

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Our study includes five sections: Interreligious dialogue approaches, The present context of interreligious dialogue, A fundamental option for dialogue: the Vatican Council II (1962-1965), The role of religions in contemporary society and The initiatives and testimonies in the Congregations.

1. INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE APPROACHES

1. Interreligious dialogue is not of the same nature as ecumenical dialogue. It is a movement that affects Christian Churches and leads them to the unity of Christ's Church, broken during the course of history.

Interreligious dialogue contemplates a deeper knowledge of the present religions, their beliefs, their way of looking at things, their own sensitivity, all with a view to the cooperation of believers for a supportive and understanding world. Its atmosphere is that of prayer; its horizon, the unity of mankind as a family (cf. *Nostra Aetate* of the Vatican Council II).

Within this dialogue, the Church of Christ presents itself as the sacrament, in other words, as the sign and channel of an intimate union with God and of the unity of mankind, according to the Vatican II definition (*Lumen Gentium*).

Thus, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue do not have the same root nor the same goal. Still, both imply the same attitudes, behaviors, and the same spirit so well expressed in the *Decalogue for Peace* (2002).

2. Interreligious dialogue involves religious freedom properly understood. When it comes to religion, no one should be forced or prevented in any way, as stated in Vatican II (*Dignitatis humanae*). It also requires a just conception of testimony. As one Muslim said, "It is up to us to give testimony and to God to convert."

Two obstacles must be avoided:

- Proselytism on the one hand. Faith is proposed, not imposed. The letter to the Catholics in France (1996) stresses these points.

- Syncretism, on the other hand. The combination of different elements from different religions is to be avoided.

3. The documents presented by the post council Church deal with four different categories of interreligious dialogue.

- The dialogue of the life where people make an effort to live with an open and neighborly attitude.

- The dialogue of action where there is cooperation in favor of man's development and liberation. In a community the size of a neighborhood, this dialogue can be established through the associative fabric.

- The theological dialogue by which experts jointly attempt to deepen their respective religious traditions, overcoming historical blocks.

- Spiritual dialogue, where those who seek God share their religious experience, the meaning of prayer, the roads that lead to the Absolute.

4. Interreligious dialogue is still stammering. In spite of centuries too often characterized by the formula: "Outside of the Church there is no salvation", the Vatican Council II once again embraced the intuitions of the Fathers of the Church that saw "seeds of the Verb" and "rays of the truth" in the other religious traditions.

Two proposals should be considered together.

- Jesus Christ is the only mediator of salvation. (1 Tm 2, 5).
- God wants all everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Tm 2, 4)

It is in this space created by both affirmations that the Christian theology of interreligious dialogue establishes itself.

There is no exclusion. The phrase "outside of the Church there is no salvation" is left out.

There is no inclusion. The respect for other religions comes from acknowledging the action of the Holy Ghost all over the world: "The wind blows where it wishes, but you cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes." (John 3,8).

There is no relativism. All religions are not the same, but the mystery of salvation embraces them and connects them, since "The Holy Ghost offers everyone" in a way known to God, the chance to be associated to the Easter Mystery." (Gaudium et Spes).

There is no opposition between dialogue and mission. Having God himself taken the initiative of the dialogue of salvation, the Church of Christ must carry out His mission in a spirit of dialogue with all men, be they believers or not (cf. Paul VI, Ecclesiam Suam, 1964).

II. THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

"When will religions become means of unity between people, and stop looking for additional reasons to kill each other?" (Julien Green, Diario, 1983). This issue is extremely current. God seems to be the hostage of religions, risking the unhappiness of mankind. Religions are unavoidable causes of disorder, such as crusades and holy wars; also, they are vehicles for intolerance and fanaticism. Religions in the end may have attached God to better serve their own purposes. And the holy scriptures of all religions do not lack in stimulus for the "craftsmen of peace." The situation is paradoxical. Many of our fellow citizens believe that religions, including Christianity, are violent by nature.

Within this context, interreligious dialogue seems to be quite a challenge.

1. In this global village which the planet has become, the believers of all religious traditions live together in the same space-time. Previously, a certain religion would coincide with a certain country. Interreligious dialogue fits in with globalization and the crossbreeding of our multicultural societies. Nevertheless, an ill-managed universalization causes instead identical withdrawals of numerous social groups, as if the proximity or fear of the other leads us to withdraw to our own tribe.

2. Another characteristic of the current situation in the Western world is the awareness that religions have stayed "consistent" or "relevant." Not long ago, religions were expected to disappear in the face of scientific and technical rationality. It has not completely been the case. All of a sudden, sociologists and philosophers are wondering about the place that religion has settled into in our modern societies. Religions are requested to express themselves on city matters, although a certain laicism has reappeared. Religions are well-accepted, it's the religious institutions that are in crisis.

3. Another current aspect of the matter: nowadays, there is an awareness of the complex relationship between religion and modernity. This report may take on the look of a confrontation, or even a battle. Such was the case of Catholicism opposed to the principles of the Age of Enlightenment. Currently, the opposition is to Islam.

In the face of this situation, the danger would be in building a common front of religions against modernity or secularization. It is better to discover what religion can contribute in "meaning" to our societies, to our fellow citizens in search for signs or spirituality.

A fundamental cultural issue must be taken into consideration: the relationship between "reason" and "faith. At the end of an interview with the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the man who was then Cardinal Ratzinger, suggested a demanding and critical dialogue between philosophical reason and religions:

"We have seen that there are extremely dangerous pathologies in religions: they lead us to consider the divine light of reason as a kind of control organ that religion must accept as a permanent organ of purification and regulation [...] But our reflections also showed that there are also pathologies in the sphere of reason (of which the world is less aware); there is a violence of reason which is no less dangerous, and which, because of its potential efficiency, is even more threatening: the atomic bomb, mankind as a product. This is why reason must acknowledge its limits and learn to listen to the great religious traditions of mankind. If it emancipates itself completely and discards this chance to learn, this form of correlation will be destructive." (Cf. Jürgen HABERMAS, Joseph RATZINGER, "The Prepolitical Basics of the Democratic State" *Esprit* 306 (July 2004, pp 5-28).

A FUNDAMENTAL OPTION FOR DIALOGUE: THE VATICAN COUNCIL II (1962-1965)

1. The history of modern Catholicism is marked by the Vatican Council II. The Church took a strong and committed stand on the relationship between the Church and the world (*Gaudium et spes*), on the relationship between the Truth and Freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*), on the identity and mission of the Church (*Lumen gentium*), on the openness of the Church towards the other religions (*Nostra aetate*).

The participants of the Council realized that, to truly understand the mission of the Church, it was necessary to begin by defining "revelation." Revelation is not a catalogue of truths that must be believed, it is the commitment of God to mankind.

Continuing with this divine revelation, "mission" will refer to the commitment of the Church to mankind. There is a deep relationship between these two commitments, these two Gestures: Revelation of God and Mission of the Church. To name this deep relationship, Pope Paul VI used the key word "dialogue" (Ecclesiam suam, 1964): "The dialogue of salvation was spontaneously inaugurated by divine initiative. 'The Lord first loved us.' (1 John 4,19); it is up to us to take the initiative and extend this dialogue without waiting to be summoned. (No. 74)." This articulation between Revelation of God and Mission of the Church defined as Dialogue is essential. It symbolizes the originality of the Vatican Council II.

2. If the Church commits itself to Interreligious dialogue, it is because it believes that the initiative of this alliance comes from God, and that it forms part of its mission to be a sacrament of friendship of God with all men, the signal and instrument of "the intimate union with God and the unity of all mankind." The small flock of sheep that leads the Church knows, through experience, that in spite of its mistakes and infidelity, its vocation is to receive, celebrate and announce this relationship of friendship, this alliance that God offers all of mankind. Knowing also that he who confesses as Christ did, the only savior of the world, Jesus of Nazareth, who paid with his life the blindness and religious-political absolutism that rejected his message of love and freedom, justice and peace; this flock understands that its role is to continue to be prophetic, watchful and humble, to serve the poor with the guidance of the Spirit of Christ who arouses and summons the friends of God wherever they may be, within or without religions.

This means that the Church's commitment to interreligious dialogue is one more way of putting into practice this friendship that comes from God and sets man free. And it does so in two ways. On the one hand, through the infinite respect it shows the family of mankind, in its diversity of cultures and religions, seeking to know them and find them, in the spirit of the Nostra aetate council statement. On the other hand, through the energetic call to prayer, reflection and action, as in the case of the great conference of Assisi of October 27, 1986, thus serving the aspirations of mankind that give him dignity: love and truth, justice and peace, hope and forgiveness. By doing that in the name of Jesus Christ, the Church carries out its vocation as "the universal sacrament of salvation", witness and craftsmen of the reception of the world in the Trinitarian life of God.

The Spirit of Assisi has come together in a "Decalogue", a code of good behavior for religions which is published below.

THE "ASSISI DECALOGUE FOR PEACE"

After the Assisi interreligious meeting, after September 11, 2001, Pope John Paul II sent a Decalogue to all the chiefs of state: John Paul II wished to repeat this strong commitment of the religions for peace.

1. We commit ourselves to proclaiming our firm conviction that violence and terrorism are incompatible with the authentic Spirit of religion, and, as we

condemn every recourse to violence and war in the name of God or religion, we commit ourselves to doing everything possible to eliminate the root causes of terrorism.

2. We commit ourselves to educating people to mutual respect and esteem, in order to help bring about a peaceful and fraternal coexistence between people of different ethnic groups, cultures, and religions.

3. We commit ourselves to fostering the culture of dialogue, so that there will be an increase of understanding and mutual trust between individuals and among peoples, for these are the premises of authentic peace.

4. We commit ourselves to defending the right of everyone to live a decent life in accordance with their own cultural identity, and to form freely a family of their own.

5. We commit ourselves to frank and patient dialogue, refusing to consider our differences as an insurmountable barrier, but recognizing instead that to encounter the diversity of others can become an opportunity for greater reciprocal understanding.

6. We commit ourselves to forgiving one another for past and present errors and prejudices, and to supporting one another in a common effort both to overcome selfishness and arrogance, hatred and violence, and to learn from the past that peace without justice is no true peace.

7. We commit ourselves to taking the side of the poor and the helpless, to speaking out for those who have no voice and to working effectively to change these situations, out of the conviction that no one can be happy alone.

8. We commit ourselves to taking up the cry of those who refuse to be resigned to violence and evil, and we desire to make every effort possible to offer the men and women of our time real hope for justice and peace.

9. We commit ourselves to encouraging all efforts to promote friendship between peoples, for we are convinced that, in the absence of solidarity and understanding between peoples, technological progress exposes the world to a growing risk of destruction and death.

10. We commit ourselves to urging the leaders of nations to make every effort to create and consolidate, on the national and international levels, a world of solidarity and peace based on justice.

“Humanity must choose between love and hate.”

John Paul II

(March, 2002)

IV. THE ROLE OF RELIGIONS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

1. Political governments would like religions to have a role in society that does not necessarily coincide with the mission that religions believe to be theirs. Religions have a critical and prophetic function regarding the society they are settled in, and have the duty of condemning injustices and disregard for man's dignity. It is the prophetic dimension of a religion that allows it to resist the political powers threatening it, without finding itself forced to withdraw to private spheres.

2. This aspect of interreligious dialogue forces every religious tradition, especially Christianity, to reflect more on its presence in society. Faith has a social fruitfulness, it creates a social bond. Are we sensitive enough when faced with the world issues of justice, solidarity and peace? At present, religions must also lean on their potential of wisdom and spirituality to respond to all of man's needs on earth. There should be an ecological justice and the role of religions in this sense is no mere detail.

3. It is not necessary to limit the field of analysis to the reports that religions prepare on each other. Rather than a return to religion, we are currently witnessing a return to idols. Our societies are devoted to the cult of growth, unlimited use of energy resources, closing their eyes to injustice, to the right of the people to make their own decisions, etc. This is present day idolatry. The condemning of religious fundamentalism is necessary, but it should also include the condemnation of all of this idolatry.

As a group, religions surely have much to do to make this planet a more habitable place for everyone.

V. INITIATIVES AND TESTIMONIES IN THE CONGREGATION

It would be convenient to make a list of the intercultural and interreligious initiatives that there are within the congregation.

For the dialogue to take place, it must go through three essential stages: that of deep immersion in the other culture, becoming aware of what we are, and the stage of acknowledgment, in other words, accepting differences.

This is what a witness of Islamic-Christian dialogue said: "The experience of being different from others has not prevented me from constituting myself on a deep and intimate inner level; not by opposition or denial, but by stimulating me to be what I am."

As an example, here are two initiatives carried out with Redemptorist students.

SESSION OF FORMATION ON ISLAMIC-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

ANIMATOR FATHER ROGER MICHEL. CSSR

BURKINA FASO REDEMPTORIST STUDENTS

From September 18 through 27, 2003, we had a session on Islamic-Christian dialogue at the Saint Gerard House, coordinated by Father Roger Michel who came over from France for the occasion. The Redemptorist students from both houses of formation (Saint Gerard and Saint John Neumann) and their instructors were present. It was a time of meeting, questions and enriching discoveries. Here is a brief summary.

A time to meet. It is the first time that the students of both Houses and their instructors get together to reflect on a present-day issue that raises strong concerns. We have used this time to strengthen our brotherhood and to state our common ideal: announcing to the world the plentiful redemption as we follow our Father Saint Alphonsus.

Given the advance, the blazing spread of Islam in our countries, it was convenient to ask ourselves how to continue to speak of Jesus in a society that seemed determined to turn to Islam. How could we, Christians and ministers of tomorrow, build with Mohammed's followers a good understanding, an enduring peace in a dialogue that respected each side in its originality? The questions arise but there are no obvious answers. With Father Roger Michel we feel the need to begin to break the ice. It is necessary to tear down the walls that separate us and that we sometimes build, to leave our prejudices aside, so as to find each other, in order to find the Other One. In spite of our differences and disagreements, we Christians and Muslims have something in common. John Paul II in his speech to the young at Casablanca during his visit to Morocco, pointed it out: "Christians and Muslims, we have much in common, as believers and as men." We have anthropological, spiritual, theological spaces to have fruitful meetings, to share our riches and to enrich each other. So our approach was to discover Islam in its own originality, stressing these spaces where we could start a genuine dialogue.

A time to ask questions. Why are we Redemptorists? Or why do we wish to be one? It seems obvious but it's not that simple. The countries where our vice-province is established (Burkina-Niger) are highly Islamized. As Redemptorists, we must spread the Good News to this world of poor people in these countries of extreme poverty. It is normal for all sects, be they Christian or Muslim, to be very successful in this world of poverty. People seek ways out of their destitution and religion is the opium that sometimes numbs, inhibits and keeps them lethargic. It is in this socio-cultural context where they need to settle in.

The social context forces us to come face to face with the Muslim religion. This meeting forces us to ask ourselves the following question regarding our faith: Where are we? Who is Jesus Christ to us? There is a personal path that we must follow so that the hope that lies within us can finally uplift us and we can finally become aware of this. We are not followers of a religion, we are disciples of a person. So we don't need to announce a doctrine or an ideology. We announce a living person, Jesus Christ. We give testimony with our lives of his mercy and the insane love that led him to the cross to show us how God is love. It is Saint Alphonsus' attitude toward his servant Abdallah. In this same manner, our Christian life should give rise to questions from within ourselves, and at the same time we should let ourselves be questioned by the lives of others. The meeting with Islam invites us to strengthen even more our faith and our hope, and it also puts our charity to the test.

A time to discover. This meeting of instruction allowed us to discover each other. We were able to evaluate our concerns, discover our fears and seek solutions. In general, we were very happy to find that our concerns were almost identical.

With Father Clochard (Father Blanco, in charge of the Christian-Islamic Dialogue for Burkina), we covered African Islam and more specifically the groups we find in the countries within our vice province. We were able to establish that it is a very divided religion, although when it comes to essentials, the different groups agree. In our countries, mosques spring up all over the territory, like cultivated mushrooms out of the ground. Islamic banks multiply, Islam is frightening when you look at the scarecrow! Nowadays, Islam is seeking its identity. It had its golden era. Nevertheless, aren't the intolerance, the hate, the violence, and the terrorism all signs of its decadence? The true Muslims see this and try to fight this surge of adrenaline. Saïd Al-Ashmawi, former president of Egypt's supreme court, states:

"The Islam of intolerance and violence is not the religion of my father and my grandfather... My Islam is a religion of tolerance and brotherhood." Thus, we can work with other Muslims to build peace and promote a world of brotherhood.

Through the press, we see a partial Islam: the kamikazes, the talk, the Intifada, the Jihad and everything that moves in an environment of violence. You end up under the impression that Islam is only that. Our session was an opening-up, a breaking of the cloudy ice that distorted our gaze upon Islam. Father Christian, Prior of Tibirine, says these last words of mercy to the person about to slit his throat: "You, my friend of the last minutes." It is possible to keep a true friendship with your slayer even after death. It is about meeting and it shouldn't be sterile. In order to make this last offering of one's life, it is truly necessary for Jesus Christ to be not just an ideology, a book, or a doctrine, but a live, active person present in our lives today.

This session was beneficial to us on all levels. We hope to have meetings like this every so often to deal with concerning current issues.

BROTHER JEAN ROLAND KISSWENDSIDA, CONGO

Discovering God

By Vincent Vaz, CSsR.

On behalf of the 2nd year theologians

Mount St. Alphonsus, Bangalore

In these times in which spaceships go to outer space to discover other planets and where submarines explore the bottom of the ocean, it is natural for the human spirit to attempt to seek beyond its boundaries. There is a supernatural parallelism. World events today lead us to see the spirit of God in action in all religions and to find the seeds of His truth revealed in His works. The Church encourages us, through Vatican Council II, to dialogue and collaborate with the members of other religions to acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual

and moral goodness found in other beliefs as well as their social and cultural values (Nostra Aetate, No. 2). So we should be able to see "seed of truth and grace" in other beliefs (Ad Gentes 9), and "the seeds of the word" (Ad Gentes 11,15). But different and ordinary reasons prevent us from visiting and exploring the sanctuaries of faith belonging to other peoples.

India was the birthplace of many religions. Most religions consider Abraham as their father in faith. In India, we have the ancient habit of 'Athiti Sathkar', by which a visitor coming to one's home is treated as if he were God. We see it in the story of the Old Testament where Abraham meets with the three foreigners, and invites them to have supper with him, after which they continue their journey. Hospitality is part of many cultures but it is an essential element of our Indian tradition and culture. We experienced this hospitality when Father Ivel Mendanha, with Fathers Clemente Vadakeddaht, Edward Raju and Raja Arulartanam, took 14 of us, theologians from the Bangalore Province, to visit the sacred sanctuaries of the other religions and beliefs (please see photo gallery).

Our first visit was to the Jain temple, where we marveled at the respect they feel for Tirthankara - a holy man of the tradition. Jain does not believe in God but has saints that show them the way. They come to the temple and recite a kind of eulogy complimenting the saints for achieving freedom, which now their admirers also wish to achieve. Each one must find the way to heaven through his own fulfillment. They believe in Ahimsa, in other words, in non violence and in the triple path of true knowledge, true conduct and true faith. Their temples are rich in symbols and each symbol is rich in meaning. They believe in personal renunciation. We were filled with wonder by the crowd of people and youth that come to the temple with special clothes that symbolize renunciation in order to express their desire to do good and to renounce all that is evil.

Then we went to the Rama Krishna Mission, Samaj, where the Swami, the religious chief, seems so serene with his figure radiating grace. He said that since there are different beliefs, there are also different paths toward God. He insisted that a purified spirit is the vehicle to achieve the goal of liberation. The recommended spiritual means is that of Ahimsa, meaning, that of non violence and absence of bad feelings toward others. He stressed the need to always observe the positive things in others and not their weaknesses and shortcomings. We must concentrate on others, think less about ourselves and more about others; we must live a life of satisfaction and give ourselves to God's will. He believes that Rama Krishna Paramhansa, the founder of the Rama Krishna Mission, was an "Avtara", or "incarnate", like Jesus, whose mission was to show the path to God.

Afterwards, we stopped at the Mahabodhi Society, a place of worship for Buddhists. Here we heard something remarkable. A Buddhist told us that we should not be Buddhists, but a Buddha! Not just a Christian, but Christ in our lives and through our actions. After that, we stopped at Gurudwara, the religious sanctuary of the Sikhs. Here we saw the respect they feel for their Holy Scripture, the "Guru Granth Sahib", giving it a central place in their holy temple, reading from it and teaching it to the entire community of believers that had gathered. They sit in reverence and listen to the teaching it proclaims. They then encourage the people to put what they just heard into practice. They also have many symbols, for example Kara (iron bracelet), which means that their hands are joined by the teachings of the Holy Scriptures and that their actions

must correspond to said teachings. The Kirpal (the sword) symbolizes the use of force only to defend their honor, to establish justice and to do what is fair. Whoever walks into a Sikh sanctuary, must cover their head. Their Pagadree (head-cover) means they are under the protection of God, the Supreme Being. One of their forms of prayer is Nama Jappa (repetition of God's name) and they believe they purify themselves by meditating on God's name. They believe that they must make a living by the sweat of their brow, that is why you will never see a Sikh begging. They are also very generous and believe in sharing with others, and since God is the one who only gives, we must never disrespect the person we are giving to. After the prayer ceremony, we visited the shops where they eat their food and share their bread with the poor. It is a place where everyone, rich and poor, sit together and share their food.

Last but not least, we went to a mosque, where once again, we were pleased to see their respect to God. They believe that God is one. They believe that this same God is the God of Adam, of Abraham, of Moses, of Jesus and Mohammed the Prophet. They have a very strict purification ritual before entering the mosque. Their posture in prayer also indicates their respect for God. The Muslims, as did the ancient Jews, pray many times a day. Muslims pray five times a day; they especially summon all believers to the mosque for prayer just before sunrise and sunset to honor God. They are always conscious of the aspect of sin. They believe in Allah, which means "the most compassionate one."

At each of the religious sanctuaries we visited, we experienced the intensity of the belief and conviction of faith in God. Some of the virtues we found are non violence, renunciation, taking full responsibility of our actions, religious zeal and a strong form of community worship, equality among all members, be they man or woman, rich or poor; in other aspects of their lives, we saw their commitment to being fair and to building justice in the world, their loyalty to God, their loyalty to religious practice, to love and to the simplicity of life. All expressed a surprising respect for God and a hunger and desire to follow His path. They also showed a sense of openness and respect toward other religious beliefs. They believe in God, the ultimate benefactor and loving one's neighbor. Some of them support charity organizations such as schools, hospitals and shelters for the poor.

This experience reminds us of the story of the missionary that went to a tribe, in hope of being the first in speaking to them of God and sharing Him with them. After his arrival and having lived with them for some time, he realized that long before he arrived, God was already in their lives, their customs and in their hearts. At the end of our journey, we were quite tired but we had undergone a spiritual journey that enriched us. We are grateful to Father Ivel for having helped us to discover God in action and alive in other religions and beliefs.

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STRATEGIES FOR ACTION

1. To encourage a deeper knowledge of other religions among our confreres and among our laity that we might foster a new dialogue with their members.
2. To foster through our preaching a spirit of openness and “neighborliness” in our faithful towards those of other religions.
3. To promote and support all initiatives for cooperation in the areas of development and the liberation of the human person found in distinct religions.
4. To encourage our theological centers to study and elaborate on the Major Distinct Religious Traditions in order to eliminate historical barriers and to open new paths for fellowship.
5. To foster gatherings for prayer and fellowship; especially during very significant times; among the members of other religions to enable a mutual sharing of a religious experience of God.
6. To foster in the formation of our young confreres, a deeper knowledge of other religions.