

MATURING AS BELIEVERS THROUGH INTERRELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERS

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ABSTRACT

We believe that God is present, actively at work, and reveals Himself in various ways through the religions of humankind. Interreligious dialogue in all its forms can be mutually enriching and can help us in knowing and loving God more and in maturing as believers. It can also promote harmony and facilitate collaboration in building up the human family. The effective pastoral worker is one who is open to God's Spirit in engaging with people of other faiths, and one who promotes meaningful inter-religious dialogue among peoples on all levels.

This listing features official Church documents on interfaith dialogue that have been published during and since the era of the Second Vatican Council. Included here are papal encyclicals as well as documents produced by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, by Bishops' Conferences and by Congregations within the Vatican (e.g., the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith).¹

In 1964, the Pope issued the first papal document in history to promote interfaith dialogue, called *Ecclesiam Suam*. The Second Vatican Council's *Nostra Aetate* (1965) was truly a landmark in interfaith relations. For Catholics, the document initiated new understandings and new directions in the area of promoting dialogue and reconciliation with the followers of other religions. This document prompted other important notes, statements, and encyclicals that address more specific issues, elaborate particular contexts, or advance ideas and concepts that have been expressed in *Nostra Aetate*.

In 1974, *Evangelization in Modern Day Asia* was published by the bishops of Asia, and it highlights that the dialogue with all peoples, cultures, and religions is part of the Church's mission. In the following year, 1975, in his apostolic exhortation, "Evangelization in the Modern World" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*), Pope Paul VI states, "The Church respects and esteems these non-Christian religions because they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people. They carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God."

On its 20th anniversary, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue publishes "The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission" (1984). And several years later, a significant papal encyclical on mission activity, called *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), covers a strong interreligious theme. In it, Pope John Paul II declares, "Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice dialogue."

A joint statement by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples entitled, "Dialogue and Proclamation" (1991), affirms that interreligious dialogue and proclamation are

1. "Official Church Documents on Interfaith Dialogue," *A Canadian Roman Catholic Mission Society*, <https://www.scarboromissions.ca/interfaith-dialogue/the-church-dialogue/official-church-documents-on-interfaith-dialogue>, accessed 18 March 2019.

distinct but interconnected undertakings within the Church's evangelizing mission. The *Dominus Iesus* (2000), a declaration by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, upholds that interreligious dialogue does not weaken the calling and determination to proclaim that Jesus Christ is the one-and-only Savior for all humanity.

Now, we will elaborate the theological concept of interreligious dialogue, in such a way that will prove that "dialogue is not merely a discussion, but an empathy indeed." To disprove what some probably think, that this activity and movement would narrow down the faith life, this article will argue that "interreligious encountering would bring the community of believers to wider aspects of life," that would lead to "mutual enrichment" for all parties of believers who have engaged in this effort. However, don't get this pastoral tenet wrong by thinking of the irrelevance of proclamation. "Dialogue with Proclamation" remains relevant but with a renewed understanding of proclamation.

A. *Dialogue is not merely a discussion, but an empathy indeed*

On Pentecost Sunday, 1964, Pope Paul VI instituted a special department of the Roman Curia for relations with the people of other religions. It was called the Secretariat for Non-Christians, and it was later renamed the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) in 1988.² The PCID is the bureau of the Catholic Church for the promotion of interreligious dialogues in accordance with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council's *Nostra Aetate*.

According to PCID, dialogue is a two-way communication. It implies speaking and listening, giving and receiving, for mutual growth and enrichment. It includes witness to one's own faith as well as openness to that of the other. It is not a betrayal of mission of the Church, nor is it a new method of conversion to Christianity. This has been clearly stated in the encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*. This view is also developed in the two documents, "The Attitude of the Catholic Church towards the Followers of Other Religious Traditions: Reflections on Dialogue and Mission" (1984), and "Dialogue and Proclamation" (1991).

2. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_pro_20051996_en.html, accessed 23 January 2019.

“Interreligious dialogue” had once been mistaken as Christians meeting around tables with the scholars and leaders of other religions discussing idealistic topics. Although not as commonly misunderstood as before, people have remained misguided and failed to understand properly. Typically on the basis of defective understanding, “dialogue” is thought to imply that what ought to be doing primarily is talking with people of other faiths.

Besides, “discussion” can easily turn into “debate” and “colloquium,” into an impersonal form of information-sharing. It is better, people may say, held on the neutral level of academic settings rather than conducted by members of religious communities who are bringing prejudices into the discussion.

Talking or conversing plays a role, but discussion must not dominate, nor must the shared life reduced to ceremonial events and reflections.³ Dialogue is far broader than only discussion. In the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (#57),⁴ Pope John Paul II indicates how broad a dialogue is, and it embraces many forms and expressions, “from exchanges between experts in religious traditions, from a sharing of spiritual experiences to the ‘dialogue of life,’ in which believers bear witness before each other in daily life, and help each other to build a more just and fraternal society.”

Above all, good interreligious engagements will not persuade the other side but instead work together for mutual understandings. Genuine dialogue also necessitates an attitude of empathy. Here, words, ideas and questions arise not only from knowledge and reasoning, but primarily flowing from feelings of fraternity and shared humanity. Genuine dialogue would happen if the persons involved open their minds and hearts.

Important considerations for dialogue are the “fear of offending the other” and that “solidarity” must not bring us the Christian to diminish his faith for the other.⁵ So we have twofold condition for dialogue. First, those who engage in this movement should have self-awareness about the knowledge of their identity.

3. Thomas Michel, S.J., “Towards a Pedagogy of Religious Encounter,” http://groups.creighton.edu/sjdialogue/documents/articles/michel_religious_encounter.htm, accessed 25 October 2018.

4. In the coincidence with the 25th anniversary of Vatican II’s Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*), *Redemptoris Missio* (“The Mission of the Redeemer”) was released. It is an encyclical by Pope John Paul II, published on 7 December 1990. With the subtitle, “On the permanent validity of the Church’s missionary mandate,” the Pope highlighted the importance of renewing the Church missionary commitment.

5. Samir Khalil Samir, S.J., *111 Questions on Islam* (San Francisco, Ignatius: 2008), 198–200.

Second, they desire to inform the other person about their position in its entirety and learn from the other's position in its complexity.

As Pope Francis said while adding to the spirit of sisterhood among the different religious followers, "Our religious traditions are diverse. But our differences are not the cause of conflict and dispute, or a cold distance between us. We have not prayed against one another today, as has unfortunately sometimes occurred in history. Without syncretism or relativism, we have rather prayed side by side and for each other."⁶

B. Interreligious encountering would bring the community of believers to wider aspects of life

In today's multireligious cultures, interreligious encounters take place in many situations. They strongly form our sights of the other. If positive, such encounters convey a double advantage: They generate personal bonds, and they shape our view of the other's religion. This religion is then no longer a religion of outsiders, but of families, for whom we feel compassion. In this way, such dialogues can abolish prejudices, or simply help overcome ignorance and form common empathy, and lead to everyday cooperation in many grounds.⁷

Traditionally, we have had four types of interreligious encounter with which we are already familiar: dialogue of life, action, theological exchange, and the sharing of religious experience. *First*, the Dialogue of Everyday Life is one of the simple ways in which we see the beauty of interreligious faith. The interreligious dialogue of everyday life is nothing other than the way we respect people who belong to different faiths. We coexist in society, in a country where people of different faiths and beliefs live side by side. Surpassing these differences, we have learned to live with the society by exercising tolerance.

Second, the Dialogue of Action, which has many similarities and connections with the dialogue of everyday life. However, this one demands more strategic actions with particular objectives and systematic steps to achieve them. This must not necessarily be manifested in a big and expensive project. Cleaning

6. World Day of Prayer for Peace, Assisi, 20 September 2016, <https://dimmid.org/?SEC=B56CE535-6DC7-41DA-AA53-AF4C926E2CA5>, accessed 13 October 2018.

7. Ingeborg Gabriel, "All Life is Encounter: Reflections on Interreligious Dialogue and Concrete Initiatives," *Religious Education*, vol. 112, no. 4 (July–September): 318–19, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00344087.2017.1325096?needAccess=true>.

and taking care of the environment or keeping well-being in the neighborhood could be a means to create a dialogue of action when worked out by a group of people of different religious background.

Third, the Dialogue of Religious Experience is the happening when people share the common beauty of other religions. The person gets a deeper understanding of other religions and begins to trust them. He gains a strong belief in religious pluralism as a result of this experience.

Fourth, concerning the Dialogue of Theological Exchange, the document “Dialogue and Proclamation” clearly sets out for the first time the various forms of dialogue. This document describes the dialogue of theological exchange as “where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values.”⁸

The document explains how the four forms of dialogue are interdependent and interconnected. The dialogues of life and of action require at least some theological sources. This assists those engaged in dialogue to avoid an ignorant and naïve approach. It guards Catholics, for instance, from the risks of relativism or of syncretism. Exchanges on the level of religious experience can give more life to theological discussions. These in turn can enlighten experiences and encourage closer contacts.⁹ We may say that those four interactions take place on the levels of being, doing, reflecting, and thinking on the experience of the Divine.

The important aspect of conversation happens when the life of the people has been changed into a better situation after the action of encountering. When the Christians meet the Muslims, they will exchange ideas on the ordinary matters, like how to revere the elderly, support the young to maturity, care for the sick and the poor in their midst, and work together for social justice, welfare, and human rights.

The substance of interreligious encounter is composed of the concerns seen every day in plural societies. Such communities involved in this new awareness would not only be trained theologians who have usually engaged in ceremonial “dialogue” states, but more significantly those who have practiced

8. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, “Dialogue and Proclamation” (#42), Rome, 19 May 1991, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html, accessed 25 October 2018.

10. *Ibid.*, “Dialogue and Proclamation” (#43).

regular interactions on a daily basis, like housewives, manual laborers, nurses, students, medical doctors, and other professionals.

That vision would suggest the swing of accent in the interreligious dialogue. Shifting the actors, namely from scholars and religious leaders to ordinary and lay believers. The transformation implies the reformulation of dialogue, specifically from the elite and Church clergies to the mission of the grassroots level that is exercised by common Christians and their neighbors.

Pope Francis, in his homily of the 2015 Christmas eve mass, trying to link the significance of the Child Jesus with today's values and the lifestyle of the people, told the audiences, "Amid a culture of indifference which not infrequently turns ruthless, our style of life should instead be devout, filled with empathy, compassion and mercy, drawn daily from the wellspring of prayer,"¹⁰ The Pope keeps inviting us to be sensitive of other people needs in daily life. In this sense, any possibility to encounter should be initiated, because from encounter with our neighbors would arise the sharing of life.

C. *"With my identity and my empathy, I walk with the other": Mutual enrichment*

The Fifth Bishops' Institute for Social Action (BISA) in June of 1979 also exactly mentioned the advancing of interreligious dialogue in their concluding report. They suggest that the significance of faith and service in day-to-day life be a subject and a starting point for dialogue with other religions. "All mankind is rooted in the Christ-event. This anthropology is operative even in those who do not know Christ. Our main point of contact is the search for a new humanity and a new human family."¹¹

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10. Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis, Christmas Midnight Mass, 24 December 2015, <https://pope-francis-quotes.tumblr.com/post/135873710572/24th-december-pope-francis-homily-during>, accessed 27 August 2018.
 11. "BISA V: Final Statement and Recommendations of the Fifth Bishops' Institute for Social Action," 21 May to 1 June 1979, Baguio City, Philippines, in FAPA I, 217–21; "BISA V: Final Statement and Recommendations of the Fifth Bishops' Institute for Social Action," no. 30. FABC Papers no. 131, *A Glimpse at Dialogue in Asia 30th Anniversary First Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs* (BIRA). FABC Office of Ecumenical & Interreligious Affairs (OEIA), p. 11, <http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/FABC%20Paper%20131.pdf>, accessed 21 September 2018.

Pope Francis,¹² on his strategic account for the Asian Church writes, “And so, with my identity and my empathy, my openness, I walk with the other. I don’t try to make him come over to me, I don’t proselytize.” By this road map proposition, he wishes to highlight that a clear sense of one’s own identity and a capacity for empathy are the point of departure for all dialogue. He reiterates what Pope Benedict had told us clearly: “The Church does not grow by proselytizing, but by attracting.”

Much earlier, Pope John Paul II, in his Address to Muslims, Brussels (19 May 1985), had emphasized an element of mutual enrichment. He writes, “All believers, Christian and Muslim, to come to know one another better, to engage in dialogue in order to find peaceful ways of living together and mutually enriching one another.”¹³ And to the Christians, on how they are supposed to see and understand the faith of their fellow Muslims and come up with collaboration, John Paul II, in his early Papacy, said, “to consider every day the deep roots of faith in God in whom also your Muslim fellow citizens believe, in order to draw from this the principle of a collaboration with a view to the progress of man, emulation in good, and the extension of peace and brotherhood in free profession of the faith peculiar to each one.”¹⁴

The personal testimony by Fr. Thomas Michel, who had engaged in dialogue with Muslims for a long time, is very edifying.¹⁵ He begins his story with one stimulating question, “Have my encounters with believing, practicing Muslims enriched my life?” He wonders whether God has also somehow used these encounters to make him a better Catholic.

Fr. Tom, as he has been usually called, writes his story about his life in Turkey. He was teaching in Turkey and had a humble apartment in a working-class neighborhood. His Muslim neighbors had acknowledged him as the “rahip.” This refers to the Qur’anic word (*rahib*) for a Christian monk.

He narrates his routine life in a city where he had lived. One afternoon, he returned home and found a man sitting and waiting for him. He usually locked his door when he was not at home. And the man surprised him by telling him

12. “Address Of Pope Francis To The Bishops Of Asia,” Haemi Shrine, 17 August 2014, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/august/documents/papa-francesco_20140817_corea-vescovi-asia.html, accessed 27 February 2019.

13. As quoted by Michel, “Towards a Pedagogy of Religious Encounter.”

14. Ibid. (Quoted from Homily at Mass, Ankara, 26 November 1979.)

15. Ibid., “Towards a Pedagogy of Religious Encounter.”

not to bother his house safety, since the women of the neighborhood were always around. He realized that locking the door was an indication he didn't trust neighbors. Since then, he never locked his door again

And the following days, often, he returned from the university and, to his surprise, he found that someone had left a covered bowl with rice and eggplant, or a few kebabs on the counter. After finishing the food, he used to wash the bowl and left it in the same place. But, puzzlingly, in a few days it would disappear. And on another day, he would find that his clothes had been washed, floors swept, shirts ironed and folded.

He never saw the persons who performed this kind service. And, at the end of the semester, it was time for him to leave that city. So he asked if he could meet them to thank them for their generous help. But the man surprised him by saying, "You don't have to meet them. They didn't do this for you; they did it for God, and God who sees all that we do will reward them. The Qur'an teaches that *rabiha* (monks) are one of the reasons why Christians are the closest community in friendship to Muslims, so it is an act of worship (*ibadah*) for us to treat you with kindness."

Fr. Tom writes his reflection that these women, despite of different religious belief and Muslims themselves, had epitomized Jesus's instructions on the Sermon on the Mount, "to perform one's charity without letting the left hand know what the right is doing." And he writes, "A shared life among believers in God can take many forms."

And through the journey for decades with Muslims in different countries, he finally believes, "God has worked in my life through my encounters with Muslims. . . . I can trust that the same Divine Spirit has been at work among my Muslim friends through their encounters with me. . . . They remain Muslims, as I remain a Christian . . . But none of us remains unchanged. . . . We are spiritually richer than before the encounter."

The proceeds of dialogue would go beyond mutual enrichment. By living side by side, people can overcome the negative preconceptions and labeling. Prejudices have been passed from one generation to the next, and are amplified and reinforced by the mass media, which is a huge challenge for living in harmony. Dialogue and encountering between different religious traditions and varied cultures need more innovative ways and methods of handling that situation then.

D. Critical question: Dialogue without proclamation?

We have acknowledged that dialogue is not a negotiating process in which one's faith is "given away" or even put at risk for the sake of peace. If dialogue is assumed as the partaking of life among the faithful, then the concern is doable and not something too hard to achieve. Christians merely make a determination how they may live together with other believers in peace, work together in harmony with the underprivileged, and do other upright conducts.

This, nevertheless, will test critically the focal and main Christian dogma. If the Christians are essentially sufficient by sharing life with their neighbors, where is the long tradition of proclaiming the Gospel by the Church, as also deep-rooted in the Gospels?

Based on the teaching of the Vatican Council II, and the debate has continued for more than half a century since the publication of *Nostra Aetate*, a question unsurprisingly arises. If people can be saved within their own religious traditions, why should the church engage in missionary activity? Is it not better to leave people where they are? At best, should it not be our aim to make Muslims better Muslims, Buddhists better Buddhists, and so on?

This question has been responded in *Redemptoris Missio*, where John Paul II says that proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue are not two conflicting elements.¹⁶ We cannot say that the time of proclamation is finished and that it must give way to dialogue. The church must always stay truthful to the Lord's command to proclaim the Gospel and to call people to embrace baptism and become members of the community of the faithful.¹⁷

When we examine the document "Dialogue and Proclamation," we will find that there is no theological tension between being a Church in dialogue and proclaiming the Gospel. There is the option of being a Church that is following the Spirit's lead to partake humanly in life with others. "Christians must always be aware of the influence of the Holy Spirit and be prepared to follow wherever in God's providence and design the Spirit is leading them. It is the Spirit who is guiding the evangelizing mission of the church. It belongs to the Spirit to inspire both the church's proclamation and the obedience of faith. It is for us to be

16. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* (#55–57) (1990).

17. *Ibid.*, (#46–47, 55); Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, "Evangelization and Interreligious Dialogue," https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/articles/fitzgerald_Oct03.htm, accessed 15 February 2019.

attentive to the promptings of the Spirit. Whether proclamation be possible or not, the church pursues her mission in full respect for freedom, through interreligious dialogue and witnessing to and sharing Gospel values. In this way the partners in dialogue proceed in response to the divine call of which they are conscious. All, both Christians and the followers of other religious traditions, are invited by God to enter in the mystery of his patience, as human beings seek his light and truth. Only God knows the times and stages of the fulfillment of this long human quest.”¹⁸

The documents like *Redemptoris Missio* and “Dialogue and Proclamation” have indicated that deep down inside in dialogue lies the clarity of Church teachings. We supposed to be intrigued by Fr. Dan Madigan’s writing, “The Questions that *Nostra Aetate* Chose to Leave Open.” He provokes the readers, focusing on the particular element of dialogue with Islam in *Nostra Aetate*, with at least three serious theological questions that has not been addressed: *Can structures (Church as religious system) save us? Is Muhammad a prophet? Is Qur’an the divine Word?*¹⁹

18. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, “Dialogue and Proclamation” (#84).

19. The nature of this paper is pastoral in purpose. We have found that feature in the approach and emphasis this paper takes and the flowing of the arguments it exhibits. Even though the highlights of this paper give a direction toward a tangible better life, like on how actions could be taken, and how the peaceful and harmonious life become visible and materialized, we should not neglect the theological challenges in interreligious encountering. Daniel A. Madigan SJ, “Nostra Aetate and the Questions it Chose to Leave Open,” *Gregorianum* 87.4 (2006): 781–96, https://www.acu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/223089/Nostra_Aetate_And_The_Questions_It_Chose_To_Leave_Open.pdf, accessed 15 January 2019.

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