

Interfaith initiative marks anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*

By Murray Watson

On Oct. 28, 1965, more than 2,000 bishops of the Catholic Church gathered in Rome with Pope Paul VI for the Second Vatican Council issued a historic document called *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Age), on the church's relationship to non-Christian religions. It was a revolutionary document on many levels, but perhaps its most ground-breaking part was its fourth section, which spoke of the Catholic relationship to Judaism.

That paragraph addressed a number of misconceptions about Jews and Judaism that had become traditional in Catholic thinking and teaching, and proposed a new, more positive model for that relationship, based on the profound links that unite Christianity and Judaism. While the section itself was brief, *Nostra Aetate* inspired a wide range of official documents and local grassroots efforts and activities that built upon its teachings and

Watson is a Catholic biblical scholar who has worked for nearly 20 years in the field of inter-religious dialogue, primarily with the Jewish community. He works closely with the Sisters of Zion, and is a consultant to the Interfaith Department of Scarborough Missions in Toronto.

contributed to the significant renewal of Catholic-Jewish relations which still continues today.

October 2015 will mark five decades since Pope Paul VI and the bishops at the Second Vatican Council published *Nostra Aetate*. To celebrate *Nostra Aetate's* golden anniversary, the Interfaith Department of Scarborough Missions has launched a new online educational initiative to share some of the stories of those who have been most intimately involved in that interfaith journey. Called What Dialogue Looks Like, this project offers biographical sketches of some of the pioneers who were involved at the time of *Nostra Aetate* and shortly afterward, as well as some of the many contemporary voices in Jewish-Christian relations today.

Because this is an educational initiative, we would like to make it known to the broadest possible audience in the Canadian church. Leading up to the October anniversary, the Prairie Messenger will feature "capsule biographies," which are

also posted on the "Catholic-Jewish Relations" section of the Scarborough Interfaith website (http://www.scarboromissions.ca/IC_Relations/dialogue_partners.php). By October there will have been featured material on numerous individuals — Jews and Christians, men and women — who have played key roles in drafting the conciliar declaration, or who have led local, national or international efforts to put *Nostra Aetate's* vision into practice, through various forms of dialogue, action and scholarship.

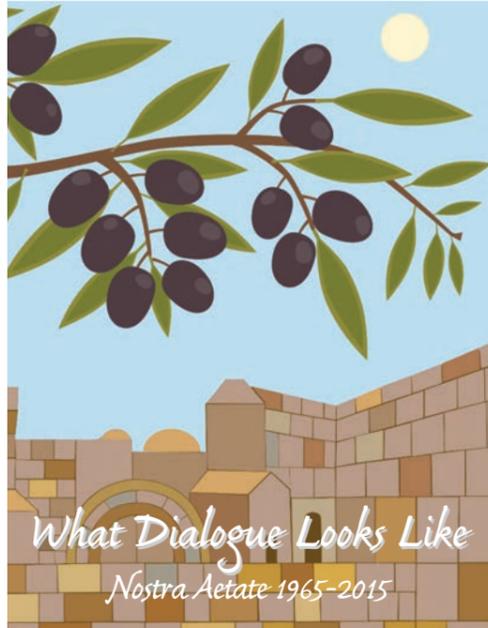
Sister Lucy Thorson, a Sister of Zion who is part of Scarborough's

interfaith team, hopes that these short overviews can raise awareness of the contributions of many key figures, whose work has until now been largely familiar only to scholars: "Our goal is that teachers and community leaders in local schools, synagogues and churches might use these biographies as part of their own educational work, to help Catholics and Jews to appreciate what a truly significant advance *Nostra Aetate* represented, and to raise awareness of how many exciting Jewish-Christian endeavours are taking place today, both here in Canada and elsewhere. We hope that Scarborough can make a unique contribution to the preparations for next year's commemorations, and can interest many more people in exploring this fascinating and important aspect of modern Jewish and Christian history."

The upcoming 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* offers an ideal

opportunity to reflect with gratitude on the contributions of so many gifted leaders in the Jewish-Christian relationship, whose teachings, writings, example and efforts have incarnated the overall vision of the Council, and have helped both the Jewish and Christian communities to develop deeper bonds of esteem, respect, friendship and understanding. For further information, please contact Sister Lucy Thorson, NDS, by phone at 416-261-7135 or by email at lthorson@scarboromissions.ca

The first two individuals to be featured are the French Jewish historian and interfaith activist Jules Isaac, and Dr. Mary Boys, a Sister of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, who is a professor of practical theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and a distinguished author in this field. Future biographies will include figures from across North and South America, Israel and Europe.



Dr. Mary Boys, SNJM: challenge of dialogue

Dr. Mary Boys, SNJM

Dr. Mary Boys is a native of Seattle and has been, since 1965, a Sister of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary (a religious congregation of Roman Catholic women). Since 1994, she has served on the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York, where she teaches in the field of practical theology; she currently serves as UTS's Dean of Academic Affairs.

A prolific author and popular speaker in the field of Jewish-Christian dialogue, Boys has lectured across North America and overseas (including in Israel) on a wide range of topics relevant to the development of the Jewish-Christian relationship, including the controversy raised by the Mel Gibson movie *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004. She is a gifted educator who is frequently called upon as a media commentator, in terms of contemporary Christian views of Judaism, and has served as an adjunct faculty member of the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Teachers' College of Columbia University. She has received numerous honorary doctorates from both Christian and Jewish educational institutions.

Boys' own publications have included: *Biblical Interpretation in Religious Education* (1980), *Educating in Faith: Maps and Visions* (1989), *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: One Woman's Experience* (1997), *Has God Only One Blessing?* *Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (2000), and *Christians and Jews in Dialogue: Learning in the Presence of the Other* (2006), co-authored with Sara S. Lee. Her most recent book, published in 2013, is *Redeeming our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations Between Jews and Christians*, an in-depth examination of the Gospel accounts of the Passion and death of Jesus, in an effort to understand how those texts have been used throughout history to promote hostility toward the Jewish people — and how they

must be read and preached differently today.

Her book *Has God Only One Blessing?* is arguably her best-known book to date, and offers the reader insights into the status of various challenging issues in the Jewish-Christian relationship, including the rapidly changing relation of the church (*ecclesia*) and the synagogue (*synagoga*), the question of Christian prosely-



Dr. Mary Boys, SNJM

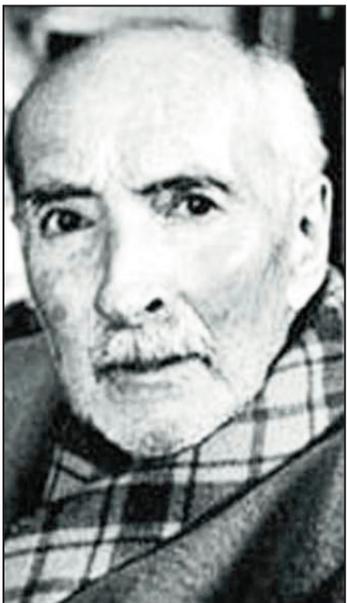
tizing of Jews, and the subject of the Jewish covenantal relationship to the land of Israel. In it, she provides a helpful overview of Christian origins, of some of the more painful eras in Jewish-Christian interaction, and of the significant steps undertaken by the Christian churches in modern times, to begin transforming their (historically negative) stances toward Judaism. In this volume, she speaks passionately about the changes the churches are called to make, and how demanding this might prove to be:

— Taking up such challenges requires us to enter more profoundly into our community's faith in order to be transformed by it and thereby to become a leaven in the community and society. This faith is a dynamic reality.

— MOVE BEYOND, page 14

Jules Marx Isaac (1877 - 1963)

Born in Rennes (Aix-en-Provence), France, Jules Isaac grew up in a largely assimilated Jewish family, and pursued a career as a professional historian and academic. In France, he is perhaps best remembered as the co-author of the series of history textbooks (called "Malet—Isaac")



Jules Marx Isaac

that was used for decades in French schools. Because of the respect in which he was held as a scholar, Isaac was appointed in 1936 as the Inspector-General of Schools for the whole of France, one of the most distinguished educational positions in the country.

After the Nazi invasion of France during the Second World War, the newly enacted anti-Semitic laws caused Isaac to lose his post (the French Minister of

Education said at the time that "it was not acceptable for the history of France to be taught to French youth by an Isaac"). In late 1943, his wife and several of his immediate family were arrested and sent to a concentration camp; a number of them were subsequently murdered during the *Shoah* simply because, as he later wrote, they bore the (Jewish) name of "Isaac."

Isaac spent much of the war as a fugitive, staying in various safe-houses, and it was during this time that he decided to devote his scholarly energies to the question of the historical and theological roots of Christian anti-Judaism. Supplied with smuggled reading materials by sympathetic friends and colleagues, Isaac examined in detail 21 points where he believed traditional Christian teaching about Jews and Judaism desperately needed to be rethought, to avoid possibly the kinds of anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic attitudes that had largely enabled the *Shoah* to proceed unopposed.

In 1947, Isaac presented his research to the newly created International Council of Christians and Jews at its meeting in Seelisberg, Switzerland, and they formed the basis of that conference's now-famous Ten Points of Seelisberg. He eventually compiled his considerable research into a full-length book, published in 1948, called *Jesus and Israel*, which has since become a foundational text in modern Jewish-Christian relations.

Isaac was one of the founders of the *Amitié judéo-chrétienne de France* (the French Jewish-Christian Friendship Associa-

tion), and spent the remainder of his life arguing eloquently for a reform of Christian thinking and preaching about Jews, to avoid the mistakes and harm of earlier centuries.

Having attempted — with little success — to interest Pope Pius XII in his findings in 1949, Isaac was energized by the news, in 1959, that Pope John XXIII had called an ecumenical council of the world's Catholic bishops (what would become known as Vatican II). In June 1960, Pope John received Isaac in an audience at the Vatican, and the historian presented his arguments, with an appeal for the Council to consider a radical reform of Catholic teachings about Jews. The pope agreed with Isaac, and entrusted his dossier of materials to Augustin Cardinal Bea, a distinguished Jesuit biblical scholar and ecumenist, who was asked to gather a group of experts and begin drafting a document, *On the Jews*, for the Council's deliberations.

That document — after a long, circuitous and often uncertain path, many intrigues and major revisions — was eventually approved in October 1965 as *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican II's landmark declaration on the Catholic Church's relationship to non-Christian religious traditions. Sadly, however, Isaac did not live to see the outcome of his efforts. He died in September 1963, but is rightly considered today as one of the major figures whose efforts contributed to the renewal of Christian thinking about Judaism, and as one of Europe's great interfaith pioneers.

Templeton Prize winner poses tough question



Everyday Theology

Louise McEwan

At the end of a steep hill in the neighbourhood where I grew up, there stood a house shrouded in mystery. Adults whispered about a “retarded” child who lived there and who was confined to a room. They argued about whether or not his parents should put him in a “home.”

I was both fascinated and afraid when I passed by the house. I had no context for the comments I overheard. I wondered about the boy, about his appearance, how he spent his day, was he lonely, and would he hurt me if he came out of the house.

That was in the mid-1960s

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around the time that Jean Vanier, the 2015 Templeton Prize winner, visited an asylum, a “home,” in Trosly, France. It was the house of my neighbourhood on a grand scale and he was as ignorant of it as were the people in my neighbourhood.

He discovered a hidden world of anguish, shame and hopelessness, a place where intellectually disabled people were shut away from sight. So, he took action, inviting two of the men who had no family to live with him. Their mutually transformative experience of living as peers — eating, doing chores and, sometimes, fighting together — gradually began to attract others.

This was the humble beginning of L’Arche, a unique organization of 147 communities around the globe that fosters the mutual transformation of all its members — whether able or disabled. Emphasizing our common humanity, L’Arche is a sign of hope for the world, demonstrating that people of different cultures,



Templeton Prize: Paul Hackett

FULLY HUMAN — The 2015 Templeton Prize laureate Jean Vanier celebrates the Feast of L’Arche with L’Arche community residents and faith leaders at the Templeton Prize ceremony at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London, May 18, 2015.

religions and abilities can live together in peace.

Vanier’s experience in that first L’Arche community was liberating. Freed from the culture of success where people are valued for their abilities and achievements, Vanier discovered what it means to be fully human. In Vanier’s experience and thought, to be fully human means to discover that each individual is a

treasured part of the human family. Before being a Christian or a Jew, before being an American or a Russian, before having visible or invisible disabilities, says Vanier, we are a person.

When Vanier speaks of what it means to be fully human, he embraces the vulnerability that many of us try to hide. For Vanier, the story of every individual is the discovery of one’s fragility; we are born, grow and die in weakness.

Living with vulnerable people has taught him that the cry of the disabled for love is the common cry of every person. It is a cry that echoes the heart of God. When people are loved for who they are, not for what they can do, the spirit soars and they can enter more deeply into relationship. “To become fully human is to let down the barriers, to open up and to discover that every person is beautiful. Under all the jobs and responsibilities, there is you.”

I first heard of Vanier in the 1970s. My late mother-in-law, who was instrumental in bringing Vanier to our diocese to give a retreat, said of him, “He preached the gospel by the way he lived.” He made a deep and lasting impression on her, as he did on other individuals who attended that retreat, and who, despite the

passing of decades, still speak about him with great clarity.

One woman, who told me of her retreat experience, said the content of the retreat was secondary to Vanier himself. He opened up a God of love to her with his gentle manner and the love in his eyes. Listening to Vanier, she said all these years later, “was like sitting as a child at the feet of the Master,” adding, “he could have said anything and reached me.”

Another individual described Vanier to me saying, “He is the most authentic person I have ever met. His commitment to the gospel was remarkable and he was living it beautifully.”

The Templeton Prize, valued at approximately US \$1.7 million, honours an individual who has made an extraordinary contribution to affirming life’s spiritual dimension. While it is clear that Vanier’s Christian faith and love of Jesus is at the basis of his lived theology, he is not pushy about creed. When asked what he would say to a person who does not believe in God, Vanier replied, “Do you believe in love? You don’t need to believe in God. God is love. The important thing is not belief — but can you grow in love?”

That may be the tougher question.

Churches, not Christianity, in trouble

Religious Issues Today

Rev. Tom Ehrich



Let’s be clear: The much-heralded “decline of Christianity in North America” isn’t about God losing faith in humankind.

It isn’t about losing our moral compass thanks to whatever you happen to loathe. It isn’t about fickle millennials. It isn’t about zigging trendy or zagging traditional.

In fact, I would argue that Christianity isn’t in trouble at all. Churches are in trouble. Denominations are in trouble. Religious institutions like seminaries are in trouble. Professional church leaders are in trouble.

But churches can’t hold God hostage. God will do what God will do. Whether our churches stay open for business, God will keep on loving all that God has made. Loss of an institution won’t deter God.

So let’s relax about Christianity — the faith — going down the tubes. This isn’t an existential crisis for God or for faith in God.

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Even if every church in North America went dark, God would try another way.

The tragedy — in the classic sense of self-inflicted wounds and fatal flaws — is that we did this to ourselves, and we hurt many people along the way. Here is what we did:

1. We stopped trying.

For a time, religious institutions were bold risk-takers. Then we settled into maintenance mode, because it felt safe and comfortable. We fought over churchy things that didn’t matter because the things that did matter — racism, inequality, demagoguery, corporate thievery, obsession with money and sex — cut too close to home.

2. We stopped giving.

Over the past 50 years, our giving has dropped by more than half as a percentage of family income. We have starved our churches of resources. When tough budget choices had to be made, the facilities that we wanted usually defeated the mission that God wanted.

3. We turned inward.

Just as houses went from porches in front to patios out back, we stopped connecting with our neighbours. We stopped looking outward, except for the occasional noblesse oblige charity. We

opened our doors on Sunday and welcomed each other.

4. We fixated on Sunday morning.

Long after Sunday changed character in our lives, we kept expecting Sunday worship to do our work. Rather than transform lives through mission work, circles of growth and personal spirituality, we had people sit in pews for a crammed hour of singing, praying, announcing, chatting, communing and learning. Then we sent people out to their cars and figured we had done our work for the week.

5. We trashed our reputation.

We became known as judgmental, angry, self-serving, smug, boring and old. As far as people outside can tell, we live to fight, we think too highly of ourselves, and we are moral scolds. Who needs that?

What, then, is the future? The future for God is as bright and glorious as ever. Our ever-changing, ever-dynamic, ever-loving and ever-transformational God will be just fine. We can say our prayers with confidence.

Churches, on the other hand, are in trouble. Many will run out of money. Many will lose heart. And yet some, perhaps many, will rise to the challenge. They will give up the old certainties and do what Jesus did.

Those challenge-meeters will look outward, proclaim good news, welcome strangers, serve “the least of these,” give their lives and resources away, work for justice and mercy, be faith communities seven days a week and put love ahead of right opinion and kindness ahead of victory.

And God will be in the midst of them.

Move beyond narrow limits

Continued from page 9

Fidelity to its living character challenges us to be changed by the transformation in the church’s relationship with Judaism. . . . Engagement with the profound subject matter of the Jewish-Christian dialogue summons us Christians to conversion. Here “conversion” denotes not the changing of one’s religion, or even a one-time religious experience resulting in dedication to God, but rather a lifelong process of deepening in integrity and authenticity. Specifically in the Christian context, conversion implies continuing movement into the depths of the mystery of God by following the way of Jesus through the presence and power of the Spirit. . . . *Ecclesia* will stand in right relation to *synagoga* only when we Christians remember

how earlier renditions of these figures imaged a defeated Judaism and a triumphal church, and repent of the way in which Christianity distorted Judaism. By teaching differently about Jews and Judaism, we not only will present a more faithful account of the “other,” but we will more truthfully describe ourselves. By educating for dialogue, we will ultimately come to understand more profoundly who we are as those committed to the Way of Jesus.

— In our time, *ecclesia*’s dialogue with *synagoga* is meant to draw us into the boundlessness of the Divine. It challenges us to move beyond the narrow limits in which we confine the Holy One, and to acknowledge in our heart of hearts that God, Mother and Father of us all, has many children — and more than one blessing.