

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

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Fig. 1 – Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel with Cardinal Augustin Bea (1963)

# Research Question

## The Significance of the Inquiry

1. Situating the study within the broader history of **Christian–Jewish relations**
2. Identifying the **structural theological tension** within the conciliar framework
3. Clarifying the doctrinal limits of **Vatican II reform**
4. Reframing the parameters of **Catholic–Jewish dialogue**

“

What doctrinal, historical, and hermeneutical constraints limited *Nostra aetate*’s capacity to effect a deeper theological reconfiguration of **Catholic–Jewish relations**, as envisaged by both Catholic reformers and Jewish interlocutors?

”

# Dissertation Structure

## The Trajectory of the Inquiry

### Chapter 1 – The Drafting of *Nostra aetate*

- Post-Holocaust impetus
- Conciliar negotiations
- Theological, political, and institutional pressures

### Chapter 2 – Doctrinal Constraints

- Magisterial continuity
- Christological finality
- Limits of covenant and salvation

### Chapter 3 – Reception and Continuing Tensions

- Post-conciliar reception
- Magisterial clarification
- Ongoing structural tensions within dialogue

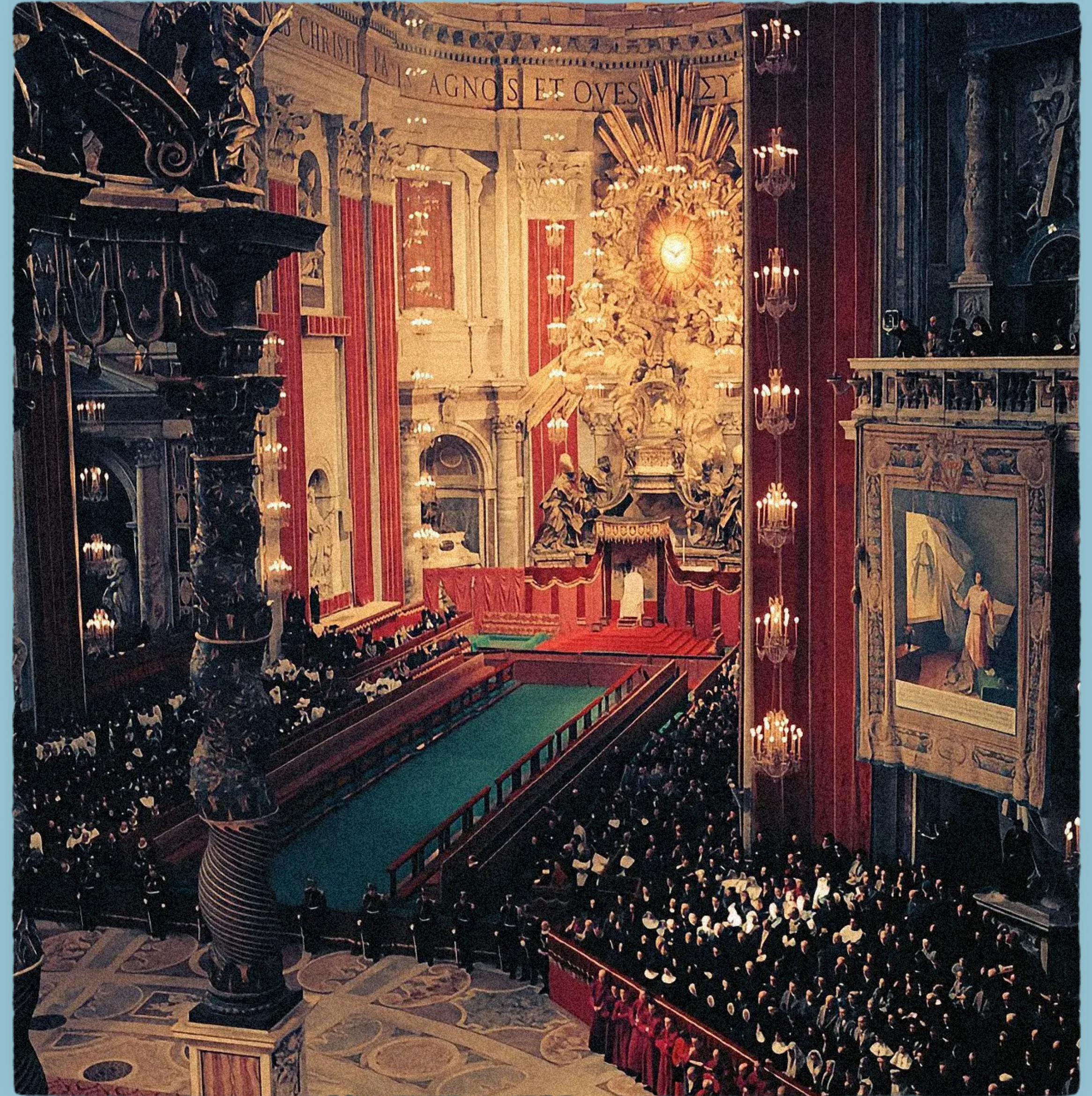


Fig. 2 – The Second Vatican Council in St Peter's Basilica (1962–1965)

# Primary Sources

## Part I: Conciliar Documents

- Successive conciliar drafts of *Decretum de Iudaeis* (1961–1965)
- Abraham Joshua Heschel, ‘**On Improving Catholic–Jewish Relations**’ (1962)
- *Nostra aetate* §4 (1965)

“

**God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues.**

”

# Primary Sources

## Part II: Post-Conciliar Documents

- *Dominus Iesus* (2000)
- *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable* (2015)

“

The theory that there may be two different paths to salvation, the Jewish path without Christ and the path with the Christ, whom Christians believe is Jesus of Nazareth, **would in fact endanger the foundations of Christian faith.**

”

# Secondary Scholarship

## Key Perspectives

### Thomas Stransky

Internal history of *Decretum de Iudaeis* and conciliar negotiations

### John Borelli

Conciliar drafting process and interpretive debates

### Gavin D'Costa

Christology and covenant theology

### Karma Ben-Johanan

Jewish reception of Vatican II

### David Berger

Jewish critique of Christian universalism

“

This was the approach adopted by ***Nostra aetate***, which **allowed the Church to live with the contradiction between Jewish rejection of the Gospel and the Jews’ continuing status as God’s chosen people**, without insisting on resolving it.

”

# Methodology

## The Analytical Framework

1. **Historical–theological analysis** of conciliar developments
2. **Textual analysis** of conciliar and post-conciliar documents
3. Examination of **magisterial continuity** and doctrinal limits
4. Engagement with **Jewish theological reception**

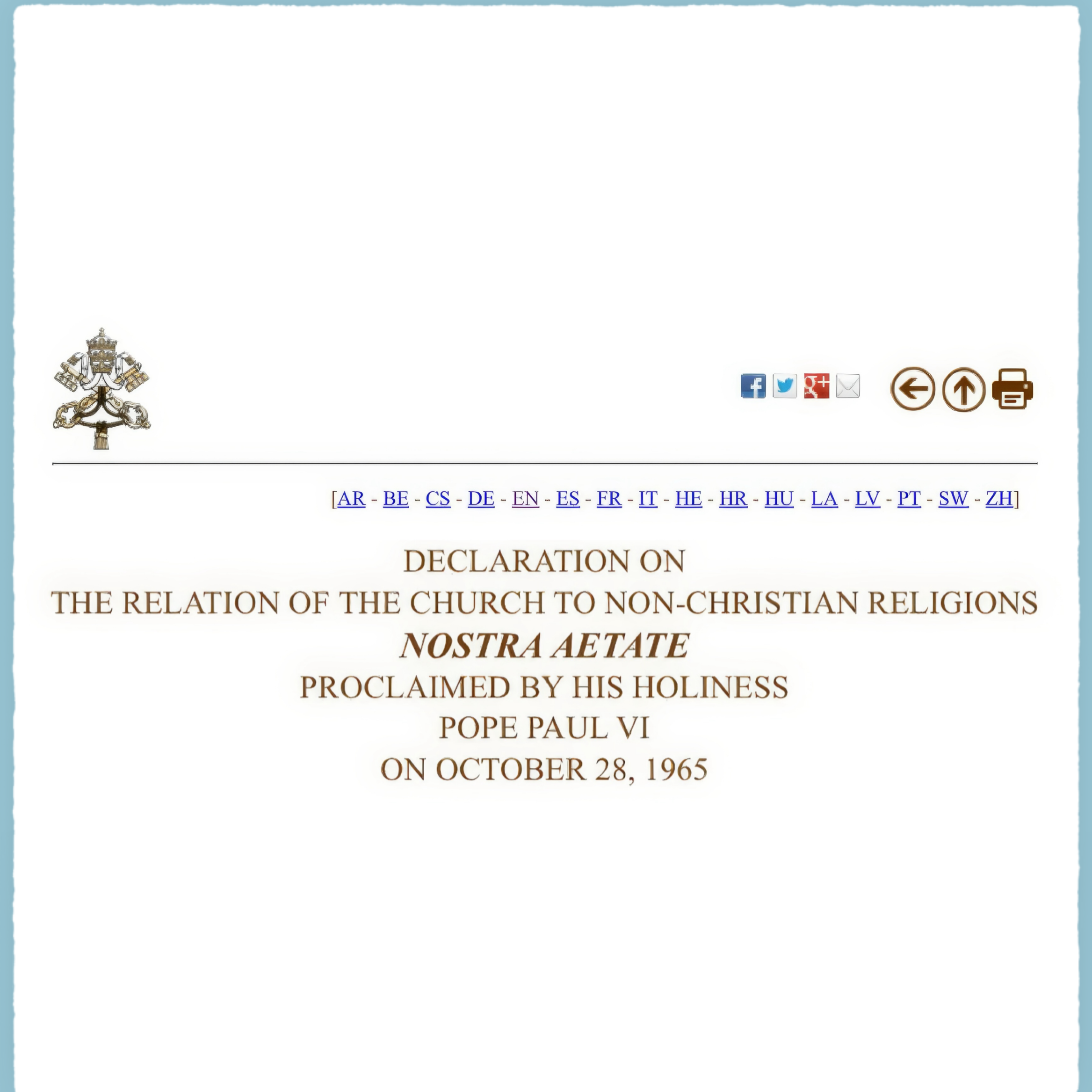


Fig. 3 – *Nostra aetate* (1965)

# Preliminary Findings

## The Emerging Argument

*Nostra aetate* marked a **decisive moral shift** in Catholic–Jewish relations.

However, the declaration remained **doctrinally constrained**.

Catholic teaching **maintains both**:

- Israel's **enduring covenantal vocation**
- Christ's **universal salvific mediation**

“

On the one hand, **the Council encourages dialogues with other religions**; on the other, **it also affirms that the Roman Catholic Church is the only repository of all true religion.**

”

# Wider Significance

## The Implications for Catholic–Jewish Dialogue

- Shows how *Nostra aetate* initiated a **decisive moral transformation** in Catholic–Jewish relations
- Demonstrates that the declaration nevertheless remained **doctrinally constrained**
- Reveals the **enduring theological tension** between Israel's continuing covenantal vocation and Christ's universal salvific mediation
- Defines the **conceptual boundaries** within which future Catholic–Jewish dialogue must operate



Fig. 4 – Pope John Paul II at the Western Wall (2000)

# Figures

Fig. 1: American Jewish Committee, *Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Cardinal Augustin Bea* [Photograph] (1963) <https://icjs.org/nostra-aetate-60th-anniversary/#:~:text=Photo:%20Rabbi%20Abraham%20Joshua%20Heschel,Image%20via%20American%20Jewish%20Committee> [accessed 9 March 2026].

Fig. 2: Lothar Wolleh, *Second Vatican Council* [Photograph] (c. 1962–1965) [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Second\\_Vatican\\_Council\\_by\\_Lothar\\_Wolleh\\_\(005\).jpg&oldid=1123521774](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Second_Vatican_Council_by_Lothar_Wolleh_(005).jpg&oldid=1123521774) [accessed 10 March 2026].

Fig. 3: *Nostra aetate* (28 October 1965), §4, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vatii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html) [accessed 12 March 2026].

Fig. 4: Amos Ben Gershom, *Pope John Paul II places a letter between the stones of Jerusalem's Western Wall* [Photograph] (26 March 2000) <https://www.timesofisrael.com/from-pope-to-saint-two-men-who-revamped-jewish-catholic-ties/> [accessed 16 March 2026].

# References

<sup>1</sup> *Nostra aetate* (28 October 1965), §4, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html) [accessed 11 March 2026].

<sup>2</sup> 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)* (2015), §35, <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 March 2026].

<sup>3</sup> Karma Ben-Johanan, *Jacob's Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022), p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> Eliezer Berkovits, 'Judaism in the Post-Christian Era', *Judaism*, 15.1 (1966), 74–84 (p. 81).

# Bibliography

Ben-Johanan, Karma, *Jacob's Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022)

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*Nostra aetate* (28 October 1965), §4, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html) [accessed 11 March 2026]