

Letter to Presidents of Bishops' Conferences on the Spirituality of Dialogue

Your Excellency,

1. Though there have always been contacts between Catholics and the followers of other religions, the Second Vatican Council, and in particular the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, can be considered a watershed in these relations. It brought about a renewal in the outlook of the Church towards other religions. In the intervening years, guided by the teaching of the Pontifical Magisterium and by such documents as *The Attitude of the Church toward the Followers of Other Religions* (1984) and *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), Catholics have been making considerable efforts to meet the followers of other religions. They have undertaken various initiatives and, with time, these have increased in number and become more widespread. Encounters with people of other religions occur at the level of daily life, in the joint promotion of social projects, in the exchange of religious experience, and in formal exchanges where Christians and other believers discuss elements of belief or practice.

Catholics and other Christians engaged in such interreligious dialogue are becoming more and more convinced of the need of a sound Christian spirituality to uphold their efforts. The Christian who meets other believers is not involved in an activity which is marginal to his or her faith. Rather is it something which arises from the demands of that faith. It flows from faith and should be nourished by faith.

In October 1998 the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue took the *Spirituality of Dialogue* as the theme of its Plenary Assembly. At the end of the Assembly the Members thought it would be useful to share some of the reflections with our brothers in the episcopate around the world. They asked me to write to you to report on some of the considerations put forward during our meeting, and to request your reaction in view of an eventual document from our Council.

2. God is love and communion

God is love and communion. As St John tells us, God is love (cf 1 Jn 4:16). The mystery of the Most Blessed Trinity reveals to us that the Eternal Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, and this mutual love of the Father and the Son is the Person of the Holy Spirit. Moreover the Father communicates himself entirely to the Son who is God from God, Light from Light. The Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son is together with the Father and the Son one God who is communion in the depth of his mystery. This Trinitarian mystery of love and communion is the eminent model for human relations and the foundation of dialogue.

3. God communicates himself to humankind

Out of his bountiful love God decided to communicate himself to the human beings that he had created. The Only-Begotten Son of God took on human nature in order "to gather the scattered children of God" (Jn 11:52)., to restore communion between

humanity and God, to communicate divine life to people and finally to bring them to the eternal vision of God.

The Incarnation is the supreme manifestation of God's saving will. It is the way chosen by God to go in search of the human being, damaged and estranged from God by original sin, as the shepherd goes in search of the lost sheep. Incarnation means, on the one hand, that the Son of God assumed all that is positive in human nature. On the other hand, it takes the form of *kenosis*. As St Paul writes to the Philippians: "Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:5-8). This was the way chosen in the divine plan to reestablish communion between humankind and God, to recapitulate all things so that finally "God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28; cf. Eph 1:15). So when Christians meet other believers, they are called to have the mind of Christ, to follow in his footsteps.

4. Conversion to God

The Christian who wishes to enter into contact and establish collaboration with other believers must strive first of all to be converted to God. In this context conversion to God is understood as openness to the action of the Holy Spirit within oneself, seeking positively to discern the will of God, and readiness to do this will when it is known. The Christian is aware that everyone is bound to search for the will of God and to obey it as it is made known by informed conscience. Everyone can, and should, make progress in this commitment to seek and do God's will. Moreover, the more the partners in interreligious dialogue "seek the face of God" (cf. Ps 27:8), the nearer they will come to each other and the better chance they will have of understanding each other. It can be seen, therefore, that interreligious dialogue is a deeply religious activity.

5. Christian identity in dialogue

The Christian who meets other believers does so as a member of the Christian faith community, and therefore as a witness to Jesus Christ. It is important that the Christian should have a clear religious identity. Interreligious dialogue does not demand that the Christian should set some elements of Christian belief or practice aside, putting them as it were between parentheses, much less putting them in doubt. On the contrary, other believers want to know clearly whom they are meeting.

It is our firm conviction that God wants all persons to be saved (cf 1Tim 2:4) and that God can give his grace also outside the visible boundaries of the Church (cf LG 16; *Redemptor Hominis* 10). At the same time the Christian is aware that Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, is the one and only Saviour of all humanity, and that only in the Church which Christ founded are to be found the means of salvation in all their fulness. This should in no way induce the Christian to assume a triumphalistic attitude or to act out of a superiority complex. On the contrary, it is with humility and with a desire for mutual enrichment that one will meet with other believers, while holding firmly to the truths of the Christian faith. Interreligious dialogue, when conducted in this vision of faith, in no way leads to religious relativism.

6. Proclamation and dialogue

In dialogue the Christian is called to be a witness to Christ, imitating the Lord in his proclamation of the Kingdom, his concern and compassion for each individual person and his respect for that person's liberty. There is a need to rediscover the close connection between proclamation and dialogue as elements of the evangelizing mission of the Church (cf *Dialogue and Proclamation* 77-85). It will be seen that these elements are not interchangeable, nor are they to be confused, yet they are indeed related (cf *Redemptoris Missio* 55). Proclamation aims at conversion in the sense of free acceptance of the Good News of Christ and becoming a member of the Church. Dialogue, on the other hand, presupposes conversion in the sense of a return of the heart to God in love and obedience to His will, in other words, openness of the heart to the action of God (cf. *The Attitude of the Church toward the Followers of other Religions* 37). It is God who attracts people to himself, sending His Spirit who is at work in the depths of their hearts.

7. The need to understand other believers

The Christian who engages in interreligious initiatives feels more and more the need to understand other religions in order precisely to understand better the followers of these religions. It will be seen that there are many points of contact: belief in one God who is Creator, the aspiration to transcendence, the practice of fasting and almsgiving, recourse to

prayer and meditation, the importance of pilgrimage. The differences, however, should not be overlooked. A Christian spirituality of dialogue will grow if both these dimensions are maintained. While appreciating the workings of the Spirit of God among people of other religions, not only in the hearts of individuals but also in some of their religious rites (cf RM 55), the uniqueness of the Christian faith will be respected.

8. In faith, hope and charity

The spirituality which is to animate and uphold interreligious dialogue is one which is lived out in faith, hope and charity. There is faith in God, who is the Creator and Father of the whole of humanity, who dwells in light inaccessible and whose mystery the human mind is incapable of penetrating. Hope characterises a dialogue which does not demand to see instant results, but holds on firmly to the belief that "dialogue is a path towards the Kingdom and will certainly bear fruit, even if the time and seasons are known only to the Father (cf Acts 1:7)" (RM 57). Charity which comes from God, and is communicated to us by the Holy Spirit, urges the Christian to share God's love with other believers in a gratuitous way. The Christian is therefore convinced that interreligious activity flows out of the heart of the Christian faith.

9. Nourished by prayer and sacrifice

This spirituality is nourished by prayer and sacrifice. Prayer links the Christian with the goodness and power of God without whom we can do nothing (cf Jn 15:5). Without God's life-giving action, mere human activity is not able to effect any permanent spiritual good. Sacrifice strengthens prayer and promotes communion with

others. Christians learn from their faith to love other believers even when the latter apparently do not reciprocate, or at least not immediately. The teaching of Christ is that we must love with detachment, that we should be ready to walk the extra mile, that we should not look for revenge if we suffer wrong-doing but rather seek to overcome evil by good. This is a sign not of weakness, but of spiritual strength.

10. Your suggestions

In communicating the above reflections of our Plenary Assembly to our brothers in the episcopate, through you, the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences, I wish to ask for your own reflections and suggestions. It is obvious that these will take into account the experience of interreligious dialogue in your area, the difficulties encountered but also the fruits that have been evident. I would be grateful if your answer could reach me before September 1999. It will be extremely helpful to our Pontifical Council in the preparation of an eventual document on the Spirituality of Dialogue.

Thanking you for your kind cooperation, I remain,

Devotedly Yours in Christ

Francis Cardinal Arinze
President

Vatican City: 3 March, 1999

Towards a document on the Spirituality of Dialogue

- 1. What has been the experience of interreligious dialogue in your Diocese, in your area, in your country? What have been the major difficulties encountered? What would you see as the fruits of this dialogue?*
- 2. What has been the impact of relations with the followers of other religions on the spirituality of the Christians, lay-persons, religious men and women or priests, in your Diocese, area, country?*
- 3. What points of the letter on the Spirituality of Dialogue do you consider to be particularly important? Are there any which you would like to see further developed? Are there any points which have not been mentioned and which you would like to see included in a document on the Spirituality of Dialogue?*

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue
Via dell'Erba, 1
00120 Vatican City.