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Spiritans and Interreligious Dialogue in Pakistan

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Introduction

To be Spiritan in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan means encountering Muslims on a daily basis. This is a condition *sine qua non* of our stay there. As far as Interreligious Dialogue (IRD) is concerned, my experiences say that in some cases, with some people, IRD is both conflictual and collaborative. It is conflictual, because some Muslims see Christians and other minorities as “*kafir*,” unbelievers, as people worthy of less consideration. Because of this, dialogue does not have its proper place. In this case, it brings conflict for both. An example of this is when I went to a shop; as soon as a man in that shop knew that I was a Christian from another country, he said the following sentence: “*Apna kaam karo phir jao,*” which means “finish your business and go. This is an Islamic country.” On the other hand, IRD is also collaborative, because there are Muslims who welcome Christians as one of themselves apart from religious differences. In this case, Muslims and Christians help each other in their activities, work, religious celebrations, etc. As we continue in our presentation, we will see more examples of these realities.

In my opinion, people pay little attention or know little about IRD. However, they are forced to do so by the fact that they live with each other. Some Christians or Hindus have no choice other than to accept the decisions of the Muslim majority. Dialogue is so much limited, if present at all. Any gesture, word, behavior can be a source of conflict. There are many sensitive expressions or behaviors that minorities should avoid, so as to maintain peace with the
majority. An example of this: a father in a Muslim family wanted his son to marry the daughter of his Christian neighbor. The father of this girl did not accept that this would happen. So the Muslim threw a burnt Quran into his compound and then called out that this man was doing something wrong. The enraged crowd came and attacked this man. This was a blasphemy case. He suffered prison. But now we are in the process of proving his innocence. A Muslim advocate is working with us and the diocese. Pray that he will be released, like Asia Bibi.

Being a Spiritan in Pakistan, it appears to be impossible to work alone. There is much collaboration among religious of different congregations. As far as IRD is concerned, there are some activities we do with other religious congregations. An example of this is the environment protection program which is an activity of JPIC in appearance, but it is a place of IRD also. A Columban priest initiated this program. It is already launched in the parish where we Spiritans are working. Muslims, Christians, and Hindus are invited and involved in this program. We share our views, our activities, food, and prayers as well.

At diocesan level, there is a special commission called the “National Commission for Interreligious Dialogue and Ecumenism” (NCIDE). It was established in 1985 by Pakistan’s Catholic Bishops. They realized that there was a great need for peace and harmony because of the increasing incidents against Christians. They have introduced joint celebrations of the religious festivals, such as Eid for Muslims, Christmas and Easter for Christians, and Diwali and Holi for Hindus. This helps people of different religions to understand and appreciate each other’s spirituality.

As far as my experience goes, there is not much work going on with government or non-governmental organizations in conflict resolution and peace building in which we are involved.

IRD in the Pakistani context is a delicate and sensitive mission. A good understanding of other religions is a must. Personally, my encounter with good Muslims helps me to deepen my faith and change my view of Islam. This mission makes me patient, vigilant and aware of the situation in which minorities are living. It also gives the chance to become a true witness of Christ.

As we have seen above, Pakistani Christians, who are sometimes marginalized and persecuted, need people like us Spiritans who have IRD as a mission priority. I am deeply convinced that IRD fulfills the criteria of Spiritan missionary spirituality. We can help minorities to make this dialogue possible. It is so because this is the life of the church itself. Fr. Channan, who is the chair of the Dominican Peace Center in Lahore, said in one of his interviews that “Without dialogue, there is no future for the church in Pakistan.” Beusmans added that “dialogue helps in bridging the gap which clearly exists between the religions and the perceptions of their believers.”

What are the Challenges for IRD in Pakistan?

MISUNDERSTANDING AND WRONG CONCEPTION OF IRD
IRD has been misunderstood by both Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. Dialogue should be viewed as an end not as a means. If it is viewed as a means, then it is a method of winning
members to Christianity, to Islam, or to Hinduism. If it is viewed as an end, then it is a way of building relationships between people of different religions. On this note, IRD aims at sharing basic needs such as peace, education, equal rights, freedom, economic and political stability, etc. This is the real purpose of IRD which is sometimes misunderstood.

UNWILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE IN IRD
It remains a challenge if one of the two parties in the dialogue is not willing to do it. If this is so, the big task is how to convince them to accept and participate in dialogue.

RELIGIOUS FANATICISM AND RIGIDITY OF LAWS
There are people who use religion to oppress others. They cannot see the suffering of others. They are driven by some biblical or Quranic passages which are read out of context. For example, in Surah 1 of the Quran, 190: “Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you.” And, in the Bible, “Do not look on such a man (false witness) with pity. Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, and foot for foot” (Deuteronomy 19:21). This gives rise to misunderstanding and hinders the relationship between people.

Sometimes, laws become a barrier to dialogue because it is better to fulfil the laws than to respect truth, justice, and human rights. As an example of this, note the blasphemy laws in Pakistan, from which many Christians, Hindus, and Muslims have been suffering and have lost their lives. We have the recent case of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman, mother of five children. She was accused unjustly in 2009 and was imprisoned and sentenced to death in 2010. She suffered in the prison. The high court of Pakistan released her unconditionally due to insufficient evidence. Up to now, some Muslims want her execution to take place. In this case, dialogue does not have its place at all.

At this point, allow me to reveal a trick which I played with the generalate. It is a secret which I reveal now. When I was writing to the generalate for my mission appointment, I wrote one page and a half on Pakistan which is the place I wished to be and I prepared myself for this ministry for a long time. For my other two choices, I just wrote half a page. I did that to show my interest in going to Pakistan. Then, at my ordination in Madagascar, the people were saying “wawwwww!” when the provincial announced that Jose is being sent by the congregation to be in Pakistan.

Personally, before I became a Spiritan, it was my wish to work in Asia, especially in Pakistan. I was not aware of what was awaiting me. I prepared myself and my family as well. My essay, at the end of my theological studies focused on “the Spiritan mission towards the oppressed Christians in Muslim countries: case study of Pakistan.” Through this essay, I gathered information about IRD and a few paragraphs dealt with it. I was not even sure that the generalate would send me to Pakistan. However, I had great hope for a positive answer. Therefore, my first recommendation is for students to put much preparation into the ministry for which they are passionate. This does not mean that we do not consider other areas of ministry. In addition, we need to be patient when reaching the place where IRD is part of the mission.
I think and believe that the real place from where we find support is our community, that is, from the confreres with whom we are working. Their example, experience, and knowledge make us ready to work more and feel at home. The local people can also show us in detail how to work through a challenge. They know the mentality of their co-citizens. To overcome challenges, one has to put aside all prejudices, be ready to learn, and be patient. We also have to trust in God’s providence.

By the fact that I have just completed my first two years in Pakistan, there is a lot to learn, to discover, and to be understood. Every day I find new things to learn. I finished my language classes. Little by little I am getting used to the Spiritan mission in Pakistan. All the challenges, which I mentioned above, result from my observation. I am yet to experience them as time goes by. One area where we can promote a positive interreligious collaboration is by having multiple common projects and common celebrations. These activities are much more practical than theoretical.

**The Four Levels of Dialogue**

The four levels of dialogue which we see from the Bagamoyo Chapter (dialogue of everyday life, dialogue of collaboration in common projects, spiritual dialogue and theological dialogue) are all life-giving experiences. What I encourage other circumscriptions to do is to identify some areas and projects to which personnel go in line with IRD and focus more on it. It is true that we are limited financially, infrastructurally, and in personnel. However, focusing on a few projects is better than having too many projects that are not worked out well.

I would think that our Spiritan approach to IRD differs from other congregations in our identification with the very poor and oppressed people in our society. As an example of this, take the mobile clinic which the group of Pakistan operates. Marwari women and children are the main target of this project. These categories of people suffer more than any other. They are from the low caste of the society. They are economically poor and many did not go to school at all. Their daily activities are mainly farming and keeping animals. They have to work in the field alongside men. In addition to this, they have to fetch water, firewood, cooking food, cutting grass for livestock and taking care of men and children (washing clothes, cleaning the house, etc.). They are vulnerable, and weak physically. Therefore, we Spiritans try to help them by giving them some medicine at a very low cost. What has IRD to with such a project? Marwari people have the same work, in the same condition, whether they are Muslim, Hindu, or Christian. Therefore, we do not discriminate. As long as they are Marwari people, we do help them.

**Dialogue with Hindus**

We also dialogue with Hinduism especially the Marwari Bhil people who are of Hindu Origin. Michael from Ireland was so much involved in this beside the health ministry. He used to at-
tend important Hindu feasts like “Divali”, the celebration of the victory of Light over darkness, and “Holi,” the festival of colors. He would sing bhajans (songs) and play instruments. He visited all who welcomed him whether Hindu or Christian. John Baptist from Uganda personally meets many Hindus through the health program, although he has not reached the level of discussing stuff with them. Anyhow, they love listening to “stories” of Jesus healing people, but are slow at changing their religion which is not in any case our first goal.

It should also be noted that tension exists between the Marwari Bhil who converted to Christianity, and other Hindu people who think missionaries want to snatch followers from the Hindu religion. All the unfortunate situations that befall the Marwari Christians are attributed to the mistake they made to convert to Christianity. Those who take the step to become Christians are persecuted, not only by the Muslim majority, but also by their own Hindu relatives from whom they made the leap to become Christian.

My Suggestions for the Promotion of IRD in the next Five Years

• A permanent communication among confreres involved especially in the IRD context. This helps us to exchange ideas, experiences, and approaches to deal with challenges. This can have a form of a review, blog, magazine or/and audiovisual recording.
• Reinforce the general coordinator of IRD who can make regular visits to the houses of formation at every level, or countries where IRD seems to be much more difficult. Encourage formators to orient students to IRD as a mission priority of the congregation. This can provide fulltime missionaries who are ready to dedicate their lives and times to the IRD mission.