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## Dialogue

### At the frontiers of evangelization

#### Why?

The testimony of Cardinal Duval, Archbishop of Algiers:

*"What is the meaning of our Christian presence here? Why should the Church be present in this Islamic country? We wish to live, among the men and women of this country, that fraternal brotherhood which is the heart of the Gospel. We would like to overcome the prejudices that Christians may have against Muslims, against Islam, and we want to serve this country which we love and which welcomes us. We want also to provide here in the heart of Islam the lived witness of our faith so that they also may lose their prejudices against us. But there is a still more fundamental motive. It is the right of Christ to be known and loved, to see his saving word brought to all, because it is an invitation to all without exception. We are here - respecting persons and their consciences - without any desire to proselytize".*

#### The Spirit

Dialogue is the concrete way in which we express our faith in the fact that the Holy Spirit is active among us, leading us into all truth. It is the recognition that we meet Christ in one another, a Stranger who is our brother or sister, but whom we have to go out of ourselves to meet. The ultimate theological basis for dialogue is that the Spirit of God is working in the heart of every person, that every human being is a unique manifestation of God in an image and likeness that cannot be duplicated. The Word of God "*enlightens every man who comes into this world*", as St. John tells us, and if we claim to be "*hearers of God's word*" we must be ready in all honesty to listen to this word as it comes to us in the life of our brothers and sisters. In the Church today evangelizing, or announcing the Good News, is as much a willingness to listen as a willingness to speak. We cannot address human beings 'unilaterally', for that would be to treat them as objects, not as unique personal subjects.

#### Attitudes

Dialogue is not a means to gaining something. It aims at growth in understanding of the truth, a better

mutual relationship and a deeper 'communion'. Quite clearly the aim of dialogue is not to prove that I am right and you are wrong; nor is its aim to win you to my way of thinking. In dialogue one *explains* with *courage and clarity* and *without pretence*, while the other *listens* as sympathetically as possible. Neither party need compromise on basic issues, but both *share*. Dialogue, then, is a style of life, a spirituality, a living out in practice of the meaning of redemption in a glad acceptance of the other. It is not answering people's questions, not telling them what we know. It is much more leading people to make their own free decisions.

#### Obstacles

The fundamental *religious obstacle* to openness and dialogue has been called the 'Religion of Anxiety'. It is the religion of those who have not found their freedom in the humanness of God, who has shown himself to us in Christ, but who feel anxiety at this God and, to protect themselves against him, cling to the law of fear and repression. As a result they look for eternal support and comfort to things which can give no such support: institutions, rituals, rules, taboos, authorities. They make their opponents into devils. The same idols, laws, images, illusions are kept alive and fostered, and eventually dependence on this kind of routine leads to apathy, fossilizing, lack of openness to the world, spiritual death. One's idols and values become identical with oneself, so that attacks on these are seen as deadly personal dangers, and are resisted with fatal blind aggressiveness.

Those who are ruled by the religion of anxiety love only what is like them, while people who differ from them disturb and upset them, since they increase anxiety. Racial hatred, religious bigotry, persecution all spring from this poisonous root (cf. Jurgens Moltmann's *The Crucified God*).

Pope John Paul II has said: "*Dialogue is not an easy thing. Religion itself can be made an instrument and become an excuse for polarization and division. In the current world situation, to engage in dialogue means learning to forgive, since all religious communities can point to possible wrongs suffered through the centuries*" (*L'Osservatore Romano*, 23 March 1984).

## The Church

Pope Paul VI's first Encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam* (6 Aug. 1964), can be called the charter of dialogue for the Catholic Church. A year after the publication of *Ecclesiam Suam* came the conciliar document *Gaudium et Spes* (the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), giving a new image of what the Church stands for in the world. The Vatican II Decree

on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, goes beyond the assertion that the Catholic Church is the true Church, to assert that Jesus, in his Spirit, is at work in the Churches and communities *beyond the visible borders of the Catholic Church*. No Catholic document had ever spoken of non-Catholic Christians in this way. Last year (1984) the Secretariat for Non-Christians gave more precise orientations on Dialogue and Mission in the document *The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of other Religions*.

## With other Christian Churches

Since Vatican II most of the great controversial questions between Catholics and Protestants have either been resolved or put in a totally different light. It is very different, however, with fundamentalist sects and the many cults that fuse elements of Christianity with syncretistic ideas. Their lack of structure and clarity, especially in the dogmatic element, makes dialogue with them extremely difficult.

### A Questionnaire

As regards what is happening among Christian Churches, the latest information is available in the replies sent by 41 National Ecumenical Commissions to the Questionnaire from the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (July 1984). The questionnaire dealt with aspects of *Ecumenical Formation and Collaboration in the Local Church*, and the replies were presented to the meeting of National Ecumenical Commissions held in Rome from 22-27 April this year (1985). Of relevance here are the replies from some countries where Spiritans work.

In **Zaire** there is collaboration with the Protestant Faculty in the training of seminarians. Working together on the translation of the Bible into local languages has had positive results. It is necessary to distinguish in Zaire between the very few *engagés* who know what dialogue means and act on it, the very many priests who are *compréhensifs* (know but do not act) and the large numbers of religious and laity who are *incertains*, seeing difficulties rather than need. Seen as a widespread problem are the dangers of indifferentism and relativism ("we are all the same really").

In **Gambia** the Gambian Christian Council met to discuss together the possibilities of dialogue between Christians and Islam. The absence of texts in the local languages and the difficulty of finding time for people to meet together in ecumenical dialogue pose problems. There is, however, a growing positive response to coordinated development, relief and medical activities, especially in the Sahel.

**Ghana** emphasizes the formative potential of joint ecumenical initiatives taken there, such as chaplaincies, pastoral letters, health projects, an ecumeni-

cal nurses' training school, shared chapel at the main hospital, meetings of the Heads of Churches' Committee of Cooperation, mutual recognition of baptism. Despite these initiatives there are still misunderstandings, even among leaders, and certain continuing signs of lingering interdenominational rivalry.

**Zambia** has many collaborative structures in medical, educational and refugee work; also some joint pastoral letters have been issued on questions of justice. There is, however, a problem voiced there concerning the mind of the Catholic Church as regards Common Witness: "*In many places our policy is to spread the Good News everywhere and to be open to all who approach us. We are not much concerned about making Anglicans, for example, better Anglicans. Our main effort is towards spiritual ecumenism, by making ourselves better Catholics and by offering witness to others*".

CELAM, the Conference of Latin American Bishops, reports that everywhere throughout Latin America the vast majority of the people are baptised Catholics and the smaller Churches feel bound to combat Catholicism. Even so, progress is being made through the committed few, although few Church members (Catholic or otherwise) are formed for ecumenical dialogue. In some Latin American countries the fact that quite frequently some members of other Churches are former Catholics is a further problem. In Brazil the CNBB (the Episcopal Conference) took the lead in the formation of the National Council of Christian Churches. Paraguay attributes the lack of interest in ecumenical dialogue to a reaction against the ever growing influence of the sects. The socio-economic aspects of ecumenism are assisted by the 'Foundation to aid Paraguayan Artisans through Marketing', founded by a Redemptorist missionary.

**With the Orthodox Churches:** Not mentioned in the replies to the SPCU Questionnaire but most deserving of mention here is the work of a group of Spiritans in Gamu Goffa, Ethiopia. Together with some Sisters and lay members they form a pastoral team working and living in a service capacity to the Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox Church. They describe the elements of their pastoral mission as Proclamation, Service and Communion.

## With the Non-Christian Religions

Vatican II, in the document *Nostra Aetate* (The Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), signalled a new departure for Catholic thinking about other religions. The document emphasizes the common heritage shared by all religions and the "rays of

*the one truth*" that are found in them all. It expands on the awareness of the mystery of God at work in every human heart and community. It exhorts Catholics to "*prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and*

*in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture" (no. 2).*

## Dialogue with Islam

Islam is of particular import to Spiritans both because of its vigorous growth in many of the countries where we work – and indeed worldwide – and because of the difficulties of entering into dialogue with Mohammedans.

**Obstacles.** Colonial expansion in the Muslim world is linked for Muslims with the 'mission' of Christianity. The colonial powers imposed their own educational system in many places, and tried to weaken the hold of Islam, as for example in North Africa and Asia. This led to the formation of militant Islamic brotherhoods, the rise of nationalism, and various movements to restore Islam to its former status, culminating in the militant Islamic revival of the 1970s and 1980s. Muslims accused Christians of using money, power, education and medicine to win converts (as in fact Libya and some other Islamic states are doing today). In general Christians treated Muslims as political rivals, and in many cases discriminated against them.

Difficulties in dialogue arise from prejudices on both sides. Most Christians have an over-simplified idea of Islam's 'fatalism' and 'laxity' (e.g. the matter of four wives). On the Islamic side there is the fundamentalist and rigid theology and the view of Jesus as only a man as against our questioning of Mohammed's standing as really a prophet. And always there are the wounds left by centuries of hostility and incomprehension between the religions, as related in the history of the Crusades and 'Holy Wars'.

**Possibilities for dialogue** with Islam lie in our common biblical heritage, with common prophets such as Abraham and Moses. Jesus is treated with great reverence in the Koran as the greatest prophet after Mohammed. The Koran in Islam finds an analogy in Christianity in the Word of God revealed in Jesus. A good basis for dialogue is found also in the spiritual and ascetical practices of Islam – prayer, fasting, pilgrimages, works of charity – as well as in its fundamental beliefs – God, creation, revelation, God's messengers, the meaning of life as submission to God's will (the essence of Islam!), the final judgement, the strong sense of community. They also honour Mary and at times call on her with devotion (cf. *Nostra Aetate*, no. 3)

Conditions for Dialogue: (1) True respect for the people, the writings and the beliefs of Islam. (2)

## Spiritans in Dialogue with Non-Christians

Recent reports from Spiritan confreres give some idea of the current situation in countries where the Congregation is present.

In the **Gambia** Islam is very strongly present and some Christians come to feel that to be a Christian puts them outside the Gambian culture. At the social level relations with Muslims are good, as also are relations with the government. Much of this is attributed to Spiritans' involvement in education over the last quarter of a century, when they conducted the

| Religions of the World                 |               |
|--|---------------|
| Christians                             | 1,000 million |
| Muslims                                | 800 million   |
| Hindus                                 | 600 million   |
| Marxists and<br>'secular religionists' | 500 million   |
| Traditional Chinese                    | 500 million   |
| Buddhists                              | 250 million   |
| Animists                               | 200 million   |
| Other religions                        | 100 million   |
| Traditional Japanese                   | 60 million    |
| Jews                                   | 15 million    |

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Christians must try to heal the wounds of the past and be sensitive to the fears and suspicions of Muslims faced with dialogue. (3) Only by a perseveringly friendly attitude and even by a readiness to keep turning the other cheek will this suspicion and hostility be broken down. (4) A Christian entering into dialogue with Islam must have a deep understanding of his own faith and security in it; insecurity and fear are the greatest obstacles to dialogue.

## Dialogue with Hinduism

The conciliar document *Nostra Aetate* affirms that "*in Hinduism men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an unspent fruitfulness of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek release from the anguish of our condition through ascetical practices or deep meditation or a loving, trusting flight toward God*" (no. 2). In the midst of conflict the Hindu experiences a loving ground to his being; he comes to see he has a goal in life beyond this visible world. Everyday ordinary things are symbols of something deeper. God is heard like a song in all creation, where he reveals himself to those who are reverent and open to that music. It is God himself who loves him and will save him. But it is up to man to accept or reject salvation: he has to take the consequences of his choice and deeds.

There are openings for dialogue in the similarities between Hindu and Christian beliefs, e.g., the concept of God's appearance on earth; the concept of grace; sacraments; and similarities between the Christian Trinity and the Hindu ultimate reality.

best schools in the country. While there is no formal dialogue, over the last ten years events favourable to dialogue have been taking place: the institution of Koranic teachers (many of them trained in Cairo or Libya) in all schools in the country; the growth of Islamic Madrasiyya (a kind of catechetical school); the foundation of the Muslim High School; an Islamic Institute at Gambia College (to be affiliated to the University of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia). These are looked on as positive developments rather than a 'threat' because until Muslims know their own faith in some

developed and systematic way the possibility of dialogue will remain very difficult. After the fundamental problem of attitudes, the next greatest obstacle to dialogue is ignorance of one's faith. Two of the twelve Spiritans in the Gambia have done Islamic studies in Rome.

**Mauritania** proclaims itself officially an Islamic republic and Mauritians are proud of their Islamic faith. The Bishop, Mgr. de Chevigny, says: "There is no question of direct preaching of the gospel or of conversions. However, we feel that there is place for another kind of mission: that of fraternal presence, of bearing witness in action, and of prayer. By our behaviour we can preach that God is love". For the eight Spiritans, witness plays a paramount role in their apostolate. One, the only Brother in the group, works with Caritas in projects dealing with health, agriculture and the distilling of fresh water from sea water, and many Sisters are involved in medical and social work. Such forms of collaboration engender a lot of good will, but personal contacts are a greater means of dialogue. Mgr. de Chevigny says: "Over and above all, it is the entire Christian community that is missionary and gives witness."

**Algeria**, Mauritania's neighbour, is juridically a secular state, but Christians form a tiny minority - 80,000 in a population of 22,000,000. "Christians", says Archbishop Teissier, Coadjutor to Cardinal Duval of Algiers, "are recognized as individuals and as a group, but on condition that they do not try to proselytize and are prepared to work for the development of the country as planned by the government." Three Spiritans work in Algeria and all three have studied Arabic and done Islamic studies in Rome and in Algeria. Two of them teach in lycées to earn their living but also as a means of contact and dialogue with Muslim teachers and students. The students know them as Catholic priests. Another works full-time at a centre for the education of difficult young people, some of whom are seriously handicapped.

Still in North-West Africa, **Senegal** is experiencing an expansion of Islam. The flow of petrodollars is helping in the construction of mosques, and Islamic loudspeakers are blaring everywhere, stressing that Islam is the religion of the majority. A branch of Islam founded in Senegal, Mouridism, has a growing influence in a nationalistic sense. While at present there is religious freedom, there is also a movement to declare Senegal an Islamic republic. Cardinal Thiandoum attended the recent Congress of Imams of

Senegal. There is an Episcopal Commission for Christian-Muslim relations (there is no Muslim on it), charged with furthering dialogue. But, as in other countries, so too in Senegal dialogue with Muslims is largely a matter of personal contact and witness. The Superior of the Spiritans in Senegal has written: "Dialogue is not between two religions but between people, Muslim and Christian, and even more so African. This common humanity and common African origin, with its traditions of tolerance and discussion, should allow what may be called a dialogue of life" (*Pentecôte sur le Monde*, July-Oct. 1984).

In **Mauritius** Christians represent only a third of the population (300,000 out of 1,000,000), while Muslims are 47% and Hindus 17%. Two of the three Spiritans who are deeply involved with Non-Christians there have recently assessed their work as follows: "We take one day a week for analysing and evaluating our methods of dealing with others. Once in a while, young Hindus participate in these meetings. That gives them a chance to witness to their faith while asking us to give the reasons for the faith that is in us. The groups coming to Pont-Praslin are growing larger and larger. Some come for retreats, others for more informal meetings, still others for the activities of the club. Up to now, however, it has not been possible to have a meeting between the various groups. Hindus, Muslims and Christians come, each in their turn, and for the present we can't get further than that. It is this kind of experience that makes us aware that we are tight-rope walkers with our rope stretched between the walls of prejudice."

In **Pakistan** Catholics number 386,000 in a population of 80,000,000 - some 0.5%. Here, as in Asia generally, the flame of the gospel is a weak glimmer. The Spiritans work with the Marwaris, who are Hindu Tribals of the lowest caste and are defenceless and often exploited. It is probable that they will soon adopt Islam or one of the other religions, probably Christianity, to help liberate them from their actual condition of oppression and poverty. But they are wary of Islam because they consider the Muslims to be their oppressors. In this overwhelmingly Islamic environment nine Spiritans bear witness to the Gospel by their continued involvement with the poor and despised, wearing the local dress and sharing their food. They are available to their people around the clock and every day. In the absence of formal structures for dialogue with Islam, they participate in the "Theology-in-Context Group", which studies the meaning of theology in Pakistan.

## Conclusions

(1) Dialogue does not have conversion as its primary aim or goal. Neither does it exclude the possibility of a change from one faith to another.

(2) Dialogue is not aimed at undermining or destroying in any way the faith of the Non-Christian. Christ came not to abolish but to fulfil. Whatever is good and valuable in their faith should be encouraged and built upon whenever possible.

(3) Dialogue means having contact or interaction in some form with the Non-Christian community. This means that we should no longer leave them in isolation by going along our separate parallel lines just because they are not 'convertible' in the institutional sense. The Church in recent years has tended to focus on the Animist groups for this reason - thus identifying its mission with the founding of new Chris-

tian communities only. This is a very inadequate idea of Mission, especially in the African context.

(4) The Church is called to be the sign and instrument of unity within the human family. Our task, therefore, is to gather into one the family of mankind and not allow religion itself (or any other human differences) to become a barrier or source of division. We are called to be 'builders of bridges'. As Christians we are now painfully aware of the scandal that our divided Christian communities have caused.

(5) Seen in this light, dialogue becomes a part of the Church's mission. It is not a preparatory stage or a kind of prelude to mission. It is an understanding of Mission that permits us to respect the duty of evangelizing and also at the same time the right to religious liberty.