Opinion
Guest Voices



Pope Francis blesses a sculpture during a brief stop at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia Sept. 27, 2015. The sculpture commemorates the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



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Growing up as a Muslim child of immigrants in Mainz, surrounded by a rich Catholic culture, I experienced firsthand both the beauty and the tension that can come from living between religious worlds. At home, I recited the Quran: in school, I sang Christmas songs. I fasted during Ramadan while my classmates opened Advent calendars.

I often felt the weight of being seen as "other," but still I recognized that our faiths were not as distant as they were often portrayed. I was raised to revere Jesus as a prophet, one of the most beloved figures in Islam. Mary's name is honored in the Quran more than any other woman. Above all else, I believed in the one God — in mercy, in accountability and in a shared moral call to justice.

In *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church's groundbreaking document on its relationship with other religions, I saw a vision that affirmed my experience, one that invites Muslims and Christians to move beyond fear and toward mutual respect, shared values and a more just future. *Nostra Aetate* offers hope, but does not and should not erase the painful parts of our shared history.

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It was the spirit of this document that gave me the opportunity as a Muslim to study at Georgetown University and to serve as a Muslim chaplain-in-residence on the same campus, where I walked alongside students of all faiths — and none.



Pope John Paul II is pictured during a general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican in 1980. (CNS photo/Catholic Press photo)

Meanwhile, Muslims were also making efforts to advance relationships with other communities. In 1950, the Muslim scholar Bediüzzaman Said Nursi wrote a letter to Pope Pius XII expressing his hope for cooperation between Christians and Muslims

against growing hostility, widespread poverty and moral decay. Nursi visited Patriarch Athenagoras in 1953 in Istanbul about working together on the issues of the time. Nursi's vision is rooted in the example and universal teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and still resonates: collaboration rooted in faith, not in spite of it.

Pope John Paul II, on his 1980 apostolic visit to my hometown of Mainz, spoke directly to Muslim immigrants — my community — acknowledging our presence, our faith, and our dignity:

> But not all guests in this country are Christians; a particularly large group professes the faith of Islam. To you as well I extend my heartfelt blessing!
>
> If you have brought your belief in God from your homeland to this foreign land with sincere hearts, and if you pray here to God as your Creator and Lord, then you too belong to the great pilgrimage of people who, since Abraham, have repeatedly set out to seek and find the one true God.
>
> When you are not afraid to pray publicly, you offer us Christians an example that deserves respect.
>
> Live your faith, even in a foreign land, and do not allow it to be misused by any human or political interest!

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Pope Francis continued this legacy in *Fratelli Tutti*, his 2020 encyclical on fraternity and social friendship. In it, he calls on people of all faiths and none to recognize one another as brothers and sisters. Inspired by his friendship with Grand Imam Ahmed el-Tayeb, Pope Francis affirmed that authentic dialogue must be a force for peace and solidarity.

The message of *Nostra Aetate* is still relevant today, not only for clergy and theologians but also for the wider public, helping the next generation understand the complexity of our histories and the promise of a shared future. We live in a world of polarization, but this document reminds us that Christian-Muslim collaboration is not naive, but necessary; and we can find, in one another's scriptures and hearts, the

foundations for respectful relationships, justice and peace.

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