



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:

1. The Dialogue of Life is simply living as good neighbours, sharing our lives with other;
2. The Dialogue of Action is working together with others for the good of all;
3. The Dialogue of Theological Exchange is scholarly dialogue carried out by specialists;
4. The Dialogue of Religious Experience is a sharing in religious life and spirituality.

Why should Christians engage in interreligious dialogue?

- God has called human beings into a loving dialogue with Himself. All dialogue is a response to God's call.
- The Bible reveals that all humanity is one. We are created by the one God in his own image, we have a common ancestor and we all need God's forgiveness, because we are sinners
- All humanity comes from and returns to God; we are all engaged in the same journey.
- All human beings ask the same fundamental questions about, for example, the meaning and purpose of life, suffering and death, the answers to which are addressed in all religions.
- The human and spiritual unity of all peoples is a motivation to seek a common path.
- Other religions have elements of truth and holiness in them which reveal the presence and working of God's grace.
- Christians have different relationships with different religions which are important to explore. Pre-eminent among these different relationships is the one with the Jewish people with whom Christians have a familial relationship.
- Dialogue enables us to discover more about God and God's Kingdom by reflecting on what we find in other religions.
- The events of our time reveal God's call to dialogue today, particularly migration and the increased possibilities of modern communications which have brought the peoples of the world into closer proximity.

Church teaching about interreligious dialogue is to be found in:

- The documents of Vatican II particularly *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium*, both of which are available online.
- Subsequent papal pronouncements.
- Papal actions, particular those of John Paul II and Benedict XVI that embody teaching on dialogue.
- Vatican documents in particular those of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and some issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Why interreligious dialogue part of the Church's sharing the Good News?

- God calls all to a loving dialogue with Himself. Dialogue is our response to God's call.
- Dialogue obeys the Gospel's command to love our neighbour.
- Evangelisation consists of two aspects: proclamation and dialogue.

- The four forms of dialogue build God's Kingdom of love.

How are other religions related to the Church?

- The Church's mission continues God's dialogue with the human race.
- What is true and holy in other religions reveals that God is already present in them.
- For Christians, dialogue is about entering into the love of Christ for humanity: the story of God's love for the whole of humanity.
- The Holy Spirit who is at work in other religions and is the source of all that is true and holy in them is the same Holy Spirit that was given by the Father through the Son to the Church at Pentecost.
- The Kingdom of God goes beyond the visible institution of the Church – the two are different from each other, but not separate.

Dialogue requires Christians who are:

- Well informed and well grounded in their own religion.
- Able to listen charitably and openly.
- Open to all that is true and holy in other religions.
- Strong enough to be open to see the presence God in the beliefs of others without compromising their own belief in the uniqueness of Christ and his role in the salvation of all.
- Able to understand that God wants all to be saved and that He alone judges people's beliefs.
- Accepting of each other's equality, human dignity, and right to religious freedom and respect.
- Willing to explore the richness of the spirituality of interreligious dialogue.

Glossary

Vatican II and *Nostra Aetate*: The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church was convened by Pope John XXIII in Rome, 1962-65. The Council issued documents covering every aspect of the Church's life and relationship with the world. *Nostra Aetate* is the document which deals with the Church's relationship with other religions.

Seeds of the Word: An expression first used by Justin Martyr in the 2nd century CE who recognised the presence of God in other religions. This presence is, according to him, like a seed that can grow and lead people to God.

A ray of the one Truth: the presence of what is true and holy in other religions.

Dialogue of salvation: God's initiative of revealing Himself and acting in human history in order to have a relationship with humankind and to lead us to salvation.

[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.