

## Embracing Diversity

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Last month I was involved in planning a series of events to mark the 45th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the declaration by the Vatican that brought about a revolution in how the Roman Catholic Church views its relations with other faiths, and with the Jewish community in particular. It was this groundbreaking recognition that Judaism is the “older sister” of Christianity that paved the way for Pope John Paul II to visit the main synagogue in Rome, and Christian and Jewish holy sites in Israel.

It has also opened the door to dialogue here in Scotland, where we have previously commemorated the declaration with a tree-planting ceremony at the home of Cardinal O’Brien. This year, the Scottish Bishops Conference joined with the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities to organise a symposium about developments in the relations between our two faiths. We were honoured to welcome two of the leading figures of this international dialogue, Fr John Pawlkowski, a professor who has a number of American, Polish, and Jewish awards for his work, and Rabbi David Rosen – probably the only rabbi who is a Papal knight.

This was all the more timely, coming so soon after the visit of the present Pope, where he was welcomed, both in Edinburgh and in London, by leaders of all the main faiths. Welcoming the symposium to Giffnock Synagogue, Rabbi Moshe Rubin commented that “it was truly remarkable that we were surrounded by so many people of different faiths who would in the past have felt threatened by each other. Much of that change is due to *Nostra Aetate*.”

We really should not underestimate how lucky – or should I say blessed? – we are to live in such times, at least in such a place. There may still be parts of the world where relations between faiths and cultures is characterised by conflict, oppression, or even genocide. But, thankfully, however precarious the equilibrium, here that is not so.

Sadly, however, we don’t need to recall Germany in the 1930s to see how catastrophically economic turmoil can disturb that balance. All over the world, there are populists thumping the tubs of isolationism and xenophobia, from those who sup with the “Tea Parties” in the United States – an occasion for a long spoon if ever there was one – to the right wing rabble-rousers of eastern Europe. On our doorsteps, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, has repudiated multiculturalism, and President Sarkozy of France has expelled the Roma, and even here, while the fascist parties have been trounced, their thuggish followers are taking to the streets disguised as “Defence Leagues”.

Surely there is no more important time for ordinary people to embrace diversity, and signal to politicians that we prefer peace to strife, and coexistence to exile.