

MEETING GOD IN FRIEND AND STRANGER

Frankfurt, 5 November 2025

PART ONE

By whose authority?

I was invited to come to this Conference and give this talk after speaking at a small gathering called together to reflect on Christian-Muslim relations. This was one of three preparatory sessions on interreligious dialogue organised before an event that was to take place at St Chad's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Birmingham in the UK. This major event was organised by Bishop Patrick McKinney of Nottingham, the Lead Bishop for Interreligious Dialogue for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. Invitations to the event were issued by Cardinal Vincent Nichols and Archbishop Bernard Longley, the President and Vice-President respectively of that Bishops' Conference.

The preparatory talks were organised locally. They took place in three venues in Birmingham and the speakers were local religious leaders. The first reflected on Christian-Jewish relations. The second on Christian-Muslim relations. In the end the third did not take place. I came to take part in these meetings in the ordinary way of signing up for them as a consequence of seeing them advertised. I did not attend in any official capacity, but, because of my place as a bishop in the Birmingham Catholic community I was asked to give the expression of thanks after the first meeting, and to speak on *Nostra Aetate* and Christian-Muslim relations at the next meeting.

I cannot say that I have any academic or practical expertise in interreligious dialogue. I have simply responded to opportunities that have come my way either from my own initiative or because I have been asked to take part by Archbishop Bernard Longley, whose auxiliary bishop I am. However, my concern for interreligious dialogue goes back many years. I was appointed curate to St Mary's the Mount, Walsall, in 1979, a year after my ordination to the priesthood, and a few months after my return from the English College in Rome, where I had completed a degree in philosophy. Walsall was a town with a diverse community. There was a significant Muslim population, though I knew of them more by hearsay than by direct contact. Some of the students in the Catholic secondary school nearby were Muslims and I got to know them slightly through my work there. It was common to see people leaving mosques after Friday prayers. St Mary's also had a parish hall that was used by the Muslim community at the end of Ramadan.

In 1983, I became a lecturer at Oscott College, the diocesan Catholic seminary. In due course a small group of lecturers put together a brief course on those faiths and religions that they happened to have an interest in to prepare students from several parts of England and Wales for the communities they would become part of after their own ordination to the priesthood. These lectures were followed by visits to various places of worship around the city of Birmingham. As a result of this I was invited by members of a local synagogue to visit a museum in Leicestershire that commemorated the holocaust. I had just come back from a visit to Guernsey, one of the Channel Islands that had been occupied by the Nazis during the Second World War and from where Jewish people had been deported. There was a small museum of

the Occupation there, which conveyed as well as it could, but with some force, what Jewish people had suffered from the Nazi persecution of Jews. The visit to Leicestershire reinforced that sense of terror and made it clear the great extent to which the Nazis had been committed to the extermination of Jewish people.

On a happier note, my next visit to the synagogue was for the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the return of what was called the ‘Oscott Scroll’ of Jewish scriptures to the Jewish congregation that worshipped there. The scroll had been part of a legacy left to the Oscott Library by a German priest who had been taught in England while being a prisoner of war, by a Dogma professor of Oscott, Dr Francis Davis. The librarian discovered, in time, the nature of the scroll and steps were taken to present it to the Singers Lane Synagogue in Birmingham. This led to closer relationships between Jewish and Catholic leaders in Birmingham. I have benefited from these more recently because I have been invited to worship in various Birmingham synagogues to commemorate those who have died in the Hamas attacks of 2023. Events far away, it goes without saying, have an impact on people closer to home. At one of these acts of worship an historian from the Imperial War Museum reflected on the presentation of the death and labour camps of the 1930s and 1940s in Germany and Nazi occupied Europe, particularly in films. At a later meeting a member of the IDF recalled her involvement in the response to the Hamas attacks on the day that they happened.

None of these things might formally be called ‘dialogue’, but they are preparation for dialogue for these reasons: that they have initiated and developed my personal relationships with Jewish people with whom I am now friends; they have made me feel in a personal way, though necessarily incompletely, the pain of Jewish suffering, and given me an insight into the history of the Jews as a persecuted people and of the Catholic Church and European culture as persecutors of people on the grounds of alleged differences and of a deliberate refusal to see a whole group of people as truly human. I have also a greater appreciation of the situation that *Nostra Aetate* addressed in 1965 and continues to address today.

My relationship with Birmingham Muslim religious and civic leaders is more recent. Something that is noticeable is the growing numbers of Iftars that happen across Birmingham. I have been to three in recent years at Birmingham Newman University, the Pakistani Consulate in Birmingham and a Muslim college in the same city. I have attended a meeting of Christian and Muslim leaders at which we discussed texts from the scriptures of both groups on Adam and Eve, goodness and sin. I have also been invited to lunch at one of the many local mosques. It is also worth mentioning an initiative called *The Places of Worship Heritage Trail* around the Handsworth, Lozells and Smethwick, areas of Birmingham, with diverse ethnic and religious populations. This is an online and walking tour around those areas introducing people to the religious history and to significant places of worship in them.

This also is more of an informal opportunity for dialogue, but it makes the point that dialogue needs to be experiential, that it is not only about similarities and differences of belief but that dialogue needs to be rooted in a common experience of community living, of openness to a variety of different cultures that are all present in one small space, that those cultures cannot be reduced to some lowest common denominator, and that each culture, faith and believer must have the opportunity to express themselves in the way that is true to them, without smoothing off rough edges or diminishing people’s feelings for the sake of courtesy or easy solutions.

PART TWO

Meeting God in Friend and Stranger

During the 1980s and 90s the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, through their Department for Mission and Unity, later to become the Department for Dialogue and Unity, undertook work in response to *Nostra Aetate*. The work was led by Bishop Charles Henderson, an auxiliary bishop in Southwark. His project was to produce a series of leaflets that would introduce the world religions to Catholic clergy and lay people. What was significant about these leaflets was that though they were published by the Bishops' Conference, each faith and religion was presented by a member of that believing community. Though a paper exercise this was itself a first step in dialogue. A particular individual had the responsibility of presenting their faith or religion on behalf of their fellow members in a short account of what was believed to be the central themes of that faith or religion. One important requirement was the willingness of the author to reflect on his or her own belief, as well as to have a sufficient knowledge of the breadth of their faith to be truthful to that belief and that faith. At the same time the author had to have some acquaintance with the people to whom the leaflet was being addressed. These are the fundamental requirements of a more formal dialogue. Experience can take dialogue some way, but the time comes when people have to talk more specifically about what they believe and why, what is the source of their faith and its impact on their way of life. This series of leaflets is in the process of being updated and republished. Once complete, the leaflets will be a useful resource for schools and also for the many more attentive Catholics who are conscience of the recent developments in their neighbourhoods and of their responsibility both to learn from others and to profess their own faith not just to other Christians but also to those of other faiths, religions and cultural backgrounds.

An outcome of a greater awareness of the need to welcome others and to foster good relationships with them through understanding their religious way of life was the teaching document *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger*. This was published by the Catholic Truth Society on behalf of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales in 2010. Its lead author was Mgr William Steele, a priest of the Leeds diocese, a renowned British ecumenical theologian, lecturer at Ushaw College, and later spiritual director at the English College in Rome. The document was dedicated 'To the memory of Bishop Charles Henderson and Mrs Ann Noonan.' Mrs Noonan was equally devoted to the cause of interfaith and interreligious dialogue.

The document itself has six chapters. The first explains what interreligious dialogue is. There is then a chapter on recent changes in British society followed by Chapter Three on dialogue within the teaching of the Catholic Church. Chapter Four considers prayer and worship. The fifth chapter takes up the question of interreligious marriage by offering a reflection on the Christian Perception of Marriage. The concluding chapter considers interreligious dialogue at the local level. The event that took place at St Chad's Cathedral on Sunday 26th October developed the teaching of *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger* in two ways. The first was with respect to worship. The context was the current year of hope and the pilgrims of hope that Pope Francis initiated. The worship was the Evening Prayer of the Roman Catholic Church. The ceremony would have been familiar to all those who say privately or publicly the Divine Office. The Cathedral choir sang the Psalms. Students from Catholic schools in Nottingham also took part. The schools are in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious city. The interreligious element of

Evening Prayer was the contribution made by local Faith Leaders. There were five reflections. One of these was from a member of the Church of England. The others were from Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. Each presented a declaration of their own faith that emphasised what all faiths hold in common. In that way, as well as in the congregation gathered in the cathedral another kind of interreligious dialogue took place.

The second development from *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger* was the dialogue before Evening Prayer, led by personnel from the *Centre for the Art of Living and Dying Well* of St Mary's University, Twickenham, a Catholic institution. This was a relevant topic in the light of the Assisted Dying Bill being debated by the United Kingdom parliament. One of the Centre's recent projects is a truly interreligious enterprise. Its formal title is the *Ethnic Minority Faith Perspectives on Death Literacy and End-of-Life Care*. It is founded on community based participatory research and includes partnership with Lancaster University and the Royal Marsden. The account of this research included in the 26th October booklet states that 'Participants from Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish and Sikh backgrounds detail the religious and cultural practices which communities and individuals hold dear as they near the end of life... This pilot study also highlights the challenges faced by ethnic minority faith communities in hospital/healthcare settings...'

It is true that neither of these developments can be attributed directly to *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger* but that document played a part in making *Nostra Aetate* better known among the Roman Catholic communities of England and Wales. Events such as the one that took place in Birmingham on 26th October would not have taken the form that they did without the impetus given to interreligious dialogue by *Nostra Aetate*. That event also displayed important aspects of interreligious dialogue that may not always have been obvious even from a close reading of *Nostra Aetate*, but which are anticipated in *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger*. One of those consequences is that of keeping before the eyes of local and national governments the fact of belief in God and at least in the existence of a transcendent realm situated within human cultures and civic society in such a way that these voices need to be heard if a proper understanding of the world is to be respected. It is a mistake to think of human society simply in its secular aspect and to dismiss as irrelevant the beliefs even of a minority of the members of that society.

Furthermore, 26th October emphasised the strength of the partnership that can prosper between people of many faiths when they have interests in common that a secular society might overlook or brush aside. It also gave a wider context for the further reception of *Nostra Aetate*. As this conference shows that Council document has itself become the subject of dialogue, both as to what it means, what it demands of Catholics and how its expression might need to be modified in the light of changing theological insights, greater experience, and the more confident expression of their faith by members of those faiths and religions in the countries to which their adherents have migrated and which over the decades have become their homes.

There is also a dialogue within religions, just as there is a dialogue within Christianity and even within Catholicism itself. *Nostra Aetate* proposed the Catholic Church as one who recognised the need for dialogue and as herself as taking an initiative in getting those dialogues under way. It is to be expected that the Catholic Church should give itself privileged place in dialogue, recognising itself and presenting itself as the guardian of the truths revealed in Jesus Christ. That aspect of dialogue was not evident in St Chad's Cathedral, where leaders of several faiths

spoke to each other formally in the words of their own thoughts or scriptures without making reference to this claim of the Catholic Church. It may be said that one of the obstacles to deeper dialogue is the Catholic Church itself. *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger* emphasises this element of the Church's teaching, as it had to, in order to be a teaching document that acknowledged the similarities between faiths and religions as well as the difficulties that in depth interreligious dialogue gives rise to. *Nostra Aetate* set out the terms for a Catholic understanding of dialogue and set the parameters within which that dialogue should take place. These days other voices have joined the discussion, for there can still be a tension between dialogue and evangelisation and proselytism. Each faith makes its own claims for its truth and would probably prefer that all human beings accepted the faith that they themselves profess; one of the qualities required for interreligious dialogue is the restraint of that tendency without taking steps away from the central truths that participants hold.

PART THREE

Specific points

Interreligious dialogue takes many forms. It happens within worship, in formal conversations and sometimes spontaneously. An example of the last of these is a question that arose from someone who had taken part in the preparatory talk for 26th October on Christian-Muslim relations. The question was 'how do you dialogue with people who do not believe that Jesus is divine?' It was addressed to me as a bishop who had given the presentation on behalf of *Nostra Aetate*. It goes to the heart of the complexity of interreligious dialogue. There appear to be differences of belief among people of faith as to what the truths of religion actually are. In reply, I pointed out that not all Christians believe that Jesus is divine.

There are those who recognise Jesus as an exceptionally good man, as someone whose teaching deserves respect and is worth following if the world is to be a better place. But, they say, the words of Jesus have no transforming power. They leave Jesus' audience just as they are without leaving any mark on human nature, such as might be described as renewing in human beings the image and likeness of God that was diminished by sin. It is also the case that some passages in the Christian scriptures seem to suggest that Jesus is not the equal of God but his instrument. These considerations show that a further aspect of interreligious dialogue is an intra-religious dialogue, that is, one within the individual faiths and religions as to what their beliefs actually are – not just about God, his word and how it is communicated, but what it is to be human, what goodness is and whether even religious people are on a journey to the same destination towards a realm beyond the earth or whether the desires expressed in religious belief are able to be fulfilled here.

The growing emphasis on dialogue has had an impact on the way in the Catholic Church reflects on itself and presents itself. As well as being the sixtieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* 2025 is also the seventeen hundredth anniversary of the Council of Nicaea in 325. The Roman Catholic International Theological Commission has published a document to mark the occasion called *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour*. It presents the debates of the Council of Nicaea as a dialogue intent on answering the question as to whether Jesus of Nazareth is Son of God in a more than symbolic sense, but actually endowed with the nature of God himself and so equal to the Father and, to use the official word of Catholic faith, 'consubstantial' with him. This

document shows that reflection on the language of faith is not a question only of semantics – describing the relationship of one word to others. Dialogue in depth also shows that doctrinal truths enhance the human realities which share the same name. Calling God ‘Father’ both of his incarnate word and of men and women more generally gives greater meaning to the word ‘father’ when it is used of human fathers, who take on the same role of generation and love as is displayed by God in his relationship with Jesus and with creation as a whole.

This document claims that dialogue uncovers the something greater that the surface meaning of the words conceals. Language, its use, how it develops, its weaknesses and its capacity to express realities that lie outside empirical experience or the limits of science is a necessary concern of dialogue. Dialogue is language based and those who take part in it need to consider it in all its aspects. In interreligious dialogue this also raises the question as to where to draw limits to the word of God. Limits to God’s word would also mean limits to God’s power. If God can only do what a strict interpretation of a word’s meaning implies then it would seem impossible to say that God communicated the whole of his being to another in such a way that that other would be a further instance of the being of God and properly to be called God’s Son. This restriction would be something imposed in advance on the scope of any dialogue and could make it seem as though any dialogue on the matter had concluded before it had begun.

A contemporary and continuing development of the practice of dialogue in the Catholic Church is the phenomenon of synodality. This spiritual movement initiated in its present form by Pope Francis is a complex one. It’s starting point is that the exploration of faith is to lead to an enriching encounter with Jesus risen from the dead, leading the Church as its head to the fulness of life in the presence of God. Within the practice is the further belief that the Holy Spirit is also a partner in dialogue, prompting deep reflection, being the Church’s memory and opening people’s vision to riches of God that have not yet been fully appreciated or even properly discovered. This is an open vision, but with its own limits since it has been said that even a synodal Church does not have the authority to change the teaching entrusted to the Church by God himself. This new enterprise of dialogue is still new. It is at an experiential stage in which no one quite knows how things will develop, but it has hallmarks of hope and is an encouragement to all forms of dialogue – first of all that they should continue in all their variety, and then that they should be open to what the Spirit is not only saying to the Churches but also to other faiths and religions and to the world.