

A PROGRAMMED RESPONSE TO PLURALISM

The first presentation looked briefly at the growth of pluralism, and in particular religious pluralism, in the U.K., at some of the reactions to this pluralism, and then offered some reflections on the teaching of the Church suggesting the right way to react. The reflections remained general in nature. It is now time to be more specific and to attempt to suggest a programmed response to pluralism. Focus will be primarily on the parish, but I hope that those of you who are not engaged in parish ministry will be able to make the necessary adjustments to your own field of work.

1. The inclusive parish

Though the concern is with the parish and the pastor, it may be well to start off with a word about the bishop. Vatican II's Decree on the Pastoral Role of Bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus*, states:

Bishops should devote themselves to their apostolic office as witnesses of Christ to all (men). They should not limit themselves to those who already acknowledge the Prince of Pastors but should also devote themselves to those who have strayed in any way from the path of truth or who have no knowledge of the Gospel of Christ and of his saving mercy, so that ultimately all (men) may walk "in all goodness, justice and truth" (Eph 5:9) (CD 11).

This text reminds the bishop that his pastoral care extends to all people living within the area of his diocese. He cannot confine his attention to Catholics only, even though they may rightly claim priority in his pastoral activity. He will be called to relate to other Christians, and also to people who belong to other religious traditions. These latter are not to be neglected on the pretext that there is too much to do already in looking after the members of the Catholic fold. The bishop is called to be a witness of Christ to all. His ministry is inclusive.

The question naturally arises as to how this witness is to be given in relation to people of other religions. A later paragraph goes some way to answering this question:

Since it is the mission of the Church to maintain close relation with the society in which she lives the bishops should make it their special care to approach people (textually "men") and to initiate and promote dialogue with them. These discussions on religious matters should be marked by clarity of expression as well as by humility and courtesy, so that truth may be combined with charity, and understanding with love. The discussion should likewise be characterized by due prudence allied, however, with sincerity which by promoting friendship is conducive to a union of minds (CD 13).

Much could be said about the spirit in which relations are to be developed, but what I should like to emphasize is that the bishop is not to be passive with regard to society, only reacting when necessary, but is called to initiate and promote dialogue.

What then of the parish priest? Canon Law states that "The pastor exercises pastoral care in the community entrusted to him under the authority of the diocesan bishop *in whose ministry*

of Christ he has been called to share (c. 519, underlining mine). If the bishop has the care of all people within the territory of his diocese, cannot it be said that the parish priest has likewise care of all who live within the bounds of the parish, whether they be Catholics, other Christians, people belonging to other religions, or modern-day pagans? Will he too not be expected to take the initiative to establish contact with the different categories of people in the parish?

What forms of contact could there be? Here are a few suggestions.

- house visitation (if this is still done); when visiting a Catholic family would it not be possible to greet briefly the neighbours who just happen to be Muslims or Sikhs?
- something similar could be said about hospital visitation, offering a greeting to the people of other religions who are in the same ward as Catholic patients.
- paying a visit to the different places of worship, particularly when the people there are celebrating a feast, in order to bring them greetings.
- meeting the religious leaders of these communities in extended clergy fraternals; there will surely be a need to maintain strictly ecumenical contacts, but from time to time the network could be widened. The contacts established may prove exceedingly valuable if tensions break out, since channels of communication with the other community will already have been established.
- participation in inter-faith meetings organized by the local authorities.

I can hear a cry of protest, or sighs of frustration. How can we be expected to do all this when we do not have time to do everything our Catholic flock expect of us, let alone leaving periods free for reading, reflection and writing. A partial answer to this objection can be found in the final words of c.519 which says that the parish priest is to carry out his ministry “with the cooperation of other presbyters or deacons and with the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful”. The PP does not have to do everything himself. He can involve others in his ministry.

There may be parishioners who would be willing to go on house visitation, including calling on families that are not Christian.

Religious and lay people may be part of the hospital visitation team.

Delegations from the parish could go to greet other communities when they are celebrating their feasts.

An assistant priest (an endangered species?) or a deacon might take part in the meetings of religious leaders held according to the pattern of clergy fraternals.

A member of the parish council might be delegated to attend the inter-faith meetings convoked by the civil authorities.

Is this fanciful? Only you can tell.

What would still be necessary would be a feed-back to the parish community. Everybody should be informed about who is in the parish, and particularly if new-comers have come into the area. If people are told about contacts made, they might become more interested to take part themselves. There is nothing like exposure and experience to break down prejudice and arouse a sense of mission. The bidding prayers might reflect not only international events but also the needs that exist on the doorstep.

2. Education for parish service

If the priest and people are to reach out to other faith communities, they will need to know more about them.

If you want to bring greetings to the Muslims for 'Id al-Fitr, the breaking of the fast after Ramadan, or 'Id al-Adha, the Feast of the Sacrifice held in concomitance with the Hajj, the Pilgrimage to Mecca, then you have to know when the feast will take place in any particular year. The same goes for Vesakh of the Buddhists, or Diwali of the Hindus. And what centenary are the Sikhs celebrating?

It is easy to lump all the Muslims into one, and not to realise that they belong to very different traditions. It would be useful to have an inkling about what they hold in common, and how they differ. Similarly with the Buddhists. That monastery in the suburbs of the town, to which group does it belong? Is the Dalai Lama really a sort of Buddhist pope? One could go on and on with such questions. And the more one learns, the more one realises how little one knows.

The lack of knowledge can produce a reaction of fear, and inhibit contacts. The reluctance to engage someone of another faith community in conversation may come from ignorance not just of their beliefs, but also of one's own. Many people do not know how to answer the questions that are put to them, and so they prefer to avoid contact. There is an opportunity lost for witness, whether it be in the context of dialogue or of proclamation.

Can anything be done to provide such knowledge? Where there is a university, there will be probably some sort of extramural course on world religions. In fact if one searches there are many resources available. These would include the various offerings on the internet. Yet there would need to be a complement to private study, a group which meets for discussion to stimulate understanding and assimilation, a guide as a point of reference. What would also be important would be to accompany the study of another religion or of other religions with a deepening of one's own faith. Moreover people have different levels of intellectual baggage, and the courses on offer are not suitable for everyone. Could anything be provided at the parish lecture, a talk, a meeting with someone who has experience of dialogue in a certain domain?

Do parishes today have lending libraries? Would it be possible to make books on the various religions available? Do people have access to the series of leaflets that were prepared by the Committee for Other Faiths? Or if people do not read any more, then what about cassettes on dialogue? There are a number that have been made. They could sometimes be seen together by a group, and be used as a starting point for a discussion.

So far I have been talking about adult education, equipping people for the various tasks they might take on in the service of the parish's outreach. Yet the children should not be forgotten. All sorts of questions arise with regard to the children in Catholic schools. What type of religious education is to be given? Is it a knowledge of religions as a cultural fact, with special emphasis on Christianity since this has been the main influence on the culture of this country, or is it an education in the faith? If it is the latter, what happens to the children belong to other faith communities? Will they have to do maths problems, as I did when I was a boy attending the non-Catholic grammar school? Or will instruction in their own religion be provided? Can the parish community, rather than the Catholic school, provide the faith education and the preparation for the sacraments? What sort of understanding of other religions are young

children given? Will they grow up with sympathy for the Muslims, Hindus and the Sikhs that they meet, or will prejudices be formed or strengthened? Will there be too much emphasis on the others, so that the Catholic children end up knowing little or nothing about their own faith? It is easy for me to sit here listing these questions, but the answers cannot be given by “the expert”; they have to be worked out to suit the local context.

3. RCIA

There is a special type of education that is given in the parish, and that is the instruction given to adults who are to be received into the Church. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has proved to be a valuable instrument for this purpose. It presupposes a period of pre-catechumenate which is expected to be a time of primary evangelization, in which the essential elements of the *kerygma* are conveyed. Some of the people who present themselves during this period may be interested inquirers, “sympathizers”, but others may already be firmly committed to going forward to baptism. At this stage, but also later, the instructions should be adapted to their circumstances.

Are there among the enquirers and candidates for baptism people coming from other religions? It is said that in France about 10% of the catechumens come from a background of Islam. What is the situation in this country? Several questions arise here. Are Catholics in this country ready to reach out to people of other religions and to invite them to join the Catholic community? Do we, as individuals, bear witness to our faith in such a way that others may become interested in knowing “what makes us tick”? Are our communities attractive so that people would want to join them?

You may think that these questions are inappropriate coming from me, as someone who is dedicated to dialogue. Yet the Church can never forego its mission to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Dialogue cannot take the place of proclamation. Both tasks have to be carried out. It is all a matter of discernment. What I am advocating is not a hard sell, publicity drives for the Church, and even worse “crusades”. Yet we should be ready to talk about our faith. As Peter says to the first Christians: “Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have” (1 Pet 3:15). The questions may spring at first from pure curiosity, but then, with the help of the Holy Spirit, there may develop a growing sense of commitment. So the answers may progress from a mere imparting of information to a sharing of experience of Jesus Christ.

What is important is that when people of other religions do come to enquire about the faith they are accepted as they are, with all the riches of their respective backgrounds. Much will depend on their degree of belonging to their original tradition. It is not for us to force people to be Muslims, or Hindus, or Buddhists, if they have only been so sociologically, without any real practice. Yet care should be taken not to take an antagonistic attitude towards these religions, but rather cultivate a readiness to build on the values that are already enshrined in them.

You often hear it said that there can be no conversions from Islam. This is not true, though it is certainly hard for citizens of majority Muslim countries to change their religion, since there is in most cases not full religious freedom in this sense. Yet conversions do take place, and particularly in countries such as this one where there is true freedom of religion. A confrere of mine, Jean-Marie Gaudeul, has written a book entitled *Called from Islam to Christ. Why Muslims become Christians* (London, Monarch Books, 1999). He has studied the published

stories of Muslims who have become Christians and has examined their motivations for taking this step. For some it has been the attractiveness of the person of Jesus, already as he is portrayed in the Qur'an. Indeed to some Jesus has appeared in dreams. Others have been led by a thirst for the truth, and have found that the Christian message fulfils their longings. The element of forgiveness in the Gospel message is felt to be powerful, as also a new sense of freedom and of a personal relationship with God as Father. The sense of community has often been an important factor, a community that is not oppressive but welcoming and freedom giving. Some are looking for "an Islam beyond Islam", a more spiritual religion beyond precepts. I remember Gaudeul saying once that the first New Testament text that should be explained to Muslims is Paul's Letter to the Romans, since there Paul emphasises freedom over the rule of the Law.

Gaudeul does not only describe the different ways to Christ and to the Church. He adds a series of useful reflections which apply also to converts from other traditions besides Islam. He asks what kind of welcome do people need. Here is his answer: "The reception accorded to the converts is to be determined by their personal spiritual needs before and above the interests of the group. The offence in proselytism, as in rejection, is that the persons are not considered in themselves" (p.283). He goes on to say that the candidates for baptism must have the opportunity of explaining themselves. Really they must be led to the realisation that they are not choosing their new religion, as they would choose a new style of clothing, but that they are responding to a call.

Once a person is baptized, that is not the end of the journey. There is a need for the person to be welcomed into the community, to be invited to take an active part in the liturgy, to share in parish activities. There is above all a need for friendship, since the move from one religion to another can be accompanied by a break from one's former family and friends. Are our parish communities ready to play this role?

4. Mixed marriages

In today's pluralistic societies men and women belonging to different religions are almost bound to meet and some will want to share their lives in marriage. Some people tend to exalt such marriages as being the ideal way to interreligious dialogue, just as some would see inter-church marriages as the truest form of ecumenism. Others may be radically opposed, seeing interfaith marriages as a real danger to the faith. There probably has to be a realistic middle way. At some stage Catholic youngsters should be told that the difference of religion may possibly bring additional strain to a relationship that is to last for the rest of one's life. Yet when a mixed couple come to see the priest and say they want to get married, it is usually too late to get them to change their minds. Their freedom has to be respected.

Sometimes one gets the impression that the question of mixed marriages is reduced first to the problem of whether a dispensation is going to be granted, and then to what type of wedding to have. This is surely not sufficient. Preparation of mixed couples for marriage presents a similar problem to the presence of converts from other religions in the RCIA group. It will have to be judged whether they can join with other couples taking the preparatory course, where such a course exists, or whether it would be better for them to prepare alone. They will certainly need special attention. They should be led to look squarely at the possible difficulties ahead. The major question will be the religious upbringing of the children. The Catholic partner has to promise that the children will be brought up as Catholics, and the non-Christian partner needs to be aware of this promise. This does not mean that the children are

not to be taught to appreciate the religion of the non Christian partner, nor does it mean, if it happens that the children are not in fact baptized, that the Catholic partner should give up any idea of teaching them about the faith. They will need encouragement to do this.

Just as with catechumens pastoral care should not end once baptism has been administered, so concern for mixed couples should not end with the wedding. There needs to be after care. Even Catholic couples need this, and movements such as Marriage Encounter and Teams of Our Lady can be a great help. Perhaps people in mixed marriages need the support of a group even more. Young couples will be able to share their difficulties with others who have had the same experiences and receive advice from them, or at least encouragement and strength. It seems to me that such groups should not be confined only to those couples who have married according to Church law, but could also include those who were refused a dispensation or did not ask for one. Surely the Catholic partner in such a marriage has the right to receive support from the Catholic community.

5. Joint action

One form that interreligious relations can take is the dialogue of action, people of different faith communities working together on behalf of their fellow men and women. Such action may be at the local level, organizing a car pool, setting up a play centre for children, initiating various youth activities. It may be a common involvement in concerns of a national nature, the right attitude towards immigrants, the need to combat racism, pro-life issues. The perspective may be international, regarding debt relief and fair trade, action for peace and reconciliation, ecological concerns. These actions may in some cases be purely secular, with religion playing no part. Yet there are interfaith movements where the respective religions provide the motivation for commitment in action on behalf of those who are suffering and in need.

How can such active dialogue be encouraged? Our Catholic communities have perhaps a tradition of going it alone. Ecumenical endeavours are difficult, let alone interfaith cooperation. It is often easier, and quicker, for the community that has seen a problem to tackle it and try to solve it, without waiting to get others involved. The dialogue of action is a real form of dialogue, since it supposes that people agree on the goals they are setting themselves, that they are happy about the methods to be used, the way these goals are to be achieved, and that they are clear about how responsibility is to be shared, including financial responsibility. All this can take time, hence the temptation of going it alone. Yet would it not be more profitable if others were to become involved? Is there not a sort of instinct, an ecumenical instinct or an interfaith instinct, to be aroused, so that what can be done together will be done together?

6. Interreligious prayer

Would it help in creating this spirit of cooperation if people of different religions prayed together? Are parishioners to be encouraged to engage in such prayers? Should Catholic chaplaincies be to the front in organizing prayer events? There are many questions that arise regarding this form of interreligious relations. Some of these questions have been addressed in a joint study undertaken by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Office for Inter-Religious Relations and Dialogue of the World Council of Churches. The results have been published in a special issue of our journal *Pro Dialogo* (98/1998).

It is useful to distinguish first of all between informal prayer and formal prayer. Occasions for people of different religions to pray together may arise spontaneously. It may be when having a meal together, or when visiting a sick person. If one's Jewish or Muslim friends are prayerful people, they may well wish to share a time of prayer with their Christian guests, or with those who have come to visit a sick relative. In a book written some years ago, *Encounter in the Spirit. Muslim-Christian Meetings in Birmingham* (Geneva, WCC Publications, 1988), Andrew Wingate, an Anglican priest, described the shock he received when the Muslim imam with whom he had become friendly asked if he could pray for Andrew's father who was sick. He had to ask himself whether he believed in the prayers of someone of a different religion. After some soul-searching he answered in the affirmative and, as he says, "praying together has been central to the friendship". As long as each respects the identity of the other, there should be no difficulty in sharing prayer.

Where formal prayer is concerned there needs to be greater caution. By formal prayer here I do not mean liturgical worship which is naturally confined to the members of the particular faith community performing the worship. We would not expect Muslims to take an active part in the Eucharist, just as they would not expect Christians to join them in performing *salât*. Yet there are occasions when people of different religions desire and feel the need to offer prayers together in public.

Such a need can be felt at times of crises, whether natural disasters, terrible accidents, or in times of war. There are also civil occasions, such as Commonwealth Day, when prayer together seems appropriate. We, in the Catholic tradition, have the example of the Pope's initiatives, the ecumenical and interreligious gatherings in Assisi in order to pray for peace, in 1986, in 1993 (for peace in Europe and particularly in the Balkans), and in 2002 as a response to the events of 11 September 2001. On the latter occasion encouragement was given to arrange similar gatherings for prayer in different parts of the world.

The joint study referred to above distinguishes between multi-religious prayer and united or integrative interreligious prayer. The first would be that type of service used in Assisi, where representatives of different faith communities were asked to pray in turn, the others listening to them and uniting with them in their hearts. The second would be an order of prayer in which all would be invited, and would be expected, to join in, so while there might be different readings from the sacred books of the religions, there would be common hymns and common prayers recited together. It is obvious that this second type of service is much more problematical. It may be possible to find some texts to which no one will object – the prayer attributed to St Francis is one such – but this unity is obtained at the expense of the riches of diversity. If a unified expression is sought, it may be better to have recourse to symbolic actions, such as the lighting of candles or lamps, which often speak louder than words. Nor should one forget the powerfully unifying force of silence. Whether in the multi-religious type of prayer or in the united interreligious prayer, careful preparation is needed, and as far as possible this should be common preparation together with the members of the other faith communities. In this way springing unexpected things on people, perhaps causing embarrassment, can be avoided. It is perhaps better to err on the side of prudence.

The participants in the first PCID - OIRR/WCC consultation on this theme felt that they needed to reassure their fellow Christians. They stated: "Participation in interreligious prayer does not signal an inadequacy of, or insufficiency in, the Christian prayer tradition. Some may ask whether we had exhausted the riches of the Gospel that we now turn to other religious traditions for the sustenance of our spirituality. Our stories of interreligious prayer reveal that

those who engage in interreligious prayer are strengthened and widened in their own Christian faith. They experience an overflowing of grace” (p.233). In this spirit a positive answer can be given to the questions at the beginning of this section. Parishioners could and should be encouraged to participate, with prudence and charity, in interfaith prayer. Chaplaincies could take the initiative in this field. Praying together, being present before God together, is surely one way of helping people to grow together in confidence and thus encouraging cooperation.

7. The parish as a school of prayer

If Christians are to pray with people of other religious traditions, they should first be familiar with prayer according to their own tradition. *Dialogue and Proclamation* says that the dialogue of religious experience, of which interreligious prayer could be considered one of the forms, is “where persons, *rooted in their own religious traditions* (my underlining), share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute” (DP 42). Are the people in our parishes, the young Catholics who frequent the chaplaincies, finding the help they need to discover their spiritual roots? Speaking of other religions, Paul VI, in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, said that they have taught generations how to pray (cf. EN 53). Can we say the same about the Catholic Church? In a recent piece in *The Tablet*, Sue Delaney notes that “in recent years, many Christians have turned towards the meditation practices of Hinduism and Buddhism. Contemplative meditation, formerly practised only by monks and nuns, is now being adopted by increasing numbers of lay people, including the mothers of families, often with little or no guidance. This can led to problems” (*The Tablet*, 17 July 2004, p.16).

Why is there little or no guidance? Let me refer to an older article which appeared, if I remember rightly, in *The Furrow*, written by the Irish Jesuit, Michael Paul Gallagher. He entitled it *Isn't there anything except the Mass?* This was a question put by an Irish lady exasperated by not finding something to suit her spiritual needs. Is it not true that the Eucharist, “source and summit of the Christian life” (LG 11), has tended to monopolise the prayer life of the parish? Scheduling vigil Masses, and evening Masses both on Sundays and sometimes during the week, has allowed many more people to participate in this essential act of worship, but it has left little room for other forms of devotion or types of prayer.

Perhaps this is unfair. You may say that meditation is essentially a private exercise, to be practised in one's private room with the door shut (cf. Mt 6:6). You will doubtless add that there do exist charismatic prayer groups, bible sharing groups, Taizé prayer groups. You will say that people have the opportunity of practising centring prayer or of belonging to the World Fellowship of Meditation launched by Fr Laurence Freeman in continuation with the teaching of Dom John Main. Well, happy are those who have this possibility. Can any provision be made for others?

Those who are in contact with people of other faith communities, especially Buddhists and Hindus, may be attracted by their tradition of meditation. On a visit recently to a small Hindu ashram in Argentina, I was surprised to find that nearly all the people gathered were in fact Catholics. Will they find anyone to talk to about what they are experiencing, and also who might share with them the riches of the Christian spiritual tradition? Catholic monasteries, especially those in which the monks and nuns are active in Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, could be expected to provide this spiritual nourishment and guidance. It would be an asset to Catholic life if at least some parishes were able to give similar assistance.

8. Conclusion

You are probably feeling completely frustrated now. “This man, I can hear you murmur, is asking so many questions and giving so few answers. And he thinks we are like these Hindu gods, with so many arms and legs, capable of busying ourselves with many different undertakings all at the same time.” What can I say to these objections?

First, I do not think that answers can be given from on high. Principles can be reiterated, but they have to be applied in concrete circumstances, and you are the ones who know these circumstances.

Secondly, who said that the priest has to do everything himself? In this field of the relations of the Catholic community to other faith communities there is room for much cooperation. It is a question of discovering talents and tapping them, of encouraging people to develop their interests and use their gifts. The bishop cannot be expected to carry out the whole pastoral plan of his diocese alone, so why should a parish priest try to do this in his parish? If lay people are involved in all the areas touched upon this morning: educating people about other faith traditions, assisting with the RCIA programme, giving support to those engaged in mixed-faith marriages, fostering common action with people of other faith communities, helping to organise joint prayer meetings when the occasion arises, contributing to the parish becoming truly a school of prayer, will not the parish be a happier and a more lively place, truly one where there is “life in abundance”?

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A PROGRAMMED RESPONSE TO PLURALISM

Questions for group discussion

1. Do you think the media, including the Catholic media; give a fair deal to other faith communities?
2. Does your own parish bulletin ever take notice of these communities?
3. Are there opportunities for cooperation with other faith communities at the local level? What would be the necessary conditions for such cooperation?
4. Government has recently shown greater interest in matters of faith and relations between faith communities: Is this a helpful or a harmful development?
5. How can parishes, and chaplaincies, become schools of prayer?