declaration on the Church and non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate* ("In our times"), is a brief but highly important document, one that generated some of the most intense debate during the Council.

It was the particular wish of Blessed Pope John XXIII that the Council discuss the relationship of the Church with the Jews, and he asked Cardinal Bea to prepare a draft document. That draft, "Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," was presented on November 19, 1963, during the Second Session. It consisted of four chapters, addressing Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, with a fourth chapter dedicated to Judaism. Cardinal Bea introduced the decree to the Council Fathers, emphasizing the deep concern of Pope John XXIII for the Jewish people, and establishing the basis for a strong and respectful relationship with the Jewish people through the Scriptures, especially Saint Paul: "the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). Cardinal Bea also reminded the Fathers of what most of them knew only too well: that anti-Semitism had led in recent decades to the Holocaust, and that the propaganda of the Third Reich had been able to draw on Christian and Catholic sources to support its campaign against the Jews. This, Cardinal Bea urged them, must never happen again. The Church must take a clear stand against anti-Semitism, and it must acknowledge the sins of the past.

The debates were varied. Some felt there should be a separate decree on relations with the Jews, but some of the Eastern Fathers objected strenuously to this. They often carried out their ministry as a small minority in largely Muslim regions, amidst constant tensions. If the Council were to create a separate document on the Jews, they feared it would be interpreted as a political statement, an endorsement of the nation of Israel, and would impede the pastoral work of the Church. Some felt the document should be stronger in acknowledging the sins of the past; others—though they were in the minority—felt it already went too far.

Cardinal Bea and his Commission revised the document



Jon Lellelid of Temple de Hirsch Sinai in Seattle sounds the shofar at the Yom Hashoah service remembering the Holocaust, St. James Cathedral, 2009—the fruit of the new relationship between Catholics and Jews.

before the Third Session. It garnered much attention because it included a statement that the Jewish people were not guilty of "deicide," an accusation Christians had leveled against them as a people for centuries.

But when the document came before the Council Fathers, the statement on deicide had been removed, and the debates were fierce. "What is put off is not put away," declared Cardinal Bea, urging the Fathers not to avoid the question, but to confront it. In the end, *Nostra Aetate* marked enormous progress, but also compromise. The passage on deicide was restored, but the document did not go so far as to apologize for the sins committed in the name of the Church. That would happen on March 12, 2000, when Blessed Pope John Paul II presided at the "Day of Pardon" during the Great Jubilee Year 2000. It was the first formal apology of the Church for the sins her members committed against the people of the Covenant, and it was surely the fruit of *Nostra Aetate*.

Key Teachings of *Nostra Aetate*:

- On the great world religions—Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men."
- On relations with Muslims: "Although in the course of the centuries many quarrels have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this most sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace, and freedom."
- On the charge of deicide: "What happened in Christ's passion cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as repudiated or cursed by God, as if such views followed from the holy Scriptures."
- On prejudice: "The Church rejects, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion."

Corinna Laughlin, Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy

The Cathedral Bookstore has some great reading if you want to learn more about Vatican II.