

The Way Ahead –
conclusion of the celebrations marking
the 40th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*

Over the last two days we have remembered, celebrated and reflected on the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the relationship of the Church to other religions, *Nostra Aetate*. We have looked back at the document itself, and at the fruits that have grown from the seed which it sowed. Interreligious Dialogue is now an integral part of life in the Church. It is an enterprise in which we share. It is a work to be done. It is a dimension of evangelisation that is open and receptive. It is a discernment of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who belong to other faiths. It is an urgent task especially in a time of ethnic conflicts that have a religious dimension to them.

So what is the way ahead? What must we do? Where is the Spirit leading us? I would begin by talking about dialogue itself. This is a delicate matter since the idea of dialogue and the culture of dialogue is Christian in its provenance. It is part of the theological and philosophical tradition of the Christian West. It was explicitly identified as a key concept in Christian theology by Pope Paul VI in section 70 of his great encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*. The Judeo-Christian tradition is a tradition of dialogue between God and man: in the creation, in the call of Abraham and of Moses, and finally in the relationship between Christ and his heavenly Father. Our evangelisation is dialogical in character. When we proclaim the Word of God, we look for the promptings of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and minds of those to whom we preach. Dialogue is integral to Christianity. The development of both ecumenical dialogue and interreligious dialogue was therefore a natural development of a living tradition. Once we recognised the validity of the Baptism of other Christians, the natural next step was to seek to establish dialogue that would seek to build on and deepen our agreement in faith. Interreligious dialogue is quite a different matter. We are not seeking unity of faith, but, having recognised elements of truth in other religions, we naturally seek to explore that more deeply, to consolidate, to establish shared values and so create new bonds of friendship with those of other religions. But we must also recognise that dialogue may seem very foreign to them. It may seem like the imposition of a Western way of thinking on cultures and religions in which a culture of dialogue finds no resonance. Nevertheless, we cannot but propose dialogue as a way forward in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society. This, for example, is how we should engage with people of other religions who come to Catholic schools. And we should seek to explain and propose it to government and other statutory authorities which work in partnership with faith communities. Dialogue could be the means whereby we can draw together in such a way as to give a united response to government initiatives.

So the way forward must be a dialogue in all the areas that have been spoken about today.

Let me suggest some of the areas of dialogue that need further exploration. With the Jews we have a unique bond but also a very troubled history. We have apologised for the anti-semitism that has been part of Christianity. We have made great progress especially in our recognition that God has not revoked his Covenant with the Chosen People. But we need to do more and we need to do more together. We must overcome not only any residual anti-semitism but also any reluctance or diffidence in our engagement with the Jews. We must also ask and elicit their engagement in dialogue on the outstanding questions and issues that we need to explore together. We need to hear each other's voices and each other's perceptions. But we must not underestimate what has already been achieved especially under the courageous leadership of Pope John Paul II. Already we may acknowledge and celebrate the Jewish people as our elder brother, as our parent religion, and acknowledge and celebrate our common roots and common heritage.

With Muslims we must seek to explore the implications of what is shared. Perhaps most important of all is trying to create an atmosphere of dialogue in which we think not in terms of differences but of convergences. A culture of dialogue is one in which we focus on what we share in order to provide a positive framework in which to look honestly at our differences. And we need to overcome any residual antipathy towards the Muslim people.

With other religions that lie outside the monotheistic traditions, it is a matter of identifying values and beliefs that we can respect and share. Our whole mind-set needs to be one of openness. But, with all interreligious dialogue ours must be an openness that eschews relativism. We undermine the whole project of interreligious dialogue if we collude with the idea that all religions are equally valid ways of relating to God. Interreligious dialogue requires us to bring to the table the whole of our faith and for Christians that includes our belief in the absolute uniqueness of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. If we do not proclaim Christ is Lord of all and Prince of Peace then we come to the table of dialogue empty-handed. Dialogue is an encounter between the fullness of the different faiths, not a watered-down version of them. Any attempt to lump all faiths together is really a form of agnosticism.

But the way ahead also lies along the path of dialogue in a much more everyday sense. Every conversation is a dialogue no matter how slight or trivial the content. What matters is the spirit in which we speak to one another. Friendship is a key to inter-religious dialogue. There is no substitute for it. Friendship can exist between people who have diametrically opposed beliefs and views. It builds on affection, on trust, on natural warmth. It can change lives and change local communities. It just requires openness and trust. It may mean making the first move. It will certainly involve respect for the other no matter what their beliefs. Networks of friendships are

vital. And so too are the more formal groupings that exist - interfaith councils and other structures for networking and creating multi-cultural communities should be embraced and developed.

Catholics should play their part in responding to the government's outreach to faith communities. We need to be there, to be at the table, to be involved so that our voice is heard for the good of all. And, as well as individual friendships, where possible we should try to establish friendship between communities. Something as simple as taking from the greetings from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue for the feast of Eid or Diwali to our local mosque or temple on behalf of the Catholic parish is a gesture of friendship on the part of the parish.

Interreligious dialogue is dialogue between people of prayer. That binds us together even though we do not pray together: "*Lex orandi, lex credendi.*" Our prayer is a ratification and expression of our faith. We must respect one another's prayer because we respect one another's faith. But, despite our differences, the way ahead must be a way of prayer. We should pray for one another and at some level we pray in solidarity with one another. The two meetings at Assisi, when Pope John Paul called people of different religions to come together to pray for peace, remain an icon and a model for what we can do in this area. Respecting and encouraging each other in prayer but from the vantage point of our own faith and the prayer that flows from that. As was said of the first Assisi Day, we don't come to pray together. We come together to pray.

But if the way ahead doesn't include joint prayer it can and should involve joint celebration and cultural sharing - enjoying and sharing the cultural riches of the traditions of faith to which we belong. That is important for building community, for building solidarity, and what we have come to call social cohesion. And that brings me to my final point where I make no apology for speaking again about peace. The path ahead must be a path of peace and a path that seeks to make peace, peace between faiths, peace in our communities and peace in the world. The language of peace is a language we share. The hope for peace is a hope we share. Let us not abandon it but tread the path of peace together with all our brothers and sisters of other faiths.

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