

(Revised November 1999)

# OUR NEIGHBOUR'S FAITH – AND OURS

*Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture. (Nostra Aetate/In Our Age n. 2)*

Who is my neighbour? It must have been startling when Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan in reply to that question. The 'outsider', the stranger, with unfamiliar beliefs and customs - that is the neighbour. Today, do we find this difficult to accept? We ask "Am I a neighbour? What is my responsibility?"

In the Gospels we are told to care not only for our own people but for the stranger too: *If you love those who love you, what reward have you? The Christian must do good and lend, expecting nothing in return... Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Mt 5:43-8, Luke 6:35-6).*

Do we know our neighbours? They include many believers from other religious traditions. Christians are a minority group within the population as a whole. While numbers are difficult to estimate, there are many Muslims and large communities of Hindus and Sikhs along with Buddhists, Jains and Baha'is. The Jewish community has been here for much longer, and has contributed greatly to our shared history.

These neighbours are members of world-wide religions whose ideas and beliefs differ from our own but whose service to others and dedication can be a great example to us all. Mosques, temples, synagogues and

gurdwaras in many of our cities bear witness to the religious commitment and community solidarity of these neighbours. Most are British citizens, forming part of the local and national community. They are people of faith. What is our response as Christians? We can see this as a very positive challenge, one which can help us to take our own faith more seriously, and our search for truth in our own tradition.

The Jubilee of the year 2,000 marks a significant milestone for the Christian world, which we can celebrate and affirm. At the same time we must reach out to those who do not share our beliefs, but who, while loyal to their own faith, support us in living out our faith.

We can find guidance in the Church's teaching; for instance a Vatican II document "In Our Age (Nostra Aetate) tells us:

*The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although different in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all people. Yet she proclaims, and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life. (NA2)*

An appreciation of our neighbour's faith does

not in any way weaken our own. An important aspect of Christian teaching emphasises the value of the person, ruling out any discrimination or persecution:

*The Church reproveth, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against people or any harassment of them on the basis of their race, colour, condition in life or religion. (NA5).*

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## MISSION

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Mission is an important aspect of Christian life. Christians are called to bear witness to God's universal love for all people. Mission includes all the activities of Christians, for we are all 'sent'. There is the simple witness of Christian presence; commitment to serve those in need; liturgy and worship; preaching, and teaching the word of God; and dialogue, meeting others as part of our Christian life.

These views on mission are contained in a short document of the Secretariat for Non-Christians (now renamed Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), published in 1984, "The attitude of the Church towards the followers of other religions - reflections and orientations on dialogue and mission". Over the years the Pontifical Council has taken part in meetings and discussions, exchanged visits with religious leaders and published books as well as a regular Bulletin. The Council keeps in touch with local interfaith efforts throughout the world. The greetings sent by the President of the Council to faith communities on the occasion of important feasts are an appreciated contribution to dialogue.

In a document called 'Dialogue and-Proclamation' the PCID together with the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples spoke of the Christian duty to preach the Gospel in appropriate ways and in the spirit of dia-

logue. These are *two ways of carrying out the one mission of the Church: proclamation and dialogue*. The Committee for Other Faiths has printed a summary of this document called "Ways of Sharing Faith".

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## WITNESS

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Once witness meant martyrdom. Sadly, there are still parts of the world where Christians and others suffer discrimination, persecution and even death, for their faith. Our concern for better relations with other religions does not mean that we forget our brothers and sisters who share our faith but do not enjoy the same freedom.

For most of us, though, witness means living our faith wherever we are. Next door to us there may be Sikhs or Muslims. As we get to know each other better, we may talk about religion. We need to know our own faith well and it helps if we know something about theirs. St Peter reminds us that we must:

*be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you but this must be with gentleness and reverence. (1 Peter 3:15)*

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## DIALOGUE

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Pope John Paul II has emphasised the importance of dialogue on many occasions. Speaking to the Secretariat for non-Christians in 1984 he said:

*Dialogue is fundamental for the Church, which is called to collaborate in God's plan.. with respect and love towards all persons... The friendly relationship between believers of different religions comes from respect and love for one another; it starts with recognising the basic freedom to practise one's own faith completely and to compare it with that of others.*

The Pope himself has taken the initiative. He invited Faith leaders to Assisi in 1986 to pray for peace, was the first Pope to visit a Synagogue in Rome, and called the Interreligious Assembly in Rome in October 1999 in preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2,000.

The world-wide dialogue movement is not new. In 1893 representatives of the world religions met in Chicago for the 'World Parliament of Religions'. This was commemorated in a particular way in 1993 and a third Parliament was held in 1999. There are numerous interfaith organisations and initiatives throughout the world.

Dialogue does not mean just 'talking' but includes many forms. Most important for us is the dialogue of **daily life** as we strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing our human concerns. This may lead to the **dialogue of action**, where good neighbourliness brings solidarity and shared practical action for the good of society as a whole. There is also the formal **dialogue of theological exchange**, where we seek to grow in understanding and appreciation of each other's heritage and spiritual values. Finally, there is the dialogue of **religious experience**, when, through being deeply rooted in our own religious tradition, we can share our spiritual riches, such as prayer and contemplation.

The consequences of dialogue are far-reaching, as John Paul II has said: *All Christians must be committed to dialogue with the believers of all religions, so that mutual understanding and collaboration may grow; so that moral values may be strengthened; so that God may be praised in all creation.*

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## LOCAL INITIATIVES

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In the United Kingdom today the Churches are taking an increasing interest in Interfaith issues. The Roman Catholic Committee for Other Faiths works to help Catholics pro-

mote a greater awareness and understanding of other Faiths, through dialogue, prayer and action in the light of the Church's teaching. Churches Together in Britain and Ireland has a Commission for Inter Faith Relations (CCIFR). Numerous interfaith organisations and groups exist around the country. In particular, the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom links a great many organisations and supports co-operation at all levels. It has excellent resources and publications, including a "Code of Conduct", and is a central point for information and advice.

Up and down the country there are many opportunities for Christians to meet and collaborate with people of other Faiths to improve race relations, to protect the family and moral values, to care for the environment, tackle problems in education etc. A sensitive approach to Religious Education is required, just as we expect Christian minorities in other countries to be treated with respect. In 1997 the Bishops' Conference produced a consultation paper "Catholic Schools and Other Faiths" with its accompanying "Guidelines for Study and Implementation".

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## HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

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Prayer, outreach, cultural exchange, education, collaboration and communication can all help prepare the new generation growing up to live in a marvellously varied and mutually enriching society. As a guiding principle we listen to the Spirit within our own hearts and also seek guidance from the Church's teaching. Our pilgrimage of faith is a challenge and an adventure, which we share with all God's children. Interreligious dialogue at every level will be one of the foundation stones for peace in the new millennium.

### Some questions

Do you know any of your neighbours of other Faiths? Does your parish have any contact with people of other Faiths? Is there a local

inter Faith group? Are any Catholics involved? Do you belong?

Smith Street, LONDON SW1P 3NZ. The Inter Faith Network for the UK, 5-7 Tavistock Place, LONDON WC1H 9SN.

### Resources

Your local RE Centre. Your own neighbours. CTS publications 40-46 Harleyford Road, LONDON SE11 5AY. The Committee for Other Faiths. Churches' Commission for Interfaith Relations, Church House, Great

### Suggested Reading

Religions in the UK: a multi-faith directory, published by the University of Derby in association with the Inter Faith Network for the UK. ISBN 0 901437 68 9.

*This leaflet has been prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote, through a correct understanding of dialogue founded in prayer, the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.*

+ Charles Henderson  
Chairman

## COMMITTEE FOR OTHER FAITHS PUBLICATIONS

**Getting to Know People of Other Faiths series:** Catholics and Other Faiths, Our Neighbour's Faith and Ours - a Catholic introduction to living with neighbours of other Faiths. What is Islam?, What is Buddhism? Who was the Buddha?, What is Hinduism?, The Mosque, What is the Baha'i Faith?, Our Sikh Neighbours, Is God at work outside the Church?, Christian Prayer and Eastern Meditation, What is Daoism?, Prayer and Prayers in Islam, What is Jainism?, Hindu Festivals, What is Shinto?, Who are the Zoroastrians? Aspects of Judaism, African Traditional Religion. The full set, one each of 18 leaflets, is available for £3.00 post free. Orders up to 25 leaflets will be charged at 10p per leaflet plus £1.00p postage and packing. Orders in bundles of 50 of the same leaflet £5.00 post free.

**Family Life in... series:** Catholic Family Life (in preparation), Jewish Family Life, Family Life in Islam, Family Life among Sikhs, Hindu Families, Family Life in Buddhism: set of leaflets £1.00, 50 of one leaflet £5.00.

**Ways of Sharing Faith** (summary of Dialogue and Proclamation) is also available at 20p each post free, £5.00 for 50. **Hospital Chaplaincy and Other Faiths 20p, £6.00 for 50.**

**ORDERS may be sent to:** CFOF, 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1BX.  
Please make cheques payable to: **NCF (Other Faiths)**

*Further information and copies of these leaflets can also be obtained from. Westminster Interfaith Centre: St Anne's, Underwood Road, LONDON E1 5AW.*