

Ways of Sharing Faith

A Summary of 'Dialogue and Proclamation', Rome 1991

Foreword

In May 1991 two Vatican Departments, the Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, issued a document of principles and guidelines for interfaith work entitled 'Dialogue and Proclamation'. The two congregations, in consultation with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and with Bishops throughout the world, had been working on the document since 1986.

The purpose of 'Dialogue and Proclamation' is to reassert the need for us both to share our faith and also to listen to others sharing theirs; it is to demonstrate that each one of these approaches does not render the other redundant, irrelevant or inappropriate and it is to study the relationship between the two. The Committee for Other Faiths of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

felt it important that the fundamental teaching contained in this document should be made more readily available to the many people in our country whose life, work or spiritual concern brings them into direct contact and dialogue with people of other faiths. This leaflet 'Ways of Sharing Faith' is a reduced version and summary of 'Dialogue and Proclamation.'

**The Bishops' Committee for Other Faiths.
4th November 1993.**

Introduction

Rapid communications and mobility mean that now many people are more aware of the different religions and of the impact these have on the lives of their members. The important role played by the different religious traditions cannot be overlooked. This broader awareness of the situation raises many questions and issues.

In 1965 the Second Vatican Council stressed both the importance of dialogue between different religions and also the duty of the Church to proclaim Jesus Christ (NA 2).

In 1964 Pope Paul VI established the Secretariat for Non-Christians. This is now called the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

The Secretariat defined Evangelisation as including:

presence; solidarity with humankind; commitment to social development and human liberation; inculturation; liturgical life, prayer and contemplation; interreligious dialogue and collaboration; witness and proclamation; catechesis.

However, dialogue between Christians and members of other religions is only gradually being understood. For while some people fail to see the value of dialogue, others feel that dialogue means that the proclamation of the Gospel has lost its urgency.

Pope John Paul II speaks of the unity of the whole human race which exists in spite of differences between religions and he speaks of the role of the Church as an effective sign of this unity.

He has also said:

“Just as interreligious dialogue is one element in the mission of the Church, so the proclamation of God’s saving work in Our Lord Jesus Christ is another. There can be no question of choosing one and ignoring or rejecting the other.” (CID 1987).

Terminology

EVANGELISATION refers to the full mission of the Church to bring the Good

News into all areas of human life in order to transform life and cultures from within and make them new. (EN 18).

DIALOGUE consists in a witness to one’s own beliefs and in a common exploration of different religious convictions. It is concerned with respect for truth, religious freedom and mutual understanding. It should permeate all the activities of the Church and its relations with people and communities of other faiths.

PROCLAMATION is the clear communication of the Gospel message. It is an invitation to faith in Jesus Christ, which can be public, or part of a private conversation. Proclamation leads to catechesis, which aims to deepen faith. Proclamation is not the same as evangelisation, but just one aspect of it. (EN 22)

CONVERSION is “the penitential return of the heart to God in the desire to submit one’s life more generously to Him” (DM 37). Conversion also refers to a change of religious adherence.

The Vatican Council tells us that we have an obligation to be just when we appraise other religions. We need therefore to be in close contact with them, and to have some theoretical knowledge of them.

Other faiths are to be approached with great sensitivity. For centuries they have striven for answers to the mysteries of the human condition and have expressed the spiritual experience, values and longings of millions of adherents.

Theological and scriptural background

The Council reaffirmed the traditional doctrine that God offers salvation in Jesus

Christ to all people of good will and that Jesus Christ died for everyone.(cf GS 22)

It acknowledged that the positive values in other religions (and in the lives of their believers) come from the presence of God through the universal action of the Holy Spirit.

'Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral good found among non-Christians, as well as their social and cultural values' (NA 2). However, if these values are to be made perfect in Christ, mission is necessary.

The Scriptures make plain that from the beginning of creation God made a Covenant with all peoples (Gn 1-11). Indeed people who were not Israelites are proposed by New Testament writers as models of faith. (eg. Heb 11:4-7)

The prophets understood God's salvation as extending through Israel to other nations and to the whole world.

Jesus himself entered dialogue with men and women who were not members of the Chosen People and he recognised their goodness (Mt 8:5-13). Jesus Christ is also the Word of God that enlightens every person. Paul attacked the Gentiles who failed to recognise God in His creation but he praised those who revered the unknown God (Acts 17:22-34).

The early Fathers often made negative judgements about other religions but they also showed openness recognising that God had already in an incomplete way manifested himself outside the Christian Church in preparation for the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ. St Augustine stressed the universal presence of the mystery of Christ

even before the Incarnation.

Pope John Paul II explicitly recognises the presence of the Holy Spirit in members of other religious traditions and in history before the time of Christ. (RH 6). The Holy Spirit is present in the prayer of every person whether they are Christian or not. It is in that practice of what is good in their own religion and by following their consciences that members of other religions respond to God's invitation. In this way they receive salvation in Jesus Christ even though they do not recognise Him as their saviour. (AG 3 9 11.)

The Church and other Faiths

The Church is the seed and the beginning of the Kingdom of God which is inseparable from Jesus and from his work. Members of other religious traditions who respond to God's call according to their own conscience are open to the Spirit and are related to the Church which is the visible sign of God's Kingdom.

The Church's mission is to foster the Kingdom of our Lord and his Christ (Rv 11:15). The Church recognises that God's Kingdom is to be found in an incomplete way outside its confines in the hearts of the followers of other religious traditions who are living by the evangelical values of the Gospel. It is easy to discern the fruits of the Spirit in the lives of individuals whether or not they are Christian. What is more difficult is to identify which elements in other religions are grace-bearing.

For although other religions have positive values they also reflect the limitations of the human spirit. Some fundamental elements of the Christian religion are incompatible with some aspects of other religions.

Christians in a peaceful way have to challenge others about some of their beliefs; they also have to allow their own faith to be questioned. Founded by God the Church is holy but her members are not perfect, they are constantly in need of renewal and reform.

Dialogue

God offers salvation in an 'age long dialogue' to humankind. In faithfulness to God, the Church must also be in dialogue with all people.

Pope Paul VI said 'interreligious dialogue is fundamental if the Church is to collaborate in God's plan. It has a place within the Church's saving mission. The Church must show respect and love towards all people' (Assembly of Council for Interreligious Dialogue 1984).

Interreligious dialogue is valid because its aim is deeper conversion towards God. Conversion may, or may not, include a decision to leave one's spiritual 'home' in order to join another.

Sincere dialogue implies both mutual acceptance of differences, even of contradictions, and respect for free decisions taken by people according to their consciences.

There are four forms of dialogue:

Dialogue of life takes place when people try to live in harmony, sharing their joys and sorrows, their problems and preoccupations.

Dialogue of action occurs when people of different faiths work together for human development and liberation.

Dialogue of theological exchange is when specialists seek to understand each others' religious heritage and appreciate each

other's spiritual values.

Dialogue of religious experience occurs when people, rooted in their own religious tradition, share their spiritual riches with people of other faiths.

The different forms of dialogue are interconnected. For instance, contacts in daily life and a common commitment to action will normally develop into cooperation in promoting human and spiritual values.

Under the guidance of the Pope and the bishops, all local Churches, and all their members are called to dialogue.

Local Churches are called to stand up for human rights, proclaiming justice, and denouncing injustice whatever the religious allegiance of the victims. They must join with others in trying to solve the great problems facing the world, and work together in education for justice and peace. The cultural contexts of dialogue, both secular and religious, must also be recognised.

Partners in dialogue must be committed to truth and to allowing themselves to be transformed by truth. They must enter it from the integrity of their own faith. Christians must remain firm in their belief in Jesus Christ as the only mediator between God and man, and also in their belief that God manifests himself to the followers of other religions.

Christians receive the fullness of truth in Jesus Christ, but individual Christians may not grasp that truth fully. In fact truth is not a **thing** we possess but a **person** by whom we allow ourselves to be possessed.

Christians must be prepared to learn the positive values of other traditions and be

prepared to revise preconceived ideas. In this way Christians will discover that true dialogue deepens faith, increasing their awareness both of the distinctive elements of the Christian message and of the active presence of the mystery of Jesus Christ beyond the visible boundaries of the Church.

Past history, an insufficient grounding in one's own faith and in the beliefs and practices of other religions, as also cultural and language differences, all make dialogue more difficult. Mis-understanding and lack of conviction about the value of interreligious dialogue; suspicion about other people's motives; lack of openness, political, economic, racial and ethnic intolerance, growing materialism and religious indifference are also barriers in dialogue.

But in spite of the difficulties, the Church's commitment to dialogue remains firm and irreversible. Dialogue has in fact been successful and has already led to growth in mutual understanding and active cooperation. It has had a positive impact on the Church and led to renewal and greater openness.

Proclamation

Jesus' command is to proclaim the Gospel. Witnessing, making disciples, baptising and teaching are all aspects of the Church's mission.

Jesus Himself did not proclaim the Good News by word alone. He proclaimed it by His actions, His attitudes and His choices, and through His whole life, death and resurrection.

Therefore the mission of the Church is, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to proclaim the Kingdom both by word and deed, continuing the work of Jesus.

The proclamation of the early church was world wide. 'Only in Jesus is there salvation, for, of all names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved' (Acts 4:11- 12).

Paul's mission was to win 'the obedience of faith among all the nations' (Rm 1:5), because God 'desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and people, the Man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all' (1 Tim 2:4-6).

John said 'We ourselves have seen and testify that the Father sent his Son as the saviour of the world' (1 Jn 4:14). The Christian message is a powerful one, through it the word itself becomes an interior presence 'anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make a home in him' (Jn 14:23).

Every evangeliser relies on the power of the Spirit to proclaim salvation in Christ. Often the most powerful witness is given precisely when the disciple is most helpless and yet remains faithful.

The presentation of the Gospel message is not an option for the Church, but a necessary duty, commanded by Jesus. It is irreplaceable. For it makes it possible for non-Christians to turn freely to the Lord in belief and find that their inner hopes are infinitely surpassed.

The Church does not proclaim in a void. The Holy Spirit is already present among the hearers of the Good News even before the Church's missionary action reaches them. Many have already responded implicitly to God's offer of salvation in Jesus Christ. One

sign of this is their sincere practice of their own religion.

The Church must discover the right way of announcing the Good News. Jesus revealed the meaning of the Kingdom only with infinite care, gradually unveiling the full implications of his message, namely his identity as the Son of God and also the scandal of the Cross.

His closest disciples reached full faith only through the Easter experience and through the gift of the Spirit. Today people must go through this same process of discovery and of commitment.

Proclamation must be patient. It must respect people's freedom and even their slowness to believe. (EN 79). Proclamation must have trust in the Spirit, have 'fidelity to the message whose servants we are' (EN 4) and it must not be in isolation from the Church.

Proclamation must be humble, because the revelation of Jesus Christ is a free gift, and also because the messengers do not always live up to the Gospel.

Proclamation must respect the presence of the Spirit in the hearts of the listeners for God is the 'principle agent of Evangelisation' (EN 75).

Proclamation must be in the form of a dialogue, not aimed at a passive listener but shaped to the culture and spiritual traditions of those being addressed. It must be intelligible to them, responding to their deepest aspirations.

If the Church is to proclaim the Gospel properly it must accompany it with prayer and penance, meditation, liturgy and the Eucharist.

Proclamation suffers if there is a gap between word and deed, between the Christian message and the way Christians live it, and also if Christians fail to proclaim the Gospel because they are ashamed.

Proclamation also suffers when Christians lack respect for other believers or when they have that attitude of cultural superiority that links the Christian message to a particular culture.

Sometimes attempts at proclamation in the past aroused suspicion from other religions who feared the destruction of their religion and culture. A lack of human rights and religious freedom, and also persecution make proclamation difficult - but the Cross is the source of life.

When a religion is identified with a national culture or a political system, it can lead to intolerance or to the legal banning of conversions. Proclamation is also difficult when people are indifferent.

Where proclamation is impossible, the Church carries out her evangelising mission through presence and witness, through work for human development and through dialogue.

Conclusions

The Church encourages dialogue with other religious traditions, and she also fosters dialogue among other faiths. In sharing together, the different religions collaborate to promote truth and life, holiness, justice, love and peace. These are all dimensions of Christ's Kingdom.

Dialogue and proclamation are both authentic elements in the Church's mission, both are legitimate and necessary. True dialogue

presupposes the desire to make Jesus Christ better known, while proclaiming Jesus Christ must be carried out in the Gospel spirit of dialogue. One and the same Church and indeed one and the same person can be diversely engaged in both.

Christians in dialogue have a duty of responding to the expectations of others to receive information about the content of the Christian faith. Christians with a deep love of Jesus are motivated to share Him with others, but they should regard it as quite normal that followers of other religions should desire to share their faith as well.

All Christians are called to be involved personally in both proclamation and dialogue, which are two ways of carrying out the one

mission of the Church. There should be special training for them.

Studies, which take into account each different religion, its geographical area and its socio-cultural context, should be undertaken on the relationship between dialogue and proclamation.

Special attention must be paid to young people who live in a pluralistic world. They meet the followers of other religions at school, work, in youth movements and other associations and within their own families.

More than tasks to be accomplished, dialogue and proclamation are graces to be sought in prayer.

Abbreviations:

- AG - Ad Gentes - Vatican II, 1965.
- CID - Assembly of the Council for Interreligious Dialogue, John Paul II Rome 1987.
- EN - Evangelii Nuntiandi, Paul VI, 1975.
- ES - Ecclesiam Suam - Paul VI, 1964.
- DM - Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission - Rome 1984.
- GS - Gaudium et Spes - Vatican II, 1965.
- NA - Nostra Aetate - Vatican II, 1965.
- RH - Redemptor Hominis - John Paul II, 1979.
- RM - Redemptoris Missio - John Paul II, 1991.

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 "Getting to Know People of Other Faiths" and this leaflet offer 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, What is Christianity?, Muslims and the Question of Fasting. The full set, one each of 20 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.

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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: 23, Kensington Square, LONDON W8 5HN.



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