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INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE – A RISK OR AN OPPORTUNITY?

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We develop in multi-cultural and multi-religious societies. To say this is to state the obvious. There is no religiously homogenous society. In Europe, from kindergarten onwards, young children rub shoulders with companions of all origins and different religious affiliations. There is nothing surprising about this if one thinks of what Paul Tillich wrote: “Religion is the substance of culture” (in *Théologie de la culture*, éd. Placet 1978 p. 92; [*Theology of Culture*, 1959]). History knows no non-religious cultures!

Nevertheless in Europe from the eighteenth century onwards a conviction began to appear that faith is incompatible with reason. Although he was a believer, Descartes was to apply his methodical doubt to matters of faith. This current of thought was to give birth to the philosophy of the Enlightenment: reason has access to truth on its own. Natural moral standards, tolerance, deism or even, for some, atheism led to the belief that man is self-sufficient. After the considerable progress of the sciences (Newton died in 1727), the development of travel (and missions) and unresolved social crises, it seemed to many that Christianity, with its dogmas and moral teaching, did not serve progress. All people were thus considered to belong to a common humanity and, endowed with reason, easily discovered that a natural religion exists, without dogma and without fanaticism. The individual sufficed unto himself. There was no need to look to religion to explain man’s origin, nor to await a happiness beyond this earth. Thus man is placed at the centre of the world and the supernatural is eliminated. At the level of ideas, this vision of things was to lead to Scientism (all that human reason does not justify does not exist) and at the level of achievements, to the French Revolution (to organize society without God), culminating in the twentieth century with the two forms of totalitarianism (Marxism-Leninism and the Nazi ideologies).

It is very obvious that the Church contested this vision of things and maintained that to exclude the religious from reason was to amputate man, created in the image of God. Pope Jean-Paul II's Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* expresses it well: "In God there lies the origin of all things, in him is found the fullness of the mystery, and in this his glory consists; to men and women there falls the task of exploring truth with their reason, and in this their nobility consists" (no. 17).

But this God whom we dismissed in the past is reappearing in public discourse today. News stands are full of books and magazines on religious subjects, esotericism and the new religions. "The revenge of God" (Gilles K  pel) has been spoken of. Today, one cannot understand the world without religions. And this – for here indeed is the great paradox of the current situation – is because they are seen as a danger: fanaticism, fundamentalism and terrorism have been or still are associated with a perverted form of Islam. It is not, of course, a question of the true Islam practised by the majority of this religion's followers. Still today it is a fact that people kill for religious reasons (the assassination of the Chaldean Archbishop of Mosul). I read that 123 Christians met with death in 2007 in Iraq, India and Nigeria because they were Christian. The reason is that religions are capable of the best as well as of the worst: they can serve holiness or alienation. They can preach peace or war. Yet it is always necessary to explain that it is not the religions themselves that wage war but rather their followers! Hence the need, once again, to conjugate faith with reason. For to act against reason is in fact to act against God, as Pope Benedict XVI said at the University of Regensburg on 12 September 2006: "In the beginning was the $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ '.... *Logos* means both reason and word – a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason.... A reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion to the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures".

Thus we are in a world in which because of material and human precariousness, the dangers of war and the hazards of the environment, in the face of the failure of the great political systems of the past century, men and women of this generation are once again asking themselves the essential questions on the meaning of life and death, on the meaning of history and of the consequences that amazing scientific discoveries might bring in their wake. It had been forgotten that the human being is the only creature who asks questions and questions himself. It is remarkable that *Nostra Aetate*, the

Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican Council, should underline this aspect of things in its introduction: “Men look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence. The problems that weigh heavily on the hearts of men are the same today as in past ages. What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is upright behaviour, and what is sinful? Where does suffering originate, and what end does it serve? How can genuine happiness be found?” (n. 1).

Thus we are all condemned to dialogue. What is dialogue? It is the search for an inter-understanding between two individuals with a view to a common interpretation of their agreement or their disagreement. It implies a common language, honesty in the presentation of one’s position and the desire to do one’s utmost to understand the other’s point of view.

Applied to interreligious dialogue, these presuppositions make it easier to understand that in the context of religion it is not a question of being “kind” to others to please them! Nor is it a matter of negotiation: I find the solution to problems and the matter is closed. In interreligious dialogue it is a question of taking a risk, not of accepting to give up my own convictions but of letting myself be called into question by the convictions of another, accepting to take into consideration arguments different to my own or those of my community. All religions, each one in its own way, strive to respond to the enigmas of the human condition. Each religion has its own identity but this identity enables me to take the religion of the other into consideration. It is from this that dialogue is born. Identity, otherness and dialogue go together.

My Christian faith proclaims that Jesus “the true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world” (Jn 1:9) This means that in every human being there is the light of Christ. Consequently, all that is positive existing in religions is not without shadows. All that is positive shares in the great Light which shines on all the lights. One then understands better the prologue of *Nostra Aetate* and the document “Dialogue and Proclamation”: all that is true and holy in every religion is accepted, strengthened and brought to its completion in Christ. It is the logic of the Incarnation: the Logos assumes, purifies and glorifies human nature! But be careful: we do not say “all religions are of equal value”. We say “All those in search of God have equal dignity”!

The aim of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, established by Paul VI on the day of Pentecost 1964, is to apply this vision of things which emerged from the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (the Second Vatican Council's shortest declaration). The Dicastery has three goals:

- to further mutual knowledge, respect and collaboration among Catholics and the members of non-Christian religions;
- to encourage and coordinate the study of these religions;
- to promote the training of people destined for interreligious dialogue.

It is important to emphasize that the artisans of this interreligious dialogue are not officials of our Dicastery but members of the faithful and pastors from the local Churches. We only intervene to help them in order to encourage in a doctrinally correct manner knowledge and collaboration among believers who are called, in the very first place, to convert, that is, to draw close to God and submit to his will. This type of dialogue is an essentially religious activity.

Our Council is structured as follows:

- a group of members who are Cardinals and Bishops from various countries, who meet at a Plenary Assembly every two/three years;
- a group of consultants: about 30 specialists from more or less everywhere;
- the staff of the Dicastery.

All together we endeavour to follow the path marked out by Benedict XVI: “to examine God’s mystery in the light of our respective religious traditions and wisdom so as to discern the values likely to illumine the men and women of all the peoples on earth, whatever their culture and religion.... Our respective religious traditions all insist on the sacred character of the life and dignity of the human person.... Together with all people of good will, we aspire to peace. That is why I insist once again: interreligious and intercultural research and dialogue are not an option but a vital need for our time” (*Address to the members of the Foundation for Interreligious and Intercultural Research and Dialogue*, 1 February 2007).

It is always necessary to return to *Nostra Aetate*, particularly paragraphs nos. 2 and 3: “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 differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is ‘the Way, the Truth and the Life’ (Jn 1:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (II Cor 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life” (no. 2). And it is necessary to mention the special relations which unite Christians and Muslims who “worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty... who has also spoken to men” (no. 3), as well as the existing bonds with the Jews, from whom “the Church ... received the revelation of the Old Testament” and to whose race, “according to the flesh” Christ and the Apostles belonged (cf. no. 4).

Then one understands better, as the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (7 December 1990) said, that interreligious dialogue “does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest”, but “is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills”. Thus, “through dialogue, the Church seeks to uncover the ‘seeds of the Word’, a ‘ray of that truth which enlightens all men’, these are found in individuals and in the religious traditions of mankind”. Consequently, “the religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church: they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ’s presence and of the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all” (no. 56, *passim*).

One can say that from the end of the Second Vatican Council to our own day, Catholics have moved on from tolerance to encounter, to arrive at dialogue:

- + dialogue of life: good neighbourly relations with non-Christians which encourage the sharing of joys and troubles;
- + dialogue of works: collaboration with a view to the well-being of both groups, especially people who live alone, in poverty or sickness;
- + dialogue of theological exchanges which permits experts to understand in depth the respective religious heritages;

+ dialogue of spiritualities which makes available the riches of the life of prayer of both to all, in both groups;

Interreligious dialogue therefore mobilizes all those who are on their way towards God or towards the Absolute.

Believers who carry on this kind of dialogue do not pass unnoticed. They are a society's wealth. Since citizens who adhere to a religion are the majority, there is a "religious fact" that is essential, to the extent that all religious faith is practised in the heart of a community (the "confessions")! By their number, by the length of their traditions, by the visibility of their institutions and their rites, believers are present and can be identified. They are appreciated or they are opposed, but they never leave one indifferent, which brings their leaders to get on with other communities of believers without losing their identity and to meet each other without antagonism. Civil authorities must only take note of the religious fact, watch in order to guarantee the effective respect for freedom of conscience and religion, and only intervene if this freedom is damaging to the freedom of non-believers or disturbs public order and health.

But more positively, it is always in the interest of leaders of societies to encourage interreligious dialogue and to draw on the spiritual and moral heritage of religions for a number of values likely to contribute to mental harmony, to encounters between cultures and to the consolidation of the common good. Moreover all religions, in different ways, urge their followers to collaborate with all those who endeavour to:

- assure respect for the dignity of the human person and his fundamental rights;
- develop a sense of brotherhood and mutual assistance;
- draw inspiration from the "know-how" of communities of believers who, at least once a week, gather together millions of widely differing people in the context of their worship in authentic spiritual communion;
- help the men and women of today to avoid being enslaved by fashion, consumerism and profit alone.

To conclude, then, to the question: "Interreligious dialogue: a risk or an opportunity"?

I answer, it is both!

If this is so, you might ask me: “But then why is it that religions frighten people?”

I answer that we should not fear religions: they generally preach brotherhood! It is their followers of whom we should be afraid. It is they who can pervert religion by putting it at the service of evil designs. Religious fanaticism, for example, is a perversion of religion, as is the justification of terrorism in the name of religious values. Religious leaders must have the courage to condemn and to excise these “tumours”.

Unfortunately, however, other factors contribute to fostering a fear of religions:

- the fact that we are very often ignorant of the content of other religions;
- the fact that we have not met the believers of other religions;
- our reticence in confronting other believers for the simple reason that we have not very clear ideas about our own religion!
- and then, of course, the acts of violence or terrorism perpetrated in the name of a religion.

And, further, the difficulties encountered in practising their faith by believers belonging to minority groups in countries where a majority religion enjoys a privileged status because of history or law.

In order to remedy this situation it is necessary to:

- have a clear-cut spiritual identity: to know in whom and in what one believes;
- consider the other not as a rival, but as a seeker of God;
- to agree to speak of what separates us and of the values that unite us.

Let us take the case of Islam. What separates us cannot be camouflaged:

- the relationship with our respective Scriptures: for a Muslim the Qu‘ran is a “supernatural dictation” recorded by the prophet of Islam, while for a Christian, Revelation is not a book, but a Person;

- the Person of Jesus, whom Muslims consider to be only an exceptional prophet;
- The dogma of the Trinity which leads Muslims to say that we are polytheists.

But there are also realities which see us united and sometimes even collaborating in the dissemination of the same cause:

- faith in the oneness of God, the Author of life and of the material world;
- the sacred character of the human person which has permitted, for example, collaboration of the Holy See and of Muslim countries with the United Nations Organization to prevent resolutions that damage families;
- vigilance to avoid symbols considered “sacred” from being made the object of public derision.

I would like to indicate also, some concrete areas of life where Christians and Muslims together can contribute effectively to the common good of society:

- First, by witnessing to a life of prayer, both individual and communal, recalling that "Man does not live on bread alone". In our world today it is a must to stress and to show the necessity of an interior life.
- Secondly, Christians and Muslims faithful to their spiritual commitments can help to understand better that freedom of religion means much more than to have a Church or a Mosque at their disposal (this is obvious and the minimum you can ask) but it is also to have the possibility to take part in public dialogue through culture (of schools, universities) and also through political and social responsibilities in which believers must be models.
- Together Christian and Muslims must not hesitate to defend the sacredness of human life and the dignity of the family, as they did in the framework of recent meetings organized by the United Nations Organization.
- They should not refrain from uniting their efforts fighting against illiteracy and disease.
- They have the common responsibility to provide moral formation for youth.
- Finally, they must be peacemakers and teach the pedagogy of peace in the family, in the church and mosque, at school and at university.

In the "Open Letter" of the 138 Muslim leaders addressed to the Christian religious leaders, it is opportunely stressed that Christian and Muslims represent 55% of the world population and consequently, if they are faithful to their own religion, they can do a lot for the common good, for peace and harmony in the society of which they are members.

Such a context is favourable for calmly tackling ancient, thorny "subjects": the question of the human person's rights; the principle of freedom of conscience and of religion; reciprocity with regard to places of worship.

Lastly, what engenders fear is above all a lack of knowledge of the other. It is necessary for us to first become acquainted with one another in order to love one another! This is God's will. As Pope Benedict XVI said in Turkey: "We are called to work together, so as to help society to open itself to the transcendent, giving Almighty God his rightful place..." (*Meeting with the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate*, Conference Room of the "Diyanet", Ankara, 28 November 2006).

Finally, I should say that Christians and Muslims are heralds of two-fold message:

1. Only God is worthy of adoration. Therefore all the idols made by men (wealth, power, appearance, hedonism) constitute a danger for the dignity of the human person, God's creature.
2. In God's sight, all men and women belong to the same race, to the same family. They are all called to freedom and to encounter Him after death.

If I may say so, believers are prophets of hope. They do not believe in fate. They know that gifted by God with a heart and intelligence, they can with His help, change the course of history in order to orientate their life according to the project of the Creator: that is to say, make of humanity an authentic family of which each one of us is a member. Anyway, for us Christians we must always remember Paul's exhortation in the letter to the Romans: "Let us then pursue what leads to peace and to building up one another." (14:19) It is a beautiful roadmap, isn't it!

But having said that, we must be humble. We have not explained God! We have to stop on the threshold of mystery, "...the Mystery of God where man is grasped instead of grasping, where he worships instead of reasoning, where he himself is conquered, instead of conquering." (Karl Rahner)

Full text is also available on www.catholicchurch.org.uk