

5. OUR MISSION AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Introduction

128 1. If we imagine ourselves with the Trinity, in the spirit of Ignatius, looking down on the earth as the third millennium of Christianity is about to unfold, what do we see? More than five billion human beings – some male, some female; some rich, many more poor; some yellow, some brown, some black, some white; some at peace, some at war; some Christian (1.95 billion), some Muslim (1 billion), some Hindu (777 million), some Buddhist (341 million), some of new religious movements (128 million), some of indigenous religions (99 million), some Jewish (14 million), some of no religion at all (1.1 billion).¹ What meaning and what opportunity does this rich ethnic, cultural and religious pluralism that characterizes God's world today have for our lives and for our mission of evangelization? And how do we respond to the racism, cultural prejudice, religious fundamentalism and intolerance that mark so much of today's world?

129 2. General Congregation 34 encourages all Jesuits to move beyond prejudice and bias, be it historical, cultural, social or theological, in order to cooperate wholeheartedly with all men and women of good will in promoting peace, justice, harmony, human rights and respect for all of God's creation. This is to be done especially through dialogue with those inspired by religious commitment, or who share a sense of transcendence that opens them to universal values.

The Church and Interreligious Dialogue

130 3. Vatican II has exhorted all Catholics to a dialogue which will "acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found in other religions, and the values in their society and culture" in order to "join hands with them to work towards a world of peace, liberty, social justice and moral values."² The Holy Father has repeatedly asked Jesuits to make interreligious dialogue an apostolic priority for the third millennium.³ In a world where Christians comprise less than 20%

¹*International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (January 1995), p. 25. According to the editor, these statistics are taken from the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, updated and projected using a new demographic analysis provided by researchers at the United Nations. As with all statistics they must be used with care.

²Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate* nn. 2, 3.

³John Paul II, "Ad quosdam Societatis Jesu Sodales" (27 February 1992): AR 18 (1982) p. 728; Homily at General Congregation 33 (2 September 1983): AR 18 (1983) p. 1093; Allocution to General Congregation 34, 5 January 1995, n. 6; cf. Appendix I.

of the population, it is imperative that we collaborate with others to achieve common goals. In the context of the divisive, exploitative and conflictual roles that religions, including Christianity, have played in history, dialogue seeks to develop the unifying and liberating potential of all religions, thus showing the relevance of religion for human well-being, justice and world peace. Above all we need to relate positively to believers of other religions because they are our neighbours; the common elements of our religious heritages and our human concerns force us to establish ever closer ties based on universally accepted ethical values. Dialogue is "an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity"⁴ and it should "never be made a strategy to elicit conversions."⁵ To be religious today is to be interreligious in the sense that a positive relationship with believers of other faiths is a requirement in a world of religious pluralism.

131 4. The Society must foster the *four-fold dialogue* recommended by the Church:

"a. The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.

b. The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.

c. The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.

d. The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values."⁶

132 This Dialogue of Theological Exchange can more easily be carried on with religions which have a written tradition. However, the dialogue with indigenous religions is equally important. These religions express a sense of the divine and the transcendent

⁴John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 56.

⁵Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, published in G. Rosales and C. G. Arévalo (eds), *For All the Peoples of Asia*, New York 1992, Orbis, p. 167.

⁶*Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, 1991), n. 42.

which must be "approached with great sensitivity, on account of the spiritual and human values enshrined in them."⁷ They play an important role in creating ecological harmony and human equality and have developed a great variety of expression and ways of communicating religious experience through devotional practises, ritual, dance and song, which are a true source of blessings.

The Society and Inter-Religious Dialogue

133 5. Our experience in the service of faith and promotion of justice over the last twenty years has brought many of us into closer contact with believers of other religions. They have helped us to respect the plurality of religions as the human response to God's salvific work in peoples and cultures. We realize that God, who wants all people to be saved, leads believers of all religions to the harmony of the Reign of God in ways known only to him.⁸ God's Spirit is in continuous dialogue with them. "Interreligious dialogue at its deepest level is always a dialogue of salvation, because it seeks to discover, clarify and understand better the signs of the age-long dialogue which God maintains with humanity."⁹ An open and sincere interreligious dialogue is our cooperation with God's ongoing dialogue with humanity. "By dialogue we let God be present in our midst, for as we open ourselves to one another, we open ourselves to God."¹⁰ Interreligious dialogue is therefore "a work desired by God," "an integral element of the Church's evangelizing mission,"¹¹ which finds expression in the service of faith and the promotion of justice.

134 6. Our *service of faith* takes place today in a world that is becoming increasingly conscious of the plurality of spiritual experiences in diverse religions. Dialogue helps us to recognize that these religions are graced with an authentic experience of the self-communication of the divine Word and of the saving presence of the divine Spirit.¹² In ecclesial communion we

⁷*Ibid.*, n. 14.

⁸Cf. Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) Statement of 20 November 1979, in Rosales and Arévalo (*op. cit.*) p. 115.

⁹John Paul II, "Address to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue," 13 November 1992. Cf. *Bulletin of the Council* n. 82 (1993), p. 6.

¹⁰John Paul II, "Address to the Leaders of non-Christian Religions", Madras, 5 February 1986; AAS 78 (1986) p. 769 f.

¹¹John Paul II, "Address to the Pontifical Secretariat for Non-Christians," 28 April 1987 (Cf. *Bulletin of the Secretariat* no. 66 (1987), p. 224; *Dialogue and Proclamation (op. cit.)*, n. 38.

¹²Cf. FABC Statement of November 1986 in Rosales and

experience in Jesus Christ the uniquely concrete revelation of the divine Word and the universally significant outpouring of the divine Spirit. With love and conviction we share this experience with our sisters and brothers of other religions, for "we are all pilgrims setting out to find God in human hearts."¹³

135 7. Interreligious dialogue and *proclamation* of the Gospel are not contrary ministries, as if one could replace the other. Both are aspects of the one evangelizing mission of the Church.¹⁴ "These two elements must maintain both their intimate connection and their distinctiveness; therefore they should not be confused, manipulated or regarded as identical, as though they were interchangeable."¹⁵ Dialogue reaches out to the mystery of God active in others. Proclamation witnesses to and makes known God's mystery as it has been manifested to us in Christ. Our spiritual encounter with believers of other religions helps us to discover deeper dimensions of our Christian faith and wider horizons of God's salvific presence in the world. "Dialogue is a new way of being Church."¹⁶ Through proclamation others encounter the compassionate God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whose Spirit brings about a new creation in all realms of life. Without in any way relativizing our faith in Jesus Christ or dispensing with a critical evaluation of religious experiences, we are called upon to grasp the deeper truth and meaning of the mystery of Christ in relation to the universal history of God's self-revelation. "It is the same Spirit, who has been active in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church, who was active amongst all peoples before the Incarnation and is active amongst the nations, religions and peoples today."¹⁷

136 8. Our involvement in the promotion of justice takes place in a world in which the problems of injustice, exploitation and destruction of the environment have taken on

Arévalo (*op. cit.*), p. 259.

¹³Paul VI, "Address at the Eucharistic Congress," Bombay, 12 March 1964; AAS 57 (1965) pp. 124-126.

¹⁴"*Evangelizing mission*, or more simply *evangelization*, refers to the mission of the Church in its totality.... Proclamation... occupies such an important place in evangelization that it has often become synonymous with it and yet it is only one aspect of evangelization.... Dialogue means all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment." *Dialogue and Proclamation (op. cit.)*, n. 8-9.

¹⁵John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 55.

¹⁶Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam Suam*, n. 63.

¹⁷FABC Statement of November 1986, in Rosales and Arévalo (*op. cit.*), p. 259.

global dimensions. Religions have also been responsible for these sinful elements. Hence our commitment to justice and peace, human rights and the protection of the environment has to be made in collaboration with believers of other religions. We believe that religions contain a liberating potential which, through interreligious collaboration, could create a more humane world.¹⁸ Through this process the Holy Spirit overcomes the structures of sin and creates anew the face of the world until God will be all in all. Jesus always focused on the human person as the centre of religious beliefs and practises. Hence commitment to integral human liberation, especially of the poor, becomes the meeting point of religions. "Christians will join hands with all men and women of good will and work together in order to bring about a more just and peaceful society in which the poor will be the first to be served."¹⁹

Guidelines

- 137 9. Though inter-religious dialogue is an integral element of Jesuit mission, the forms of its practise depend on the concrete situations of our life and work. Indigenous religions and the great world religions, the new religious movements and the fundamentalist groups invite us to a dialogue that is proper to the perspective and challenge of each. Hence no universally valid guidelines can be given for the dialogue itself. What is important is that we grow in openness to the divine Spirit to be able to walk with others on a "fraternal journey in which we accompany one another towards the goal which God sets for us."²⁰ The following guidelines offer an orientation for developing a culture of dialogue in our life and ministry.
- 138 9.1 Our spirituality should be characterized by a "deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills".²¹ Consequently, we must be alert to the global quest for a contemplative experience of the Divine, and compassionate towards the poor who seek justice and freedom. We will seek to be enriched by the spiritual experiences and ethical values, theological perspectives and symbolic expressions of other religions.

¹⁸John Paul II "Address to the Leaders of non-Christian Religions", Madras, 5 February 1986; AAS 78 (1986) p. 768.

¹⁹John Paul II, Message to the People of Asia, Manila, 2 March 1981. See *Bulletin* of the Secretariat for Non-Christians 46 (1981), p. 14.

²⁰John Paul II, Allocution at the Day of Prayer for World Peace, Assisi, 27 October 1986; AAS 79 (1987) p. 868.

²¹John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 56.

- 139 9.2 Genuine dialogue with believers of other religions requires that we deepen our own Christian faith and commitment, since real dialogue takes place only between those rooted in their own identity. For this reason, we need a solid foundation in philosophy and theology, with a special focus on the person and mystery of Jesus Christ. GC 34 urges all Jesuits to study carefully the decrees of Vatican II, the papal documents, and the statements of episcopal conferences on the value and necessity of interreligious dialogue.
- 140 9.3 In our formation a closer acquaintance with the beliefs and practises of other religions must be given through special courses and actual involvement in a pluralistic milieu. Since the core of all true religion consists in its capacity to lead people to an authentic and deeper spiritual experience, it is important that we strengthen in our formation the mystical dimension of Christian faith and Jesuit spirituality in encounter with the spiritual traditions of others.
- 141 9.4 Our proclamation of the Gospel must be sensitive to the religious and cultural background of those to whom it is addressed, and "attentive to the signs of the times through which the Spirit of God is speaking, teaching and guiding all men and women."²²
- 142 9.5 Theological reflection must dwell on "the significance in God's plan of the different religious traditions and the experiences of those who find in them their spiritual nourishment."²³ It has to explore the meaning of the Christ-event in the context of the spiritual evolution of humanity articulated in the history of religions.
- 143 9.6 Our commitment to justice demands that we share in the life and the struggles of the poor and work with believers of other religions in creating basic human communities founded on truth and love.²⁴ In social action we willingly collaborate with them in the prophetic denunciation of the structures of injustice and in the creation of a world of justice, peace and harmony.
- 144 9.7 Our *social and cultural centres* will identify and promote the liberating dynamics of the local religions and cultures, and initiate common projects for the building of a just social order.
- 145 9.8 Our educational institutions will conscientize their students on the value of interreligious collaboration and

²²*Dialogue and Proclamation*, (*op. cit.*), n. 78.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴FABC Statement of November 1985 in Rosales and Arévalo (*op. cit.*), p. 254.

instil in them a basic understanding of and respect for the faith vision of the members of the diverse local religious communities, while deepening their own faith response to God.

146 9.9 Pastoral service will prepare our Christian communities for dialogue. We must be concerned with people beyond the limits of the Christian community and help them experience God's compassionate love in their lives. "We are all children of God and we must all work together in harmony for the mutual benefit of all."²⁵ The Church is a "community in pilgrimage journeying with peoples of other faiths towards the Kingdom that is to come."²⁶ In this process she is called to be the voice of the voiceless, in particular of the young, women and the poor.

147 10. Some Jesuits have already been trained for the fourth aspect, and are actively engaged in conversations among experts in religious traditions. Their experience has been rewarding and fruitful. Their own faith has been deepened and shared with others, and their respect for the spirituality of other religions has grown. But given the task ahead, their number is inadequate.

148 11. GC 34 encourages each Assistancy to prepare Jesuits able to become experts in the fourth aspect of interreligious dialogue. Since this dialogue is becoming a global concern, such planning should include inter-Provincial and international exchange of persons, and be done in collaboration with other groups. Jesuits involved in this aspect of interreligious dialogue have a two-directional responsibility: 1) to engage in honest, respectful dialogue with experts in the other religious traditions; 2) to communicate the fruits of this dialogue to those of the Society engaged in the first three aspects of dialogue, in order to help them understand and appreciate its urgency. Since this is a new and uncharted frontier, there will certainly be misunderstandings and misconceptions. We are once again invited to make ours the presupposition of St Ignatius: "to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbour's statement than to condemn it."²⁷

Concrete Responses

149 12. Dialogue with the *Jewish* people holds a unique place. The first covenant, which is theirs and which Jesus the Messiah

²⁵Paul VI, "Address to Non-Christians", Rome, 5 March 1967. See *Bulletin of the Secretariat for Non-Christians* 5 (1968), p. 65.

²⁶FABC Statement of August 1987 in Rosales and Arévalo (*op. cit.*), p. 300.

²⁷*SpEx* [22].

came to fulfil, "has never been revoked."²⁸ A shared history both unites us with and divides us from our elder brothers and sisters, the Jewish people, in whom and through whom God continues to act for the salvation of the world. Dialogue with the Jewish people enables us to become more fully aware of our identity as Christians. Since the publication of *Nostra Aetate*²⁹ in 1965, the Catholic Church has radically renewed the Jewish-Christian dialogue after centuries of polemics and contempt in which our Society shared. To enter into a sincere and respectful relationship with the Jewish people is one aspect of our efforts to "think with and in the Church."

150 13. The emergence of *Islam* as a religious, political and economic force is a fact of our world even in Western Christian countries; it has truly become a global religion. Although rivalry, conflict and even war in previous centuries have made dialogue in recent times more difficult, both the Church and the Society have striven to build bridges of mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims. In Vatican II the Church expressed her esteem for Muslims, recognizing the positive values in Islam and pointing to the close bond Muslims have with the Church.³⁰ The relations of the Society of Jesus with Muslims go back to St Ignatius himself, from the time he discerned his vocation at Manresa as the call to go to Jerusalem and remain there among Muslims. The experience of Jesuits who have approached Muslims with preparation, knowledge and respect has often shown that a fruitful dialogue is indeed possible. However, in some places Jesuits have found it difficult to dialogue with Muslims, especially in states based on Islamic Law. In such situations they feel apprehensive about possible violations of religious rights and even of basic human rights. To face such situations, Jesuits need great faith, courage and the support of the rest of the Society.

151 14. *Hindus* in general welcome the Christian initiatives of dialogue. Their threefold way of spiritual growth through ardent devotion, profound meditation and action for the welfare of all offers an integrated vision and way of life. Their profound philosophical enquiries and mystical perceptions, their noble ethical values, "ashram" heritage and rich symbolism of popular religious practises, all open broad avenues for fruitful dialogue. In the context of social discrimination and revivalist movements, partly the result of religious ideologies, Jesuit involvement in dialogue between Hindus and Christians becomes a great imperative.

152 15. *Buddhism*, in its many forms, is a major religion influencing the lives of millions of people around the world.

²⁸John Paul II, Allocution to the Jewish Community, Mainz, 17 November 1980; AAS 73 (1981) p. 80. (Cf. Rom 11:29).

²⁹Cf. Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, n. 4.

³⁰Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, n. 3; *Lumen Gentium*. n. 16

The Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path of the Buddha propose a view of this world based on its essential inadequacy and a way of life which, through the practise of ethical discipline, wisdom and meditation, leads to a state of inner liberation and spiritual enlightenment. Buddhism calls its followers to a selfless universal compassion for all living creatures; it has a special appeal for contemporary men and women seeking a true, personal spiritual experience. Dialogue with Buddhists enables Christians to join hands with them to face the basic frustration so many feel today and address together problems of justice, development and peace; in addition it invites Christians to rediscover the contemplative riches within their own tradition.

153 16. The phenomenon of religious *fundamentalism* which is found in all religions, including Christianity, poses serious difficulties. A passionate concern to return to the foundations of each religion combined with a reaction to the onslaught of modern secular culture have given great impetus to the growth of revivalist movements. The history of oppression of one religion by another dominant one has produced animosities and prejudices which add fuel to such movements. Often religious feelings and structures are manipulated by political, economic, cultural or ethnic power groups in order to safeguard their vested interests. All this results in fundamentalist ideologies and movements within religious communities. Our Jesuit responsibility is "to understand why the members of a revivalist movement have taken their particular stance, and to discover in an unprejudiced manner their legitimate intentions and hurt feelings".³¹ This can pave the way for dialogue and reconciliation, which would demand from us the willingness to acknowledge our past intolerant attitudes and injustices towards others.³² Apostolic discernment should be used to determine what can be done in such situations.

Conclusion

154 17. As Companions of Jesus sent into today's world, a world characterized by religious pluralism, we have a special responsibility to promote interreligious dialogue. The Ignatian vision of reality provides the spiritual inspiration and ministerial grounding for this urgent task. It opens our eyes to the incomprehensible mystery of God's salvific presence (*Deus semper major*) in the world. It makes us sensitive to the sacred space of God's direct dealing with human persons in history. The contemplation of God labouring in all things helps us to discern the divine spirit in religions and cultures. The Kingdom meditation enables us to understand history as God's history

³¹FABC Statement of 3 November 1988 in Rosales and Arévalo, (*op. cit.*), p. 309.

³²*Guidelines for A Dialogue Between Muslims and Christians*, Secretariat for Non-Christians (Ancora Press, 1971), pp. 74-77.

with us. The Jesuit heritage of creative response to the call of the Spirit in concrete situations of life is an incentive to develop a culture of dialogue in our approach to believers of other religions. This culture of dialogue should become a distinctive characteristic of our Society, sent into the whole world to labour for the greater glory of God and the help of human persons.

Recommendations To Father General

- 155** 18. General Congregation 34 asks Father General to explore the feasibility of setting up a Secretariat for Interreligious Dialogue to promote and coordinate Jesuit initiatives in this area. The secretary could help to ensure that training programmes for Jesuits are organized in view of a wider involvement in dialogue. He could publish a Bulletin for the exchange of Jesuit experiences and theological reflections in the area of dialogue.
- 156** 19. The General Congregation asks Father General to explore the possibility of establishing a Department for the Study of Religions at the Gregorian University. This Department could offer academic courses on Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions, as well as on the Theology of Religions. It could establish academic rapport with other universities and centres for religious studies in various parts of the world.
- 157** 20. The General Congregation asks Fr. General to explore the possibility of expanding the scope of the apostolate of the Jesuit Community of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Jerusalem so that, in dialogue and in concert with other Christian centres in Jerusalem, the Jesuits there might explore programmes in interreligious dialogue among Jews, Christians and Muslims, along with their continuing work of biblical and spiritual renewal of Jesuits from various Provinces.