

The Dialogue of Theological Exchange

After *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican Council document we are celebrating today, the Vatican source most often quoted by Catholic theologians and practitioners is the document jointly published by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples: *Dialogue and Proclamation*. This document describes the dialogue of theological exchange as that where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective heritages and to appreciate each other's spiritual values. Pope John Paul II has called this heritage and spiritual values "the treasures of human wisdom and religion (*Fides et Ratio*, 31) and "the spiritual riches with which God has endowed the peoples of the world (*Redemptoris Missio*, 55). When people spoke of dialogue in the past it was mostly the dialogue of theological exchange that was meant. Having said this, it must not be overlooked that in fact, Christians have been living cheek by jowl with people of all faiths and interacting with them since the earliest days of Christianity. But the document "Dialogue and Proclamation" clearly sets out for the first time the various forms of dialogue about which we shall be hearing this afternoon. The document in fact points out that "were dialogue to be reduced to theological exchange, dialogue might easily be taken as a sort of luxury item in the Church's mission, a domain reserved for specialists" (no. 43). The document explains how the four forms of dialogue are interconnected. The dialogues of life and of action need at least some theological basis. This enables those engaged in dialogue to avoid an uninformed and naïve approach. It protects Catholics for instance, from the dangers of "indifferentism, of relativism and of syncretism". Exchanges at the level of religious experience can give more life to theological discussions. These in turn can enlighten experiences and encourage closer contacts.

The person engaged in theological exchange, call him a theologian or call him simply a mature Christian is a person of whom many qualities are required: certainly a thorough grasp of one's faith, not merely an intellectual grasp but one that grips the whole person. Certainly theologians have to be people who enjoy the trust of their bishops. It is they who, in the last analysis, have the care of the flock, to shield Catholics from error and to warn them about ambivalent positions. In turn, the bishops and the Church need theologians. It is through the contribution of theologians that the Church makes progress in the better understanding of the faith. The history of the development of dogma owes an immense debt to theologians. Bishops on their part, while guarding the orthodoxy of the faith, encourage theologians to explore new paths to better understand God's revealed Word. Their encouragement and support is very valuable and theologians need and being human beings, expect this. We have a good example of this in *Dominus Iesus* where the document encourages theologians to seek to understand more fully the way in which the salvific grace of God comes to individual non-Christians (no.21).

Those engaged in the dialogue of theological exchange need other qualities too. Human qualities: humility for a start, respect for others, a knowledge of the cultural and theological background of "the other" while letting them express themselves in their own terms. A knowledge of anthropology too, of languages and related sciences can be very helpful.

It has to be appreciated that to make progress in theology, theologians often have to break new ground. In doing this, like the proverbial tortoise, they have to stick their neck out, to move forward. Sometimes they do not get it right but move in unexplored territories they must. Some theologians may seem to live ahead of their times- are discarded or condemned only to be rehabilitated in later times. Theirs is often what has been called “a frontier apostolate”. They may be thought of by some as being somehow on the margins of the Church while in fact they may be at the heart of it, calling us to see a more true picture of what the mystery of God might be, of the role of the Church, of the place of other Faiths and of God’s loving plan. Yes, theologians need imagination. But most of all they need courage to follow the lead of the Spirit.

Theological exchange takes place through the written word, writing books and articles in journals and waiting for a response from whoever engages with the writer. But it also takes place, and perhaps more fruitfully, in formal and informal encounters on home ground, on the partner’s ground or on neutral ground. Engaging in the dialogue of theological exchange in a social context, over food and drink is an excellent way of engaging, too. Building personal friendships is a good preparation, to lay to rest prejudices and to take in new data. The way to theological exchange becomes then clear. The aim is not to score points but to engage in a common search for the truth. As Michael Barnes writes in an article in the last issue of *The Tablet*, “The point of dialogue is not to arrive at some “resolution”. It is to experience delight, surprise and even puzzlement through the encounter with other human beings”.

I would also say that a theologian who lives in a multifaith milieu is better placed to engage in dialogue than a university professor who keeps mostly to his books and never gets out of his faith ambience. The tendency to absolutise one’s faith in the latter case is greater. I am sure that people like Fr Michael Barnes are better placed to do theology, having settled in Southall, than if he were living within a Catholic university and in a totally traditional Catholic milieu.

My last point starts by recalling a little anecdote I read in a book entitled “Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religions” written by Pope Benedict when he was still Cardinal Ratzinger. Pope Benedict quotes from a book by Pope Gregory the Great (d 601) who says how once St Benedict went up a tower and looking out the window at night prayed earnestly to God in this nighttime vigil. Suddenly out of the dark he saw a light pouring down from above and driving all the darkness away. Something quite marvellous happened. Saint Benedict saw the whole world held before his eyes in a single ray of sunshine. “How could this be?” asked an interlocutor in Pope Gregory’s book. And Pope Gregory replies: “If Benedict saw the whole world, it was not that the world had become smaller but that Benedict’s vision had become so wide. Well, it seems to me that the dialogue of theological exchange will be greatly helped if our vision of the utter mystery of God’s ways with human beings is widened. Opening our heart and mind in humble prayer to God, like St Benedict, is, I suggest, the way to this wider vision.

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