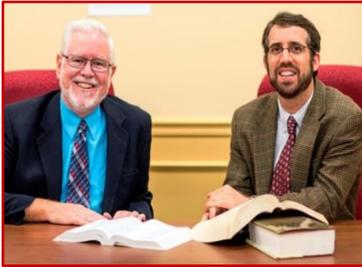


JANUARY 2015 *CONNECTIONS*: CELEBRATING ALL FAITHS ON JESUIT CAMPUSES

Celebrating a 50 Year "Journey of Friendship" Between Catholics and Jews in Philadelphia

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On October 28, 1965, everything changed between Jews and Catholics. On that day, Pope Paul VI promulgated the Second Vatican Council's "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," commonly known by its opening Latin words, *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Time").

Although the final form of the Declaration considered other world religions, it began in reaction to the unspeakable abomination of the Holocaust (also called the *Shoah*, in Hebrew) as a statement "On the Jews." The shock of the genocide of Jews in the heart of Europe led Christians, including Roman Catholics, to recognize and reform long-lived hostile teachings about Jews and Judaism. For over a millennium, Christians claimed that God had doomed Jews to a wandering and marginal existence. They held that Jews were blind enemies of God whose covenantal life was obsolete. This teaching of contempt was enshrined on dozens of medieval cathedrals in the female figures of Church and Synagogue, the former majestic and triumphant, the latter broken, defeated, and blindfolded.

As part of the Church's post-Shoah reckoning of the soul, section 4 of *Nostra Aetate* insisted that "Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures." On the contrary, it said, "God holds the Jews most dear." These were the words that began to change everything.

In Philadelphia, the impact of *Nostra Aetate* was quickly felt. Within a year, the Jesuit community at what was then Saint Joseph's College cooperated with the American Jewish Committee in planning an Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations (IJCR). It was the first American, Catholic university to respond to *Nostra Aetate*'s call for that "mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit ... of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues."

From its inception, collaboration with Philadelphia's large and historic Jewish community has been essential to all of the IJCR's work. Guided for forty years by the late Rev. Donald G. Clifford, S.J., Saint Joseph's University, in recent years, has expanded the IJCR's scope to meet the emerging needs of the maturing Catholic-Jewish relationship for sustained interaction between Catholic and Jewish scholars.

As professors in SJU's Department of Theology and Religious Studies, we are privileged to direct an Institute that is structured to encourage such interaction. We co-teach regularly, collaborate in ongoing dialogue and research, and contribute to national and international interfaith initiatives. This teamwork demonstrates that *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent documents and developments in both the Catholic and Jewish communities have created an atmosphere of trust and respect that makes it possible – for the first time in history – for Catholics and Jews to explore religious topics at the very heart of their respective Christian and Jewish self-identities.

For these reasons, in the fall of 2015, Saint Joseph's University will join with Jewish neighbors and partners of nearly five decades to commemorate both *Nostra Aetate* and the many years of work of the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations. We will celebrate what Pope Francis has called our "journey of friendship ... a genuine gift of God" [Address to the Chief Rabbis of Israel, May 26, 2014] by means of special programs of study and commemoration throughout the coming months, leading up to the dedication on the campus of an original sculpture.

In sharp contrast to the medieval representations of Synagogue as broken and defeated and of Church as triumphant, this new sculpture will reflect the teaching of the Catholic Church as it has developed since *Nostra Aetate*. The allegorical feminine figures of Synagogue and Church, to be rendered with nobility and grace, will now bring to life these words of Pope Francis: "Dialogue and friendship with the children of Israel [i.e., the Jewish people] are part of the life of Jesus' disciples. ... [T]here exists as well a rich complementarity which allows us to read the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures together and to help one another mine the riches of God's word" [*Evangelii Gaudium*, §248-249]. In other words, as crowned and noble women, they will be "study partners," representing their respective religious communities living in covenant with God and learning from one another's sacred texts and traditions.

We believe that there can be no better way to celebrate the new relationship between Catholics and Jews brought about by *Nostra Aetate* than to transform an ancient image of disdain into one recommitting us to interreligious amity and learning. We look forward as Jews and Catholics to celebrating together all that has been achieved "in our time" and to continue learning together on our unprecedented "journey of friendship" in the years ahead.

Above: Philip A. Cunningham, Ph.D. (left) is Professor of Theology and Adam Gregerman, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. Together they direct its Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations (sju.edu/ijcr). Photo courtesy of Saint Joseph's University.

