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Kathy Murpha

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Teen Religion

Young people
crave genuine dialogue

Kathy Murtha

I am standing before a group of forty teenagers. Their pants are hanging down way below the level I consider normal, revealing a variety of painful looking piercings and tattoos. Their heads seem to be permanently attached to various cords and gadgets. And upon those heads rests some peculiar looking headgear. One head is proudly decorated in upright purple hair. Most striking is the rainbow of skin color. Every human shade under the universe is present. I am virtually the only one in the room representing the Anglo-Saxon hue and culture.

Scarboro Mission — then and now

These are Catholic school students gathered for a day retreat exploring the Golden Rule as common ground between the world's religions and its potential as a vehicle for peace and justice. We are gathered in what might be seen as the most unlikely of places — Scarboro Mission. Scarboro Mission is a Catholic society which was founded nearly a hundred years ago for the training of young Canadian men as missionaries to China. It was built by the good Catholics of Toronto whose compassion and generosity were expressed at that time in an eagerness to save the souls of the poor Chinese babies.

I can't help but think how surprised they would be to see the present gathering. I keep thinking how would I ever assure them that this is indeed the blessed fruit of their labor and generosity? A hundred years ago, Toronto was dubbed the "Belfast of North America." Today Toronto is living up to its native name of "Meeting Place," for it has truly become one of the greatest meeting places of the world's cultures

and religions. This is the multicultural, multi-religious home inhabited by our young people who are attuned to its present unprecedented Spirit-filled possibilities.

Ryan

A few months ago a young person came knocking on the door of Scarboro Missions. He came "trailing clouds of glory" and the decent scent of hair gel. He was concerned about the state of the world and the state of his hair. His name was Ryan. Ryan grew up surrounded by people of different cultures and religions. At an early age he bugged the Hindu woman next door to teach him Hindi so he could converse with her children. In elementary school his playmates taught him Punjabi and Arabic. The tragedy of September 11, 2001 sparked a desire in him to study the Qur'an and a deeper commitment to the interfaith movement. "Everyone has a calling in their life. I remain inspired to build bridges between diverse communities... This is my passion." There is no doubt that Ryan is an exceptional young person. But I do not believe he is an exception. He gives clear expression of the work of the Spirit in our time among the young in general. This unmistakable movement of the Spirit has been greatly enflamed by countless brave teachers who have foraged ahead into uncharted territory with much opposition in order to prepare the young for God's future.

I grew up in a small town in southern Ontario where the railway tracks divided the Protestants from the Catholics. I had

virtually no contact with the people on the other side. I just recall feeling pity for them that they didn't have as many holidays as we did. In terms of cultural diversity the most exotic strangers I encountered were the Italian family who ran the vegetable store and even they belonged to the same church as I did.

Nothing in my life prepared me for Ryan and for what I have now come to perceive as the great spiritual adventure of our time — the awakening of people to the realization we are one family in spite of all our differences, the fulfillment of Jesus' dream, "May they all be one."

Dialogue of religions

As Catholics we are strongly urged to enter into dialogue with people of other religions. This encounter is unavoidable in our increasingly pluralistic society. As a retreat director I find myself frequently thrown into the fray of this dialogue. Several times during the course of a retreat when guests from other religions share their insights and experience of the Sacred, they have turned to me inquiring what is special and sacred about Christianity. What does the Christian tradition bring to the contemporary dialogue of religions? With all eyes



upon me, I find myself wondering where is the Baltimore Catechism when you really need it. Without the security of handy pat answers I am forced to dig deep within myself and beyond into the rich Catholic record of encounter with the Holy.

I open my mouth and out blurts the Christmas story. I tell the story of a God who loved us so much that He emptied Himself of His divinity and became one with us fragile, struggling human beings. I have heard the story many times, but sud-

“Is it true, Miss? Did God really come tumbling head first bare naked onto this earth as a little baby — like we did?”

denly in the context of this interreligious intergenerational dialogue it begins to take on a clarity and poignancy that is totally fresh and makes the skin of my spirit all tingly. In the retelling of the Christmas story it begins to dawn on me that this beautiful story of God’s love and longing to be close to us, His intricate and irrevocable entangling of the human and the divine, belongs to everyone. It is the gift we bring to the banquet table of the human family.

“Is it true, Miss? Did God really come tumbling head first bare naked onto this earth as a little baby — like we did?”

“Yes, Jason, it’s true. And not only did God do that, but he calls each one of us to do likewise — to empty ourselves to be able to walk in solidarity with all of creation. This is the way, the only way, as Jesus taught us.”

Nodding in agreement

I gasp in horror. Did I actually just say “*This is the way, the only way*” in a multi-religious gathering? I didn’t mean it in an exclusive way. I was speaking from deep

within my own tradition seeking to touch upon the universal. I fear that I have just stepped into a minefield and am about to take everyone with me. I look out upon the sea of faces before me and I am surprised to see people of other religions nodding in agreement. Perhaps I didn’t stray into a minefield, but managed to stumble upon common ground. Is it possible that we might share the insight that self-emptying is a critical step on the spiritual journey? How exciting! The common ground begins to expand beneath me and I feel thrilled at the idea of delving into our tradition with new eyes.

This is just a tiny taste of the transformative power of inter-faith dialogue. Mix that together with the purifying potential of intergenerational dialogue and the sparks begin to fly. Time and time again I have experienced the power of Pope John Paul’s conviction that “Respectful dialogue with others enables us to be enriched by their insights and challenged by their questions and impelled to deepen our knowledge of the truth.”

No exclusive grasp on God

Young people crave genuine dialogue. And honest dialogue demands a self-emptying. While you cannot have a dialogue with someone who has nothing to say, neither is there any chance of dialogue with someone who has all the answers. As I see it, the greatest obstacle to the work of the Spirit in our times is fundamentalism. It is the source of enormous human suf-

fering and threatens the very life of God’s creation. By fundamentalism, I mean the rampant illusion that some people have an exclusive grasp on God or the truth instead of God/truth possessing them. Fundamentalism is not only a problem with those “Muslim people over there” — we are all tempted to seek refuge in its security. We stubbornly refuse to empty ourselves and surrender to the Mystery that is greater than we humans can imagine.

Nothing shuts down communication with the young faster than a monologue spewed forth by one who has all the answers. Their bodies squirm in protest. Youth are not looking for people with all the answers to questions they haven’t asked. They are searching for people who are willing to live with questions that arise from their own lived experience and the hope and struggles of their time. They hunger for people who, in embracing the questions, are willing to walk humbly into the unknown with the confidence that the future is in God’s hands.

Missionaries and mystics

In assisting the young I have felt particularly drawn to the experience and insights of the missionaries and mystics. Our missionaries have centuries of experience in intercultural/interreligious dialogue. Many have allowed themselves to be purified and transformed by their encounter of the Holy among a foreign people. Their outward journey to a strange land has led them to a realization of the mysterious unity that pervades all of God’s creation. Our mystics, on the other hand, took an inward journey into the human heart. And like many missionaries they too came to discover the all-encompassing communion of all beings. I believe that here lie the precious treasures of our inherited tradition that could prove invaluable for the young living in a pluralistic global community. How fascinating that the division between outer and inner, action and contemplation has proven wholly illusory and the wall between the two has begun to crumble. It is indeed timely. We are urgently in need of a spirituality that embraces action and contemplation.

The Spirit has been frequently described as a gentle breeze, but I am beginning to perceive the Spirit at work today as a powerful force that causes deep rumblings within the ground under our feet. That ground is indeed shifting. Could this be a fresh unleashing of the Pentecost experience? ■

