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**Inter-religious dialogue: a secular challenge <sup>1</sup>**

I am glad to share the experience of the Master Programme on “Intercultural and interreligious conflicts management” that runs in Pisa University. The topic we have to study this afternoon is very wide. I would say a lot, but to respect the time I have chosen only few points.

For Catholic Church inter-religious (and inter-cultural) dialogue is a recent challenge. The officially beginning dates back to 1965, when – at the end of the Second Vatican Council – was approved *Nostra Aetate* Declaration, concerning the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions. Ecumenical (*id est* Inter-Christian) dialogue was already weak: rather than dialogue, ecumenical goal was unity. Better: reach unity of all Christians confessions with Rome (Catholic church) as common head. But this is another topic.

Relationship with non christian religions were a completely different matter. Other religions were simply «untrue» religions. That worked also for monotheistic ones: Jews were a «deicide» people, Moslems were «unfaithful». To save themselves they had to convert to Catholic church. Second Vatican Council changed completely this perspective. Catholic Church understood that

«Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?» (NA, 1).

In front of those items Catholic Church admits that all religions «have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and a more developed language» (NA, 2).

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<sup>1</sup> Testo rivisto dell'intervento svolto a Torino il 23 maggio 2007 in occasione del Corso – organizzato dalla Fondazione “La Gregoriana” e dall'Istituto internazionale Maritain – per Diplomatici dei Paesi del Mediterraneo e del Medio Oriente su “The Catholic Church and the International Policy of the Holy See” [Rome (May 7-20, 2007) – Turin (May 21-27, 2007)], destinato alla pubblicazione negli Atti del Corso.



At the same time proclaims «and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.» (NA, 2).

In this context, Catholic Church regards with special esteem Moslems and Jewish, as Abraham's stock. Especially regarding Moslems, maintains: «Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, [nevertheless] this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom» (NA, 3).

If we look at these words using our own eye glasses, we must admit that *Nostra Aetate* Declaration is «a starting point for the improvement and development of relations between the Church and non-Christian religions». Probably, these generic words may appear «naïve ... but ... it would be difficult for the Council to come up with any more than it has»<sup>2</sup>.

This realism is important for dialogue.

You know this very well also due to your job. If you want a real communication you have to understand the signs that come from your interlocutor. Sometimes, these signs are free and open in some respects, closed and prohibitive in others. Nevertheless, *Nostra Aetate* give us a spirit of optimism, that we have to foster. «Dialogue becomes more than a cliché, and by dialogue I mean every relation with another as an 'other,' in which we accept to receive from the 'other' in order that we ourselves may grow religiously, and thus grow together with others»<sup>3</sup>.

Really, nowadays dialogue is our unique possibility. On the opposite side we find the clash of civilizations, wars, violence, terrorism.

Here come out our first problem: why religions – speaking about peace - make war? Jacob Neusner found three grounds:

a) in social context religions define a "we" against a "they", separating similars from different;

b) in psychological context religions teach to differentiate what is nearest resembling in an unique homogeneous set everything else is far;

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. "150th General Congregation, October 15, 1965," in Floyd ANDERSON, ed., *Council Daybook: Vatican II, Session 4, Sept. 14, 1965 to Dec. 8, 1965* (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1966), 140.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Thomas F. STRANSKY, "The Declaration on Non-Christian Religions," in John H. MILLER, ed., *Vatican II: An Interfaith Appraisal* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 337]



c) in political context religions offer an homogeneous doctrine for a generic political order that doesn't exist. In his opinion, all who believe in a unique God do believe different things according this unique God; really, «we that believe in God haven't yet begun to think "differences" as a religious possibility»<sup>4</sup>.

I agree with this religious perspective. Inter-religious dialogue is a religious item. But it is not only a religious item. It started as a religious matter, but nowadays it is also a political issue, because it involves the wider question about identities. Dialogue is very close to identity.

Second Vatican Council – *Nostra Aetate* particularly – help us to understand that one's personal identity, precisely as Catholics, can only be enhanced by the encounter with other religions. For example, Jesus cannot be adequately understood apart from God's covenant with Israel. Thomas Stransky wrote that Vatican II made a quantum leap in arriving at its own self-understanding: «*first* understand the others as they understand themselves to be, and only then evaluate the convictions and actions of others with criteria from the Roman Catholic tradition. Furthermore, in that very dialogue, the Roman Catholic Church begins to understand itself more authentically. Through Vatican II the Church began to appreciate that dialogue helps also to foster its own integrity»<sup>5</sup>.

That's right for all religions. Who knows only one religion, knows no religion [Neusner].

Recently we experienced inter-religious dialogue as the common place where is possible build peace. Assisi is the icon of this effort (I would say: *jihad*). Firstly, in 1986, when Pope John Paul II invited religious leaders all over the world to praise God for peace; secondly when he reiterated his invitation in 2002, for a shared commitment of religions in front of the world. All religions agree about: a) a heightened sense of the value of peace as a gift from God, to be prayed for with ever greater trust, according to the practice and tradition of each religion; b) the desire to demonstrate solidarity joining together in shared supplication for peace; c) the urgent need to witness together a commitment to peace and justice, both in daily life and in the great decisions of political and social life. A witness which the secularized

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jacob NEUSNER, "Parlare di pace, fare la guerra. Il paradosso delle religioni", in Comunità di Sant'Egidio, ed., *Religioni in dialogo per la pace* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1991), 99-113.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Thomas F. STRANSKY, "Reflections on 'Nostra Aetate': 20 Years After Vatican II", *The Month* (May 1986): 164. Author's italics.



world, though far removed from religion, often demands and of which it feels itself in need.

In my opinion, we live an actual challenge; we cannot superficially set aside what divides us, but we must decide to meet really one another. To do this, also inter-religious dialogue must be led in a secular (it. *laico*, fr. *laïque*) way! I mean: is important that we believe and trust in the force of dialogue.

Dialogue is not only a tool; it is a purpose; it's a way of life. First of all it requires listening and real comprehension. To have a "secular dialogue" we must be sincere and broadminded. We must introduce someone, present our and his/her real ideas and purposes without hidden place or "double spacing" (hidden agendas or double talking)<sup>6</sup>.

Dialogue is dialogue, and not a way to convert! Dialogue is not tolerance, it's exchange (it doesn't come from latin *colloquium*, but *commercium*). We can appreciate each other only through this secular inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. We don not need neither a diplomatic dialogue nor a formal one. We need a secular, concrete, dialogue.

Sure, we must believe in our own ideas and faith; we can also try to convince that our ideas are rights and our own faith is "really true", but we cannot speak primarily to convert and to convince as it were the unique way to win. We cannot be sure that we are right and the other is wrong. Dialogue is not a way to fight; its a way to live together. Moving from this point we may remain in our own identity, understanding and respecting the "other". So, we will be able to appreciate our identity as a singularity, and at same time other identities as singularities. That will teach us that we all are plural. We could wear our own dress, understanding who wear different dresses: we will understand that our dresses are simply coverings. Under these coverings are men and women.

Through dialogue we can understand religious and cultural diversities as opportunities to meet each other. Diversities are not barriers, are not borders. Nobody is always total right, or total wrong. Through dialogue we can live better; always continuing to introduce each other and have known. If we will be able to have a "secular dialogue" we can become friends.

Let me repeat that this secular dialogue is a need.

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<sup>5</sup>Cf. Pierluigi CONSORTI, "Dialogo interreligioso e laicità", in Enza PELLECCIA e Pierluigi CONSORTI (edd.) *Diritti, tolleranza, memoria. Una città per la pace* (Pisa: Plus-University press, 2005) 273-286.



To close this speech, I would propose some specific problems according to intercultural and interreligious dialogue. First of all, the language. To talk with you this afternoon I cannot use my language; same for you. We need an “hub language”! This is not only a problem of words, it is rather for concepts! In my experience, we use often the same words giving them different meanings. It can happen for “religion” or “culture”, for “freedom” or “human rights”, *et caetera*. For example, Prof. Bonanate remembered us one of the most important political and juridical principle for European (and western) societies: *cuius regio eius et religio*. And he said that it represents «the preemptory and definitive solution to the problems that originate from religion and politics interlacing». I do not totally agree. Concerning this relationship (politics and religion in Western societies) I think that other “slogans” are most appropriated: for example “*Silete theologi in munere alieno*” [Alberico Gentili: “Keep silent theologians in matters which concern others!”], or “*etsi deus non daretur*” [Grozio: as though there were no God]. Those – in my opinion – explain better the actual separation between politics and religion in western societies. You see, this item could be a problem in front of Islamic tradition. You see: we need dialogue.

But we have a problem: we don’t love secular dialogue. We prefer teach each other. This is not only a religious problem. Related to democracy, for example, some of us think that western democracy is an absolute value. And they think that it is to enforce also by using arms. But which is the western democracy? The American one or the French? The British or the Italian? The Russian or the Spanish? You see: there is not democracy: there are democracies. And what about Asian democracies? Are there Islamic democracies? What do we really know about Islamic political principles? What do you really know about European democracies?

You see, we need dialogue.

And about human rights? We say “human rights” according to 1948 Universal Declaration or to French Declaration? Are they the same? And what about the Islamic – or the Arabic – declarations? Are there God rights?

Sometimes we say that we are looking for a dialogue to understand and to become friends. But really we think that we have to teach and that we can become friends only if we share the same principles. Related to Islam, some western governments pretend a deeper reception of western values as common ground to dialogue. In this way, will be not secular dialogue.



Only some days ago Pope Benedict XVI remembered how neither liberalism nor capitalism are a right answer for mankind. Nevertheless, somebody thinks that is possible to ground friendship on enmity; justice on inequity. Regrettably, who refers to a “clash of civilizations”, doesn’t think to equal civilizations. In his opinion there is only a civilization that must defend itself from lower civilizations. Only a rational religion against irrational ones; a right society against dictatorships; free women against subjugated women.

You see, we need dialogue.

To close, I want remind that Catholic Church is not a Western experience! «Catholic» means «Universal». You went in Rome, I was born in Rome and I lived in Rome for 46 years: Holy See seats in Rome, but Catholic Church is not Rome, is not an European experience. Who says that is wrong: Catholicism is an universal religion; it is all over the world! Please, do not confuse Catholic Church with western societies. Christianity is not liberalism, is not capitalism!

You see, we need dialogue. To dialogue we must live together, and we need peace. Dialogue is the first result of peace; peace is a consequence of dialogue.