

The Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Netherlands

## **The Joy of Learning**

*Dialogue between Catholics and Jews as Contribution to Society*

*Letter from the Dutch Bishops on the 40th Anniversary of the Council Declaration 'Nostra Aetate', 4.\**

*"In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely the relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship"*

These are the opening words of Nostra Aetate, the Declaration by the Second Vatican Council on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions, which was proclaimed on 28 October 1965. Section 4 of this declaration stresses that the Jewish religion has an essential and permanent meaning for the Church and the world.

The world has changed much in the forty years that have passed since Nostra Aetate. Contacts between peoples and cultures have increased, but so have the contrasts and tensions, especially since the turn of the century. The growing globalisation has expanded our horizon, but leaves many people feeling uncertain about the future. We find ourselves confronted by violence that sometimes invokes religious texts or traditions. The question of the place of religion in modern, secularised society has become more urgent, even in our own country. On one side, people are aware of the evil of religious extremism, which divides people and pits them against one another. On the other, people see how religion draws people and peoples together. We, Catholics, experience our meeting with Judaism as very enriching: it binds together Jews and Catholics while making both of us more strongly aware of our own and the other's traditions. It creates confidence in the other and in ourselves. That is why we wish to examine in this letter how this meeting can contribute to our entire society.

### *Questions of Meaning and Questions of Ethics*

People search for the meaning of life: the whither and why of life and death, our place in the world, our relation to the other. Jews and Christians both find a guiding principle for their lives in the first chapters of the Torah, the heart of the Jewish Bible, which Christians call the 'Old Testament'. There we read that people are created in God's image and likeness, and we learn what that means for our relation to all of creation, to God and to other people. For Jews and Christians, the foundation of their view of and attitude toward life are grounded in this involvement with God and neighbour and in God's involvement with us and creation.

People also ask questions about good and evil, about good and evil thoughts and actions. In the view held by Jews and Christians, being created in God's image and likeness confers a unique dignity on each person. To each person means that more is involved than just my own dignity, it also encompasses that of the other, especially that of our vulnerable fellows. The question asked by the living God, "Where is your brother?", is an appeal to our responsibility. It is the foundation for our ethical thinking and acting, which, as a continuation of Scripture and tradition, must continually be brought up to date. Jews seek their inspiration in their long tradition of explaining the Torah. For Catholics, Christ and His explanation of the Torah are the measure. That is why we say, "In becoming human, God gave humanity its ultimate dignity. We may thus never succumb to situations in which a human life is endangered, regardless of the reason."

### *Dialogue as Fundamental Attitude*

When Jews and Christians want to enter into conversation with one another and with others about questions relating to the meaning of life and ethics, the willingness to dialogue is an absolute necessity. This attitude is characterised by willingness to learn, self-criticism, listening and seeing and considered action. In addition, this type of conversation demands unceasing practice from each of us.

### *Willingness to Learn*

Learning is the most outstanding characteristic of the Jewish tradition. The Torah, which Christians call 'the Law' holds central place in Jewish learning. The Torah is a framework of rules that offers safety and protection. At the same time, it contains the wisdom of centuries, starting with the gift of the Law given to Moses on Sinai and continuing on to the wisdom of modern-day rabbis. For Jews, it is a source of joy to study this tradition and to learn while discussing it. Modern Jewish learning reminds Christians of Jesus, whom the New Testament repeatedly calls 'teacher' and who challenged his disciples to learn from the Torah. The image of Jews studying together also reminds us, bishops, that we are not only teachers but that, like the apostles, we always will be, and will want to, be Jesus' disciples. We call upon our young people, in particular, to follow us in this: believing is learning throughout life.

### *Self-Criticism*

Self-criticism is the willingness to examine one's own behaviour and thinking, however difficult this may sometimes be. This means that in our relation to the Jewish people we Catholics must be prepared to acknowledge our share of the responsibility for what the Jews have suffered throughout the centuries. We wrote about this in our first episcopal Letter on

relations with Judaism, 'Living from One and the Same Root'. However, self-criticism may not be a dead letter. That is why now and in the future we want to remain alert to every type of anti-Semitism, including that among Catholics.

### *Listening and Seeing*

An authentic conversation requires an open ear and an open eye. Only by being open to the other is it possible to see the person one is speaking with as he or she is. *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World calls it a duty to listen to the wide variety of ways of speaking in our time. In doing so, we must be particularly open for what is positive in each person; this is a perspective that frequently comes under pressure in our time. In Judaism, this attitude is magnificently expressed in a very old saying by Jehoshua ben Perachia, "Get thee a teacher and get possession of a study companion and judge every man favourably" (*Pirque Avoth, the Sayings of the Fathers*, 1:5). We need not conceal one another's faults or explain them away. Jehoshua says that the most important is to search well. Just as Paul teaches in one of his first letters: "Test everything; retain what is good" (Cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:21).

### *Considered Action*

Reflection is not an end in itself. It should ultimately lead to proper behaviour. But in our present society, there is a tendency to overhasty action in which reflection is often lacking. Where is the balance? What is more important, learning or doing? In the rabbinic tradition, we find a discussion on this between Rabbi Tarfon, who said that doing was more important than learning and Rabbi Akiba, who considered study the more important. At the end of the discussion, it was decided that learning was more important because it leads to doing. The same question arises in chapter 10 of Luke's gospel. A student of the Law asks Jesus what he should do to gain eternal life. Like other Jewish teachers of his day, Jesus answers that he must love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and his neighbour (Leviticus 19:18). He explains the meaning of the latter in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37); you are the other's neighbour when you show concern for his lot and act accordingly. "Go and do likewise."

### *Keep Practicing*

The sacred texts from our religious traditions remain a source of inspiration for Jews and Christians on socially beneficial action. But we can only contribute to this when we understand contemporary language and needs. If we want to be able to offer fundamental human values, then we have to practice, to learn and, as believers, to enter into and remain in conversation with one another. Much has been done in this area between Jews and Catholics in recent decades. Many Catholics have learned in houses of study how enriching and joyful it is to enter into conversation with Jews and to study with them. That is why we

continue to stimulate and support learning initiatives, both in parishes and in institutions for theological training.

*For and With Society*

This exercise in coming together with retention of each one's uniqueness is a hopeful sign. It can be the impetus for showing that our living religious traditions can link their sacred texts with contemporary life and contemporary questions. And do so in such a way that they contribute to a humane society in which 'well-being for all' takes precedence. At each new juncture we can learn that our own freedom and well-being may never be acquired at the expense of others' freedom and chance in life. As people we must strive toward the common good, which we Catholics call the 'bonum commune'. In all developments, from globalisation to the issues surrounding medical intervention, human dignity and the common good must serve as our standard, with special attention and concern for the most vulnerable among us.

This requires the commitment from believers: if they are to give shape to a constructive public debate on the common good, believers will have to contribute visibly and positively. But this also requires that unbelievers within our society be willing and able to listen. We hope that, in the present search for what is beneficial for our society, religions will be appreciated for what they have to say and not only their sociological usefulness. It would be good if there were more room in our secularized society for listening to and learning from the answers the Jews and Christians give to the meaning of life and the proper way to act, without this leading immediately to negative judgments, prejudices, and ridicule. It is our heartfelt hope that such room will also be available to other religious traditions, in particular Islam, whose positive elements have been too much neglected in recent years.

The insight from *Nostra Aetate*, at the start of this Letter has lost nothing of its topical interest: in our time, in which contacts between peoples are becoming more intensive, but in which tensions between cultures and religions also seem to be growing, it is more than ever the Catholic Church's task to promote love among people and unity among peoples. We thus call upon Catholics to adopt the active attitude of learning and doing, of dialogue and responsible social action, for the benefit of all. We invite them to fulfil this task in conversation with Judaism, with which we Christians have a special bond. May the act of Jews and Christians learning and speaking together be a source of inspiration in the pursuit of peace and in the dialogue with other religious traditions.

*The Roman Catholic Bishops of the Netherlands,*

*25 October 2005*