Latter-day Saints: Interreligious Diplomacy Conference

*A Catholic Word to Mormons about Interreligious Engagement*

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Introduction

I have been asked to offer some perspectives from the standpoint of recent Catholic ecclesial experience as to how Mormons might pursue interreligious dialogue without betraying their own religious convictions. My work as an ecumenical officer for the Catholic bishops of the United States has led me to place great hope in the possibility of deeper friendship and mutual understanding between the Catholic Church and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Our two communities differ dramatically in the ways in which we interpret the message of Jesus Christ, and our doctrines, practices, and governing structures emerge out of two very distinct readings of the revelation found in the New Testament. Yet for reasons having to do with our shared concerns about the breakdown of a moral consensus in American culture, and about the legal challenges to religious liberty in this society, Mormons and Catholics have lately found themselves united in giving voice to civic and religious values in the public square.

An interreligious dialogue between Latter-day Saints and Catholics might well enable both sides to understand better what motivates the other to give a moral witness in society. Through such a dialogue Catholics may yet develop a more positive theological assessment of Mormonism than has been reflected up till now in official statements of the Catholic Church. Historical precedent indeed shows that the Catholic Church is capable of development in its assessment of another religious tradition, even one with whom it shares a history of mutual suspicion. The treatment of Islam at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) is one possible
analogy with how the Catholic Church might reorient herself in relation to the LDS. In this brief presentation I want to suggest that a more positive assessment of Mormonism is possible within a framework that straddles between the warrants that Vatican II offers, on the one hand for ecumenical relations, and on the other hand for interreligious engagements. Following this proposal I will offer some brief recommendations for how the Catholic-LDS relationship might develop in the coming years, drawing on the lessons learned from Catholic-Jewish relations since *Nostra aetate* put this historic relationship on a renewed course.

II. Vatican II’s treatment of Islam

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, Catholic commentaries on Islam were either polemical or apologetic in nature. St. John Damascene (675-753 C.E.) stands at the head of a Syrian tradition of theologians who sought to disprove the very possibility of a revelation given to the prophet Muhammad, and to refute the claims made in Islamic sources that contradicted Christian doctrines like the Incarnation, Jesus’ sacrificial death, and the Trinity. Christian commentators familiarized themselves with the Quran and Haddith (“traditions”) in order to advance their arguments for the invincible claims of Christianity within the Arabic cultural matrix. Throughout the Middle East, and later in Spain, a rich dialectic emerged between apologists from both traditions that enabled new philosophical modalities to be adopted by the Christian schools of medieval Scholasticism.

Catholic scholars today seek to build on the work of twentieth century researchers who sought to understand Islam on its own terms, even while trying to identify points of connection with Christian belief. Louis Massignon (1883-1962), whose influence at Vatican II has been

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1 See *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History. Volume 1 (600-900)* (History of Christian-Muslim Relations), eds. David Thomas, Barbara Roggema, etc. (London: Brill, 2009).
widely recognized, found in Islamic mysticism a bridge between the two religions. The French scholar recovered his Christian faith through his experience of Muslim kindness and hospitality while pursuing research in the Middle East. Massignon’s thought, interpreted by Jean-Marie Gaudeul as “the mysticism of Christ’s sacrifice,” locates Islam within the plan of salvation used by God to draw diverse peoples to himself in astonishing ways.2

As in other areas like liturgy and church-state relations, Vatican II was able to renew Catholic theology and practice by drawing on the research of biblical and historical scholars in the decades leading up to the council. One fruit of this research was the reexamination of the inherited axiom *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“no salvation outside the Church”) in the Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*). While maintaining the role of the Church as the universal sign and instrument of salvation for all of humanity (paragraph 1), the constitution managed to yield a positive reappraisal of the non-Christians religions of east and west by acknowledging that they too have a function within the divine plan. Following paragraph 15, which acknowledges for the first time the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit in other Christian communities (whereas previously grace was thought to be afforded simply to individual Christians), the constitution depicts Jews, Muslims, and religious seekers of other traditions as belonging to a series of concentric circles, relating in various ways to Christ’s saving work. No one is in principle denied the grace of salvation, not even those who lack any explicit knowledge of God. For the “seeds of the Word” (*semina Verbi*), as St. Justin Martyr and

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other patristic sources maintained, have been cast broadly among the pagans who have sought
the truth “in the shadows and images” of their philosophical and spiritual quests.3

*Lumen gentium* provides the soteriological framework for the positive reassessment of the
religions in one of the last documents adopted by the council Fathers in 1965. *Nostra aetate* had
originally been intended as a statement on the Jews, in an effort to begin a process of healing a
relationship scarred by centuries of mutual hostility and fear. The bishops opted instead to speak
of Judaism within a broader context of promoting unity and love among all the peoples of
religion, even while giving a more extended and dramatic treatment to the Church’s relationship
with the Jews.

The brief section that takes up Islam, paragraph 3, marks a sea-change in official Catholic
commentary on Islam. Putting aside the polemics of the past, the council Fathers affirm first and
foremost the monotheism of Muslims, which is to say, their adoration of “the one God, living
and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has
spoken to men.”4 They then go on to identify areas of overlap between Islam and the Catholic
faith, such as the submission owed to God’s inscrutable decrees after the example of Abraham,
“with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself.” The decree simply states that for
Muslims Jesus is not God but a prophet. The honor given to his mother is also acknowledged,
while noting with satisfaction that Muslims sometimes call upon the Virgin Mary with devotion.

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3 For Justin, the philosophy of the Greeks was understood to participate partially in the Eternal Logos, and was
viewed as a preparation for the gospel. See *Second Apology* 8, 1 where Justin comments on the connection between the
seeds of the Word and martyrdom: “And those of the Stoic school—since, so far as their moral teaching went, they
were admirable, as were also the poets in some particulars, on account of the seed of reason [the Logos] implanted
in every race of men—were, we know, hated and put to death—Heraclitus for instance, and, among those of our

4 Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra aetate*, October 28, 1965), par.
3; [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-
aetate_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-
aetate_en.html). All subsequent quotes are taken from this website.
Resonant with Christians is also anticipation of the Day of Judgment when God will render justice to all those who have been raised up from the dead. The decree then expresses the Church’s esteem for the manner in which Muslims value the moral life and worship God, especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Finally, Nostra aetate takes up one of the council’s overarching themes, namely, reconciliation, as it recognizes the need for a healing of memories with Muslims and the pursuit of cooperation in peace and justice. “Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.” Consistent with what it says about other traditional religions, the decree recognizes the particular contribution that Islam makes in the history of salvation and in fostering the religious sense among human beings. Far from being in contradiction with the core conviction that Christ and his Church are the universal and ordinary means of salvation for all people, such an acknowledgment of the gifts and “rays of divine truth” in the other religions actually confirms the christological truth that the decree seeks to convey. Paragraph 2 captures this inclusivist orientation of the council’s treatment of the great religions:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.
III. Mormonism as a Supersessionist Religion

Vatican II did not address in any theologically explicit way the problem of supersessionism which has historically impacted the Church’s relationship with Judaism and Islam, albeit in different ways. Supersessionism may be defined as a theological construct that considers one religion’s comprehensive view of God, history, and the human being as succeeding to, correcting, and sometimes delegitimizing the revelational claims of another religion—to which it demonstrably owes its originating linguistic and interpretive framework. Claiming that Christ fulfills, even as he reinterprets, Old Testament scripture, Christianity has often understood itself as superseding Jewish faith and covenantal life. Analogously, Islam upholds that the revelation given to the Prophet Muhammad completes even as it corrects the normative beliefs found in both Judaism and Christianity. On account of its position on ongoing revelation, Mormonism sees itself as at once supersessionist and restorationist in relation to post-Constantinian Christianity.

From a doctrinal standpoint, the revelation given to Joseph Smith is believed to facilitate a return to a purer form of apostolic Christianity, while also opening up to further revelations that qualify and expand on what has already been revealed. As one LDS writer puts it: “Future revelation is not only viewed as theoretically possible; it is needed and expected, as changing circumstances in the world necessitate new communication from God.”5 The precise form of Mormon supersessionism, on account of the “dynamic scriptural process” to which Latter-day Saints adhere, may be more benign than historic forms of Christian and Muslim supersessionism precisely because of the open-ended character of revelation, which is ever-adaptable to changing historical circumstances. Sacred texts that refer to the religious other in disparaging terms can be

reinterpreted, and thereby relativized, by the revealed word given to a latter-day prophet. Yet the precise relationship between the succession of authoritative teachers and the communally sanctioned scriptures is a problem—I am led to believe—that confronts not only Catholics with their Magisterium but also Later-day Saints with their church Prophets. Arriving at a non-coercive and interreligiously open-minded form of supersessionism may be a theological task that Mormons and Catholics can fruitfully pursue together.

The work of re-envisioning the other, particularly one who adheres to a religious program that stands in a supersessionist relationship with one’s own faith, has been pursued with by the post-Vatican II Catholic Church with earnest resolve. The repairing of the relationship with Islam by popes, bishops, and scholars bears promising testimony to what Catholicism is capable of in relationship to other religions. From its standpoint today, the Catholic Church should be able to look upon members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with esteem for calling upon Jesus as savior of the world; for acknowledging his atoning death on the cross for the salvation of all humankind; for reverencing the Old and New Testaments as inspired books; and for promoting ethical principles that resonate with the broad Christian tradition that Catholics view as integral to healing society and anticipating the coming Kingdom of God.

Catholic bishops and theologians continue, of course, to confront the question of whether a relationship with the LDS falls within the Church’s ecumenical or interreligious mandate. This question begs the more commonly posed one, which runs the risk of giving offense to Mormons: Are Latter-day Saints Christian? The Catholic Church has, to some degree, answered this question by ruling on the status of Mormon baptism. On June 5, 2001 the Prefect of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith responded to a Dubium on the validity of baptisms conferred by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. “Negative,” read the
Responsum signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.⁶ In a quasi-official commentary on the CDF decision published later that year in L’osservatore Romano, Luis Ladaria, S.J. explained that huge differences in trinitarian belief and the meaning of baptism invalidate, from the standpoint Catholic doctrine and law, the intention of the Mormon minister of baptism and of the one to be baptized. Ladaria argues: “There is not a true invocation of the Trinity because the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, according to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, are not the three persons in which subsists the one Godhead, but three gods who form one divinity. One is different from the other, even though they exist in perfect harmony.”⁷ Given the role of baptism as the basis of the whole Christian life in Catholic self-understanding,⁸ it would seem that the matter of Christian identity for Mormons is resolved, at least for Catholics, by the judgment of the Holy See.

However, other considerations might be taken into account as to whether Mormons—and other groups professing faith in Jesus, but lacking what Catholics determine to be a valid Baptism and profession of faith in the Nicene Creed—belong, in some sense, to the family of Christ’s disciples. The 1983 Code of Canon Law, which reflects the renewed teaching of Vatican II, refers to catechumens who have not yet received sacramental initiation as being “united with the Church which already cherishes them as its own.”⁹ Others who claim allegiance to Christ and look to the New Testament as a source of divine revelation might be viewed analogously as journeying toward the fullness of truth found in Christ’s Church. Quakers

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profess a Christian faith without having visible sacraments, and some Pentecostals use trinitarian language in their worship but conceive of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a Modalist fashion—i.e., as a single divine person. Catholics would be hard pressed, in view of Vatican II’s teaching, to deny that these believers have any participation in the communion of the Church. Somewhere between paragraphs 15 and 16 of *Lumen gentium*—that is, between Church’s recognition of its bonds with validly baptized believers and its acknowledgement of God’s closeness to Jews, Muslims and other people who seek the unknown God “in the shadows and images”—room must be made for those who seek salvation under the mantle of Christ’s saving cross, even while denying what we Catholics deem to be essential elements of the Christian faith.

### III. A path of friendship

Not every relationship maintained by the Catholic Church with another religion fits comfortably in either the ecumenical or interreligious context. Owing to its foundations in Judaism, the Church locates Catholic-Jewish dialogue within its own distinctive ambit. According to Pope John Paul II, “the meeting between the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God [cf. Rom. 11:29], and that of the New Covenant, is at the same time a dialogue within our Church, that is to say, between the first and the second part of her Bible.”

The Vatican’s distinct Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews is located in the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and yet its purposes are arguably more closely aligned with those of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The rationale for establishing a separate commission for religious relations with the Jewish community, and

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locating this commission within the council charged with fostering unity with fellow Christians, is testimony to the conviction that Judaism, alone among the non-Christian religions, is internal to the life of the Church.

Is it conceivable that one day there will be a Pontifical Council for Religious Relations with Latter-day Saints? As the LDS continues to take its place alongside other world religions in the 21st century, such a development within the structures of the Holy See is not unthinkable. As friendship and mutual understanding increase between these two religious bodies, I would suggest that the relationship built in recent years between Catholics and Jews become a reference point for this new endeavor at bridge-building. Three particular lessons can be derived from this latter relationship which might assist Mormons and Catholics in deepening their ties of mutual esteem.

First, the two sides must embark on a healing of memories. In Catholic–Jewish relations this has been a sine qua non for reconciliation between the two communities. Catholics have to examine and repent of centuries of anti-Jewish sentiments instilled through preaching, catechesis, and the sacred arts. The Holy See through its Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews undertook an important investigation into the manner in which Christian attitudes and behaviors contributed to the Holocaust of the last century, in which six million Jews perished at the hands of a regime that tried to destroy the memory of the God of Abraham, even as it was made up of mostly baptized Christians. The Holy See’s statement *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* noted that “For Christians, this heavy burden of conscience of their brothers and sisters during the Second World War must be a call to penitence.”

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Second, Jewish-Catholic relations have shown us that dialogue is a process of mutual learning, in which each side listens to the ways in which the other defines him or herself. So often the tendency in Christian treatments of Jewish belief and practice has been to interpret Judaism within Christian categories. The Jewish Passover becomes a type of the Christian Eucharist, the Temple Cult an anticipation of the sacrifice of the cross, and the Sabbath a foil for the Lord’s Day. It comes as a surprise to many Christians who encounter Jews in dialogue that the category of salvation is one that holds little prominence in the Jewish religious imagination. Our own theological formulations should reflect some understanding of how Jews define themselves and the very symbols of faith that lie at the heart of Christian revelation.

Third and finally, the post-<em>Nostra aetate</em> dialogue has been one that has led Christians and Jews to identify ways in which they can witness together in the areas of peace and justice. A dialogue between great religions must look from the past to the future, while taking opportunities for common action in the present—especially on behalf of human rights and the defense of human dignity throughout society. The motive in the case of Jews and Christians is that representatives of both traditions might together be agents of repairing the world – <em>tikun olam</em>.

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The possibilities of Catholic-Mormon partnership through dialogue is an area of interreligious engagement that remains largely untapped. Yet it is a fertile area for exploration for the two communities, which have lately been drawn together to address the moral crises of post-modernity. The present moment affords us an opportunity for mutual learning and problem-solving on issues like religious freedom, conduct in missionary endeavors, and the defense of the

family. It is my hope that over time—to draw on the interreligious discourse of Pope John Paul II—we Catholics and Latter-day Saints “might yet become a blessing to one another, so that together we might be a blessing to the world.”

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12 Pope's 1993 appeal marking the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising: “As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing to the world. This is the common task awaiting us. It is therefore necessary for us, Christians and Jews, to first be a blessing to one another.” [http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/pont_messages/1993/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19930406_ebrei-polacchi_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/pont_messages/1993/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19930406_ebrei-polacchi_en.html). Accessed on June 3, 2010.