

*This material is an aid to explore further the Bishops' teaching document "Meeting God in Friend and Stranger. Fostering respect and mutual understanding between the religions". It is best used in conjunction with this document.*

*The material contains a chapter by chapter guide to the teaching laid out in the document, with a short summary of each chapter, bullet points for a quicker overview, and a glossary of the terms used. This is supplemented by questions for discussion, as well as by ideas for action. For each chapter, there are also quotations from the original document to lead the reader back to it.*

*This material can be used in many ways. It can be taken as a tool for private study, or as the basis for a series of workshops. They can either follow the order of the document in six sessions guided by the six chapters, or be a one-off event that concentrates on the chapter that is most relevant for the group and its situation. This can take place in schools, parishes, chaplaincies, and wherever else everyday life and work leads to the recognition that God wants His people to engage in dialogue with others, to learn from and be inspired by them.*

*The material is not meant to replace the document itself, and hopefully the study of it will lead on to more in-depth reflections on "Meeting God in Friend and Stranger" (which is available for free download at <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/meeting-god-in-friend-and-stranger>), or other documents that are relevant to the chapters, as well as a more active participation in interreligious dialogue and shared action, which ultimately brings us closer to God.*

# Meeting *God* in Friend & Stranger *Working materials*

Fostering respect and mutual  
understanding between the religions



Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales



## Foreword

Religious belief can produce the deepest feelings of loyalty and identity. Friendship and understanding between people of different religions are essential for a peaceful world. At a time when people of different religions and cultures are living ever closer to each other in every part of the world and specifically in Britain, the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales wish to encourage Catholics to see dialogue as an integral part of their faith and practice.

Some might object that clergy and laity are already overburdened and that we should be focussing on proclaiming our faith to others rather than listening to them about their beliefs. But **the Church** – that is the whole people of God - is called to be like Christ and humbly serve others. Catholics are encouraged to work together with other Christians in this service of witness and dialogue with people of other religions and with secular culture. The bishops therefore also offer *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger* to all Christians.

*Meeting God in Friend and Stranger* draws on Scripture, on the teachings of Vatican II, on the words of Popes and Vatican departments, and has been agreed by all the Catholic bishops of England and Wales.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Kevin JP McDonald." The signature is written in a cursive style.

Kevin McDonald, Archbishop Emeritus of Southwark



## CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS 'INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE'?

This chapter defines dialogue and explains how it is challenging, and how the search to understand others can enrich our own faith.

Summary: **Interreligious** dialogue takes place on every level of our lives with others. We engage in dialogue by simply being good neighbours and friends, we can work together on issues that concern us and our communities, we can try to understand and experience something of each others religious life and culture, or we can talk about our beliefs and spirituality.

Dialogue is about a journey to discover truth in what often seems strange and different and being open to being challenged and changed and surprised by what we find. When we engage with difference we can be helped to reflect more deeply on our own beliefs and our understanding of God.

Sometimes there are difficulties when people do not want to have dialogue with us or when we encounter something that is false. We may also find that others have a preconceived view of who we are. We need to be honest and say clearly and lovingly where we disagree.

Essential for dialogue is a mutual openness and a willingness to listen and learn. Both sides must be prepared to abandon preconceptions and presuppositions about the other and listen respectfully so that the other can reveal themselves without fear of judgement and misunderstanding.



### Interreligious dialogue is:

- 'not so much an idea to be studied as a way of living in positive relationship with others' (Pope John Paul II 1990)
- 'a frame of mind, an attitude' (cf. "Meeting God in Friend and Stranger, p13)
- Simply living as good neighbours
- Working together in matters of common concern
- Trying to understand and experience something of each other's religion
- Recognising the presence of what is true and holy in other religions
- Reflecting on theological and spiritual matters
- Engaging with difference
- Being open to finding truth and goodness in other religions
- Being prepared to be challenged, surprised and changed by what we find
- Discerning between what is good and true and what is false
- Abandoning presuppositions and premature judgement
- Listening respectfully, lovingly and openly in the spirit of Christ
- Speaking honestly about our own faith
- Emptying ourselves so that the other's real identity can be disclosed





## Glossary:

**Interfaith/interreligious:** For many people the terms 'interfaith' and 'interreligious' are interchangeable. The Church prefers to use the term 'interreligious' for relations with other religions, and interfaith specifically for dialogue with Judaism.

*[Dialogue] ...means not only discussion, but also includes all positive and constructive inter-religious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment.*

*#1p13*

*Dialogue demands a combination of 'genuine love and respect, and openness to unexpected truth and goodness, with a firm grasp of our own Christian faith and a readiness to be led by its light #9p15*



## Questions for discussion:

### On the text

- ⇒ Why does the Catholic Church ask us to develop dialogue with people of different religions?
- ⇒ How can all Catholics be involved in this important task?
- ⇒ To what extent should we co-operate with other Christians in this task?
- ⇒ How far is interreligious dialogue a new teaching?
- ⇒ Which sources of Church teaching does this new document draw upon?
- ⇒ What do you understand by interreligious dialogue?

### From your experience

- ⇒ When did and how you first become aware of the term 'interreligious dialogue'?
- ⇒ Do you have friends, neighbours or work colleagues of a different religion? What sort of relationship do you have with these people?
- ⇒ Have you or your parish ever been involved in any interreligious activity? Talk about your experience.
- ⇒ Have you ever discussed matters of faith or convictions with people of different religions? What was the outcome?
- ⇒ How do you think we can deepen our understanding of our own faith through dialogue with people of other religions?
- ⇒ How do you feel about experiencing the way people of other religions live and practise their beliefs? Do you have any particular interests or concerns?
- ⇒ What are the issues that concern people of all religions and none in your area? Is there anything you and your neighbours could do to address these?



## **Ideas for Action:**

### **To begin with**

- ⇒ Find out which religions are represented in your neighbourhood.
- ⇒ Identify their places of worship in your area.
- ⇒ Find out about their major festivals.
- ⇒ Find out if there is an “interfaith forum” or equivalent in your area.
- ⇒ Find out if your diocese has an interreligious team, co-ordinator or equivalent, and see whether there is someone with a similar brief in your parish.

### **To go further**

- ⇒ Join an “interfaith forum” or interfaith activity in your area.
- ⇒ Find out about any courses or activities which deal with interreligious issues.
- ⇒ Find out about other religions from the net, from books or from personal contacts.
- ⇒ Visit a local place of worship.
- ⇒ To find out more about what the Church teaches about interreligious dialogue read ‘Meeting God in Friend and Stranger’.



## CHAPTER 2: THE CHANGING FACE OF BRITAIN

This chapter looks at the mix of religions and cultures in Britain, the impact of world events, and the position of Christianity. It assesses the challenges of pluralism and describes some of its pastoral consequences.

Summary : In Britain today people of different religions and cultures live alongside each other. They are visible through their places of worship and their religious, cultural and ethnic identities.







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*Pastoral Consequences:* Christian love of neighbour demands that we face our own negative attitudes and reach out to our neighbours, particularly when they face hostility and prejudice. Where we have common interests and values we can work together for **the common good**. Our beliefs may differ but our common humanity enables us to share our joys and sorrows.

Honesty demands that we acknowledge and face the difficulties that exist. Christians too can encounter prejudice and hostility and there are those who wish to harm our society and its values. We must support our authorities in protecting our citizens and values. But these difficulties can never excuse prejudice and hostile attitudes.

Modern British society can be a challenge to the accepted codes of conduct and traditions of people of other religions and cultures who need to protect their identity and traditions while at the same time adapting to their surroundings.

Mass communication and globalisation mean that world events have both a positive and a negative impact on us all. Natural disasters can remind us of the unity of the human race and promote solidarity, whereas violence and terrorist attacks can inflame negative feelings and prejudice against people of different religions, refugees and asylum seekers.

The Catholic Community in Britain has experienced persecution and prejudice although Catholics have now been assimilated into mainstream British culture. Today the world wide Catholic Church is a multi-racial community which is reflected in the make-up of the Catholic Church in England and Wales. This diversity has greatly enriched the Church.

The Catholic Church recognises that the **pluralism** of society in Britain today and her vision respects diversity and, therefore, freedom from prejudice and persecution and equal civil status for all. It does, however, reject a **relativism** that judges all religious beliefs to be equally valid. The Church holds that truth is one and universal created by the one God although glimpses of this one truth can be found in different religions.



### **Catholic are equipped for dialogue because:**

- They have themselves suffered persecution and prejudice in the past.
- They have had to safeguard their own religious beliefs and traditions and have done so by forms of separation (e.g. education).
- They have learnt to adapt and integrate into mainstream culture.
- The Catholic Church is a multi-racial community and understands the need to **inculturate** the gospel.
- The Catholic Church has benefitted from its diversity.
- The Catholic Church holds that truth is One. There are glimpses of the one truth in other religions. Pluralism does not mean relativism.

### **What should Catholics do?**

- Face up to their own negative attitudes.
- Give a lead in reaching out to others, especially those suffering from prejudice.
- Give particular attention to the needs of migrants and asylum seekers.
- Work together with all people on shared concerns such as upholding life from conception to death, justice and peace, and protecting creation.
- Deepening our own faith in order to share it with others in appropriate ways including simple gestures of friendship and support.
- Never allow the difficulties arising from those hostile to British culture and society, and from those who merely seek to exploit what our society offers, to be an excuse for prejudice or even hostility.



## Glossary

**Pluralism:** 'the co-existence in one society of many cultures, religions, philosophies and outlooks on life. In this sense of the word the Catholic Church does not only recognise pluralism as a fact but also respects it, in the sense that it supports everyone's right to freedom from persecution and prejudice, to and equal civil status within society, and to liberty and self-fulfilment within the constraints of the common good.' (p20)

**Relativism:** The belief that all religious paths are equally valid. Truth is what the believer believes; it is not universal. There is no absolute, objective truth that holds good for all.

**The Common Good:** acting for the benefit of all in a community or society so that all can flourish and live in peace and justice from conception to the natural end of life.

**Inculturate:** expressing belief in a way that appropriate to a different culture

*The Catholic Church's promotion of dialogue, and its respect for the freedom of all to practise their religion ... stems from the conviction that truth is one and universal, that there are glimpses of that one truth and supreme good in other religions, and that it is the one God who, in his loving Providence, is the Creator of those elements of truth and goodness. P21*

*We are right, therefore, to rejoice at the great diversity of peoples within the universal Church and we respect the religious diversity of modern Britain, seeing it as an opportunity for dialogue. #36p24*



**Questions for discussion:**

**On the text**

What is the difference between pluralism and relativism?

Why is a clear understanding of one's own religious faith important in dialogue?

What is the purpose of dialogue with other religions?

How can dialogue be compatible with the belief that truth is one and universal?

What events or initiatives could help create an atmosphere of dialogue and partnership?

**From your experience:**

What experience do you have of prejudice against people of other religions, cultures and races? How did you deal with it?

What experience do you have of prejudice against Christianity, the Church, Christians, and how did you deal with it?

The bishops talk about the challenge of pluralism. What do you find challenging, and enriching about living in a multi-cultural society?

How welcoming is your parish to people from other cultures? What benefits and challenges does their presence bring?

What concerns do you think people of all religions have in common, particularly in your area, and which are the occasions that can be marked together?



## Ideas for Action:

### To begin with

- “Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who has loved another has fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8) – try and let your love for friend and stranger shine through your daily interactions.
- How multi-cultural is your parish? Can you find out where people in your parish come from?
- Find out what religious and ethnic groups and associations are present in your area.
- Find out about the care of migrants and asylum seekers in your area. Consider ways in which you might be able to get involved.
- Find out what other religions in your area are doing to promote social cohesion.
- Find out what your local council is doing for the benefit of ethnic and religious groups.
- Find out what your local Catholic school is doing to raise awareness of other religions.

### To go further

- Reflect on the Gospel of Luke Ch 10: the parable of the Good Samaritan. Look for more Bible passages that are an encouragement to see beyond prejudices, and to be helpful to one another. Share them with others in your parish.
- Suggest and help organise a multicultural Mass in your parish.
- Read one of the Church's documents on social teaching, economic policy, migration, or other religions (e.g. *Caritas in Veritate*, *Nostra Aetate*, or *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, *Mission of the Church to migrants in England and Wales*, all of which are available online)
- Join a multi-faith forum in your area.



### CHAPTER 3: DIALOGUE AND THE TEACHING OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

This chapter traces the development of Catholic teaching and spirituality about interreligious dialogue since Vatican II and outlines the principles on which the Church's theological position today is based.

Summary: The **Vatican II** document ***Nostra Aetate*** gave new life to the Church's relationship with other religions. Members of other religions were presented as people with whom Christians should engage in dialogue and collaboration, and from whose spiritual lives inspiration can be drawn. This relationship has been actively fostered, particularly by recent Popes who have further expounded Church teaching through their pronouncements and actions.

The Church has different relationships with each religion, but first among these is the relationship with the Jewish people. The Church's roots are in the history of God's relationship with the Jewish people. *Nostra Aetate* makes clear that the Jews remain especially beloved by God and categorically rejects all forms of anti-Semitism.

*Nostra Aetate* recognises that there are elements of truth and holiness in other religions and acknowledges that the Holy Spirit is at work in them. Other religions contain '**seeds of the Word**' and '**a ray of the one Truth**'. God's good plan, and the promise of eternal life, applies to every human being. At the same time, Christ is the only one through whom it is possible to come to this eternal life. What is true and holy in other religions does not replace the Good News of Christianity, but can create a fertile environment for it.

The Church's insistence on dialogue is based on three themes. The first one is the unity of the human race. All of humanity is created by the one God in his own image. This means that each person has the same rights, and the same dignity. We share one Creator and His plan for our futures. All of us are sinners, and all of us need God's forgiveness and mercy. We ask the same questions about the meaning and purpose of our lives.



Second is the need to recognise what is true and holy in other religions. Christ alone is the source of Salvation, but the Church sees goodness and forgiveness in everyone who seeks God, whether they are official members of His Church or not. The Spirit being active in other religions means that the Church is closely connected to what is true and holy in them – these insights come from the same source, and can enrich the Church who holds a responsibility for promoting and recognising them.

Thirdly the Church calls us to dialogue because dialogue is initiated by God in what has been called the **dialogue of salvation** (see glossary). Today God calls the Church to dialogue through new events and circumstances. Migration and developments in communication have brought different peoples in closer contact, which can be an enrichment, but also a source of misunderstandings and hostilities. Dialogue is essential to promote peace. Dialogue is also part of the Church's efforts to make the Good News known. Wherever Christians live by the Gospel they are spreading this message by their presence and action. Anything done in the name of the gospel is helping to spread it, and can be called evangelisation. There are two sides to it which are related but different. One is proclaiming the Good News of the gospel to invite people to believe in it. Dialogue, on the other hand, aims to achieve a deeper understanding and mutual enrichment, and to find truth in other religions. Dialogue does not want to talk people into accepting the Truth, but bears witness to the Church's beliefs while being prepared to listen to the other sincerely. These two aspects of evangelisation complement each other.

The spirituality of Christian dialogue is deeply rooted in the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We share in Christ's active love for all people, and in the Father's love and forgiveness which becomes manifest in Christ's actions. We are given the motivation and power to do so by the Holy Spirit who is the source of all that is true and holy in other religions and so provides the common ground between us. By discovering what is true and holy in other religions we discover our relationship to them and should not be surprised that God is already there.

Other religions can have aspects that are strange and difficult to understand. Exploring what we find strange in other religions can deepen our understanding of the mystery of God whom we can never fully understand. God's Kingdom is closely connected to His Church – the Church is its sacrament, a visible sign of its invisible reality. God's Kingdom is, however, larger than its sign, the Church, and God does not restrict Himself to His Church in His love.



Dialogue, carried out with prudence and charity, requires that Catholics are firmly grounded and well informed in their own faith. It is not about compromising or watering down faith, but about listening humbly and carefully to the beliefs of others, in the hope of creating greater respect and greater understanding, and of building the Kingdom of God.

## **The Church identifies four different types of dialogue:**

The Dialogue of Life is simply living as good neighbours, sharing our lives with other;

The Dialogue of Action is working together with others for the good of all;

The Dialogue of Theological Exchange is scholarly dialogue carried out by specialists;

The Dialogue of Religious Experience is a sharing in religious life and spirituality.

*[The] assertion that Christ is the only Saviour ...is an assertion... of the bountiful goodness of God and of the awesome responsibility Christians have of living up to what they have received, of being humbly thankful for it, and of being ever ready to share it with others.  
#67 p35*

*The Spirit, then, who is at work in other religions, and supremely in Christ himself, is one and the same Spirit who gives life to the Church. Because it is the same divine Spirit who is at work in both, the Church and the religions have a positive relationship to each other. By that God given presence and action we are deeply related, though at the same time sadly distant from each other. #73 p37*





## Questions for discussion:

### On the text

What do we have in common with other religions?

How does the Church treat relations with other religions differently and why? What about the relationship of the Church with Judaism?

Where does the Church's understanding of dialogue come from, and why do we need to dialogue with people of other religions?

In what way is dialogue part of the Church's mission, and how does it relate to proclamation and evangelisation? How is dialogue Trinitarian?

How can dialogue with people of other religions strengthen our own belief, and be part of spreading the Good News of the Gospel?

What is the difference between the Kingdom of God and the Church?

Which of the four types of dialogue attracts you most and why?

### From your experience

Do you find this teaching new, or surprising?

To what extent does this teaching inspire you or make you feel uneasy?

What experience have you had of relating to people of different religions?

Has your attitude and approach differed depending on the religion?

How would you deal with someone who strongly rejects your own beliefs?

Have you ever shared your faith with another person of your own faith or of another religion?

Do you feel grounded in your faith, and well-informed? What would help you to feel more so?



What have you have found inspiring – a sign of truth and holiness – in people of other religions?

### **Ideas for Action:**

#### **To begin with**

Become more deeply informed about your faith while acknowledging your own questions and the limits of your knowledge so as to become a confident partner in dialogue.

Learn about the major world religions and their main beliefs and practices.

Be aware that even people of good will can hold misunderstandings and prejudgements about others.

Read *Nostra Aetate* or the full version of “Meeting God in Friend and Stranger. Fostering respect and mutual understanding between the religions” to find out more about the different relationships the Church has with each of the main religions.

Think about how you could explain, respectfully, the Church’s position to a non-Christian – could you explain the balance between a belief in Christ and the openness to the faith of others?

#### **To go further**

Read and reflect on one of the following Vatican II documents :*Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Ad Gentes* or *Dignitatis Humanae* especially on the sections which deal with interreligious dialogue.

Read Pope John Paul II’s encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*.

Find out about the beliefs and practices of one major religion present in your area.

Join or form a group locally or in your parish to get better acquainted with the Church’s teaching on interreligious dialogue.

Find out about courses in your area on different religions, and on interreligious dialogue.



### CHAPTER 4: PRAYER AND WORSHIP

Many people share the desire to come together in solidarity to pray in the face of significant events or tragedies. This chapter examines the theology and the practicalities of multi-religious prayer.

Summary: Joyful human celebrations, the response to natural disasters or tragedies, or simply the meeting in friendship of people engaged in interreligious dialogue often means that people want to come together to pray or worship. An example and model of such multi-religious prayer was the meeting of the leaders of different Christian traditions and different world religions at Assisi called by Pope John Paul II in 1986.

All authentic prayer is inspired by the Holy Spirit and is the work of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, within us. Through the one Spirit the prayer of the Church and the prayer of other religions is closely connected. Yet it cannot be called Christian prayer because Christian prayer is always to the Father, in the Spirit, through the Son, Jesus Christ.

Prayer expresses belief. The different beliefs of the religions are expressed in their prayers. This means that we cannot literally 'pray together' as our prayers all express different beliefs. However, we can and should 'come together to pray'. This means praying for one another in solidarity and love, with respect for one another. To 'come together to pray' is an authentically Christian act that promotes human unity and solidarity and shows awareness of the universal presence of the Holy Spirit.

When people of different religions come together to pray each prays from their own tradition *in the presence* of the other religious groups while the others remain in respectful silence. Multi-religious prayer requires sensitivity and careful preparation, whether one is hosting the prayer or is accepting hospitality in another place of worship. We need to be attentive to the customs, postures and dress of people of other religions when we visit their places of worship and make sure they feel reassured and at ease when they are our guests.



## Multi-religious prayer:

- Is the work of the Holy Spirit.
- Is encouraged by the Catholic Church.
- Should be 'coming together to pray' as happened in Assisi.
- Cannot be 'praying together' because prayer expresses belief. Christian prayer is always to God, in the Spirit, through the Son.
- Means praying according to one's own traditions and belief while respectfully being present at the prayer of others.
- Is an authentically Christian act because it promotes the unity of all people and their unity with God.
- Witnesses to the universal presence and action of the Holy Spirit.



*Catholics should thus feel confident, and be encouraged to 'come together to pray' with those of other religions. To take part in such occasions is an authentically Christian act, serving to promote the unity of all people and their unity with God. It is part of the mission of the Church.*



**Questions for discussion:**

**On the text**

When is it appropriate for people of different religions to come together to pray?

For what reasons did Pope John Paul II call together leaders of different world religions in 1986? What is your reaction to Pope John Paul II's initiative at Assisi? How is it a helpful model for multi-religious prayer?

On what basis can we pray together with people of other religions?

What makes Christian prayer different from other forms of prayer?

If all authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, why can't we pray together?

What is the difference between 'praying together' and 'coming together to pray'? Why is this important? What does this mean for taking part in the acts of worship of other religions?

How is interreligious prayer different from praying with Christians of other traditions?

**From your experience**

How do you feel about the Church's teaching on prayer and worship?

Have you ever joined people of different religions in prayer, or let them know that you are praying for them?

Have you ever attended a service in a non-Christian place of worship?

What is your experience of visiting the places of worship of other religions? What puts you at your ease, and what makes you anxious?

Do you find the prayers of other religions helpful to your own faith? How can they be used appropriately by a Christian?



## **Ideas for Action:**

### **To begin with**

Pray for your brothers and sisters of other religions and their needs—the leaflets with suggestions for bidding prayers at the major festivals of other religions might be helpful in this—they are available at <http://www.cbcew.org.uk/page.aspx?pid=458>.

Find out about your nearest “interfaith forum” and ask about visits to places of worship of other religions, or visit a place of worship in your area. There might be prayer meetings you can join, too.

Try and learn about the prayer customs, postures and dress of other religions.

Join an interreligious walk or pilgrimage.

### **To go further**

Read up on the scriptures of other religions and their stories that inspire prayer.

Choose some Christian prayers which you think would be suitable to use in an interreligious service. Select readings from the Christian Scriptures and tradition which you might use in an interreligious service.



## CHAPTER 5: INTERRELIGIOUS MARRIAGE

In Britain today many people marry partners with different religious beliefs from their own. This chapter looks at the Catholic understanding of marriage and how Catholics thinking about marrying someone of a different religion should be prepared and supported.

Summary: In Britain today Catholics marry Christians of other denominations, people of other religions, or those of no religious faith. The Church provides these couples with guidelines so that their marriage is a valid union in the eyes of the Church and the couple can receive the right support and formation in their understanding of marriage.

The Catholic Church affirms that marriage is created and blessed by God to be a lifelong and fruitful union between a man and a woman. The aim of the marriage is that the couple contributes to each other's wellbeing, has children and raises them. When the couple are both baptised Christians their marriage is a sacrament - they are enabled to live their marriage in a way that makes it a real sign of Christ's love for his Church. Because of this, the Christian family is often referred to as '**The domestic church**'.

Other religious traditions are committed to marriage and family life as well. This commitment is also based on traditional religious and moral values. Cultural and religious differences may cause problems to arise within an **interreligious marriage**. However, if cultural and religious differences are treated with respect and consideration, the different religious beliefs of the couple can be a source of enrichment rather than a burden, and make an interreligious marriage a place of deep dialogue.



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A marriage between a Catholic and an un-baptised person is described in the law of the Church as having a **'disparity of cult'**. Such a marriage must receive permission from the local bishop to be a **valid marriage**. This permission, or **dispensation**, can only be granted if certain conditions are fulfilled by the Catholic partner and when it is certain that there is no pressure that might endanger their Catholic faith. The Catholic partner must also promise to bring up the children of the marriage as Catholics as far as is possible within the unity of the marriage. It is essential that the non-Catholic partner is aware of these promises and also has some understanding of what Catholics believe about marriage, including the necessity that both parties give full and free consent to the marriage.

An interreligious couple can experience opposition from parents, friends or religious communities. There are many things to consider, particularly regarding the upbringing and religious education of the children and any potential pressure that might come from within the marriage, from the families of the partners, or



from their respective religious communities to convert to the other religion. But practical matters such as how the wedding should be celebrated are also important and must be treated carefully and sensitively – it is, for example, possible to have the wedding outside a church. An interreligious marriage needs proper and appropriate preparation and strong and skilled support, as well as pastoral care at every stage of the couple's life together.





**An interreligious marriage:**

- Is when a Catholic marries a person from a different religion who is not baptised
- Is a life-long, exclusive union between a man and a woman in love
- Is freely entered into by the couple for their own benefit and for the good of their children
- Is only valid when a special dispensation is granted by the local bishop
- Requires agreement from both parties regarding the raising of children
- Can give rise to many challenges
- Can be an opportunity to deepen the faith of both partners
- Can lead to cultural enrichment
- Requires careful planning and preparation
- Needs long term pastoral care



## Glossary

**The domestic church:** the Christian family which is the church in miniature. 'A community of grace and prayer, a school of human and Christian virtue and the place where the faith is first proclaimed to children.' #156 p66

**Interreligious marriage:** when two people of different religions marry each other

**Disparity of cult:** the technical term for a marriage between a Catholic and a person who has not been baptised

**Valid marriage:** a marriage recognised by the Catholic Church

**Dispensation:** the permission of the bishop to allow a marriage between a Catholic and a person of another Christian denomination, a person of another religion or a person of no religion

*The importance [other religions] give to marriage and the family manifests once again the unity of the human race at its creation and in its common aspirations. #157 p66*

*Part of the goodness of any legitimate marriage is that it is blessed by, and comes from, the one God whose will it is to bring every human being to salvation. #159 p67*

*An interreligious marriage can offer opportunities for deepening faith and for cultural enrichment. In such marriages dialogue between people of faith can be at its most profound: a 'Dialogue of Life'. If such a marriage is to flourish, such dialogue is necessary. # 160 p67*



**Discussion questions:**

**On the text**

What is Christian marriage? What does this mean for the difference between a Catholic marrying a person from another Christian tradition, and marrying a person from a different religion?

How does the Church view marriage and family life in other religious traditions?

Why is it important to give the couple every support both before and after the wedding, and who are the best people to offer it?

How can a Catholic prepare for marrying someone from another faith, and what must both partners agree to?

What agreements must the couple make in order to receive dispensation to marry from the local bishop?

What special training is required by people preparing couples for marriage and why?

To what extent will these couples need pastoral care?



### **From your experience:**

What, if any, have been your experiences of interreligious marriages?

Do you know anyone from an interreligious family? What are the issues they face?  
Describe your relationship with the family.

How would you feel if someone from your family or parish community were to marry someone from a different religion? Can you think of ways of offering support?

What difficulties, problems or dangers do you foresee when a Catholic marries someone from another religion?

What benefits could there be in marrying someone from a different religion?

### **Ideas for action**

#### **To begin with**

Read what the Church teaches on marriage in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Read the Code of Canon Law on marriage – both are available online.

Look up the “Home is a Holy Place” initiative – [www.homeisaholyplace.org.uk](http://www.homeisaholyplace.org.uk).

#### **To go further**

Find out what other faiths teach about marriage and family life.

Make contact with interreligious families in your area.

Find out what pastoral support is available to interreligious families.

Find out what interreligious training and formation is available for priests and deacons and members of the laity involved in marriage preparation.

Read a Church document on marriage, or read up on the “Home is a Holy Place” initiative (on- or off-line), or read a document interreligious dialogue (for example *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger* or *Nostra Aetate*, which are available online).



### CHAPTER 6: AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

This chapter looks at the structures, both formal and informal, that exist in England and Wales at national and local level, and within the Church at Diocesan and parish level, which provide opportunities for dialogue and facilitate and promote the building of relationships and dialogue between people of different religions and none.

Summary: The population of both Catholics and people of other religions is unevenly distributed through England and Wales, and therefore the opportunities for interreligious dialogue will vary from area to area. However, there is a 'national context' in which opportunities for dialogue can arise.

The national context: Central government and local authorities may not distinguish much between different religions but they have recognised the value of **faith communities**, or **religious communities**, in promoting **social cohesion** and in helping to deliver services to the most deprived and vulnerable in society. Religious communities contribute through providing volunteers who are motivated to help others by their beliefs, through allowing their buildings to be used to provide services, and by working together with others for a common goal. Religious leaders too can play an important part in their communities building bridges between different groups.

When different local religious communities are brought together by the local authority with other public and private bodies there is an important opportunity for 'dialogue in action'. The idea behind these partnerships is that different local groups work together to provide better services to the local community in education, health, social services and police provision. Catholics are urged to participate in these initiatives and to encourage discussion and debate on the values and principles that are implicit in public policy and to work together with other religious groups for the good of their local communities.



The Catholic context: For those Catholics who think about people of other religions in terms of their need of conversion, the work of dialogue may first need a 'journey of mind and heart' to enable them to respond to dialogue which is part of our baptismal calling. To encourage a response to this call many bishops have appointed a **Diocesan interreligious co-ordinator** to promote and support the work of dialogue in the diocese. An important aspect of this work is formation and education for both clergy and laity so that they fully understand their involvement in interreligious relations and dialogue is a divine call and an intrinsic part of being a Catholic.

Usually the laity is best placed to engage in dialogue in their daily life and work. The role of the priest is principally to give leadership, to make clear that interreligious dialogue is part of Church teaching, and to encourage and enable the laity.

Religious congregations often play a particular role in interreligious dialogue and understanding because of their missionary work, their academic experience, or their experience of contemplative prayer and mysticism which links them to similar traditions in many other religions.

Schools have a particular part to play in terms of the experience they offer to pupils and through the role they play in the community. Catholic schools often attract families from other religious communities. Children will learn to live as good neighbours alongside each other and respect each others' different religions and cultures as they study together, learn about each others' religious beliefs and ways of life and gain new insights by reflecting on them.

Local opportunities: Other structures and opportunities for interreligious dialogue, both formal and informal, also exist to help those who wish to become involved in interreligious dialogue. Many areas have local '**Council of Faiths**' or an 'Interfaith Forum' in which people of different religions meet together and work for the good of the local community or simply meet and pray. All of these opportunities are enriched by working together with other Christians, so that resources can be pooled and Christians can relate to people of other religions together.



Chaplaincies are often ecumenical and interreligious. Catholics play an essential part but must avoid a reductionist approach which disregards differences of faith for a common 'spirituality'.

### **Opportunities for interreligious 'dialogue of action' exist in**

- Government initiatives which view faith communities as partners in delivering services, especially in the most deprived areas
- Offering church buildings and other resources for the use of the community to build good relations between races and religions
- Involvement in local authority consultation exercises on matters of public policy, local strategic partnerships and other such initiatives
- Linking diocesan youth services with the work of interreligious dialogue
- Involvement in diocesan Commissions and Committees and local parish groups for interreligious dialogue
- Involvement with diocesan Commissions and Committees and local parish groups that link with work with people of different religions such as Justice and Peace and support for asylum seekers
- Local 'Council of Faiths' and 'Interfaith Forum' and other informal local groups.

### **Opportunities for other forms of dialogue exist in:**

- Delivering greetings from the Holy See or personal greetings from the parish community to different religious communities at times of change to 'celebration' significance in their religion
- Living, working, studying and praying together in schools and community groups
- Learning about different religions, their beliefs and ways of living
- Co-operating with colleagues of other religions in situations such as chaplaincies.

### **Formation and education is essential:**

- To help clergy and laity understand that interreligious dialogue is part of the work we are called to do by our baptism
- To provide a theological and spiritual basis for the commitment to dialogue
- To enable those engaged in dialogue to feel secure in their knowledge
- To understand the nature of dialogue and its place in the mission of the Church
- To respect each person's individuality and freedom to respond to the call to dialogue in ways appropriate to them
- To learn about the different religions.



## Glossary

**Faith communities or religious communities:** The term used mainly by central and local Government to describe religions as one set among many private sector organisations with potential to be partners in local initiatives to create social cohesion. Not to be confused with the usual Catholic usage of religious communities which refers to *communities of consecrated male or female religious*.

**Social cohesion:** The 'glue' that holds society together to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization.

**Diocesan Interreligious Coordinator:** a priest, religious or layperson appointed by their bishop to coordinate and advance the work of religious relations and advise the bishop about any issues arising from relations with those of other religions.

**Council of Faiths:** Local authority initiated bodies or forums formed by representatives of the different religions in an area designed to foster 'interfaith' dialogue and to be the 'voice' of religions responding to local government initiatives and policies.

*We strongly encourage Catholics ...to respond as much as they can to these government initiatives and be willing to work in partnership with statutory bodies, with people, communities and organisations of other religions, and indeed with anyone involved in these projects. #176 p76*

*Traditionally Catholics have tended to view those of other religions exclusively as people in need of conversion; it takes quite a journey of mind and heart to respond to the Church when it calls us to dialogue with those we were previously only exhorted to call to Christ and welcome into the fold. #176 p77*





## Questions for discussion

### On the text

- Which religions do people in your diocese belong to and how many of them are there? How does this affect the bishops' call to interreligious dialogue?
- What does the document mean when it talks about changes in government attitudes to religion and religions (Paragraph 169)? What influence does this have on the Church's work in interreligious dialogue?
- Describe how the bishops see the roles of clergy and laity in dialogue.
- How do the bishops describe the role of the Catholic school in relation to dialogue?
- How do you view the work of Catholic chaplains? How can they be supported?

### From your experience

- How do you feel when you hear that the bishops are asking you personally to become involved in interreligious dialogue?
- What are the opportunities or obstacles to dialogue in your situation? Describe any interreligious events or contacts you have been involved in. What would you like to be involved in, for example in parish, school, or work place?
- What sort of formation do you think you might need to engage in dialogue? Where would you go to get it?



- What opportunities for interreligious dialogue and formation are there for students and staff in your local Catholic school? How might you influence this?

## **Ideas for Action**

### **To begin with:**

- Develop neighbourly relations with members of other religions in your area, seeking opportunities to share meals and events, and greeting people with the greetings used in their religion.
- Once you have got to know someone of another religion, talk to them about their culture and faith, and share some thoughts on yours.
- Use books, the media and the Internet to find out about other religions, especially at the time of their festivals – bidding prayers might be a good time for this.
- Pray for local communities of other religions.
- Find out where local places of worship are. Ask a neighbour or acquaintance if he/she will take you to visit their place of worship; invite them to visit yours.
- Ask your parish priest if he will invite the Diocesan Coordinator to offer an introductory talk and discussion about dialogue to a parish meeting, or invite local faith council representatives to talk at an occasion in the parish or school. Ask your parish priest to invite the Diocesan Interreligious Coordinator to speak and lead a discussion on dialogue at a parish meeting. Invite local faith council representatives to speak in the parish or school. Find out if the school takes pupils to visit places of worship of other religions in your area and offer help in organising visits.



### To go further

- Set up a parish interreligious group
- Find out about the local council of faiths and any local government initiatives such as Strategic Partnerships. Find out if they have Catholic representation – volunteer your services if not.
- Encourage links between individuals and parish – and other faith individuals and communities.
- Suggest appointment of a parish “interreligious dialogue contact person” who could:
  - Organise and inform the parish of all local interreligious activity.
  - Form a parish interreligious Group.
  - Contact and develop links with local faith communities and local interreligious groups.
  - Seek to be involved in any Diocesan interreligious activity or organisation.
  - Put up a parish notice board to keep people updated.
  - Encourage parish group visits to local places of worship.
  - Invite speakers of other religions in to parish organisation meetings, parish council or similar meetings – this could be on the occasion of their festivals.
  - Make contact with local places of worship to talk about joint action or to extend friendship.
  - Invite groups from other religions to visit your church.
  - Encourage joint Islamic Relief, CAFOD and J&P fund raising
  - Find out what support the local Catholic school needs to teach about other religions and the place of dialogue in parish catechesis.
  - Take the Holy See’s greetings to Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus on their festivals.