



Gratz Insider, Fall 2015 - Story Continuation

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## The Papal Visit: A Big Week for Professor Ruth Sandberg and for Jewish-Christian Relations



Speaker panel from the Gratz College multifaith forum (from left to right): Dr. Philip Cunningham, Pastor Linnea Clark, Feyzi Eygoren and Dr. Ruth Sandberg

Dr. Sandberg had been considering holding a multifaith forum at Gratz College for some time - and then, the perfect opportunity presented itself: the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the seminal document that was promulgated by the Second Vatican Council in 1965. Dr. Sandberg explains that in this document, “the Church renounced all of its anti-Jewish teachings and began the process of renewing its relations with the Jews.” (For more on *Nostra Aetate*, see Dr. Sandberg’s [blog](#) on the Gratz College website.)

As a board member of the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations (IJCR) at Saint Joseph’s University, Dr. Sandberg knew that the university had commissioned a sculptor to create a statue commemorating *Nostra Aetate*. The formal dedication of this sculpture was set to take place at Saint Joseph’s in an interfaith ceremony during the week of Pope Francis’ visit to the United States.

With the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the anticipated arrival of the pope in Philadelphia and the interfaith celebration at Saint Joseph’s all taking place at the end of September, Dr. Sandberg realized that it would be an auspicious time for Gratz to hold its first multifaith forum. So on September 20, “Creating Space for Faith: A Conversation about Multifaith Understanding” was born.

Cosponsored with the Cheltenham Area Multifaith Council, the event was organized as a panel discussion, with audience participation encouraged. The panel included representatives from the Catholic, Lutheran, Jewish and Muslim faiths.

The Catholic speaker, Dr. Philip Cunningham, director of the IJCR at Saint Joseph’s and president of the International Council of Christians and Jews, focused his remarks on *Nostra Aetate*. The Lutheran speaker, Pastor Linnea Clark of St. John’s Lutheran Church in Melrose Park, Pennsylvania, addressed the virulent anti-Semitism of Martin Luther, as well as the official rejection of these views by the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The Muslim speaker, Feyzi Eygoren, outreach coordinator of the Peace Islands Institute, repudiated Muslim extremism, explaining that Islamic tradition respects both Judaism and Christianity.

Dr. Sandberg served as both the event coordinator and the Jewish representative on the panel. She described the initial Jewish reaction to efforts at reconciliation by other religious groups as “tentative” in a post-Holocaust world. She did point to a document called *Dabru Emet*, written by a group of rabbis and Jewish scholars in the year 2000, aimed at improving Jewish-Christian relations. Dr. Sandberg also expressed hope that in the future, a similar document would be created for the benefit of Jewish-Muslim relations.

Evaluating the success of the multifaith forum, Dr. Sandberg described it as “a wonderful way for Gratz to make a statement about our goal of developing multifaith understanding even further.” (View the speakers’ videotaped presentations from the forum [here](#).)

Later that week, Dr. Sandberg headed to the Philadelphia Convention Center for the World Meeting of Families, where she attended breakout sessions, helped staff the Gratz College table and even found time to take a photo with a cardboard cutout of Pope Francis. The Gratz programs generating the most interest that day were the certificate program in Jewish-Christian Studies, the Master of Science in Nonprofit Management for Faith-Based Organizations and the newly developed certificate program in chaplaincy.

The next day, Dr. Sandberg traveled to Saint Joseph’s University to attend the celebration of *Nostra Aetate*. The participants in that program reflected both the spirit of this groundbreaking document and the progress that has been made in Jewish-Catholic relations over the last 50 years. With both communities well represented at the podium, the speakers ranged from Bishop Joseph Martino of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to Naomi Adler, CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia. And the crowd of over 400 was a mixed group of Jews and Christians as well.



Rabbi Abraham Skorka and Dr. Ruth Sandberg at the sculpture dedication at Saint Joseph's University

The keynote speaker was Rabbi Abraham Skorka, rector of the Latin-American Rabbinical Seminary and rabbi of the Benei Tikva Congregation in Buenos Aires. In discussing the importance of *Nostra Aetate*, Rabbi Skorka described the document as “the Catholic answer to the *Shoah*.” Centuries of anti-Jewish Church doctrine had helped fuel the anti-Semitism that facilitated the barbarity of the Nazis. Rabbi Skorka explained that *Nostra Aetate* “undoubtedly created a theological turning point for the Catholic Church that fostered a new vision of respect and dialogue with the Jewish people.”

In addition, the rabbi spoke of his friendship with Pope Francis and of their mutual commitment to interfaith dialogue. At the conclusion of the ceremony, Dr. Sandberg had the opportunity to meet Rabbi Skorka and described the experience as follows: “It was absolutely thrilling to meet him. Given the similarity in temperament and the spiritual kinship between Rabbi Skorka and Pope Francis, I felt like I got to meet the pope indirectly as well.”

After the ceremony, the crowd moved outside for the dedication of the sculpture commemorating *Nostra Aetate*. The statue, entitled “*Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time*,” was designed by Philadelphia artist Joshua Koffman, who, himself a product of an interfaith marriage, represented the tenor of the day in that he was raised with both Christian and Jewish traditions. The sculpture depicts



'Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time'  
Photo courtesy of the IJCR website

two women, one representing the Jewish People (“Synagoga”), and one representing the Catholic Church (“Ecclesia”). Dr. Sandberg explains that this feminine portrayal is consistent throughout history because the words for synagogue and church are feminine nouns in both Latin and Greek. Historically, the woman symbolizing the Jews was portrayed as crushed and downtrodden, while her Catholic counterpart was portrayed as proud and exultant. However, as Dr. Sandberg explains, Koffman’s statue is “a complete reversal of the medieval stereotype.” In his modern reinterpretation, Koffman portrays two equally vibrant women sitting together, engaged in interfaith study. (A video of the Saint Joseph’s program in its entirety is available on the [IJCR website](#).)

Dr. Sandberg was not there for the pope’s surprise visit to bless the statue. Nevertheless, reflecting on her whirlwind week, she concludes, “It really gives me a lot of hope for the future. I loved every minute of this experience. It has inspired me to want to do

even more in the area of Jewish-Christian relations.”

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*For more information about the Gratz College certificate program in Jewish-Christian Studies, contact Dr. Sandberg at 215-635-7300 x168 or at [rsandberg@gratz.edu](mailto:rsandberg@gratz.edu).*