

The Structural Limits of *Nostra aetate*:
Catholic Doctrine and Jewish–Christian Reconciliation

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Abstract

Nostra aetate §4¹ (1965) has become one of the most significant texts in the modern history of Catholic–Jewish relations, marking a decisive repudiation of antisemitism and inherited accusations of collective Jewish guilt for the death of Christ. This dissertation addresses the question: What doctrinal, historical, and hermeneutical constraints limited *Nostra aetate*’s capacity to effect a deeper theological reconfiguration of Catholic–Jewish relations, as envisaged by certain Catholic reformers and Jewish interlocutors? *Nostra aetate* carries considerable historic and moral weight, yet since the declaration did not articulate a fully revised understanding of Israel’s covenantal role within Catholic teaching, its theological significance remains debated. This dissertation argues that *Nostra aetate* was transformative in addressing historical Christian hostility towards Jews and in facilitating a framework for renewed dialogue, while remaining structurally constrained by Catholic commitments concerning revelation, Christology, ecclesiology, and salvation, precluding any affirmation of dual-covenant theology.

Chapter 1 reconstructs the historical and conciliar formation of *Nostra aetate*, beginning with the post-Holocaust moral reckoning that prompted renewed scrutiny of Christian teaching about Jews and Judaism. This section considers how Jewish interlocutors, especially Abraham Joshua Heschel, and the aspirations of Cardinal Bea’s Secretariat shaped the successive redactions that produced the final declaration from the original 1961 *Decretum de Iudaeis* (Decree on the Jews). The drafting of the text was governed by theological aims, institutional dynamics, geopolitical context, and a careful adherence to doctrinal limits.

Chapter 2 examines the doctrinal conditions that governed what the Council could affirm. It argues that the limits of *Nostra aetate* cannot be reduced to conservative opposition or diplomatic compromise, since they arise from structural features of Catholic self-understanding: magisterial continuity, the authority of Scripture and tradition, the unicity of salvation history, the universality and finality of Christ, and the ecclesiological logic of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. These commitments therefore enabled the Council to affirm Israel’s enduring significance while preventing any recognition of Judaism as an autonomous salvific covenant independent of Christ and the Church.

Chapter 3 analyses the post-conciliar reception of *Nostra aetate*, focusing on Jewish responses and subsequent Catholic

¹ Hereafter, ‘*Nostra aetate*’ refers to the declaration as a whole; ‘*Nostra aetate* §4’ indicates the section dealing explicitly with the Church’s relationship to the Jewish people.

clarifications in *Dominus Iesus* (2000) and *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable* (2015). It argues that these later documents did not reverse the conciliar articulation of *Nostra aetate* but disclosed the doctrinal logic already implicit within it. The dissertation concludes that the enduring impasse in Catholic–Jewish dialogue arises from the attempt to hold together Israel’s irrevocable covenantal vocation and the universal, definitive mediation of salvation in Christ.

Chapter 1

Historical Context and Conciliar Formation

Introduction

The Holocaust confronted Christian Europe with a devastation so profound that attempts to interpret its significance and reckon with its moral and doctrinal implications drew the Church into an unprecedented process of theological self-examination. In its aftermath, Jewish interlocutors and Catholic reformers increasingly argued that patristic polemic, medieval ecclesiastical legislation, and inherited patterns of homiletic and catechetical instruction had together shaped a theological framework in which hostility towards Jews could assume a measure of Christian plausibility.² In the immediate post-war years, the Church was therefore urged to reconsider doctrinal formulations perceived to have fostered antisemitism, as articulated at the Seelisberg gathering of 1947.³ While some feared that such scrutiny might compromise the coherence of received teaching, others regarded it as an act of fidelity to the Gospel's summons to truth and renewal. Within this increasingly dialogical context, Catholic reflection began to confront the extent to which elements of Christian teaching had, across the centuries, been interpreted in ways that reinforced suspicion of the Jewish people, thereby shaping a doctrinal language that malignant ideologies could exploit.⁴ Renewal therefore required more than pastoral goodwill; it demanded a theologically serious engagement

² James Parkes asserts that the antecedents of modern antisemitism were laid in the earliest Christian centuries, establishing a persistent 'theological picture of the Jew' that endured through late antiquity and the Middle Ages. See James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1964), p. 299.

³ The Seelisberg Conference brought Jews and Christians together to examine 'the role of Christian doctrines in the development of antisemitism in Europe', discussing a series of proposals formulated by French historian and Holocaust survivor Jules Isaac. See Karma Ben-Johanan, *Jacob's Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA-London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022), p. 26.

⁴ Dan Cohn-Sherbok stresses 'the persistence of Christian anti-Judaism from New Testament times to the present day' (p. xiv), noting that 'Jewry was detested throughout the Middle Ages' and that 'the demonic Jew became a feature of Western Christendom' (pp. xv-xvi), where Jews were subjected to accusations of 'satanic activities', 'ritual murder', and the practice of magic (p. xvi). See Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The Crucified Jew: Twenty Centuries of Christian Anti-Semitism* (London: HarperCollins Religious, 1992), pp. xiv-xvi.

with Judaism itself—an engagement integral to the Church’s wider reconsideration of its mission in the modern world.

This chapter therefore situates the Church’s post-Holocaust reckoning within the historical, theological, and institutional processes by which it was translated into conciliar form, culminating in the promulgation of *Nostra aetate*. The aim is not to judge the declaration retrospectively, nor to assess its theological adequacy from the standpoint of later developments, but to reconstruct the pressures of moral urgency, theological aspiration, ecclesial limitation, and geopolitical contingency through which its drafting took place. By tracing the evolution of successive schemas, the interventions of Jewish interlocutors, and the internal dynamics of the conciliar process, the chapter establishes both the conditions under which Catholic–Jewish relations could be rearticulated, and the constraints under which that rearticulation took place.

Section 1 situates the emergence of a conciliar declaration on the Jews within the immediate post-war context, tracing how moral urgency and theological concern converged in John XXIII’s decision to entrust the matter to the Secretariat for Christian Unity and initiate the drafting of *Decretum de Iudaeis*. Section 2 examines the aspirations that shaped the early drafts, focusing on the dialogue between Cardinal Bea and Jewish interlocutors—above all Abraham Joshua Heschel. It argues that this dialogue exposed a growing tension between the desire for Catholic–Jewish reconciliation and inherited theological commitments that made it difficult to affirm Jewish covenantal existence on its own terms, rather than subsuming it within a Christian teleology. Section 3 analyses the doctrinal and institutional resistance that surfaced within the Council, showing how curial opposition, supersessionist assumptions, and papal reserve together constrained the possibility of a fuller rearticulation of Catholic–Jewish relations. Section 4 follows the declaration through its final stages of contestation and consolidation, showing how political pressure, theological compromise, and conciliar negotiation determined the limits of the text ultimately promulgated as *Nostra aetate*. In reconstructing this trajectory, the chapter lays the historical foundation for the doctrinal analysis undertaken in Chapter 2 and the examination of post-conciliar reception in Chapter 3.

1.1 Post-Holocaust Context and Theological Impetus

Although *Nostra aetate* would emerge as a wide-ranging declaration on the Church’s encounter with non-Christian religions, its initial impetus was markedly narrower: a reconsideration of the Church’s relationship with the Jewish people. Early in the preparatory period, the recently elected John XXIII signalled his determination to

convene an ecumenical council that would embody a renewed pastoral openness. In 1959, he elevated German Jesuit Augustin Bea to the cardinalate, and the following year appointed him as the first president of the newly created Secretariat for Christian Unity, which he charged with drafting a text that would confront the fraught legacy of Christian–Jewish relations. This mandate followed directly from the Pope’s audience with French historian and Holocaust survivor Jules Isaac, who called for a fundamental re-examination of Christian teaching, preaching, and catechesis, in order to eradicate the roots of antisemitism,⁵ thereby confirming for John XXIII the need for an authoritative conciliar response.⁶ From this commission emerged the Secretariat’s initial draft, *Decretum de Iudaeis*—a document intended to repudiate inherited charges against the Jews and to express the Church’s desire for reconciliation. Once the draft passed from the Secretariat’s internal deliberations into the wider conciliar process, it encountered a complex array of external pressures that would further shape its development over time, with growing concerns from Arab states about the Church’s perceived alignment with Israel, alongside the consequential vulnerability of Eastern Catholic communities living under Arab regimes.⁷ As deliberations continued, it became increasingly evident that the Secretariat’s work would extend beyond the particularities of historical grievance and effect a broader programme of renewal. A modest proposal concerning Catholic–Jewish relations thus evolved into a matter of genuine conciliar significance, attracting global attention and becoming a focal point for ecumenical dialogue with implications extending well beyond the Church.⁸

⁵ See Roberto de Mattei, *The Second Vatican Council: An Unwritten Story* (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 2012), p. 374.

⁶ Karma Ben-Johanan asserts that John XXIII’s 1960 meeting with Isaac was ‘decisive in shaping the pope’s decision to formulate a declaration on the Jews’. He notes that the Pope relied on theologians ‘who represented no significant Catholic community’ yet enabled the Church to address Judaism after the Holocaust. See Ben-Johanan, *Jacob’s Younger Brother*, p. 27.

⁷ The contents of the draft were leaked, raising concerns in Arab states. Between the inception of the brief draft prepared in August 1961 and its presentation to the Council Fathers during the first session in October 1962, the schema was temporarily removed from the agenda in response to political tensions. See John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA–London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 220.

⁸ Henri Daniel-Rops emphasises the extraordinary international attention surrounding the Council’s announcement. He highlights that ‘prominent religious leaders, not of the Catholic communion’ welcomed it and that ‘the press of the whole world’ followed developments closely, indicating the strong ecumenical attention surrounding its preparation. See Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Second Vatican Council: The Story Behind the Ecumenical Council of Pope John XXIII* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1962), p. 104.

The earliest drafts of what would eventually become *Nostra aetate* emerged from a desire to formulate a Catholic theology of Israel that could sustain a genuine reconciliation with the Jewish people. Reformers within Bea's Secretariat for Christian Unity recognised that authentic renewal demanded more than a correction of inherited interpretations; it required a renewed theological articulation intended to prevent the Church's teaching from being understood in ways that imperilled Jewish dignity, while also honouring Israel's enduring vocation within the mystery of salvation in the post-Holocaust world. This theological reorientation was driven not only by a deep moral reckoning with the legacy of antisemitism but also by the growing realisation that inherited Christian teaching concerning the Jewish people needed to be addressed with theological clarity and doctrinal integrity.

The task, however, was not straightforward. Reformers within the Secretariat increasingly recognised that the aspiration was not merely a revision of language but the creation of a theological framework that would allow for true reconciliation without compromising foundational Christian beliefs.⁹ This endeavour was significantly influenced by sustained exchanges with Jewish interlocutors, among whom the Polish-American rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was especially prominent.¹⁰ Heschel's insistence that authentic encounter must renounce any expectation of Jewish conversion prompted the Secretariat to reckon more directly with the implications of its inherited theological assumptions about Israel and salvation.¹¹ Heschel's intervention was emblematic of a wider Jewish scholarly critique, which called for a more rigorous and theologically serious engagement with the historical, doctrinal, and

⁹ The document's formulators understood their 'chief task' was 'to distance Catholic doctrine on the Jews from antisemitism', responding to Isaac's claim that certain Christian portrayals had fostered modern hostility. Bea, together with Jewish Austrian-American convert Monsignor John M. Oesterreicher, recognised that their proposals implied a 'tremendous transformation', leaving the Council Fathers 'torn between their honest desire to be morally "up to date" and their profound loyalty to Catholic tradition'. See Ben-Johanan, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, p. 28.

¹⁰ In his 1962 memorandum to Bea, Heschel urged the Council to 'issue a strong declaration stressing the grave nature of the sin of antisemitism as incompatible with Catholicism and, in general, with all morality' (p. 5). He further pressed for a conciliar commitment to deeper Catholic understanding of Jewish faith, warning that '[i]gnorance breeds suspicion' and calling for the elimination of 'abusive and derogatory stereotypes' (p. 8). See Abraham Joshua Heschel, 'On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations: A Memorandum to His Eminence Agostino Cardinal Bea, President, The Secretariat for Christian Unity', memorandum, New York, 22 May 1962, pp. 5, 8, <https://ajcarchives.org/Portal/Default/en-US/RecordView/Index/1527> [accessed 1 December 2025].

¹¹ Heschel argued that reconciliation required the Church to renounce any expectation of Jewish conversion, maintaining that '[g]enuine love implies that Jews be accepted as Jews' and appealing for recognition of 'the integrity and permanent preciousness of Jews and Judaism'. Ibid., p. 7.

moral dimensions of the Church's relationship with Judaism.

While such exchanges did not determine Catholic doctrine, they reinforced the reformers' conviction that any conciliar statement must give authentic expression to the Church's faith without either compromising Catholic Christology or distorting Jewish self-understanding. The Secretariat's task was therefore to articulate a theological account—within the bounds of Catholic doctrinal coherence—capable of affirming Israel's enduring role in salvation history. Yet as the 1961 draft circulated beyond the Secretariat's immediate circle, its aspirations were soon tested. Jewish interlocutors identified residual elements that echoed older theological expectations, prompting the first sustained wave of critique that would begin to shape the document's subsequent development. It was already becoming clear that these aims could not be fully realised without engaging doctrinal frameworks whose inherited coherence would both structure—and circumscribe—the possibilities of conciliar rearticulation.

1.2 Aspirations and Theological Constraint

Decretum de Iudaeis retained language that, while intended to affirm Israel's scriptural dignity, risked reinscribing older conversionist expectations. It spoke of the Church's hope for 'the union of the Jewish people with herself as an integral part of Christian hope', and anticipated a future moment when 'the fullness of the children of Abraham according to the flesh will embrace Him who is salvation'.¹² Although grounded in Romans 11, such phrasing implied that Jewish fidelity to the covenant would ultimately reach its fulfilment through ecclesial incorporation, thereby situating Judaism's future within a Christian teleology. Jewish interlocutors recognised immediately that these formulations, however benevolently framed, nonetheless preserved the expectation that Israel's destiny lay in conversion.

This development of Jewish theological objections formed the immediate backdrop to Heschel's May 1962 memorandum submitted to Bea, in which he articulated the post-war moral context in prophetic terms. Heschel urged the Council to seize an 'exceptional opportunity for the Church to exert its moral influence by reaffirming its opposition to persecution and bigotry, and its condemnation of the sin of antisemitism'.¹³ He appealed for the Council 'to reject and to condemn those who assert that the Jews as a people are responsible for the Crucifixion of Christ' and the claim

¹² Philip A. Cunningham, Norbert J. Hofmann, and Joseph Sievers (eds.), 'Appendix I: Drafts Leading to the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*—A. *Decretum de Iudaeis* (November, 1961)', in *The Catholic Church and the Jewish - People: Recent Reflections from Rome* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 192.

¹³ Heschel, 'On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations', p. 5.

that they 'are accursed and condemned to suffer dispersion and deprivation', emphasising that 'a rejection of false religious teachings' is required in 'fighting against the hatred that has brought upon the Jewish people unparalleled horror throughout the ages'.¹⁴ At the heart of his appeal lay the conviction that Christian love must recognise Jewish covenantal existence without any expectation of Jewish conversion—'that Jews are accepted as Jews' and that 'the integrity and permanent preciousness of Jews and Judaism' be affirmed.¹⁵

Alongside these doctrinal concerns, Heschel proposed a series of practical measures to improve Catholic–Jewish relations, including the creation of a forum 'in which knowledge about Judaism would be made available to Catholic priests and theologians';¹⁶ '[r]esearch projects and publications arranged jointly by Catholic and Jewish scholars';¹⁷ and the establishment of 'a permanent high-level commission' at the Vatican, with corresponding commissions established 'at every diocese'.¹⁸ His memorandum thus set before the Council, in 'the sincere hope of improving mutually fruitful relations'¹⁹—yet with acute awareness of 'the far-reaching implications and the complexity of the issues involved'²⁰—a plea that the Church, in 'this grave hour of history',²¹ take decisive steps capable of inaugurating a relationship marked by justice, dignity, and mutual understanding.

Geopolitical pressures further complicated the situation in June 1962, when the World Jewish Congress announced Dr Chaim Vardi as an "unofficial observer" to the forthcoming Council.²² Because Vardi served within Israel's Ministry of Religions and had been publicly endorsed by senior Israeli officials, Arab governments interpreted the appointment as a political provocation and lodged vigorous diplomatic protests.²³ In response, the Secretariat of State removed *De Iudaeis* from the agenda of the Central Preparatory Commission, demonstrating how vulnerable the project remained to

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

²¹ Ibid.

²² See Thomas Stransky, 'The Genesis of *Nostra Aetate*: An Insider's Story' in *Nostra Aetate: Origins, Promulgation, Impact on Jewish-Catholic Relations*, ed. by Neville Lamdan and Alberto Melloni (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2007), pp. 29–54 (p. 41).

²³ Ibid., p. 42.

external pressures.²⁴ Eastern Catholic bishops, acutely aware of the precarious position of their communities within Arab states, warned that a public conciliar statement on the Jews might provoke reprisals against members of their communities.²⁵ These anxieties intersected with doctrinal hesitation, producing a climate in which every line of the schema appeared fraught with consequence. When the first conciliar session closed in December without any statement on Catholic relations with Jews, Bea privately petitioned John XXIII to restore a theological declaration to the agenda—a request the Pope approved.²⁶

Despite these geopolitical pressures, the Secretariat proceeded with revisions, and the second draft of *Decretum de Iudaeis* issued in November 1962 sought to address earlier concerns by repudiating the deicide accusation,²⁷ resisting scriptural interpretations that portrayed the Jewish people as subject to a divine curse,²⁸ and adopting biblical terminology intended to acknowledge Israel's continuing significance within God's salvific purpose.²⁹ Reformers thus sought to reshape the conditions of Catholic–Jewish relations by displacing inherited polemic with a

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Senior Eastern prelates with pastoral responsibilities in Arab countries voiced their own critique of the emerging schema alongside the protests of Arab governments, reflecting the precarious position of those communities. See Gavin D'Costa, *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 119–120.

²⁶ See John Borelli, 'Correcting the *Nostra Aetate* Legend: The Contested, Minimal, and Almost Failed Effort to Embrace a Tragedy and Amend Christian Attitudes Toward Jews, Muslims, and the Followers of Other Religions', in *Nostra Aetate, Non-Christian Religions, and Interfaith Relations*, ed. by Kail C. Ellis (Villanova, PA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 9–34 (p. 19).

²⁷ The efforts of Oesterreicher 'to denounce the deicide teaching' were 'clearly evident in the declaration's second draft', which explicitly warned against attributing guilt for Christ's death to the Jewish people—whether past or present—and against the use of the epithet "Christ-killers". See Ben-Johanan, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, p. 30.

²⁸ Early in the drafting process, even Bea himself referred to Matthew 27:25 as the cry of "all" the Jewish people—a verse long interpreted as placing Israel under a continuing divine curse. Ibid., pp. 29–30.

²⁹ Although the drafting committee sought to use biblical terminology to affirm Israel's enduring significance, some of these formulations carried unintended supersessionist overtones. The phrase 'children of Abraham according to the flesh' was defended by Oesterreicher as having no pejorative meaning and simply indicating Israel's natural descent. However, such language had long been associated with the trope of the "carnal Jew" and risked perpetuating longstanding Christian dichotomies between flesh and spirit. See Elizabeth T. Groppe, 'Naming the Fellowship Between the Church and the Jewish People at the Second Vatican Council and in Our Time', in *Nostra Aetate, Non-Christian Religions, and Interfaith Relations*, ed. by Kail C. Ellis (Villanova, PA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 89–112 (p. 107).

theological articulation capable of sustaining mutual regard in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

As the drafting progressed, it became evident that any attempt to speak anew of Israel would encounter entrenched doctrinal impediments. This resistance—shaped by conservative anxieties, geopolitical pressures, and the legacy of supersessionist theology—revealed that the limits of *Nostra aetate* §4 were not merely political or procedural but embedded within deeper doctrinal and hermeneutical frameworks that would constrain how far reconciliation could proceed.

1.3 Doctrinal Resistance and Limits of Rearticulation

Centuries of supersessionist interpretation—embedded in patristic exegesis, liturgical usage, and catechetical instruction—had configured Judaism within a teleology of fulfilment in Christ and incorporation into the Church.³⁰ Although there was broad episcopal agreement that anti-Jewish hostility must be rejected, the Council Fathers were unable to reach a unified theological position on how far conciliar teaching could diverge from traditional doctrinal formulations.³¹ Any attempt to affirm Israel's continuing vocation raised questions concerning the authority of traditional Gospel readings, the Church's received interpretations of Paul's letters—especially Romans 9–11—and the theological relation between biblical Israel and post-biblical Rabbinic Judaism. While the repudiation of the deicide charge won broad support, resistance coalesced around the deeper question of Israel's ongoing vocation, since any fuller acknowledgement of that role threatened to unsettle the inherited frameworks through which the Church had construed its place within salvation history.

³⁰ The Patristic *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition—circulating from the second to the sixth century—'embraced treatises, sermons, discourses and other Christian writings which sought to demonstrate that the Jews had been rejected by God', grounding its polemic in 'the claim that the Jews had refused to accept Christ', so that the Fathers came to regard them as 'an apostate nation'. See Cohn-Sherbok, *The Crucified Jew*, p. 25.

³¹ The drafting history reveals that key theological questions concerning Israel's present vocation remained unresolved. The drafters simultaneously acknowledged Israel's failure to accept the Gospel, yet 'avoided reference to any rivalry between the two "Israels"', and in doing so 'one part of the Pauline dichotomy (the Jews' rejection by God) was omitted, while the other was retained (the church is the new Israel)'. See Ben-Johanan, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, p. 33.

Alongside these doctrinal hurdles stood a formidable conservative bloc within the Roman Curia.³² Many feared that revising the Church's language concerning the Jewish people would endanger the perceived continuity of Scripture and tradition and introduce doctrinal ambiguity at a moment when the Council was already engaged in a vast programme of ecclesial reform. Internal memoranda warned that altering inherited formulations could have unforeseen consequences for Christology, ecclesiology, and the Church's understanding of salvation history. For such figures, even the Secretariat's effort to recalibrate tone and emphasis appeared perilous, insofar as it implied a reconsideration of long-standing theological principles.

The accession of Paul VI in June 1963 altered the dynamics within which the Secretariat pursued its work. Where John XXIII had encouraged the Secretariat to confront the theological legacy of deicide and to loosen inherited conversionary expectations, his successor approached the question of Jewish-Christian relations with greater caution, attentive to the doctrinal and ecclesial risks that further rearticulation might entail. The fate of the declaration on the Jews again became uncertain, for the Pope 'was convinced of the collective responsibility of the Jewish people for the death of Christ'—a conviction that generated 'new difficulties' and inclined him to avoid formulations that might appear to repudiate received tradition.³³ In the spring of 1964, conservative prelates—supported by curial officials and, it seems, with the new pontiff's tacit approval—circulated a shortened draft that quietly reinstated conversionist

³² Andrea Riccardi describes the emergence of a closely aligned party which 'stood for the traditional theology' and understood itself as entrusted with safeguarding doctrinal continuity, believing that those formed within Roman institutions could perceive the Church's problems 'with a depth and sureness not possible elsewhere'. This group did not consider itself merely 'another current of thought or party within the vast assembly of Vatican II', but rather 'its soul', called to intervene precisely at moments when doctrinal clarity appeared threatened. According to this logic, the growing emphasis on pastoral renewal and ecumenism risked allowing contingent considerations to displace the defence of revealed truth. See Andrea Riccardi, 'The Tumultuous Opening Days of the Council', in *History of Vatican II: The Formation of the Council's Identity: First Period and Intersession, October 1962–September 1963*, ed. by Giuseppe Albergho and Joseph A. Komonchak, vol. 2 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis / Leuven: Peeters, 1997), pp. 1–67 (p. 60).

³³ This account is attested in the record of French Dominican theologian and Vatican II peritus Yves Congar, citing a private remark by German theologian and then fellow Vatican II peritus Joseph Ratzinger. See Giovanni Miccoli, 'Two Sensitive Issues: Religious Freedom and the Jews', in *History of Vatican II: Church as Communion: Third Period and Intersession, September 1964–September 1965*, ed. by Giuseppe Albergho and Joseph A. Komonchak, vol. 4 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis / Leuven: Peeters, 2003), pp. 95–193 (p. 152).

motifs and omitted the earlier repudiation of the deicide charge.³⁴ When the revised draft was leaked, many bishops feared that removing the repudiation would imply a reluctance to relinquish a doctrine long inscribed within Christian consciousness.³⁵ Bea therefore challenged the teaching directly before the Council and secured broad support, ensuring that the repudiation appeared in the final text—albeit without the explicit term ‘deicide’.³⁶

The internal tensions of the Council were further heightened by the shortened draft’s reintroduction of explicit language implying a future conversion of the Jewish people. In September 1964, Heschel publicly denounced the revised wording as a form of ‘spiritual fratricide’ and declared himself ‘ready to go to Auschwitz any time, if faced with the alternative of conversion or death’.³⁷ His anguished protest exposed the moral inadequacy of formulations that—however benignly intended—continued to cast Jewish destiny within a Christian teleology. That same month, Heschel—accompanied by Polish-born Zachariah Shuster of the American Jewish Committee—secured a private audience with Paul VI on the very day that he opened the Council’s third session. In the aftermath of mounting controversy, the bishops subsequently withdrew the conversionist phrasing from the draft circulated to the Council Fathers later that year.³⁸

At the same time, the September 1964 revision marked the first removal of the long-standing language by which the Church had described its acknowledgement of Israel ‘[w]ith a grateful heart’, replacing it with the more neutral formulation ‘gladly’.³⁹ Present in every prior schema, this affective language was excised as part of a broader recalibration of tone, signalling a movement away from explicit theological valuation of Jewish covenantal life towards a more restrained mode of acknowledgement compatible

³⁴ The shortened draft omitted the repudiation of the deicide charge and reintroduced conversionist expectations; it was circulated by conservative bishops with curial support—‘probably with Paul VI’s tacit approval’. See Ben-Johanan, *Jacob’s Younger Brother*, p. 30.

³⁵ Council Fathers ‘feared that omitting the Jews’ expiation from the accusation of deicide . . . would indicate that the church was unwilling to discard the infamous doctrine’. See *Ibid.*

³⁶ See Miccoli, ‘Two Sensitive Issues’, pp. 152–154.

³⁷ Ben-Johanan, *Jacob’s Younger Brother*, p. 35.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Secretariat for Christian Unity, ‘On the Jews and Non-Christians’, 1 September 1964, <https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/na-drafts/draft1964sept-1> [accessed 31 December 2025]

with inherited Christological hierarchies.⁴⁰ The formula would briefly reappear in the November 1964 draft before being definitively removed in the final redaction, underscoring the instability of the language governing the Church's theological posture towards Israel during this decisive phase.

1.4 Contestation, Consolidation, and Final Form

By the autumn of 1964, the doctrinal tensions and institutional resistances had coalesced into a critical phase of contestation, in which the very survival, scope, and theological coherence of the declaration were placed in question. In early October, Bea convened a meeting of the Secretariat, only to receive two unexpected letters from the Council's General Secretary, Archbishop Pericle Felici, proposing that the declaration be dismantled: the paragraph on the Jews appended to the dogmatic constitution on the Church in *Lumen gentium*; the material on other religions absorbed into the yet-unwritten schema on missionary activity; and the condemnation of antisemitism reassigned to the Church's engagement with the modern world in *Gaudium et spes*.⁴¹ Felici further conveyed that the Pope wished the text on religious liberty to be reassigned to a "mixed" sub-commission that included several outspoken opponents of the Secretariat's approach—an instruction presented in the Pope's name but later shown to reflect a mediated chain of communication shaped by curial intermediaries and mounting external pressure, including threats from Arab governments to sever diplomatic ties with the Holy See.⁴² The Secretariat had already conceded ground to similar pressures the previous summer and refused to do so again. Bea proceeded with the meeting, thereby reasserting the Secretariat's competence and preserving the integrity of the draft.

The cumulative effect of these interventions was more than procedural delay or editorial compromise; it resulted in a progressive narrowing of the theological claims the declaration could sustain. While the Secretariat succeeded in preserving the integrity of a distinct conciliar statement on the Jews, successive revisions systematically excised or softened formulations whose

⁴⁰ The gratitude formula briefly reappeared in the November 1964 draft before being definitively removed in the final redaction of March 1965, underscoring the instability of the language governing the Church's theological posture towards Israel during the final stages of drafting. See Secretariat for Christian Unity, 'Declaration on the Church's Relationship to Non-Christian Religions', 18 November 1964, <https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/na-drafts/1964nov> [accessed 7 January 2026]; and Secretariat for Christian Unity, 'Amendments to Section 4', 1 March 1965, <https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/na-drafts/1965mar-may> [accessed 7 January 2026].

⁴¹ See Borelli, 'Correcting the *Nostra Aetate* Legend', pp. 23–24.

⁴² See O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, pp. 224–225.

implications might have unsettled established doctrinal commitments. Chief among these concerns was the fear that any unqualified affirmation of Israel's ongoing covenantal life might be read as endorsing a parallel salvific economy alongside the Church, thereby undermining the Council's refusal to countenance any form of dual-covenant theology. Within this framework, inherited conversionist expectations were increasingly subordinated rather than dismantled; explicit confrontation of the deicide charge was retained only in attenuated form; and language that could have suggested a positive theological valuation of Jewish covenantal life in its own right was quietly removed. What emerged was a text that marked a decisive moral and pastoral reorientation, yet did so within boundaries carefully calibrated to preserve the Church's Christological and ecclesiological self-understanding. Read across its successive redactions, the declaration exhibits a discernible pattern of progressive restraint: formulations initially marked by theological openness were incrementally qualified, softened, or removed under sustained doctrinal and political pressure.

Throughout October 1964, the Secretariat expanded the schema—now titled *De Iudaeis et de Religiones Non-Christianis* (On the Jews and Non-Christian Religions)—into a five-part declaration: an introduction addressing the unity of humanity and the fundamental questions of the human condition; a treatment of the role of religions in responding to these questions, with specific reference to Hinduism and Buddhism; an extended section on Islam and the possibilities of co-operation; a reworked account of the Church's relationship with the Jewish people, together with a repudiation of anti-Jewish teaching and persecution; and a concluding affirmation rejecting all forms of discrimination.⁴³ In November, Paul VI took the unprecedented step of attending a general congregation of the Council—the first papal presence at an ordinary working session of an ecumenical council since the Middle Ages—appearing in person as the fathers turned to debate the schema on the missions.⁴⁴ As that draft fell into disarray and drew trenchant criticism from missionary bishops, theologians who had hoped to shape that document increasingly redirected their efforts toward Bea's expanding five-part draft, whose coherence and theological integration now surpassed that of its conciliar counterparts.⁴⁵

By late November 1964, a substantially reworked draft—now bearing the title *Nostra aetate*—was presented to the Council, receiving strong support yet also a sizeable number of votes cast

⁴³ See Borelli, 'Correcting the *Nostra Aetate* Legend', p. 24.

⁴⁴ See Norman Tanner, 'The Church in the World (*Ecclesia ad Extra*)', in *History of Vatican II: Church as Communion: Third Period and Intersession, September 1964–September 1965*, ed. by Giuseppe Albergio and Joseph A. Komonchak, vol. 4 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis / Leuven: Peeters, 2003), pp. 269–386 (pp. 333–334).

⁴⁵ See Borelli, 'Correcting the *Nostra Aetate* Legend', p. 25.

with reservations.⁴⁶ Middle Eastern religious and political leaders continued to regard any explicit statement on the Jews with acute suspicion; by early 1965, public demonstrations had erupted in several Middle Eastern cities, and the Eastern Catholic bishops warned that the declaration might provoke reprisals against their communities.⁴⁷ Syrian Patriarch Maximos IV Saigh went so far as to warn that he would leave the Council were the declaration to absolve the Jews of deicide—a prospect sufficiently grave that Paul VI indicated the text might have to be withdrawn should such a rupture occur.⁴⁸ At Paul VI's urging, in April, the Secretariat therefore dispatched delegations to Syria, Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Cairo, where they encountered deep ambivalence and substantial opposition.⁴⁹

The persistence of tension on this issue was publicly evident in Paul VI's Passion Sunday homily later that month, delivered only days before Palm Sunday and within the same year that *Nostra aetate* would be promulgated. Preaching on the Passion narratives, the Pope returned to the theme of Israel's responsibility for Christ's death, describing the Gospel account as one that 'recounts . . . the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish people', who, having failed to recognise the Messiah, 'ultimately, kills Him'.⁵⁰ The homily did not negate the conciliar project, but it underscored the limits within which papal authority itself continued to operate, even as the Council sought to recalibrate the Church's relationship with the Jewish people. That this tension surfaced so starkly in the year of promulgation underscores the restrained character of the final text: *Nostra aetate* represented a carefully delimited reorientation negotiated under the pressure of historical urgency and ecclesial continuity—not a doctrinal resolution of centuries-old tensions.

The Pope himself intervened once more in September 1965, requesting the removal of the term 'deicide'—not as a retraction of the Council's repudiation of the charge, but to avoid implicit denial of the divinity of Christ⁵¹—and asked that the verb *damnat* (condemns) be dropped, although both terms had already been approved by an overwhelming majority.⁵² The Secretariat, conscious

⁴⁶ See O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, p. 250.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ See Borelli, 'Correcting the *Nostra Aetate* Legend', p. 27.

⁵⁰ Paul VI, *Homily at Holy Mass in the Roman Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe, First Sunday of Passion*, 4 April 1965, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/homilies/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_hom_19650404.html [accessed 7 January 2026].

⁵¹ See O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, p. 251.

⁵² See Borelli, 'Correcting the *Nostra Aetate* Legend', p. 27.

that failure to accommodate these revisions could imperil the entire project, accepted the modifications with reluctance.⁵³ The revised declaration was circulated to the Council Fathers in October and received overwhelming approval in the preliminary vote. The final ballot returned 2,221 votes in favour and 88 against, a margin that ensured the declaration's passage without further amendment.⁵⁴ That afternoon, Paul VI solemnly promulgated *Nostra aetate*, bringing to a close one of the Council's most protracted and contested drafting processes, marked by theological contestation, geopolitical tension, and an unprecedented reconfiguration of the Church's language concerning the Jewish people. The final form of *Nostra aetate* thus reflects not the abandonment of inherited theology, but its controlled rearticulation under the pressure of historical urgency. Within this framework, the absence of any positive affirmation of Jewish covenantal sufficiency in the final text was not accidental, but ensured that eschatological openness could be maintained without relinquishing a Christologically ordered account of salvation.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 27–28.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 28.

Chapter 2

Doctrinal Conditions and Structural Limits

Introduction

The aspirations invested in *Nostra aetate* §4 extended beyond linguistic reform or the mitigation of historical hostility towards the Jewish people, directing the document towards a deeper theological reconciliation between the Church and Israel. Despite these aspirations, the conciliar process revealed that they could not be realised without crossing doctrinal boundaries that the Church was neither prepared nor able to transgress. These limits were not merely the result of conservative resistance or political compromise but reflected structural features intrinsic to Catholic self-understanding, which circumscribed the forms of doctrinal development the Church could recognise as legitimate—even in the pursuit of reconciliation. Where reform would have required the reconfiguration of inherited teaching concerning covenant, salvation, and mediation—particularly the relationship between the Church’s Christological claims and Israel’s enduring vocation—the Council could proceed only within the parameters set by the Church’s existing doctrinal commitments. It is within this framework of authority and continuity that the enduring doctrinal limits of *Nostra aetate* §4 must be understood, including its inability to affirm either a fully non-supersessionist account of Israel’s covenantal status independent of Christ, or a dual-covenantal model of Jewish–Christian relations.

This chapter proceeds through an internal analysis of the doctrinal conditions that structured what the Council could affirm. Its purpose is not to adjudicate whether the Church ought to have gone further in its account of Jewish–Christian relations, nor to resolve the theological adequacy of competing covenantal models, but to examine why certain options—most notably the affirmation of a parallel salvific covenant—were unavailable within the Catholic magisterial framework without destabilising foundational doctrinal commitments. The approach adopted here is therefore structural rather than polemical, attending to the internal coherence of Catholic teaching as it relates to revelation, Christology, and ecclesiology, and to the limits these commitments impose upon doctrinal development.

Chapter 2 thus occupies a mediating position within the dissertation as a whole. Building on the historical and drafting analysis of Chapter 1, it clarifies the doctrinal configuration that governed those debates, thereby preparing the ground for Chapter 3’s examination of post-conciliar reception and Jewish response. The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, it considers the structural constraints governing magisterial authority and doctrinal continuity, focusing on the conditions for doctrinal development as understood within Catholic theology. It then examines the

fundamental doctrinal commitments—concerning covenant, Christology, and ecclesiology—that decisively shaped what *Nostra aetate* §4 could and could not affirm with respect to Israel.

2.1 Magisterial Authority and Doctrinal Constraint

Within Catholic dogmatics, magisterial authority is conceived primarily as a theologically grounded teaching office entrusted with the authoritative interpretation of revelation, rather than as an institutional mechanism of governance. The Magisterium thus functions as the Church's proximate rule of faith, exercising responsibility for articulating and safeguarding doctrinal truth within the life of the Church. Within Catholic dogmatics, its authority is therefore epistemic before it is juridical—charged with oversight over the reception, interpretation, and transmission of the faith within the Church's tradition. Magisterial credibility does not arise from adaptability to changing circumstances but from demonstrable fidelity to the tradition it receives and transmits.⁵⁵ Were doctrinal teaching reducible to the discretion of successive office-holders, authority would collapse into arbitrariness, severed from the continuity that renders it intelligible as ecclesial rather than merely administrative power.

This understanding of magisterial authority is given explicit formulation in modern Catholic theology through the insistence that the Church's teaching office cannot be conceived as habitually erroneous in matters of faith and salvation. Such an insistence is not merely disciplinary or prudential; it flows from a deeper account of revelation as something received rather than constructed: a deposit entrusted to the Church to be guarded, faithfully interpreted, and transmitted across time—rather than a body of material open to reconstitution in response to changing historical or moral sensibilities.⁵⁶ As *Donum veritatis* (1990) makes clear, the credibility of the Magisterium depends upon the conviction that its

⁵⁵ Ratzinger critiques historicist accounts of truth in which fidelity is redefined as abandonment or assimilation—in which truth itself becomes a function of historical development. The rejection of this logic underpins the Catholic understanding that authoritative teaching remains intelligible only where truth retains identity across time. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. by Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989), p. 16.

⁵⁶ This understanding is grounded in the conciliar depiction of revelation as something 'handed on by the Apostles', which the Church in turn 'perpetuates and hands on to all generations' (§8). Together, '[s]acred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church', whose teaching office is described not as standing above revelation but as serving it—'teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully' (§10). See *Dei verbum* (18 November 1965), §§8–10, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html [accessed 18 December 2025].

sustained doctrinal judgements participate in the truth they seek to safeguard, even where particular formulations are historically conditioned and subject to further clarification.⁵⁷ Were long-standing magisterial teaching simply dismissible as false, the Church's claim to exercise a divinely assisted teaching authority would collapse into incoherence, reduced to a succession of corrigible opinions lacking any principled continuity. For this reason, Catholic theology permits development only within limits set by fidelity to received teaching. Development may refine, deepen, or re-articulate inherited doctrine, but it cannot legitimise forms of change that require the negation of the Church's own prior judgements. Continuity, therefore, is not an optional conservative disposition but a structural requirement of magisterial authority itself—one that decisively constrains the kinds of doctrinal reconfiguration that could be contemplated at the Second Vatican Council, including in its attempt to rearticulate Catholic–Jewish relations.

If the Magisterium were understood as free to repudiate its own long-standing doctrinal judgements in response to external pressures—whether moral, political, or historical—its authority would cease to be intelligible as ecclesial teaching and collapse instead into discretionary rule. Authority within Catholic theology depends upon demonstrable continuity with the faith once received—not upon responsiveness to shifting demands. Were continuity abandoned, teaching authority would become indistinguishable from the will of those who temporarily hold office, transforming doctrine into a sequence of reversible positions rather than a sustained witness to truth. It is precisely this structural logic that limited *Nostra aetate* §4's capacity to effect a deeper theological reconfiguration of Catholic–Jewish relations. While the Council could recalibrate tone, emphasis, and pastoral posture, it could not endorse forms of doctrinal “correction” that would negate inherited judgements concerning covenant, salvation, or mediation. The acknowledgement that particular formulations are historically conditioned therefore could not be extended to the conclusion that

⁵⁷ *Donum veritatis* grounds magisterial credibility in the conviction that ‘the things [God] had once revealed for the salvation of all peoples should remain in their entirety, throughout the ages, and be transmitted to all generations’—a task entrusted to the Church through a participation in divine assistance exercised by the living Magisterium (§13). The authority of this teaching office is described as ‘only intelligible in relation to the truth of Christian doctrine and the preaching of the true Word’, arising not as something ‘set above the faith’ but as a constitutive element of the Church’s service to revelation (§14). While acknowledging that particular interventions may involve ‘contingent and conjectural elements’ discernible only with the passage of time, the document nonetheless insists that it would be ‘contrary to the truth’ to conclude from such cases that the Magisterium can be ‘habitually mistaken’ or that it lacks divine assistance in the integral exercise of its mission (§24). See *Donum veritatis* (24 May 1990), §§13–14, 24, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html [accessed 22 December 2025].

the Church's prior teaching was fundamentally mistaken. What may appear as restraint is thus not resistance to reconciliation; it is fidelity to the conditions under which magisterial authority can function as teaching rather than the exercise of discretionary will.

These structural constraints were not merely abstract principles; they were experienced concretely by the conciliar drafters themselves in the formulation of *Nostra aetate*—particularly where proposed reforms intersected with the Church's inherited understanding of Scripture. The question of deicide offers a particularly revealing case. While reformers sought to repudiate collective Jewish culpability for the death of Christ, they were constrained by a magisterial framework in which the canonical Scriptures were received as wholly inspired, authoritative, and incapable of error.⁵⁸ Because the Church understood itself not as standing above revelation but rather as its servant and guardian, the Gospel passion narratives could not be treated as theologically corrigible historical artefacts without undermining their divine authorship.⁵⁹ As *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) reaffirms, because Scripture is held to be written under divine inspiration, error cannot coexist with it. Therefore, to judge any canonically received passage of Scripture false would be to compromise the doctrine of divine authorship on which the Church's understanding of revelation depends. Once inspiration is understood in this way, Scripture necessarily ceases to be corrigible in the manner of ordinary historical texts. The absence of an explicit repudiation of deicide in *Nostra aetate* §4 thus reflects doctrinal recognition and not evasion, since reconciliation could proceed through careful rearticulation of

⁵⁸ The deicide question has traditionally been associated with the Gospel passion narratives, particularly Matthew 27:25 ("His blood be on us and on our children"); Acts 2:23 ("this man . . . you crucified and killed"); Acts 3:13–15 ("you handed over and rejected . . . you killed the Author of life"); and John 18–19, where collective agency is repeatedly ascribed to "the Jews": they hand Jesus over to Pilate (John 18:30–31), demand his crucifixion on the basis of "the law" (John 19:6–7), and exert political pressure culminating in Pilate's final handover (John 19:12–16). Vatican II did not repudiate these texts as erroneous, but sought instead to reframe their interpretation.

⁵⁹ *Providentissimus Deus* insists that the Church does not stand above Scripture as a corrective authority but receives and guards it as divinely authored. Because the canonical books are 'written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Ghost', it is 'absolutely wrong and forbidden' to concede that the sacred writers have erred, or to restrict inspiration to matters of faith and morals alone (§20). Leo XIII explicitly rejects attempts to treat Scripture as a fallible historical artefact, arguing that inspiration is 'essentially incompatible with error' and that to admit error would be to deny God himself as the author of Scripture (§§20–21). The Gospels, including their passion narratives, are therefore received as authoritative witnesses whose truth cannot be negated without collapsing the Church's doctrine of inspiration and divine authorship. See *Providentissimus Deus* (18 November 1893), §§20–21, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_18111893_providentissimus-deus.html [accessed 28 December 2025].

responsibility and interpretation but not through the negation of the scriptural foundations of magisterial teaching.

2.2 Fidelity to Tradition as a Basis for Legitimacy

Fidelity to tradition functions as the criterion by which the Church's teaching authority is recognised as legitimate across time, extending beyond its role as a normative ideal. The legitimacy of the Magisterium depends upon its capacity to demonstrate continuity with the faith it has received; fidelity takes precedence over innovation in response to historical change. The question raised by the aspirations of *Nostra aetate* §4 is therefore not whether Catholic doctrine may develop in its account of Israel's enduring election; rather, it concerns how far such development can proceed without transgressing doctrinal constraints that render certain forms of reconciliation structurally impossible—most notably those requiring the affirmation of parallel salvific economies. As *Donum veritatis* makes clear, the Church's teaching office cannot be conceived as habitually erroneous in matters of faith and salvation without dissolving the very basis of its authority.⁶⁰ This claim does not rest on institutional self-preservation but on a theological account of revelation as divinely given and enduring across time. Authority thus remains intelligible only where doctrinal judgements can be recognised as participating in the same truth they are charged to safeguard—even as their formulation develops. Where continuity fails, authority no longer functions as teaching but degenerates into discretionary rule.

Benedict XVI gave authoritative articulation to this logic in his 2005 Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, in which he framed the reception of the Second Vatican Council as a question of hermeneutics rather than innovation.⁶¹ Against interpretations that construed conciliar reform as a rupture with prior teaching, Benedict insisted that Vatican II could be understood only through a "hermeneutic of reform" grounded in continuity with the Church's enduring doctrinal identity. The Church, he argued, is not a constituent body authorised to refound itself, but a single historical

⁶⁰ See *Donum veritatis*, §§15, 24.

⁶¹ Benedict XVI explicitly rejects what he terms a "hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture" in favour of a "hermeneutic of reform", understood as 'renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church', warning that interpretations which treat conciliar texts as provisional compromises risk leaving 'room . . . for every whim'. Vatican II, he insists, did not possess a mandate to refound the Church, whose 'essential constitution . . . comes from the Lord' and therefore cannot be overturned by conciliar innovation. Reform remains legitimate only where continuity of binding principles is preserved, even as their concrete applications are worked out within changing historical conditions. See Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia Offering Them His Christmas Greetings* (22 December 2005), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html [accessed 29 December 2025].

subject who 'increases in time and develops, yet always remaining the same'.⁶² Doctrinal development cannot, therefore, consist in the negation of inherited teaching under the guise of progress, since such logic would dissolve authority into arbitrariness and leave doctrinal meaning hostage to the contingencies of historical pressure. What renders reform legitimate is not the abandonment of prior commitments; rather, it is their faithful rearticulation under new historical conditions. Read in this light, *Nostra aetate* §4 exemplifies precisely the limits Benedict identified: it sought renewal in Catholic–Jewish relations through interpretative clarification and pastoral reorientation, while remaining bound by the continuity of doctrinal principles that the Council neither possessed the mandate—nor the authority—to overturn.

These commitments shaped the conciliar handling of Jewish–Christian relations in decisive ways. In the drafting of *Nostra aetate*, reformers sought to repudiate interpretations that had sustained collective Jewish culpability for the death of Christ. Crucially, this repudiation could not take the form of denying or correcting the Gospel narratives themselves, as such a move would have exceeded the limits of doctrinal development compatible with magisterial authority. While the Council could clarify responsibility, reject misapplications, and reframe theological interpretation, it could not declare the scriptural foundations upon which earlier teaching rested to be erroneous. The absence of an explicit repudiation of deicide in *Nostra aetate* §4 should not be interpreted as evasion or timidity. Properly understood, it reflects doctrinal recognition of the conditions under which magisterial authority could remain intelligible. Reconciliation could proceed through careful rearticulation of interpretation and responsibility, but not through the negation of the sources that the Church understood itself to receive, guard, and transmit.

The constraints identified above were therefore more than formal limits upon magisterial authority; they shaped the doctrinal substance of what *Nostra aetate* §4 could affirm. Its capacity to effect a deeper theological reconciliation between Catholics and Jews was governed by the internal coherence of Catholic teaching concerning covenant, salvation, and mediation; these commitments determined the limits within which any conciliar rearticulation could proceed. Thus, these doctrines functioned as interlocking elements of a theological system whose integrity depended upon continuity with the Church's received understanding of revelation, rather than as detachable propositions open to revision in response to historical pressure. The aspirations of Catholic reformers and Jewish interlocutors therefore encountered their decisive limits within Catholic doctrine itself—even where conciliar politics intensified the difficulty of giving those limits textual form.

⁶² Ibid.

2.3 The Unicity of the Covenant

The Catholic understanding of salvation history presupposes the unity of God's salvific action, such that covenant cannot be conceived as a plurality of parallel or autonomous paths to salvation. While *Nostra aetate* §4 affirmed the enduring election of Israel and decisively rejected the attribution of collective Jewish guilt, it did so within a doctrinal framework that understands covenant as a single divine work unfolding through time—not as multiple independent modes of salvation existing alongside one another. *Dei verbum* (1965) presents revelation as a single history ordered towards fulfilment, rather than treating it as a sequence of self-contained dispensations.⁶³ The Old and New Covenants are not juxtaposed as independent structures but integrated within a single narrative of promise and fulfilment, in which earlier stages retain enduring significance without constituting alternative salvific trajectories. Revelation is described as reaching its definitive concentration in Jesus Christ, who is identified not merely as a participant within salvation history but as its mediator and fullness. Earlier stages of God's covenantal dealings, including the election of Israel, are therefore understood as genuinely revelatory and salvific, yet intrinsically ordered towards completion rather than constituting independent or sufficient ends in themselves.

This doctrinal commitment did not emerge solely at the level of conciliar theology; it is evident in the drafting history of *Nostra aetate* itself. From its earliest formulations, the declaration articulated Jewish-Christian relations within a single narrative of fulfilment—rather than recognising Judaism as an autonomous covenantal order. The absence, across successive drafts, of any language affirming a parallel salvific covenant indicates that such a position lay beyond the parameters of theological possibility, rather

⁶³ *Dei verbum* presents revelation as definitively concentrated in Christ, 'who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation' (§2). Israel's history is thus described as preparatory, through which God 'prepared the way for the Gospel down through the centuries' (§3). This preparatory history finds its fulfilment in Christ, who 'perfected revelation by fulfilling it'—above all, 'through His death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth'—thus constituting 'the new and definitive covenant' for which 'no further new public revelation' is awaited (§4). Christ is further identified as the one 'in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion' (§7). See *Dei verbum*, §§2–4, 7.

than having been merely postponed or diplomatically omitted.⁶⁴ The Church's affirmation of Israel's enduring election was thus framed from the outset within a unified account of salvation history—one in which continuity with Israel was safeguarded, without conceding that any covenant could stand independently of its ultimate fulfilment.

This same constraint shaped the conciliar handling of the deicide question, which became one of the most contested aspects of §4. Across successive drafts, responsibility for the death of Christ was progressively re-articulated without any correction or negation of the Gospel narrative itself.⁶⁵ Whereas earlier formulations

⁶⁴ The resistance to dual-covenant theology is already visible in the earliest drafts of the declaration. *Decretum de Iudaeis* (1 November 1961) describes the Church as 'the spiritual continuation of the people with whom . . . God made the Old Covenant', and explicitly situates Jewish-Christian destiny within a single framework by affirming that 'the Church believes in the union of the Jewish people with herself as an integral part of Christian hope'. The draft circulated to the Council on 8 November 1963 similarly identifies the Church as 'a continuation of that people with whom of old God . . . was pleased to make his Old Covenant', while anticipating the eventual 'union of both in one body' in Christ. Even where later revisions refine tone and scope, no draft articulates Judaism as an autonomous covenantal order sufficient apart from fulfilment. The consistent absence of any language affirming a parallel salvific covenant across the drafting history indicates that such a position lay beyond the parameters of theological possibility rather than having been merely deferred or diplomatically omitted. See Secretariat for Christian Unity, 'Decree on the Jews (*Decretum de Iudaeis*)', 1 November 1961, <https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/na-drafts/1961> [accessed 31 December 2025]; and Secretariat for Christian Unity, 'On the Attitude of Catholics Toward Non-Christians and Especially Toward Jews', 8 November 1963, <https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/na-drafts/1963> [accessed 31 December 2025].

⁶⁵ The 8 November 1963 draft explicitly rejects describing Jews as 'a deicidal people', grounding this refusal Christologically by insisting that 'the Lord, by his passion and death, washes away the sins of all men, which were the cause of the passion and death of Jesus Christ'. Later revisions progressively remove the term deicide itself while retaining the underlying theological judgement. The September 1964 text warns against imputing responsibility for the Passion to 'the Jews of our time', while the March 1965 amendments appeal to scriptural language, noting that 'Jerusalem did not recognise the time of her visitation, nor did a greater part of the Jews accept the Gospel; indeed not just a few opposed its spreading', and that 'the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ'. However, this is qualified by the insistence that 'what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today'. The final promulgated text thus preserves the Gospel narrative and its theological claims while excluding collective culpability. Responsibility could be re-articulated, but neither Scripture nor the Church's Christological account of salvation history could be corrected or negated. See Secretariat for Christian Unity, 'On the Attitude of Catholics' (1963); Secretariat for Christian Unity, 'On the Jews and Non-Christians' (1964); and Second Vatican Council, '*Nostra Aetate*: Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions', 28 October 1965, §4 <https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/nostra-aetate> [accessed 2 February 2026].

explicitly rejected describing Jews as deicidal, later revisions removed the term altogether while retaining the underlying Christological judgement that Christ's passion cannot be attributed collectively to the Jewish people. The evolution of this language demonstrates that the Council's restraint was doctrinal rather than evasive: responsibility could be clarified, qualified, and de-collectivised, but neither Scripture nor the Church's Christological account of salvation history could be corrected or overridden. The Gospel narrative was thus received as authoritative and non-corrigeable, even as its interpretation was carefully delimited so as to exclude collective culpability.

On these terms, *Nostra aetate* §4 represents the furthest articulation permitted within the Church's doctrinal framework. To have affirmed a dual-covenant structure would have required a fundamental re-description of salvation history itself—one no longer intelligible within the account of revelation articulated by *Dei verbum*. The declaration's silence on parallel covenantal validity is therefore not accidental; it is theologically determined. As such, *Nostra aetate* §4 presses Catholic teaching to the limit compatible with the Church's understanding of revelation as unified, fulfilled, and Christologically ordered. Accordingly, it necessarily stops short of claims that would fracture that coherence and render the doctrine of salvation internally unstable.

2.4 The Universality and Finality of Christ

The doctrinal limits identified in the unicity of the covenant find their decisive grounding in Christology. Within Catholic theology, the question of whether a parallel salvific covenant might subsist alongside Christ cannot be resolved at the level of covenantal structure alone; it is determined fundamentally by the Church's confession of who Christ is and what his saving work accomplishes definitively. The universality of salvation, as affirmed by the Church, is inseparable from the finality of Christ himself. Any attempt to construe Judaism—or any other religious tradition—as an autonomous salvific path would therefore entail a reconfiguration of Christology itself.

This constraint is articulated with particular clarity in *Dominus Iesus*, which does not represent a departure from the conciliar trajectory but a retrieval and consolidation of its inner logic. The declaration insists that Jesus Christ is not one salvific figure among others, nor a historically conditioned mediator whose significance might be relativised by subsequent or parallel religious forms. Accordingly, the Church must hold that in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ the history of salvation has reached its

fulfilment, finding in him both its centre and its completeness.⁶⁶ Christ is therefore confessed as more than merely universally relevant; he is universally decisive.

This claim bears directly on the question of dual-covenant theology. If Christ brings salvation history to definitive and universal fulfilment, then no salvific structure can subsist alongside him as parallel, complementary, or independent. *Dominus Iesus* explicitly rejects precisely such proposals, allowing only for participated forms of mediation that derive their meaning and efficacy from Christ's own unique mediation—not as alternatives to it.⁶⁷ Theological models that construe salvation as oriented towards more than one ultimate end, or that posit distinct covenantal orders directed towards separate ends, are thereby excluded on the grounds that they undermine the internal coherence of the Church's Christological confession.

Necessarily, this exclusion does not depend upon a denial of God's universal salvific will, nor upon a dismissal of the religious significance of non-Christian traditions. It arises from the Church's insistence that the universality of salvation is realised *through* Christ—not alongside him. Christ's mediation is not one instantiation of a more general salvific principle; it is the concrete and definitive form in which God's saving purpose is enacted in history. To relativise this mediation would be to undermine the coherence of revelation itself, reducing Christ to one historical manifestation among others.

The declaration therefore defends the use of language such as 'unicity', 'universality', and 'absoluteness' in relation to Christ against the charge that such terms represent theological overreach or confessional triumphalism. On the contrary, it argues that this language expresses fidelity to revelation as received and confessed

⁶⁶ Within *Dominus Iesus*, salvation history is described as reaching its fulfilment and definitive centre in Christ, such that 'the truth of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Lord and only Saviour . . . through the event of his incarnation, death and resurrection has brought the history of salvation to fulfilment', finding in him both 'its fullness and centre' (§13). This fulfilment is decisive such 'that the universal salvific will of the One and Triune God is offered and accomplished once for all in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God' (§14). Christ is therefore confessed as the one in whom salvation history attains its completion, rendering any subsequent or parallel salvific structure theologically unintelligible. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, 6 August 2000, §13–14, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html [accessed 2 January 2026].

⁶⁷ The declaration acknowledges the possibility of 'participated forms of mediation of different kinds and degrees', yet insists that such mediation 'acquire[s] meaning and value *only* from Christ's own mediation' and 'cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to His'. Any proposal that would posit an autonomous salvific order operating alongside or beyond Christ is therefore excluded because it would fracture the unity of salvation willed by the One and Triune God and centred in the incarnate Word. See *Ibid.*, §14.

by the Church from the beginning.⁶⁸ Christ's salvific singularity is more accurately understood as the condition under which dialogue can proceed without dissolving the Church's identity or relativising its faith, rather than as an obstacle to dialogue.

Dominus Iesus thus provides the Christological framework within which *Nostra aetate* §4 must be interpreted. The declaration's refusal to articulate Judaism as a parallel salvific covenant does not reflect a failure of resolve but is entailed by a doctrinal commitment that cannot be relinquished without compromising the coherence of the Church's confession of Christ. The enduring election of Israel may be affirmed and theologically integrated only within an account of salvation that remains ordered in Christ. To posit an autonomous salvific covenant alongside Christ would require the abandonment of his finality. The limits encountered by *Nostra aetate* §4 therefore arise from the inner logic of the Church's Christological faith rather than from historical contingency.

2.5 Ecclesial Mediation and *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*

The limits encountered in *Nostra aetate* §4 are not only grounded Christologically but stabilised ecclesiologically. The Church's confession of Christ as the unique and universal mediator of salvation necessarily entails a corresponding claim about the Church's own mediatory role within the work of redemption. However cautiously reformulated after the Second Vatican Council, the principle traditionally expressed as *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("outside the Church there is no salvation") remained structurally

⁶⁸ Against proposals 'that theology should avoid the use of terms like "unicity", "universality", and "absoluteness"' with respect to Christ, the declaration maintains that 'such language is simply being faithful to revelation' itself. From the beginning, the Church has recognised in Jesus a salvific significance 'proper to Him alone' as 'exclusive, universal, and absolute', grounded in the confession that 'Jesus is . . . the Word of God made man for the salvation of all'. This language expresses continuity with the Church's earliest faith rather than a later polemical development, safeguarding the coherence of revelation against relativisation. See *Ibid.*, §15.

operative.⁶⁹ Vatican II thus re-articulated ecclesial mediation without abandoning or relativising it, broadening the scope of salvific hope while preserving the Church's self-understanding as the sacramental locus of salvation.

This continuity is crucial for understanding why *Nostra aetate* §4 could affirm Israel's enduring election without recognising Judaism as an autonomous salvific covenant. The Council softened inherited rhetoric, rejected collective guilt, and repudiated antisemitism unequivocally, and it did so without displacing the Church from its soteriological framework. Salvation, even where extended beyond the Church's visible boundaries, continued to be conceived as mediated through Christ and ordered—however mysteriously—to the Church as his body. The ecclesiological constraint thus mirrors the Christological one, since salvation cannot be pluralised into parallel mediations alongside Christ, nor reconfigured within covenantal structures existing independently of the Church.

The persistence of this logic becomes particularly visible when read against late preconciliar theology. The draft encyclical *Humani generis unitas* (1938), prepared under Pius XI but never promulgated following his death, offers a revealing indication of the theological climate immediately prior to the Council. While condemning racial antisemitism and affirming the Jewish people's historical election, the draft situates Jewish salvation unambiguously within an ecclesial framework. Israel's vocation is described as

⁶⁹ *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* functions as a concise expression of the Church's claim concerning the necessity of ecclesial mediation within the economy of salvation. While historically formulated in exclusivist terms, the principle has undergone significant doctrinal clarification. Vatican II reaffirmed its substance while re-articulating its scope, insisting that salvation remains inseparable from the Church as the sacrament of Christ, even where its mediation may be realised in ways not fully visible or formally ecclesial. *Lumen gentium* affirms that the Church is 'the universal sacrament of salvation' (§48), while recognising that those who do not belong visibly to the Church may nonetheless be ordered to her 'in various ways' (§16). The Council thus preserved the necessity of the Church for salvation while rejecting crude juridical exclusivism, grounding hope for salvation beyond the Church's visible boundaries in Christ's mediation rather than in autonomous salvific orders. See *Lumen gentium*, 21 November 1964, §§16, 48, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html [accessed 3 January 2026].

preparatory and fulfilled in Christ;⁷⁰ Jewish unbelief is interpreted through Pauline categories of blindness and remnant;⁷¹ and the hope for Israel's ultimate salvation is explicitly framed as a return to the Church.⁷² That such formulations could be advanced scarcely two decades before Vatican II indicates the normative ecclesiological framework from which the Council would have to proceed.

This ecclesiological framework decisively limits the theological options available with respect to Israel. To have affirmed Judaism as an independently salvific covenant would have required not merely a reassessment of Jewish-Christian relations but a fundamental reconfiguration of the Church's own soteriological self-understanding. Such a reconfiguration would have fractured the coherence of Catholic ecclesiology by decoupling salvation from the Church's mediatory role and implicitly relativising its claim to universality.

Nostra aetate §4 thus emerges as a boundary-marking statement shaped by enduring ecclesiological commitments. The Council widened hope, altered tone, and recalibrated moral responsibility, yet it did not—it could not—relinquish the conviction

⁷⁰ Within *Humani generis unitas*, Israel's election is explicitly described as preparatory and oriented towards fulfilment in Christ. The draft states that 'only one people has had a calling, properly so called', namely Israel, 'who were chosen by Almighty God to prepare the way in history for the Incarnation of His Only-Begotten Son' (§134). This vocation is said to culminate decisively in Christ, whose mission and teaching are described as 'the completion of the historic mission and teaching of Israel', such that 'His birth, life, sufferings, death, and resurrection from the dead were the fulfillment of Israel's types and prophecies' (§135). Salvation history is thereby presented as unified and Christologically consummated, rather than as comprising parallel or enduringly independent covenantal orders. See *Humani generis unitas* (draft encyclical), 20 September 1938, §§134–135, <https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/primary-texts-from-the-history-of-the-relationship/hgu1938> [accessed 3 January 2026].

⁷¹ Jewish unbelief is interpreted through explicitly Pauline categories of blindness, remnant, and providential instrumentality. Citing Romans 11, the draft asserts that, while '[a] few chosen souls' accepted Christ, 'the rest have been blinded' and that 'by their offence . . . salvation has come to the Gentiles' (§136). This framework is further elaborated through the olive tree metaphor in which unbelieving Jews are described as fallen branches and Gentile believers as grafted shoots, with repeated warnings against Gentile presumption (§§137–138). The persistence of Israel is thus interpreted theologically within a framework of temporary unbelief and enduring providence. See *Ibid.*, §§136–138.

⁷² The hope for Israel's salvation is explicitly framed in ecclesial terms as a return to Christ and incorporation into the Church. The draft maintains that salvation remains open to Israel 'on the sole condition that this people repent and accept Him as their Redeemer' (§137), and speaks of a future moment in which 'those who come back to Christ find themselves wholly at home in their own house' (§139). This logic is rendered fully explicit in the statement that 'the return of the Jewish people as a whole to their Father's house in the Church of Christ remains God's secret' (§150). Jewish salvation is thus envisaged as fulfilment through ecclesial incorporation. See *Ibid.*, §§137, 139, 150.

that salvation is ultimately mediated through Christ and his Church. The limits encountered were therefore intrinsic to the Church's self-understanding—not the product of contingency or political compromise.

Chapter 3

Post-Conciliar Reception and Catholic–Jewish Dialogue

Introduction

The theological significance of *Nostra aetate* cannot be measured solely at the moment of its promulgation. Conciliar texts acquire their interpretive significance through reception—in the ways they are read, contested, defended, and developed. The post-conciliar period therefore discloses whether §4 initiated a reconfiguration of Catholic soteriology and covenantal theology, or whether its negotiated language fixed, from the outset, the doctrinal boundaries beyond which Catholic–Jewish rapprochement could not coherently proceed.

Reception proves especially revealing because the declaration was never a purely intra-ecclesial recalibration. As Chapter 1 has shown, Jewish leaders participated as dialogical counterparts in the conciliar process that produced *Nostra aetate*, and their sustained engagement with its drafting thus renders their reception a measure of its theological adequacy. The moral repudiation of antisemitism and the rejection of inherited charges of deicide were widely recognised as historic gestures. Yet alongside gratitude there persisted a sustained theological reserve. The interpretative question concerned whether Catholic doctrine had undergone a reconfiguration capable of affirming Jewish covenantal integrity on terms intelligible within Judaism itself—rather than solely within an ecclesial framework.

The Christological and ecclesiological assumptions embedded within *Nostra aetate* §4 were later given unambiguous expression in *Dominus Iesus*, where what had remained implicit was formally affirmed. Although directed principally against theological pluralism rather than Judaism, the declaration proved structurally decisive for Catholic–Jewish relations by restating the universality and finality of Christ in terms that rendered the asymmetry of dialogue unmistakable. Subsequent efforts to address this tension, most notably in the 2015 reflection *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable*, sought to articulate the enduring validity of Israel's covenantal life while remaining doctrinally continuous with the Church's soteriological commitments.

Jewish response and subsequent Catholic clarification disclose the same structural configuration already inscribed within the finalised text of *Nostra aetate*: the subsumption of Judaism within a Catholic soteriological framework. The impasse characteristic of contemporary Catholic–Jewish theological dialogue cannot be explained simply in terms of pastoral prudence or political constraint; it arises from the sustained effort to articulate, within a single and internally coherent dogmatic account, both the

irrevocable covenantal vocation of Israel and the universal and definitive mediation of salvation in Christ.

3.1 Reception as Hermeneutical Diagnosis

Rather than treating reception as a secondary appendage to Vatican II, this chapter approaches the post-conciliar reception of *Nostra aetate* §4 as an interpretive arena in which the declaration's theological weight—and its internal constraints—are disclosed. Although the text was the Council's shortest, it rapidly became among the most publicly contested, provoking intense debate beyond the aula.⁷³ Precisely because its language was calibrated word by word within a fraught six-year-long conciliar process, later tensions should not be dismissed as mere misunderstanding or subsequent regression. They instead function as a hermeneutical test of adequacy, exposing the fault lines which the declaration sought to negotiate without destabilising Catholic self-understanding. Jewish reception is especially probative because Jews were not incidental observers—they were the primary interlocutors addressed by §4, whose very inclusion in the Council's agenda depended upon Jewish prompting and sustained engagement.⁷⁴ The reception of *Nostra aetate* makes clear that the declaration is understood not as a doctrinal resolution but as an inherently delimited beginning, whose carefully negotiated silences inscribe the possibility—if not the inevitability—of a structural stalemate.

Within the Church's own self-interpretation, the declaration was received as a historic repudiation of antisemitism and the charge of Jewish deicide, framed as a decisive moral reckoning in the aftermath of the Holocaust rather than as a systematic revision

⁷³ Borelli observes that, despite being the shortest of the Council's sixteen documents, *Nostra aetate* was 'in some ways its most controversial' (p. 9)—that once word spread that Bea and his Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity were 'looking into questions regarding Jews', debates 'churned in the press and other media' so that it was 'likely the most debated of these documents outside the hall' (p. 10). See Borelli, 'Correcting the *Nostra aetate* Legend', in *Nostra Aetate*, pp. 9–10.

⁷⁴ Magdalena Dziackowska stresses the distinctive character of the role of Jewish interlocutors in the conciliar process, arguing that *Nostra aetate* is notable because 'no other non-Christian faith adherents had such an impact on official Church documents and teaching', and concluding that '[w]ithout Jewish involvement, most probably it would have never happened'. See Magdalena Dziackowska, 'The Origins of *Nostra aetate*, With a Special Regard to the Jewish Contributions', *Free Ebrei*, VI.2 (2017) <http://www.freeebrei.com/anno-vi-numero-2-luglio-dicembre-2017/magdalena-dziackowska-the-origins-of-nostra-aetate-with-a-special-regard-to-the-jewish-contributions> [accessed 31 January 2026].

of Catholic Christology or soteriology.⁷⁵ Its brevity and generality were not treated as deficiencies but as deliberate expressions of pastoral prudence, signalling that the Council had reached the outer limits of what could responsibly be articulated without unsettling the Church's doctrinal self-understanding.⁷⁶ That perception was already explicit at the Council itself. Contemporary Catholic observers recognised the text as the maximum achievable consensus rather than an incomplete theological statement. The American Paulist observer Thomas F. Stransky judged that, 'the declaration may seem naïve in centuries to come . . . but at the present it would be difficult for the council to come up with any more than it has'.⁷⁷ As a result, *Nostra aetate* §4 stabilised rapidly within Catholic discourse as a moral and pastoral compass—an orientation that implicitly constrained the scope of subsequent doctrinal development while presenting those constraints as intrinsic virtues of the document itself.⁷⁸

The immediate Jewish reception of *Nostra aetate* §4 was characterised by a posture of genuine affirmation tempered by sustained theological reserve. Jewish interlocutors widely recognised the declaration as unprecedented in Christian history,

⁷⁵ The Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity retrospectively frames *Nostra aetate* as 'the very first time in the history of Christianity that an Ecumenical Council had expressed itself in such an explicitly positive way with respect to the Church's relationship to Judaism', repeatedly describing it as a 'fundamental turnaround' and 'the most important milestone in the history of the relationship of the Church to the Jewish people'. The account roots this shift in the Holocaust, after which 'a true change in thinking took place', culminating in the Church's 'clear and definitive no to antisemitism' and its rejection of the charge of Jewish deicide. See Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, *Cardinal Augustin Bea as a Protagonist of Reconciliation between Catholics and Jews*, 10 April 2019, <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/ilc---international-catholic-jewish-liaison-committee-/discorsi/cardinal-augustin-bea-as-a-protagonist-of-reconciliation-between1.html> [accessed 1 February 2026].

⁷⁶ The declaration's 'extreme brevity' and 'relatively general' character are treated as sources of strength, relying on its 'inherent surplus of meaning'. It functions as a pastoral and moral compass whose reception would be deepened and promoted by later popes rather than systematically expanded at the level of doctrine. See Ibid.

⁷⁷ *Council Daybook: Vatican II, Session 4, Sept. 14, 1965 to Dec. 8, 1965*, ed. by Floyd Anderson (Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1966), p. 140.

⁷⁸ Marc H. Tanenbaum states that 'the text of the final version of the Declaration that was adopted represented a compromise document compared to the text that was introduced at the close of the third session' (p. 52). He nevertheless insists that, 'seen in the perspective of nineteen hundred years of Christian-Jewish history, this Declaration represents an incredible achievement' (p. 53), notwithstanding its restraint and omissions. See Marc H. Tanenbaum, 'A Jewish Viewpoint on *Nostra Aetate*', in *Twenty Years of Jewish-Catholic Relations*, ed. by Eugene J. Fisher, James Rudin, and Marc Tanenbaum (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), pp. 39–60 (pp. 52–53).

particularly in its repudiation of antisemitism and its decisive movement away from inherited accusations of collective Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus. Even so, the final text stopped short of explicitly naming or condemning the charge of 'deicide'.⁷⁹ The declaration was therefore welcomed as a long-overdue moral recalibration of inherited patterns of Christian hostility rather than as a fully articulated theological resolution.⁸⁰ For some, disappointment centred not only on the dropped term 'deicide' but the absence of apology or explicit reference to the Holocaust.⁸¹ Accordingly, Jewish reception increasingly adopted the language of a "first step"—appreciative of the document's re-orientation of Catholic moral teaching in relation to Jews, yet conscious that it stopped short of offering the kind of theological assurance that many Jewish interlocutors would have regarded as fully securing

⁷⁹ See Second Vatican Council, '*Nostra Aetate*', §4.

⁸⁰ Tanenbaum records that Jewish responses to *Nostra aetate* ranged from enthusiasm to scepticism, but notes that even positive receptions were framed primarily in moral rather than theological terms. While welcoming the declaration as 'an important contribution to improve the future relations between Catholics and Jews', he stresses that Jewish affirmation focused on the repudiation of antisemitism and the deicide charge—not on any perceived doctrinal convergence. He observes that widespread media portrayals of the declaration as having "absolved" Jews for the death of Christ generated resentment, since '[n]o Jew in my acquaintance has ever felt guilty for the death of Jesus' and 'the Declaration itself does not use "absolve" or "exonerate" even once' (p. 51). See Tanenbaum, 'A Jewish Viewpoint on *Nostra Aetate*', p. 51.

⁸¹ Noam Marans documents that early Jewish reception of *Nostra aetate* combined appreciation with explicit regret, particularly concerning what the final text omitted. In its initial response following the Council's vote on 15 October 1965, the American Jewish Committee stated: 'We regret keenly some of the assertions in the Declaration, especially those that might give rise to misunderstandings'. While the statement welcomed the repudiation of collective Jewish guilt and antisemitism as 'an act of justice long overdue', the AJC's expression of "keen regret" reflected disappointment that 'the word "deicide" was dropped from the final version or that antisemitism was only "decried" in the final text' and that 'there was no mention . . . of the Holocaust or Christian culpability in violence against Jews over millennia, and certainly no apology'. See Noam Marans, 'From Regret to Acclaim: A Jewish Reaction to *Nostra Aetate*' (2015) <https://www.ajc.org/news/from-regret-to-acclaim-a-jewish-reaction-to-nostra-aetate> [accessed 2 February 2026].

Jewish covenantal integrity.⁸² *Nostra aetate* was thus received less as a covenantal statement than as an ethical corrective, enabling Jewish interlocutors to welcome the Church's moral reorientation. At the same time, the declaration remained bounded by Christological and soteriological commitments that did not—and, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, could not—affirm Jewish covenantal integrity on terms intelligible within Judaism itself.

3.2 Heschel, Berkovits, and Covenant Asymmetry

Heschel occupies a distinctive position within Jewish reception of *Nostra aetate* §4 as an engaged interlocutor whose theological commitments both enabled dialogue and disclosed its limits.⁸³ While Heschel welcomed the declaration as a genuine moral milestone and participated actively in its drafting, he consistently resisted any framework that construed Judaism as incomplete or oriented towards eventual Christian fulfilment within an ecclesial logic not its own.⁸⁴ For Heschel, authentic dialogue required the renunciation of all conversionary expectations. His protest against formulations implying a future ecclesial absorption of Israel—memorably denounced as 'spiritual fratricide'⁸⁵—exposed the Christological framework within which *Nostra aetate* §4 was necessarily articulated and beyond which it could not coherently move. At the same time, Heschel's goal was not to secure recognition for Judaism within the Church or to have Jewish theology interpreted through Christian categories; rather, he aimed to reform Christian self-

⁸² Retrospective Jewish assessments frequently frame *Nostra aetate* as a landmark whose significance lay less in theological resolution than in opening a longer and still incomplete process of redress. Joanne Palmer describes the declaration as 'a milestone, which really is only the beginning of the process' in Catholic-Jewish relations. She notes that while the text is widely understood to reject collective Jewish guilt—often taken as shorthand for rejecting the charge of deicide—'there were Jews and probably still are Jews who said and say it's too little, too late'—a judgement she characterises as 'not a completely unreasonable position'. See Joanne Palmer, 'Nostra aetate at 55', *Jewish Standard*, 4 November 2020, <https://jewishstandard.timesofisrael.com/nostra-aetate-at-55/> [accessed 2 February 2026].

⁸³ Eugene J. Fisher portrays Heschel's reception of *Nostra aetate* as appreciative yet qualified. A central concern was whether the Council's language could recognise 'Jews as Jews rather than as potential converts' (p. 114). Heschel welcomed the direction of travel, Fisher notes, but did so while 'maintaining some reservations about the final document' (p. 115). He further observes that Heschel 'appears to have felt that progress was made on the conversion issue' through the conciliar debate and its resolution in the final text. See Eugene J. Fisher, 'Heschel's Impact on Catholic-Jewish Relations', in *No Religion Is an Island: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. by Harold Kasimow and Byron L. Sherwin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 110–123 (pp. 114–115).

⁸⁴ See Heschel, 'On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations', p. 7.

⁸⁵ Fisher, 'Heschel's Impact', p. 115.

understanding, eliminating contempt and making Christianity more faithful to its own moral and spiritual vocation.⁸⁶ In this sense, Heschel exemplifies the paradox that characterised Jewish reception more broadly: gratitude for the declaration's moral reorientation without any concession on covenantal asymmetry. Dialogue, however sincere, remained structurally constrained so long as it could not affirm Jewish covenantal life on its own theological terms.

Beyond Heschel's dialogical engagement, a more systematic Jewish critique emerged that diagnosed the limitations of *Nostra aetate* §4 at the level of Christian theology itself. Writing in the immediate post-conciliar period, Romanian-born Orthodox Jewish theologian Eliezer Berkovits rejected Christian appeals to interreligious dialogue as structurally compromised, arguing that Christian universalism continued to presume Jewish error and thus rendered dialogue intrinsically asymmetrical rather than genuinely reciprocal.⁸⁷ From this perspective, moral repentance could not compensate for a doctrinal framework that still construed Judaism as preparatory, deficient, or superseded. Berkovits therefore interpreted conciliar gestures of tolerance less as theological transformation than as a pragmatic accommodation to a 'post-Christian' moral climate, unaccompanied by any renunciation of Christianity's claim to possess the fullness of truth.⁸⁸ Berkovits stressed that the Council's final schema on the Jews was shaped by external historical pressures, and that moral concern alone would

⁸⁶ Susannah Heschel recalls the reason for her father's involvement as seeking 'the cure from the disease affecting so many minds' stating a 'profound concern that those who worship should be free of contempt for any individual'. See Eugene Borowitz and Daniel Berrigan, 'Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophet of Social Activism', in *No Religion Is an Island: The "Nostra Aetate" Dialogues*, ed. by Edward Bristow (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), pp. 153–179 (pp. 171–172).

⁸⁷ Eliezer Berkovits contends that Christian dialogue remains compromised so long as it presupposes theological superiority, insisting that '[o]ne does not enter into a dialogue in honesty when one is convinced from the beginning that one is in possession of all the truth and one's partner in the dialogue is in error'. He thus concludes there is 'no reason on earth why Judaism should make itself available to "fraternal dialogue" with a religion which, by its very premises, declares others to be in error and thus, from the outset, destroys the basis of the true dialogical situation'. See Eliezer Berkovits, 'Judaism in the Post-Christian Era', *Judaism*, 15.1 (1966), pp. 74–84 (p. 81) <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1304357456/fulltextPDF/F2F238382A804A8EPQ/1?accountid=130472&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals> [accessed 4 February 2026].

⁸⁸ Berkovits situates Christian tolerance within what he calls 'the post-Christian age of world history', contending that Christianity now adopts the language of dialogue because 'the old policies of intolerance are no longer viable' (pp. 75–76). He therefore 'rejects the idea of interreligious understanding on ethical grounds', describing it as 'immoral because it is an attempt to whitewash a criminal past' (p. 82). See *Ibid.*, pp. 75–76, 82.

not have sufficed to produce even this highly guarded declaration.⁸⁹ For Berkovits, a dialogue conducted under conditions of theological inequality could only reproduce, in softened form, the same structures that had historically rendered Judaism vulnerable to contempt, coercion, and violence.⁹⁰ Appeals to tolerance were therefore suspect precisely because they emerged, in his view, not from a rethinking of Christian truth claims but from what he understood to be the moral exhaustion of a civilisation whose universalist theology had culminated in catastrophe. So long as Christianity continued to construe the Hebrew Bible as intrinsically incomplete apart from its incorporation into Christian revelation, and claimed exclusive possession of salvific truth, Jewish participation in dialogue could only amount to acquiescence in a framework that denied Judaism's self-sufficiency.⁹¹ What was offered as reconciliation thus appeared, from this perspective, as an ethically inadequate response—one that risked obscuring rather than confronting Christianity's historical and theological responsibility.

The early Jewish reception of *Nostra aetate* §4 already carried within it the structural conditions for a later stalemate. Celebrated as an unprecedented moral turn, it was nonetheless received in ways that affirmed the declaration's ethical rupture with inherited patterns of Christian theological subordination of Judaism, while simultaneously acknowledging the absence of any clear doctrinal

⁸⁹ Berkovits notes that '[a]ll the friendlier statements about Jews and Judaism made in this new age' must be understood 'in the light of the change imposed by external historic developments upon Christianity' (p. 76). He posits that the Vatican Council's schema on the Jews 'was forced on the Church by the new historic constellation' and that 'the uncharitable haggling in the Council about the final version of the schema . . . proved that the sense of shame in some Christian consciences alone would never have sufficed to produce even that extremely guarded and political declaration' (p. 76). See *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁹⁰ Berkovits frames the history of Christian–Jewish relations as a continuous theological trajectory rather than a series of contingent moral failures, arguing that '[a] straight line leads from the first act of oppression against the Jews and Judaism in the fourth century to the holocaust in the twentieth'. Modern atrocities are, in this view, not an aberration but the historical outworking of theological structures already embedded within early Christian self-understanding. He therefore concludes with stark polemical force that '[w]hat was started at the Council of Nicaea was duly completed in the concentration camps and the crematoria'. See *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁹¹ Berkovits argues that Christian–Jewish dialogue remains structurally compromised so long as Christianity interprets the Hebrew Bible as intrinsically incomplete and subsumed within its own revelatory economy. He rejects the assumption that Jews and Christians share a common scriptural foundation, insisting that 'the Hebrew Bible is complete within itself', and that Christian readings construe biblical Judaism as *preparatio evangelica*—'*a preparation for the divine epiphany as the Christian finds it in the New Testament*'—thereby misrepresenting Judaism's own theological integrity. See *Ibid.*, p. 80.

trajectory beyond it.⁹² The section thus became, simultaneously, the indispensable foundation for Catholic–Jewish rapprochement and the outer limit of what the Church could affirm without reconfiguring the Christological framework through which Judaism is theologically interpreted. The ensuing decades therefore stabilised a mode of dialogue marked by practical co-operation and intensified mutual understanding without doctrinal convergence⁹³—an equilibrium later formalised, rather than reversed, in magisterial clarifications that reasserted the universality and finality of Christ.

3.3 *Dominus Iesus* and Doctrinal Limits

What had functioned after the Council as an implicit doctrinal boundary was formally articulated in the 2000 declaration *Dominus Iesus*. Promulgated under the authority of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith during the prefecture of Joseph Ratzinger, the document emerged in a context marked by growing ecclesial anxiety over theological pluralism and doctrinal indeterminacy at the turn of the millennium. Explicitly, the declaration was not directed against interreligious dialogue as such—still less against

⁹² Borelli cautions against reading *Nostra aetate* through what he terms a retrospective 'legend', emphasising both the declaration's genuine moral significance and the severe constraints under which it was produced. He notes that key formulations were received by Jews as ambiguous or constrained, observing that the juxtaposition of Christian hope for the 'union of the Jewish people with the Church' with adjacent repudiations of anti-Jewish teaching could suggest that an eventual union of Jews with the Church was a motive for improving the behaviour of Christians towards them, even as the text retreated from stronger condemnations present in earlier drafts. See Borelli, 'Correcting the *Nostra aetate* Legend', p. 23.

⁹³ A later articulation of the dialogue-without-doctrinal-convergence posture appears in the NCS–BCEIA Consultation's 'Reflections on Covenant and Mission', which reconfigures missionary practice towards Jews without unsettling Catholic Christological finality. The document insists that 'campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church', citing the German Catholic theologian and cardinal Walter Kasper's statement to the International Catholic–Jewish Liaison Committee (New York, 1 May 2001) that 'there exists dialogue but there does not exist any Catholic missionary organisation for Jews' and that 'mission, in this strict sense, cannot be used with regard to Jews'. See BCEIA–NCS Consultation, 'Reflections on Covenant and Mission' (2002) <https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/interreligious/bceia-ncs/ncs-bceia02aug12-3> [accessed 6 February 2026].

Jewish–Christian relations in particular.⁹⁴ It was instead framed as a general doctrinal intervention, intended to address what the CDF perceived as relativising tendencies within contemporary theology. As the text itself makes clear, *Dominus Iesus* is a declaration intended to ‘reassert the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ’⁹⁵ and to refute ‘erroneous and reductive interpretations’⁹⁶ that threatened to erode the Church’s Christological and soteriological self-understanding. Although not aimed primarily at Judaism, the declaration had a structurally decisive effect on Catholic–Jewish relations. In effect, *Dominus Iesus* irreformably institutionalised the formal limits already inserted into *Nostra aetate* §4 towards the end of its finalisation—doctrinal constraints that had circumscribed how far conciliar openness could extend without destabilising core doctrinal commitments.⁹⁷ The doctrinal formulations advanced in *Dominus Iesus* were therefore not innovations *ex nihilo* but the consolidation of limits that had been negotiated—and in some cases imposed—during Vatican II itself. In this sense, *Dominus Iesus* does not represent a retreat from *Nostra aetate*; rather, it represents a clarification of what the Council’s reforming impulse could never finally surrender—notwithstanding the aspirations of figures associated with earlier drafts, such as Bea and Heschel.

The doctrinal core of *Dominus Iesus* lies in its unequivocal reassertion of the unicity of Christ and the Church as the sole mediators of salvation. The declaration maintains that ‘the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church’, and that—while individual non-Christians may attain this grace in ways that remain difficult to define—such attainment cannot occur apart from a ‘mysterious

⁹⁴ *Dominus Iesus* frames interreligious dialogue explicitly as subordinate to the Church’s evangelising mandate, insisting that, ‘as part of her evangelising mission’, dialogue constitutes ‘just one of the actions of the Church in her mission *ad gentes*’—a mission which ‘today as always retains its full force and necessity’. Within this framework, the equality presupposed by dialogue is carefully delimited, referring solely to the ‘equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue’ and ‘not to doctrinal content, nor even less to the position of Jesus Christ—who is God himself made man’. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, §22.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, §5.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, §10.

⁹⁷ The document presents itself as a response to ‘relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism’ (§4). As a corrective, the declaration insists that it is ‘necessary above all to reassert the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ’ (§5) and to reaffirm that the Church, as Christ’s body, has an ‘indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being’ (§20). The text maintains that grace is always mediated ‘by means of Christ in the Spirit’, ruling out interpretations that would regard the Church as ‘one way of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions’ (§21). See *Ibid.*, §§4–5, 20–21.

relationship to the Church'.⁹⁸ Other religious traditions are therefore denied any independent salvific efficacy of their own, as parallel or complementary ways of salvation—even where they may contain elements of truth or goodness.⁹⁹ The text further insists that, objectively speaking, followers of other religions exist in a 'gravely deficient situation' in comparison with those who possess 'the fullness of the means of salvation' within the Church.¹⁰⁰ Although Judaism is not named explicitly, these formulations apply structurally to Jews no less than to other non-Christian communities, rendering Jewish covenantal life theologically subordinate within the Church's salvific economy.¹⁰¹ This asymmetry is reinforced by the document's treatment of interreligious dialogue, which is not framed as a theologically open-ended encounter but as an activity subordinated to the Church's evangelising mandate.¹⁰² The equality presupposed by such dialogue is correspondingly delimited, referring solely to the equal personal dignity of the participants and not to doctrinal parity or truth-claims. For many Jewish interlocutors, this configuration proved decisive, since dialogue was now formally framed as an endeavour ordered—however gently—towards conviction rather than mutual theological

⁹⁸ Ibid., §20.

⁹⁹ Gavin D'Costa argues that it is 'difficult to read the Conciliar documents as giving a positive answer to the question: can other religions, *per se*, in their structures be mediators of supernatural revelation and salvific grace?', concluding that while no explicit negative answer is given, 'there is certainly no positive answer'. This doctrinal logic is echoed in David Berger's reading of *Dominus Iesus*, which 'maintains that the salvific grace of God is given only by means of Jesus and the church' and therefore 'appears to mean that other religions, presumably including Judaism, have no independent salvific power'. See Gavin D'Costa, 'Trinitarian Theology: An Invitation to Engagement', in *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), pp. 99–142 (p. 105); and David Berger, 'Dominus Iesus and the Jews', *America*, 185.7 (2001) <https://www.americamagazine.org/from-our-archives/2001/09/17/dominus-iesus-and-jews/> [accessed 9 February 2026].

¹⁰⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, §22.

¹⁰¹ Berger notes that 'Jews, if they are included in this assertion, are apparently far less likely to be saved than Catholics'. See Berger, 'Dominus Iesus and the Jews'.

¹⁰² D'Costa emphasises the 'silence, indeed refusal, to acknowledge other religions, *per se*, as possibly being salvific structures' in conciliar and post-conciliar teaching, indicating that neither pluralism nor inclusivism is sanctioned. The implications of this position for Jewish–Christian dialogue are articulated by Berger, who observes that *Dominus Iesus* frames dialogue as part of the Church's evangelising mission, rendering it intrinsically asymmetrical. He asserts that 'the denial of doctrinal equality is objectionable, even deeply objectionable, in and of itself, and the ascription of evangelical intent to the dialogue appears to be a dagger thrust into its very heart'. See D'Costa, 'Trinitarian Theology', p. 109; and Berger, 'Dominus Iesus and the Jews'.

recognition.¹⁰³ In this respect, *Dominus Iesus* renders explicit limits already latent in *Nostra aetate* §4, whose carefully negotiated final draft had deliberately avoided any reconfiguration of the Church's Christological and soteriological claims.¹⁰⁴

Jewish reception of *Dominus Iesus* is therefore best understood as a considered theological judgement on the adequacy of post-conciliar Catholic discourse. While *Nostra aetate* §4 represented a carefully negotiated attempt to recalibrate Christian attitudes towards Judaism after the Holocaust, *Dominus Iesus* demonstrated how easily such pastoral recalibrations could be reinscribed within an otherwise doctrinally continuous soteriological framework. For many Jewish readers, the central difficulty was the explicit refusal of doctrinal parity for Judaism as a living religious tradition. From this perspective, a dialogue that affirms equal personal dignity while denying symmetry at the level of truth-claims cannot secure the form of mutual recognition that post-1965 discourse appeared—however cautiously—to promise.¹⁰⁵ The tension becomes more apparent when interreligious engagement is formally situated within the Church's evangelising mandate. Even without overt proselytism, attributing missionary intent to dialogue renders the encounter structurally asymmetrical, directing it towards a determinate theological conclusion rather than an open-ended exchange. It is within this framework that one might speak—consciously and with full awareness of the term's moral weight—of a “bloodless Holocaust”: a heuristic description of the perceived implication that the universality of Christian salvation ultimately presupposes the supersession of Judaism as a distinct covenantal community.¹⁰⁶ Such a stark interpretation, whether judged excessive or not, names a reception-level anxiety shaped by Jewish historical memory in the aftermath of the Holocaust. It was in

¹⁰³ Berger concludes that by ascribing evangelising intent to dialogue, the declaration ‘effectively expects Jews to participate in an endeavour officially described as an effort to lead them, however gently and indirectly, to accept beliefs antithetical to the core of their faith’. See Berger, ‘*Dominus Iesus* and the Jews’.

¹⁰⁴ D’Costa suggests that the apparent silences of conciliar texts are ‘intentional’ and may be read as ‘prohibiting any unqualified positive affirmation of other religions as salvific structures’, thereby illuminating how *Dominus Iesus* makes explicit limits already implicit in *Nostra aetate*. See D’Costa, ‘Trinitarian Theology’, p. 105.

¹⁰⁵ Heschel later judged the final text of *Nostra aetate* significant precisely because it was ‘devoid of any expression of hope for conversion’—a feature he understood as a necessary condition of genuine recognition rather than a merely provisional or pedagogical acceptance. See Fisher, ‘Heschel’s Impact’, p. 115.

¹⁰⁶ Fisher cites Morris B. Abram, then President of the American Jewish Committee, warning during the drafting period that any declaration—‘no matter how well-intentioned’—whose effect would entail ‘the dissolution of the Jewish people as such and the elimination of Judaism as a religion’ would be ‘received with resentment by Jews throughout the world’. See *Ibid.*

response to anxieties of precisely this order that Walter Kasper, in his 2001 intervention as President of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, sought to distinguish dialogue from proselytism and to reaffirm Judaism's unique relation to the Church within a wider magisterial framework, thereby acknowledging why such concerns were intelligible in the first place.¹⁰⁷ So long as Catholic doctrine ultimately affirms the universality of Christ and the Church, *Nostra aetate*—for all its moral and pastoral significance—could not, by its very construction, overcome the deeper structural sources of Christian anti-Judaism.

3.4 *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable* and Structural Tension

The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable constitutes the most developed post-conciliar effort to negotiate this unresolved tension. Presented explicitly as a 'starting point for further theological thought',¹⁰⁸ rather than as a magisterial pronouncement, the document thereby signals both its scope and its limits. It seeks to reassure Jewish interlocutors by affirming the enduring validity of God's covenant with Israel and by clarifying that 'the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional

¹⁰⁷ Kasper, then President of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, acknowledged the pain occasioned by *Dominus Iesus*, claiming that '[i]t was not its intention to hurt or offend . . . [b]ut it did' and expressing 'profound regret' for this. See Walter Kasper, 'Dominus Iesus', 17th Meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, 1 May 2001, https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/articles/kasper_dominus_iesus.html [accessed 10 February 2026].

¹⁰⁸ *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable* is 'not a magisterial document or doctrinal teaching of the Catholic Church, but is a reflection prepared by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews on current theological questions that have developed since the Second Vatican Council'. It is 'intended to be a starting point for further theological thought with a view to enriching and intensifying the theological dimension of Jewish-Catholic dialogue'. See Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable (Rom. 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate (No. 4)*, 10 December 2015, Preface, <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crre/documenti-della-commissione/en.html> [accessed 11 February 2026].

mission work directed towards Jews'.¹⁰⁹ At the same time, however, it insists that 'there cannot be different paths or approaches to God's salvation', since any such theory 'would in fact endanger the foundations of Christian faith'.¹¹⁰ In this respect, the text sustains the traditional fulfilment paradigm and resists the theological logic of dual-covenant proposals. Rather than repudiating *Dominus Iesus*, the document stages a carefully managed coexistence of affirmations whose underlying soteriological premises remain doctrinally continuous with it. The 2015 reflection therefore represents, in a real sense, the most generous articulation presently available within Catholic theology of Judaism's covenantal permanence, even as it remains bound by Christological universality. Rabbi David Berger, an American Orthodox Jewish historian of Jewish-Christian relations, observes that its authors appear to be 'struggling to overcome their own theology',¹¹¹ seeking to respond to Jewish concerns while remaining within the boundaries of Catholic dogmatic continuity. The result is a sustained impasse: an effort to mitigate the soteriological exclusivity articulated in *Dominus Iesus* while remaining within its doctrinal framework, thereby signalling the limits imposed by Catholic dogmatic coherence.

The finalised text of *Nostra aetate* consolidated a mode of Catholic-Jewish engagement that coupled an unequivocal moral repudiation of antisemitism with the preservation of classical Christological and soteriological claims. What later emerged in *Dominus Iesus* was a formal clarification of the doctrinal foundations already embedded within the final conciliar text. The 2015 reflection of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews represents the most sustained attempt to address this tension, yet it does so without relinquishing the doctrinal framework from which the tension arose. The stalemate evident in Jewish reception is structurally produced by the concurrent affirmation of claims that

¹⁰⁹ The document states that 'the Church is therefore obliged to view evangelisation to Jews, who believe in the one God, in a different manner from that to people of other religions and world views', specifying that 'the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews'. It adds that while there is a 'principled rejection of an institutional Jewish mission', Christians remain called to bear witness to their faith 'in a humble and sensitive manner', acknowledging that Jews are 'bearers of God's Word', particularly 'in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah'. See Ibid., §40.

¹¹⁰ The text explicitly rejects 'the theory that there may be two different paths to salvation, the Jewish path without Christ and the path with the Christ'. It reiterates that 'confessing the universal and therefore also exclusive mediation of salvation through Jesus Christ belongs to the core of Christian faith', and that 'the Church and Judaism cannot be represented as "two parallel ways to salvation"', but that 'the Church must "witness to Christ as the Redeemer for all"'. See Ibid., §35.

¹¹¹ Berger, quoted in Palmer, '*Nostra Aetate* at 55'.

remain doctrinally irreconcilable: the irrevocable covenantal life of Israel and the universal and definitive mediation of salvation in Christ. So long as both are maintained in their classical form, dialogue may deepen in ethical seriousness and sustained theological engagement, yet it cannot overcome the asymmetry intrinsic to Catholic dogmatic coherence. In this sense, *Dominus Iesus* does not contradict *Nostra aetate*; it fully articulates its implicit structural logic.

Conclusion

The significance of *Nostra aetate* §4 cannot be understood in isolation or solely in terms of its historical promulgation; it is intelligible only within the doctrinal, institutional, and hermeneutical constraints that structured its drafting, guided its reception, and framed the subsequent development of Catholic–Jewish dialogue. Responding to the moral exigencies of the post-Holocaust era, the Council sought to recalibrate Christian attitudes towards the Jewish people without transgressing the structural framework underpinning Catholic self-understanding: the unicity of salvation history, the finality and universality of Christ, and the Church’s mediatory role within redemption. The declaration therefore constitutes an ethical and pastoral rupture with inherited patterns of Christian antisemitism, while simultaneously embodying limits inscribed within the Church’s magisterial and doctrinal framework. Any reconciliation it facilitates remains bound to these constraints.

As Chapter 1 demonstrated, from the first formulations of *Decretum de Iudaeis* through the drafts overseen by Cardinal Bea and debated in the aula, Jewish interlocutors—most prominently Heschel—both enabled and tested the Council’s capacity to articulate meaningful engagement with Judaism. Heschel’s insistence that authentic dialogue forego expectations of conversion foregrounded the tension between moral reorientation and doctrinal fidelity, revealing the challenge of maintaining the Church’s Christologically ordered account of Israel’s covenantal status while repudiating historic antisemitism. In these interactions, the Council’s moral and pastoral intentions intersected with doctrinal boundaries that ultimately delimited the text’s theological scope.

Chapter 2 made evident that these boundaries were neither contingent nor negotiable, but derived from the Church’s structural commitments: magisterial authority constrained by fidelity to Scripture and tradition, the unicity of salvation history as ordered in Christ, and the ecclesiological principle that salvation is mediated through the Church. The declaration’s refusal to recognise a dual-covenant model, or to attribute independent salvific efficacy to Judaism, was therefore not oversight or prudential caution, but the necessary consequence of these commitments. The Council could recalibrate tone, clarify responsibility, and remove explicit language of conversion without transgressing these doctrinal imperatives, yet it could not, without incoherence, reconceive the Church’s Christological or soteriological claims.

The post-conciliar reception, analysed in Chapter 3, confirms that these structural conditions remain operative. *Dominus Iesus* and *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable* make explicit the limits implicit within *Nostra aetate*, formalising the doctrinal architecture governing Catholic–Jewish engagement. Jewish reception recognised the moral and ethical innovation of the document, yet perceived the enduring asymmetry that continues to

delimit mutual theological recognition. Dialogue may deepen in ethical seriousness and sustain engagement, but it cannot resolve the structural tension between Israel's irrevocable covenantal vocation and the universal and definitive mediation of salvation in Christ.

Nostra aetate §4 occupies a paradoxical position: at once transformative and constrained. It inaugurates a moral and pastoral reorientation of Catholic–Jewish relations, enabling unprecedented dialogue and repudiating inherited antisemitism, while preserving the doctrinal principles that precludes recognition of Judaism as a parallel salvific covenant. Its enduring significance lies in this tension: the declaration reconciles moral and theological responsibilities without compromising continuity in Catholic doctrine. To understand its impact—and the limits of subsequent Catholic–Jewish rapprochement—is to recognise that structural fidelity and ethical innovation are mutually informing, and that the ethical reorientation it enacts is inseparable from the doctrinal coherence that constrains it. Catholic engagement with Israel's covenantal vocation therefore remains circumscribed by the Magisterium's doctrinal framework.

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