

Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza

Preaching Heresy about the Jews

On October 28, 2009, emeritus Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza, issued a commentary on Catholic/Jewish relations, and in particular made specific interpretations of Vatican II's document, *Nostra Aetate*. Although some of bishop Fiorenza's comments are unproblematic, many of them are erroneous and some are even heretical. In light of the recent corrections issued by the USCCB to its 2006 adult catechism and the 2002 Reflections on Covenant and Missions document, not to mention the long-standing tradition of the Church taught by its popes, councils and catechisms (including the 1994 Catechism of the Catholic Church), it is incumbent on bishop Fiorenza to correct his teaching on the Jews so that it conforms with what the Church has actually stated, not what bishop Fiorenza alone interprets it to be. Below is bishop Fiorenza's essay. I will make intermittent comments as necessary.

Robert Sungenis

NOSTRA AETATE - 44 Years Later

HOUSTON HOLOCAUST MUSEUM

The Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston

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<http://www.archgh.org/newsevents-RSS-110409-NostraAetate.htm>

Bishop Fiorenza: One of the treasured moments in my life was to be present in St. Peter's Basilica 44 years ago today, when the Second Vatican Council promulgated *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on Relations of the Church to non-Christian religions. It was a special moment in the 2000 year history of the Catholic Church, because it reversed centuries of Christian presuppositions and teaching about Jews. It is truly a revolutionary document because it began a reform of Christian-Jewish relations, which 44 years later is still in the beginning of a dialogue of collaboration for the betterment of our world based on mutual respect and friendship. The past 44 years have seen sincere efforts of interfaith dialogue delving into the inspiring transformation of our relationship, the continuing fruit of *Nostra Aetate*. It has not been without some tensions and misunderstandings, but it has always been sincere and mutually respectful.

Why is *Nostra Aetate*, (In Our Age), a revolutionary document and why does it promise a future full of hope? One only has to recall the prevailing attitude among Christians before 1965.

As early as the 3rd century, the theologian Origen said that the great calamities which for a long time had befallen the Jews because of the most impious crime of all when they conspired against the Savior of mankind. Therefore that city where Jesus suffered these indignities had to be utterly destroyed. The Jewish nation had to be overthrown and God's invitation to blessedness transferred to others. Origen was one of many who through the centuries held the collective blaming of "the Jews" for the death of Jesus.

R. Sungenis: Origen blamed the death of Jesus Christ on the Jews because that is what all the Fathers of the Church, in consensus, had said; it is what the Scripture had declared as it was inspired by the Holy Spirit (Acts 3:14-15; John 11:47-53; 1Thess 2:14-16); and it is what the Catholic magisterium has certified by its consistent declarations concerning the Jews. Nothing has changed, including what is taught in *Nostra Aetate*, for the Church has never declared that all Jews are responsible for the death of Christ, but only the Jews who actually instigated and facilitated his murder. If bishop Fiorenza is privy to an official teaching of the Catholic Church which says otherwise it is incumbent upon him to produce it, otherwise, he is making a false implication which implicitly indicts the Catholic Church for false allegations.

Bishop Fiorenza: As recently as 1938, Pope Pius XI commissioned the preparation of an encyclical letter that was intended to condemn racism in the wake of Hitler's policies in Germany. While rebuking the denying to Jewish people elementary rights and privileges of citizens, the draft claimed the Jewish nation bore a collective responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus and were doomed "to perpetually wander over the face of the earth." This proposed letter was never published because of the death of the Pope, and it is not known if he was aware of the works of the draft or approved them, but it indicates a common "teaching of contempt" that perdured in Christian teaching and writing.

R. Sungenis: If the draft of the encyclical said that the "Jewish nation bore a collective responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus" then it was wrong, and it may have been the Holy Spirit that prevented that document from ever seeing the light of day. By the same token, it is wrong for bishop Fiorenza to exploit this unpublished draft as an example of the accepted teaching of the Catholic Church since the Catholic Church has never made any official statement that the Jewish nation was collectively responsible for the death of Christ, and no official document of the Catholic Church has ever accused the traditional Catholic Church of holding such a belief. If bishop Fiorenza is privy to a contradiction in official Catholic Church teaching on this specific point, then it behooves him to produce the evidence, otherwise he is required as a matter of honesty to withdraw his indictment.

Bishop Fiorenza: As a child, I remember being taught that Jesus died because of my sins. I was far more responsible for his death than the Jews of his time. Nonetheless, the charge of deicide was also in our consciousness.

R. Sungenis: That is because the Jews of the first century were certainly guilty of deicide, as even *Nostra Aetate* teaches. Although we can affirm that "Jesus died because of my sins," that has little to do with the point at hand, namely, that certain individuals among the Jews took the lead in seeing to it that Christ was murdered in order to prevent the Jewish nation from believing in him.

John 11:47-53

47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin and said, "What are we going to do? This man is performing many signs. 48 If we leave him alone, all will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our land and our nation." 49 But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing, 50 nor do you consider that it is better for you that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish." 51 He did not say this on his own, but since he was high priest for that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, 52 and not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God. 53 So from that day on they planned to kill him.

Acts 3:13-15

13 The God of Abraham, (the God) of Isaac, and (the God) of Jacob, the God of our ancestors, has glorified his servant Jesus whom you handed over and denied in Pilate's presence, when he had decided to release him. 14 You denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. 15 The author of life you put to death, but God raised him from the dead; of this we are witnesses.

Bishop Fiorenza: Such was the Christian theological mindset before Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. Two months after his election, Pope John announced a great council would be called for the "aggiornameto," updating of the Church. The next year he greeted a delegation of American Jews with the biblical words, "I am Joseph your brother," of greater importance he directed Cardinal Bea, to prepare a draft declaration for the coming council on the relations between the Church and the Jewish people. In view of the long sad and tragic 'teaching of contempt,' this was truly an inspiration from God.

R. Sungenis: Whatever the "theological mindset" was prior to Vatican II is a matter of opinion. If there were Catholics who were teaching that the Jews at large were guilty of deicide or if there was a "teaching of contempt" concerning Jews, these were erroneous beliefs and they were officially condemned by the Church throughout her history. Many popes in the middle ages spoke out against anti-semitism and encouraged the proper treatment of Jews by Christians. Notwithstanding, the Catholic Church has never officially taught that the Jews at large are guilty of deicide. Hence, there was nothing at Vatican II that needed to be corrected. The only thing necessary for Vatican II was a reiteration of previous Church teaching on the Jews, which *Nostra Aetate* happily did. Anything other than a reiteration of previous Church teaching would be a sacrilege, not to mention a blatant contradiction in Church teaching. It is incumbent on bishop Fiorenza to make these distinctions, otherwise he is implying that the Catholic Church prior to him is itself guilty of falsely accusing the Jews.

Bishop Fiorenza: What led Pope John to such a miraculous decision? When he was the papal ambassador to Turkey and Greece, he met Jewish refugees fleeing Poland in September 1940 and helped them reach Palestine, then a British colony. He wrote in his diary, "Poor children of Israel. Daily I hear their groans around me. They are relatives and fellow countrymen of Jesus. May the Divine Savior come to their aid."

When the German ambassador to Turkey suggested to him that he ask Pope Pius XII to support Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, Roncalli responded, "And shall I tell him about the thousand of Jews who died in Germany and Poland at the hands of your countryman?"

Obviously, when he became Pope, John XXIII was waiting for the moment to change the Church's relations with Jews. However, bringing *Nostra Aetate* to birth was a long and difficult labor. There was opposition to it both inside and outside the Council. Some bishops were reluctant to change longstanding teachings; other bishops feared for Christians in Arab countries; Middle Eastern countries campaigned against any attempt to absolve "the Jews" for the crime of deicide. At one point, Pope Paul VI intervened to overcome any attempt to scuttle the document. Finally, on October 28, 1965, the declaration passed: 2221 bishops voted for and 88 against. Considering all the difficulties it faced and the long tragic "teaching of contempt," *Nostra Aetate* was a triumph of righteousness and grace over maliciousness and sin.

R. Sungenis: Bishop Fiorenza refers to "longstanding teachings" which held responsible "the Jews for the crime of deicide." This implies that the Catholic Church had written and propagated official teachings from

its magisterium that all Jews were guilty of deicide. Bishop Fiorenza is thus making a very serious charge against the Catholic Church, but unfortunately, he presents no evidence from official Catholic teaching that verifies his charges. Consequently, bishop Fiorenza is guilty of calumny against the Catholic Church.

Bishop Fiorenza: *Nostra Aetate* repudiated the charge of deicide declaring that “Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed.” It deplored “all hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism directed to the Jews at any time or from any source.” It also stressed that in religious education, “all must take care lest in catechizing or preaching the word of God, they teach anything which is not in accord with the truth of the Gospel message or the spirit of Christ.” Later documents referred to this hermeneutical principle of *Nostra Aetate* to avoid absolutely any actualization of certain texts of the New Testament which could provoke or reinforce unfavorable attitudes towards the Jewish people. All are reminded that, according to the New Testament, the Jews remain “beloved” of God, since the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. (Rom 11, 28-29)

R. Sungenis: There are many problems in the above paragraph. We shall take them one by one:

1) Bishop Fiorenza misquotes *Nostra Aetate* when he says “*Nostra Aetate* repudiated the charge of deicide declaring that “Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed.” Fiorenza erroneously juxtaposes another sentence with the sentence that speaks about deicide. The sentence concerning deicide from *Nostra Aetate* reads:

Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (cf. John 19:6), neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion.

The sentence that Fiorenza juxtaposes with the sentence about deicide is:

It is true that the Church is the new people of God, yet the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy Scripture.

Hence, what Fiorenza leaves out by his juxtaposition is *Nostra Aetate*'s affirmation that the Jews were responsible for the death of Christ. *Nostra Aetate* clearly says: “the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ” and it cites John 19:6 for supporting documentation (“When the chief priests and the guards saw him they cried out, ‘Crucify him, crucify him!’ Pilate said to them, ‘Take him yourselves and crucify him. I find no guilt in him.’ The Jews answered, ‘We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God’”). As it stands, contrary to what Fiorenza claims, *Nostra Aetate* did not “repudiate the charge of deicide” but actually reinforced it. The only thing *Nostra Aetate* clarified is that certain Jews were excluded from the guilt of deicide, which is the same official teaching the Catholic Church has held throughout its history.

2) Bishop Fiorenza states that “Later documents referred to this hermeneutical principle of *Nostra Aetate* to avoid absolutely any actualization of certain texts of the New Testament which could provoke or reinforce unfavorable attitudes towards the Jewish people.” Here the bishop needs to be much more careful with his choice of language, otherwise he could be guilty of charging Jesus himself with inciting anti-semitism. The basic problem is his use of the word “actualization.” If the bishop is secretly suggesting that certain New Testament passages that do not look favorably on the Jews (e.g., John 8:44; 1Thess 2:14-16) are to be ignored or dismissed as merely the opinions of the writers and not a direct teaching of Jesus or St. Paul, then he is in serious error. If he means that these New Testament passages should not be used to foster anti-semitism but that they should be used to generate sympathy for the continual unbelief of the Jewish people, then there is no problem. Bishop Fiorenza needs to clarify what his position really is.

3) Bishop Fiorenza then concludes: “All are reminded that, according to the New Testament, the Jews remain ‘beloved’ of God, since the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. (Rom 11, 28-29).” This is another instance of a specious juxtaposition of texts. St. Paul does not say that the Jews remain beloved because the gifts and call are irrevocable, as if God is somehow bound to love the Jews no matter what they do. St. Paul says that the Jews are still beloved “for the sake of the fathers,” for it is to the fathers (e.g., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) that God made his original promises that are irrevocable or unregretted. Those promises said that if any Jew believes as Abraham believed, that Jew can also be saved, but he cannot be saved just for merely being an ancestor of Abraham (cf. Romans 4:1-26). In other words, it is not because the Jews, in themselves, either deserve God’s love or are loved in spite of their obstinacy toward God. The same was true in the Old Testament. For example, God gave the land of Canaan to the Jews not because the Jews themselves deserved it but only because he made a promise to Abraham (cf., Deut 9:5; Ex 32:11-13; Josh 21:43-45; Neh 9:7-8).

Bishop Fiorenza: *Nostra Aetate* implicitly acknowledged that Israel remains in a covenant with God, and later Pope John Paul II made it explicit that Jews are “the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God.”

R. Sungenis: If bishop Fiorenza believes that *Nostra Aetate* “implicitly acknowledged that Israel remains in a covenant with God” then it behooves him to show from whence this “implicit” teaching comes. The facts are these, however. *Nostra Aetate* does not teach, either implicitly or explicitly, that Israel remains in a covenant with God, that is, an exclusive covenant meant only for Jews, as it was with the Mosaic covenant. The Catholic Church has consistently taught, and Scripture is very clear, that the Mosaic covenant has been superseded by the New Covenant. Since the Mosaic covenant was superseded, the only covenant that provides the Jews with a relationship to God is the New Covenant in Christ. But as long as the Jew denies Christ, he has no relationship with God, much less a covenant. Similar to many today, bishop Fiorenza does not specify what particular “covenant” he has in view. This ambiguity appears to be deliberate, since most clerics are aware that the Catholic Church has consistently taught that the Mosaic covenant is no longer valid for the Jews. Consequently, portraying the concept of “covenant” vaguely and ambiguously allows the word to be used in a non technical sense, and apparently the hope is to use traditional terminology but with an entirely different meaning so as to confuse the discussion and prolong the debate. The debate is prolonged even further when a citation from John Paul II’s 1981 speech in Mainz Germany is commandeered as support (“the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God”). The problem here, of course, is that in 1981 John Paul II did not reveal what he meant by “Old Covenant,” and this lacuna has been the cause of a lot of confusion. There are only two orthodox possibilities, however. Either John Paul II meant that the “Old Covenant” referred to the Old Testament scriptures, which is the teaching of the 1994 Catechism of the Catholic Church (paras. 121-123), or he meant it as the Abrahamic covenant (which he clarified in his 1986 speech in Sydney Australia). In either case (i.e., the Old Testament scriptures or the Abrahamic covenant), neither of these items were given exclusively to the Jews nor do the Jews have legal possession of them now, since they have both been given to the New Testament Church, the Catholic Church (cf., Galatians 3:1-29; Hebrews 8:1-13).

Bishop Fiorenza: While *Nostra Aetate* did not mention Christian anti-Semitism or the Holocaust, Pope John Paul was explicit in saying that the horrors of the Shoah must lead Christians to repentance: “For Christians, the heavy burden of guilt for the murder of Jewish people in the Shoah must be an enduring call to repentance.”

R. Sungenis: The problem with this citation of John Paul II is that it is appealing to one of the pope’s more vague and ambiguous statements about the Jewish people. Surely the pope cannot mean that “Christians” are responsible for the deaths of Jews in World War II, since historical records reveal that no

Christians killed or claimed to have killed innocent Jews. The pope could only be referring to the general guilt of humanity for its murderous acts since the dawn of time, a collective guilt for our sins that should constantly lead us to repentance.

Bishop Fiorenza: Sometimes beneath the surface of interfaith dialogue, there is the fear that it will lead to a “watering down” of faith in order to achieve harmony, and the result is a form of syncretism which is unfaithful to authentic Judaism or authentic Christianity. True, interfaith dialogue must be based on fidelity to the different faith traditions, which will avoid any assimilation or melting the different traditions. True, faithful dialogue will lead to a greater understanding of each other’s faith beliefs and respectful acknowledgment of the differences.

R. Sungenis: The “fear” of which the bishop speaks materialized in many ways over the last few decades. Various cardinals (e.g., Willebrands, Kasper, Keeler, Mahoney, et al) began teaching that the Jews do not need to convert to Christianity in order to be saved since they have their own covenant with God. From all that he says in this essay, Fiorenza seems to be of that mindset as well. This “fear” was further actualized in the creation of the *Reflections on Covenant and Missions* document in 2002, the very document that two committees of the USCCB decried in September 2009 as seriously flawed. The “fear” was also actualized in the 2006 *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* which states on page 131 that the Mosaic covenant was still valid for the Jews. Fortunately, this heretical statement was voted on by the plenary session of US bishops in June-August 2008 and it was decided by a 231 to 14 majority to have it removed from the next edition of the catechism.

Bishop Fiorenza: Interfaith dialogue and cooperation has led to important collaboration on common societal problems such as homelessness, reform of the criminal justice, immigration reform and accessible health care for all. In the process of these joint efforts, we have come to a better understanding of our own traditions and to better insights into each other’s beliefs and manner of governance.

R. Sungenis: In actuality, the Catholic Church has had “dialogue” with secular governments and has witnessed the same progress toward moral and civil standards. There is nothing magical about dialogue between different religions, at least in regard to societal issues such as “homelessness, reform of the criminal justice, immigration reform and accessible health care for all.” The advantage of having dialogue with governmental institutions is that the government, generally speaking, does not seek to change the religious beliefs of the Catholic Church. But such is not the case in dialogue with Jews. As noted above, in the past few decades the Jews have consistently sought to change Catholic doctrine, using “dialogue” as the pretext. The Jews have consistently sought to make it appear as if Catholic doctrines which teach that the Jew is required to submit to Jesus Christ as the Son of God in order to be saved, is “offensive” toward friendly relations; or, as Abraham Foxman would have it, even “anti-semitic.”

Bishop Fiorenza: *Nostra Aetate* called for Catholics and Jews to collaborate in “biblical and theological inquiry and friendly discussions.” The past 44 years of dialogue and joint activities that *Nostra Aetate* envisioned has shown that our two communities can come together with different interest, concerns and misconceptions of the past to address common needs and challenges in today’s society. Fortunately, the past 44 years have demonstrated that interfaith dialogue actually leads participants to a deeper understanding of their own tradition and as a result of being asked new questions or viewing their own tradition from the other’s perspective, the participants are not the same Christians or Jews before experiencing dialogue, but they understand themselves to be more committed and discerning Christian or Jews. Sometimes the dialogue does not result so happily. Disagreements surfaced about the document on Covenant and Mission issued in August 2002 by a joint effort of Jewish and Catholic scholars. This

document was issued by a Committee of our Bishops' Conference but it was not an official statement of our Conference, nor was it submitted to the usual process for an official document.

After its publication, some Catholic theologians thought there was a significant ambiguity in the document, namely about the Church's mission and evangelization with regard to Jewish people. While the Church recognizes the special relationship God had with Israel prior to Jesus Christ, and that Judaism is a religion which springs from divine revelation, she also knows that the Christian Church draws sustenance from the root of a well-cultivated olive tree on which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles. For Catholics, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, fulfills both in history and at the end of time, the special relationship that God has established with Israel. In Catholic belief, Jesus Christ, in Himself, fulfills God's revelation begun with Abraham, and proclaiming this good news is at the heart of the Church's mission. The document in question did not make this proclamation a core element of the Church's mission and implies that Catholics should not do anything which might lead Jews to conversion. This reasoning could lead some to conclude that Jews have an obligation not to become Christian and that the Church has an obligation not to baptize Jews.

Some Jewish scholars have expressed serious disappointment with the official clarification of the document, *Covenant and Mission*. As I understand it, they fear there is some effort to consider *Nostra Aetate* only a pastoral statement without doctrinal authority. Or that it was only a contextual product of European Christians guilt over the Shoah and not truly relevant. There is also the fear that there will be a proselytization to convert Jews despite the official Church statements which repudiates any effort to seek Jewish converts. I can truly say there are no plans or desire to seek Jewish conversion. The Church has always kept a distance from such organizations as Jews for Jesus. Nonetheless, in respecting human freedom, the Church will accept Jews who on their own volitions and with a conscientious decision before God, ask to be received into the Church.

R. Sungenis: Bishop Fiorenza was doing well until he wrote: "There is also the fear that there will be a proselytization to convert Jews despite the official Church statements which repudiates any effort to seek Jewish converts. I can truly say there are no plans or desire to seek Jewish conversion. The Church has always kept a distance from such organizations as Jews for Jesus." What bishop Fiorenza claims and what is reality are two entirely different things. Unfortunately, bishop Fiorenza's entire document is void of source citations to back up his claims. If the bishop insists on making these profound course corrections in Catholic belief and practice, it would behoove him to cite the specific source. Suffice it to say, there is no official Catholic Church statements which repudiates efforts to seek Jewish converts. In fact, we might say that the whole of Christianity was started precisely for the purpose of converting the Jew to Jesus Christ (cf., Luke 1:68-79; Matthew 10:5-8; Acts 2-3). Ironically, bishop Fiorenza is illustrating, in the most dramatic way, the very "fear" that dialogue with the Jews "will lead to a 'watering down' of faith in order to achieve harmony, and the result is a form of syncretism which is unfaithful to authentic Judaism or authentic Christianity." As is usually the case with heresy, it is deceived by its own deception.

Bishop Fiorenza: Nonetheless, I understand how this issue is still a bone of theological contention with some Jews. Since *Nostra Aetate*, there is a new reality in Christian-Jewish relations. One powerful sign of the reality occurred during Pope John Paul's visit in 2000 to Holy Land when he placed his prayer in the Western Wall asking God's forgiveness for the sins of Christians against Jews down the ages. Using the metaphor of a garden, Rabbi David Rosen said Christian-Jewish relations for the 44 years following *Nostra Aetate*, is like a garden surrounded by high walls. This garden of history was an ugly place overrun with branches and weeds and lurking with danger. In the last 44 years, the garden was wonderfully transformed into an attractive garden. It is not yet the Garden of Eden and there are still rocky terrains, but generally, it is a good garden. Many Israelites walking outside the garden are unaware of the transformation that has taken place. They think it might still be dangerous and unpleasant. The papal visit

to Israel opened the garden gates and revealed to many who had not known or believed in the new reality, a pleasant garden of Christian-Jewish relations in which the head of the Catholic Church was in fact a sincere friend of the Jewish people who sought its welfare and mutual respect.

Christian-Jewish relations must continue with all good will, frankness, friendship and mutual respect, because as Pope John Paul said: "Christians and Jews, as children of Abraham are called to be a blessing to the world. In order to be such, we must be first of all a blessing to one another."

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R. Sungenis: My suspicion is that since in September 2009 when two committees of the USCCB had pointed out the errors of the *Reflections on Covenant and Missions* document (which taught that the Jews are not to be sought for conversion to Christianity since they have their own covenant with God), an attempt has been made to counter the correction. The first counterattack was recently led by Cardinal William Keeler in a document he forged last month with four other bishops, which stated that the USCCB committee's critique of *Reflections* was off the mark. Obviously, there is a battle going on in the USCCB with personalities such as Keeler and Fiorenza on one side seeking to maintain the *status quo* of Catholic/Jewish dialogue that they see fast slipping through their hands. Suffice it to say, Keeler and Fiorenza and any other Catholic cleric, if they maintain their position that Jews are not to be viewed as candidates for Christian conversion through the preaching of the Gospel; and that the Jews, as an individual ethnic or religious group, presently maintain a covenant relationship with God which will result in their salvation, are teaching heresy.

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