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The Mission of Dialogue

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Dialogue, as we all know, presumes a certain respect and regard for the partner-in-dialogue. No one engages in a dialogue with another who is regarded as unworthy or inferior. Thus, if the pre-Vatican Church operated on the premise that “outside the Church there is no salvation”, Vatican II ushered in an era where, according to the landmark 1965 document, *Nostra Aetate*, the Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in the other religions. Moreover, *Nostra Aetate* also urges all Catholics to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Thus, with Vatican II, the Church’s attitude towards other religions shifted from the “conquest” mode to a “dialogue” mode. The crucified Christ has now become the dialogical Christ, and the Church’s evangelization is now effected through the praxis of dialogue.

Thus, with Vatican II, the Church not only became open to the mission of dialogue, but had her entire understanding of mission and evangelization renewed and broadened. Besides dialogue, evangelization is now also seen to include the mission of witness, the mission of service, the mission of human promotion, the mission of prayer and contemplation, as well as the mission of proclamation.

Notice that I have just described various forms or aspects of mission. Hence, the post-Vatican II Church can no longer regard the proclamation of Christ as the one and only saviour as the sole aspect of mission. Instead, this proclamation must be complemented by

witness, service, human promotion, prayer and contemplation, as well as dialogue.

Put another way, the proclamation of Jesus is no longer the one and only aspect of mission, but one of its many aspects. Equally important is for us not so much to proclaim Christ, but to discover Christ, who is already present in the peoples of other religions, long before the arrival of the missionary and the Church. In other words, mission is now conceived of as an integral and all-encompassing task, and which certainly cannot be reduced to proselytism or calling to membership those who do not yet belong to the Church.

WHAT DOES DIALOGUE REALLY MEAN?

This renewed understanding of mission and evangelization has profound implications on all of our works. Specifically, in asserting that dialogue is an integral dimension of the Church’s evangelizing mission, Vatican II seems to imply that Catholics not engaged in interreligious dialogue are not really living out the fullness of their Christian mission and discipleship. This, I am sure most of us would agree, is a rather strong statement, especially since many of us might not see ourselves as being engaged in interreligious dialogue. Moreover, many of us might also

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Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx, OP, in Nijmegen

construe of interreligious dialogue as an activity reserved for experts, the scholars and the theologians. This arises from the common misperception that interreligious dialogue refers to events which take place in seminar rooms where doctrines are compared and belief systems evaluated.

However, if we were to look at interreligious dialogue as more about fostering relationships and sharing of life and works with persons of other religions, then we would more readily accept it as part of our mission. Even so, it might be the case that some of us have seldom or never ever participated in such a mission.

Too often, Catholic organizations—like many other religious organizations—are wont to keep to themselves rather than to reach out in partnership and collaboration with persons of other religions. Even if the tasks at hand may be the same, we seem to find it more convenient to operate on our own rather than to work together and with other organizations, especially if they are of another religion.

Even when we do come together, very often our coming together is motivated more by common human grounds rather than by religiously motivated ones. Sometimes called the “human” or “secular” approach, we find it less cumbersome to relate with persons of other religions on purely human issues—such as justice, peace, human rights, AIDS, environment, education, etc.—rather than on specifically religious ones. This, of course, is indeed laudable in and of itself. The fact that adherents of different religions can come together to address common human concerns ought to be encouraged.

However, such coming together ought to be seen as merely the first step. Many more steps need to be taken. In particular, Catholic organizations need also to be able to share with and relate to Buddhist, Muslim or Hindu organizations on specifically religious grounds. Otherwise, each will continue to be suspicious of the other’s religion, since in the absence of knowledge

and communication, suspicion tends to take over. In other words, unless there is mutual sharing of each other’s religious motivations and fundamental beliefs, we have no choice but to rely on stereotypes, misconceptions, media reports and prejudices.

Religions, unfortunately, are very susceptible to abuse and manipulation, especially for political and socio-economic gains. Thus, in our efforts at building global civil societies, attention has to be given to interreligious dialogue so that we can usher in a culture where persons can be comfortable sharing their religious beliefs, religious motivations and religious practices with others who do not belong to their religion.

Likewise, the ability to share has to be equally complemented by the ability to listen and to learn and to accept what the other is sharing. In cultivating attitudes of authentic openness and sincere appreciation, the tendency to view the world in terms of “we versus they” or “us versus them” will then be minimized. What is more important is that it will then bring about a culture of interreligious harmony, which is a more feasible alternative to the parochialism and segregation which so often characterize multireligious societies. This, therefore, is as much an ideal and a need as it is a demand and a challenge for the Church in general and missionary congregations in particular.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSIONARY CONGREGATIONS

Since Mission Societies and Religious Congregations are official organs of the Catholic Church, the mission of dialogue, therefore, ought to constitute a primary component of their programmes and agendas. In other words, every missionary is more or less duty-bound to contribute towards a culture of dialogue, since Vatican II has spelt it out as integral to the evangelizing mission of the Church. Thus, as missionaries, whether we be in the fields of education or health care,

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ing mission of the Church. And, in the context of Vatican II, this evangelizing mission has to include the mission of dialogue.

As can be seen from the preceding discussions, the mission of promoting a culture of dialogue is indeed a challenge to each of us, as Catholic missionaries. This challenge, of course, comes with serious implications, four of which I will briefly suggest, by way of conclusion, and as points for further reflection.

Firstly, before people can come together for the sharing of faith, they ought to have reached a certain level of comfort in their social and working relationships. It would be disastrous for persons who do not even have secure or trusting working relationships to attempt to come together for the purpose of sharing their faith experiences. For, not only will they feel insecure in the sharing of their faith, the experience might compound their feeling that the lack of trust in their working relationships is on account of their differing faith. Thus, religion could be blamed for a fundamentally interpersonal, human and social problem. The implication of this is that missionary congregations must work ever harder to enhance their working relationships with their counterparts and colleagues who belong to other religious congregations.

Secondly, even before such working relationships can materialize, it is important that the prejudices and negative attitudes we have about other religions be set aside first. It would be disastrous for a Catholic who harbours negative feelings about, say Hinduism, to venture into a collaborative arrangement with a Hindu, for the prejudices would inevitably colour and influence the working relationship.

Thus, should the collaboration not work out, the

advocacy or social services, we have to take seriously the challenge of our witness to the evangeliz-

chances are that the initial prejudices and misconceptions would be invoked to explain the sour relationship. The implication of this is that each of us has to work harder at eradicating, or at least minimizing, the prejudices and negative attitudes we harbour against persons of other religions. A practical guide for this is to commit ourselves to not being the source of spreading anything which contributes to negative feelings people have about other religions or their adherents.

Thirdly, if one were to engage in interreligious dialogue, one has also to work on finding out more about what the dialogue-partner stands for. Thus, the importance of reading up more on the religion and faith which nourishes our partners-in-dialogue. The implication of this is that we have to take time to discover more about our neighbours' faith, learn more about it, so that what we learn directly from them can be supplemented by the knowledge which we discover from books, web sites and other resource materials.

Finally, since interreligious dialogue is as much about learning as it is about sharing, it would be important for us to be able to share our faith not only sincerely, but intelligently as well. Hence, the need for us to be personally conversant with our own faith, especially in a more mature manner, both theologically as well as spiritually. In other words, interreligious dialogue calls on us to be able to share from both our knowledge as well as our practice of the faith. The implication of this is that Catholic missionaries ought to have some degree of theological education, beyond the Sunday-school levels, as well as to be serious practitioners of their faith, beyond the Sunday-obligation levels.

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CONCLUSION

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, the mission of interreligious dialogue is by no means a simple or mundane task. It is at once integral to our being a more authentic Christian as it is integral to our becoming a more authentic Christian. In other words, in exercising our mission of dialogue, we are at the same time developing ourselves in Christian discipleship. Christian discipleship, as we had discussed earlier, is

an all-encompassing task, involving the various elements of mission and evangelization. This, of course, owes much to the renewal or change brought about by the Second Vatican Council, which, of course, is but a response to the change which was taking place in the world of the mid-20th Century. This change continues and will take more radical forms in the present 21st Century. Religious Congregations and Mission Societies, if they desire to remain relevant, have no choice but to respond to such changes.

Fr. Chia's article is a shortened and edited version of the original that first appeared in: Sedos Bulletin 2002. Via dei Verbiti, 1-00154 Roma. Vol. 34, No 2 - February, pp 49-54, titled "Mission, Dialogue and Missionary Congregations".

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Acknowledgement and Correction

The periodic paper, titled "*After September 11, 2001: Whither Mission?*" by Reverend Carl Starkloff, SJ, which appeared in the Spring, 2002 *Mission Update* issue was first printed in its entirety in the Fall/Winter, 2001 *In All Things*, published by the United States Jesuit Conference's Office of Social and International Ministries, Washington, DC. USCMA is grateful to Fr. Starkloff for providing a shorter version for our publication. Kindly note that the second sentence of the second paragraph on page 2 of the periodic paper should read:

Social philosopher Thomas McCarthy succinctly points out the ethical value of dialogue: "[P]ractical discourse does not feature rational egoists prudently contracting behind a veil of ignorance a procedure that can itself be carried out monologically but moral agents trying to put themselves in each others' shoes"⁴

4 Thomas McCarthy, Introduction to Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholson, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. viii.

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