

From the Documents of Vatican II:

An Examination of Nostra Aetate and Dignitatis Humanae

STUDY GUIDE

In the wake of two world wars, amidst an unpredictable political climate, and with rapidly increasing technological advancements, the Catholic Church elected an elderly and assumedly conservative Pope. The year was 1958. The newly elected Pope, nearly 77 years old and taking the name John XXIII, was expected to be little more than a transitional pontificate. John XXIII shocked the world instead, calling for the initiation of the 21st ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church, otherwise known as Vatican II. Without abandoning history and tradition, John XXIII sought to unite and modernize the Church. Finally beginning in 1962, the Vatican II Council held four sessions over four years, producing 16 documents. Amongst those documents were *Nostra Aetate*, addressing the Catholic Church's relationship to non-Christian religions; and *Dignitatis Humanae*, focusing on the human conscience and religious freedom. Our discussion will center around these two documents. For greater context as to the origins and aspirations of the Council, please read [Vatican Council II: Light For The Church And For The Modern World](#).

Getting started:

- According to your religious beliefs, how should we treat those who practice a religion different from our own? Explain.
- What is human dignity?

Please read the following documents and answer the questions that follow:

[Nostra Aetate](#)

[Dignitatis Humanae](#)

- How do your responses to the "Getting started" questions compare with your understanding of the readings?
 - How were your responses similar?
 - How were they different?
- Did anything in the documents make you uncomfortable or leave you with questions?
- What are some of the factors that make it difficult for people of differing faiths or religious traditions to interact meaningfully?

- If you are Catholic, do these documents meet your expectations? If you are not Catholic, did these documents reflect your expectations of Catholic Church teaching?
- This year marks the 50th Anniversary of these documents. Are these readings still relevant today?
 - In what ways have the aspirations of these documents been achieved?
 - What aspirations are still waiting to be achieved?
 - What would we add to this discussion if these documents were rewritten today?
- See Nostra Aetate, sections 3&4. Historically, there has been no shortage of tension, disagreement or hostility between the three Abrahamic religions. We should be careful not to forget the past; at the same time, the past often serves as a barrier against healing and productive conversation.
 - How do we move beyond past differences and injustices in search of a more harmonious future?
- Dignitatis Humanae (1) emphasizes “the free exercise of religion in society” while committing Catholics to “the duty of spreading (Catholicism) abroad among men.”
 - Is there any tension between the righteousness of your own beliefs and the need to respect people of opposing faith and religious traditions? How do we reconcile this tension?
- How might we work side-by-side with people of other faiths/religions without having our own faith/religion questioned and without threatening their faith/religion?