

Let me begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered, the Cammeray-gal clan of the Darug Nation, and pay my respects to their elders, past present and emerging.

On behalf of the Australian Jewish community, I thank Bishop Michael McKenna, and everyone else associated with the Commission for Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, who contributed to the drafting and publication of this new landmark document in Catholic-Jewish relations in Australia: “Walking Together: Jews and Catholics in an Australian context”.

We applaud the many ongoing efforts of the Church to improve Catholic-Jewish relations world-wide in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*, the 1965 Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican Council.

“Walking Together” follows on from the 1992 Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations. It too was published under the auspices of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. The new document acknowledges that it is a response to the many changes in the Church, and the world at large, over the last 30 years. Of course, one of the key issues we face today which needs to be referenced is the shocking increase in antisemitism all over the world but even in Australia we have seen an increase in monitored incidents of over 40% in 2 years.

There is much in the content of “Walking Together” that is admirable and timely.

Firstly, the document bears eloquent testimony to the intimacy of the connection between Judaism and Christianity. In an increasingly secular Australia, the bonds that unite all people of faith are of growing importance in preserving our religious freedoms, and in speaking up for our First Nations people. No two religions are drawn together by commonalities of belief and tradition that are as complex and extensive as those which bind Christianity to Judaism. To quote from the document: “*Catholic identity is intimately linked to the faith of Israel. Christianity’s relationship to Judaism is unique. It is unlike our relationship to any other faith tradition. Jesus was Jewish and our Christian tradition grew from within First Century CE Judaism*”.

Of course, it is in nobody's interests to under-state the fundamental differences between Christians and Jews in our theological beliefs and religious worship. “Walking Together” reminds us that in the evolution of Catholic-Jewish relations since *Nostra Aetate*, our two faith communities continue to strive to develop a loving and close relationship that is built upon a recognition and respect for those differences. The document's discouraging references to seeking to convert Jews, and rejection of any notion that Jews require anything else in order to be saved, are a refreshing contrast to past attitudes.

Secondly, there is the explicit recognition of the Jewishness of Jesus as an historical fact. This is a salutary affirmation in light of recent attempts to de-Judaize Jesus and recast him in all kinds of other guises that fly in the face of the historical record. No, Jesus was not a “Palestinian”, as some have claimed. Nobody in the first century used that description for an individual person, nation or community. Ethnically, culturally and religiously, Jesus the man was a Jew, and nothing else. His home was in a place called “Ha Galil” (The Galilee) within what the Gospels refer to as the “Land of Israel”. “Walking Together” tells us plainly and simply that *“Jesus was Jewish. He was formed by his Jewish faith. The writings of the Old Testament were Jesus’ Scriptures, and the Book of Psalms was his prayer book”*. One could add that Jesus celebrated the Jewish festivals and recited prayers in the Hebrew tongue which Jews continue to recite in our own time.

Thirdly, “Walking Together” reaffirms the irrevocable nature of the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people. It acknowledges that the Jewish people were *“the first to hear the Word of God”*.

The Israelites, the ancestors of the Jewish People, were the first nation to embrace ethical monotheism. For more than 1000 years throughout antiquity, prior to the advent of Christianity in the first century and of Islam in the seventh century, the Jews carried this belief, often in very hostile environments. They were the only community to bear a truth that others often found inconvenient and threatening. It made for a lonely journey, full of hardships and travails, which did not end when others finally came to embrace the Jewish G-d. It has taken until our own time for our Catholic siblings to commit to walking that journey with us. It is a journey that continues to test the faith and courage of even the most committed believer.

Fourthly, “Walking Together” clearly repudiates the negative portrayal of the Pharisees by Gospel evangelists over the centuries, which is still a commonly-deployed trope. The document reaffirms the truth that Jesus’ commitment to a renewal of the Jewish faith of his people *“aligned him with the Pharisees, a movement of religious renewal centred on the spiritual life of the family. Later portraits of the Pharisees by the Gospel evangelists are not historically accurate”*.

Finally, “Walking Together” decisively repudiates antisemitism. The document speaks with sensitivity and insight about the forms of antisemitism which are rooted in erroneous, but long- entrenched, interpretations of the Christian scriptures. It cites the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism (IHRA), which of course we welcome.

Yet the document does not take the logical next step, as we had hoped it would, by recognising that contemporary antisemitism has borrowed anti-Jewish tropes with supposedly Christian religious motifs, and deployed these against Jews in new ways, sometimes with equally lethal consequences. One of the examples provided by the IHRA Working Definition is *“Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel or Israelis”*. A writer who has done precisely that was publicly feted and applauded during Adelaide Writers Week earlier this month. We have welcomed Catholics and other people of conscience who have joined the Jewish community in decrying polemics of that nature.

This brings me to another matter, perhaps of more significance, we would have liked the document to address. I make this comment in the spirit of mutual respect and honesty but also in the spirit of seeking ongoing improvement.

“Walking Together” uses the word “Israel” only in the sense of a reference to the Jewish people. Yet one of the seminal events in Catholic-Jewish relations over the last 30 years was the formal recognition of the State of Israel by the Vatican in 1993. Surely that was worth mentioning, along with the State visits to Israel of Pope John-Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis.

We know that Israel is a sensitive topic for the Catholic Church, especially given the vulnerability of Christian minority communities throughout the Middle East. Yet a Vatican document as early as 1985 reminded Catholics that: *“The*

*permanence of Israel (while so many ancient peoples have disappeared without trace) is a historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God's design.”*

“Walking Together” acknowledges the ongoing validity of G-d’s covenant with the Jewish people, but seems to elide the fact that that covenant binds together the G-d of Israel, the Land of Israel and the people of Israel. Even the 1992 *Guidelines* recognised the connection of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. We regret the omission of any such reference in “Walking Together” but perhaps the next iteration of the document will incorporate it.

With these reservations and suggestions we welcome the new document. We hope that its messages of reconciliation and partnership between Catholics and Jews will resonate far beyond the organisational structures of our two faith communities and will find their way into the everyday teaching and preaching of each community about the other, and into the hearts and minds of ordinary believers. Rest assured that the Jewish community will always be there with you as an honest and caring friend to help dispel the darkness of bigotry and prejudice with the light of knowledge. We thank everyone who was involved in preparing “Walking Together” for their care and devotion to that sacred purpose.