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## MISSION AND DIALOGUE

### DIALOGUE WITH NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

The General Council considers Dialogue, which is one of the key words in the Church's understanding of Mission, as an important theme in its animation. Two successive I/Ds will treat of this subject: "Dialogue with non-Christian religions" and "Dialogue with the Modern World". An I/D on Ecumenical Dialogue will be considered later, while one on Dialogue with Traditional Religions would be more easily drawn up after the meeting on First Evangelization which will be held at Chevilly in November 1991.

*We try in dialogue  
to cooperate honestly with the leaders  
and the faithful of other religions  
as well as with those who do not believe in God.  
We put our trust in the Holy Spirit,  
leading both us and them  
"to the complete truth" (John 16:13) SRL 16.3.*

In September 1990, with the Gulf crisis already underway, leaders from most of the world religions met at Bari, Italy, to continue the joint Prayer for Peace begun by the Pope at Assisi in November 1986. (Two similar meetings had since been held, in Rome and Warsaw.) The religious leaders appealed to the deepest spiritual motives of all men and women, and especially of political leaders, to try to avoid war. And it may be noted that ambassadors of nations as different as China, the USSR and the United States had made a point of attending, thus recognizing the "strength in weakness" of religion.

This example shows that collaboration and dialogue between religions is a "sign of the times", in which we should recognize a call from the Holy Spirit to the world

of today.

An aptitude for dialogue is, for many of our contemporaries, a criterion of credibility for the religions, so often accused of having been the cause of the bloody confrontations that have divided peoples in the course of history.

In the different countries in which we take part in Mission, we cannot content ourselves with being spectators of conflicts in which religious motives often play an important part. Even if our willingness to dialogue is not always reciprocated, and if theological reflection on the subject is still tentative, let us not be afraid to make concrete and prophetic gestures of dialogue. "Every meeting is already an achievement," said some lay people engaged in dialogue here in Rome, "for it means that one does not consider oneself self-sufficient"; it makes us more receptive to the Holy Spirit.

A missionary institute like ours, "a watchman who looks beyond frontiers" (editorial of the French Province's newsletter, September 1990), has a special responsibility to help believers to look at each other in a new way, and this is without doubt one of the most urgent tasks of its mission today.

#### I. A relationship between believers

Cardinal Sin, Archbishop of Manila, said recently that the real problem of dialogue was differences about fundamentals. It is obvious, therefore, that interreligious dialogue is particularly difficult.

In spite of the difficulties, one could look upon the diversity of religions not as a scandal but rather as a reality permitted by God for the good of all believers. It is in this spirit that Muslims interpret the verse in the

Koran that says: "If God had so wished, he could have made us all one people, but he did not wish to, so as to test us."

## a) Mutual questioning and a deepening of faith

### Questioning

The interlocutor in dialogue, especially when he believes in one God, goes immediately to the essential questions: "Who or what is your God? What is your attitude to him (your religion)?" "From where does your Revelation come? You say that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and is himself God - explain what you mean by this."

An atheist might put the same questions, but one who believes in another religion would take his stand from the start on the ground of his own faith and his own experience of God. At the same time, he might not have the same conception of dialogue as we do.

The searching questions put by such an interlocutor will sound out, at one time or another, all the details of our creed, our most strongly held theological positions, the most fundamental ethical norms drawn from them, and also the juridical principles that we claim are based on the Gospel.

Archbishop Tessier of Algiers, Algeria, has said that "the doctrinal challenge of Christianity to Islam is a serious one, because it rests on heights that seem untouchable to many". Ali Merad, in a courageous study on Jesus in Islam, recognizes that the Koran itself asks questions to which Islam has not yet been able to reply.

### Deepening of faith

Confreres living in Islamic milieus have told us how they have come to a deeper understanding of God's transcendence and of the obedience and "submission" due to him. They have also rediscovered humble prayer and the meaning of asceticism. Conversely, we have been told in Senegal of young Muslims who, for their part, wish to live with "the spirit of Jesus".

Missionaries in contact with Islam or Hinduism have better appreciated the revelation of the Mystery of the Trinity, and rediscovered joy in the tenderness of the Father, the humanity of God in the Son, and Love in the Spirit. (Many Christians seem to content themselves with a vague theism, based more on religious sentiment than on faith.)

Likewise, some religious Muslims, when they come into contact with Christianity, have been led to reflect more deeply on the mystery of the Divine Oneness, which is the centre of their faith. This cannot, in fact, to quote

from the conclusions of an Islamo-Christian research group, "be reduced to a mathematical symbol or a deduction from reason". They reached this conclusion in virtue of "the very mystery of God, which is so striking in the Koran and so keenly experienced by Muslim mystics".

## b) A purifying trial

The practice of dialogue keeps us from taking refuge in hypocritical or worn-out practices. Every religious attitude becomes the object of comparisons that are sometimes aggressive, sometimes sympathetic, often silent but heavy with meaning: "What is your prayer like? Your asceticism? Your fasting? What do you understand by charity?" - are some of the questions put to us.

It is in the area of fraternal relations that dialogue is sometimes seen as a particularly difficult trial:

There may be painful experiences in a friendship that springs up between people of different faiths who are brought together by their work, for instance - a friendship that can be truly deep and sincere, but which runs into problems based on religion. How many of our confreres have been told by Muslim friends that these were sorry that they would not meet them again in Paradise, as this was closed to Christians? "It is a great sorrow," a confrere told us, "not to be able to share with our friends in the same community of faith and in the things that we hold dearest. This suffering is often physically expressed when, in the course of a fraternal gathering, one must separate and go each to one's own place of prayer with one's own community of faith."

It happens, too, that the believer, precisely because of the faith he holds, is tempted at times to "force" the rights that friendship gives him over his brother or sister of another faith.

The test comes when one or other interlocutor allows a will to power to take over. There is always a risk of dialogue becoming confrontation, when it is invaded by *apologetics* or *proselytism*, or a wish to triumph over another's freedom.

We often accuse other believers of provoking such pain, but we seem to have difficulty in realizing how often we ourselves are guilty, in so many ways, of offending others by words and attitudes that we might hardly even be aware of.

However, at times these very situations of trial give rise to new bonds of friendship and bring persons of different faiths even closer together. In one of our missions, Christians had been the victims of an attack on the part of some fanatics. Their coreligionists, humiliated by the image given of their community, took steps to make amends, and from these gestures of friendship many things began to change.

## II. An opportunity to renew Mission

Our Rule of Life (13.1 and 16.3) stresses briefly but forcefully the importance of interreligious dialogue for Mission today. It gives its theological reason and mentions the levels of its application in practice:

### a) The Holy Spirit leads us all towards the complete truth (*Jn 16:13*)

This phrase of St. John's recalls God's attitude towards humankind throughout the course of history, in the building up of his Kingdom. God, who wants everyone to be saved and to reach full knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4), has acted through his grace in the minds and hearts of all, so that they might feel their way towards him and succeed in finding him (Acts 17:27). And this grace not only reaches men and women as individuals, but can be mediated to a certain extent through the different religions.

For Christians, "dialogue presupposes a belief in the saving presence of God in other religions, and expresses the firm hope of their fulfilment in Christ" (Bishops of India, 1977).

At the same time, dialogue means listening humbly to the word that God wants to speak to us when we discover that other sincere believers have a quite different approach to his Mystery.

We have seen above how practical engagement in dialogue brings difficulties with it, but also its own special graces.

### b) With the leaders and the faithful of other religions (*SRL 16.3*)

**Dialogue with other religions is an Initiative that is both Individual and on a Community level.**

It supposes on the one hand a great freedom given to each one (freedom in the Spirit) to explore roads not signposted in advance. It also requires that the community as such should be engaged, setting up meeting places and the contacts from which dialogue will grow. All our confreres who are engaged in dialogue with other religions stress the fact that there is little future in it if it is not based on communities. For this, however, the communities should adopt a pastoral approach that is a rediscovery of evangelical simplicity, as lived by Jesus and his disciples, as they take part in their various meetings and events, and face up to the problems that arise. At times there is a certain selfishness in Christian communities, which refuse dialogue because of reactions that are understandable on the human level but which are hardly evangelical.

We are happy to note that the majority of the initiatives promoted by our confreres in the field of dialogue are firmly rooted in their local and diocesan communities,

in spite of the difficulties that arise from time to time. The Asian Bishops recently invited their Christians to take part fully in the social and community life of their region. Religion should not be a divisive factor but rather a help towards living together in a way that brings out the best in each group.

**Dialogue concerns religious leaders in particular.**

While it is natural that religious leaders should try to promote their own faith, they should at the same time do all they can to build bridges between the different religions.

Leaders of other religions are often more willing than we would imagine to take part in interreligious dialogue and cooperation, and show great openness to a common search for God's plan. In this connection, the Asian Bishops have noted the great effort at "aggiornamento" that Asian religious leaders are making as they grapple with the problems of the modern world.

More and more, religious leaders are realizing the importance of common initiatives that may contribute to the building of a better world. The World Conference of Religions for Peace, inaugurated in 1970, the joint Prayer for Peace at Assisi in 1986 (not to mention important ecumenical meetings on the same theme), are not isolated events: the leaders are aware that the future of religions must rest on a common human foundation and that believers should take part in common initiatives for the preservation of humankind and of the earth's environment.

In the local Churches, this need for dialogue between communities and their leaders has given rise in several places to diocesan commissions, in which Spiritans often play an active role.

In Mauritius, for instance, confreres who saw the need for deeper dialogue with Hinduism and Islam have been able to get their Catholic community also involved in it, though at first there was a certain amount of reticence ("Isn't there enough work to be done in just the Catholic community?"). The three confreres engaged in this work have taken charge of a small parish that gives them an opportunity for a systematic approach to dialogue. They began by learning the local languages and then organized sessions with representatives of the religions, asking them to express their convictions. The process of listening obliged the Catholics to question themselves about God, Jesus Christ and the Church. A second series of sessions was then organized, for the Catholics alone this time, to help them reflect on the questions raised by the previous dialogue.

One can see from this example how dialogue can not only affect our relations with other faiths, but how it can also renew the vitality of Christian communities and help them deepen their knowledge of their own faith. It is an opportunity for the renewal of Mission and of the Church.

### III. Dialogue is not be improvised

A confrere who had been appointed as chaplain to a university where the students are for the most part Muslim told us recently how unprepared he felt for the contacts that awaited him.

The same reflection could be made by all those for whom dialogue is not an optional extra but at the very heart of evangelization. Dialogue can become a dialogue of the deaf if the following conditions are not respected:

#### a) Learn the other's language

Is it not essential to take the time to learn what others say of God in their own words and symbols, so as to understand how they make contact with God? Hard work and patience are required if we are to respect the mystery and the secrets of this undertaking and to gain access to their ways of thinking. But experience shows that, without this preliminary effort, we quickly shut up other believers in their established prejudices and give them no chance of evolving with us.

This is why confreres who have to work in day-to-day contact with members of the great world religions make a point of investing considerable time from the beginning in learning the language and culture in which these people express themselves. And shouldn't the same thing hold for those who have to undertake "first evangelization" among members of traditional religions?

#### b) Tolerance is not enough

We should also see to it that our dialogue takes place in the best conditions and at its proper level. Invited earlier this year by Nigerian Muslims to take part in a congress on tolerance, Bishop Onaiyekan of Ilorin replied that it would be necessary to go much further than the still too negative concept of tolerance. Real dialogue, he said,

means trying to discover the values that we all share. It requires us to set up structures for various forms of collaboration.

#### c) Go back to the Gospel

Try to enter more fully into the methods that Jesus himself used (a modern way of "putting on Christ"). Jesus was not afraid to face criticism in his contacts with others: with the Canaanite woman, the woman taken in adultery, Zacchaeus, the non-Jews as well as "fundamentalist" Jews... Thus, to the astonishment of his disciples, he was found holding a discussion with the Samaritan woman at the well. Without denying the religious differences that separated Jews and Samaritans, he allowed the woman to make her personal journey of conversion and went on to announce a new cult "in spirit and in truth", which would be good news for all believers.

We should thus re-read the Gospel "in spirit and in truth", not in a spirit of exclusiveness but opening our minds "to every word that comes from the mouth of God". This means that the first form of dialogue should be that of prayer. Prayer alone can enlighten our minds and convert our hearts. "It teaches us non-violence, which is a seed of peace for the human community" (Geffré, *Spiritus*, no. 106).

To re-read the Gospel means also to realize that dialogue as lived by Christians is rooted not only in the mystery of the Incarnation (which inspires all contacts with others), but also in the Paschal mystery which is its fulfilment. As we have seen, dialogue is a trial which requires us to assume to the full the attitude of the Servant: pardoning the prejudices that are bound to be there and the occasional insults, and refusing every temptation to seek conquest or domination... Is this not to take up one's cross daily and thus cooperate in the work of salvation, which is offered to all?

### Conclusion

How are we to make progress, on both sides, on this road of dialogue? Perhaps we could put the following questions to ourselves, both individually and in community?

1) What conscious or unconscious prejudices are we able to recognize or discover in ourselves? How can we get a better knowledge of the faiths of others, and help our Christian communities also to attain such knowledge? At the same time, how can we get a deeper knowledge of the originality of the message to which we ourselves bear witness, and progress with other believers in the search for God? (The dialogue of faith.)

2) What concrete commitments can we make, in conjunction with those of other faiths, to help build a better world, with respect for life and for all of creation, for the dignity and rights of the human person, for justice and freedom...? (The dialogue of life.)

3) How can we learn to pray still better by enriching ourselves from the spiritual experiences of other believers and giving greater witness to our own life of prayer? How can we realize on a local scale prayer meetings that draw their inspiration from the Assisi "prayer of the religions for peace" and other initiatives of this kind? (The dialogue of prayer.)

Can such initiatives not nourish the enthusiasm of our apostolic life and give us new reasons to hope and believe in those who surround us?

*The text of this I/D was drawn up by Frs. François Nicolas and James Okoye, after consultation with confreres engaged in interreligious dialogue. It was then discussed, modified and approved by the General Council.*