



Hope in God Working in Us

Richard J. Babao

“Becoming acquainted with other people and other cultures is always good for us; it makes us grow. And, why does this happen? It is because if we isolate ourselves, we have only what we have; we cannot develop culturally. But, if we seek out other people, other cultures, other ways of thinking, other religions, we go out of ourselves and start that most beautiful adventure called “dialogue.” Dialogue is very important for our own maturity, because in confronting another person, confronting other cultures, and also confronting other religions in the right way, we grow, we develop and mature.... This dialogue is what creates peace. It is impossible for peace to exist without dialogue.”

The foregoing is what Pope Francis said on August 21, 2013 to the students and teachers of the Seibu Gakuen Bunri Junior High School of Saitama, Tokyo, when they visited him at the Vatican. At our age it seems that it is not only sensible, but also really imperative for us to dialogue. If my memory serves me right, it was not like this decades ago, at least from a Filipino Catholic point of view.

Renewal in Vatican II. I was a child of the 1970s just when the teachings of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) were slowly being disseminated to the expectedly resistant Catholics. Growing up in a Catholic school environment all my life, I was assured that I was “protected” from the teachings of Protestants, other Christian churches and ecclesial communities, and even Islam. These were all present in Cotabato City

where I grew up; there a fair mixture of Christian and Muslim residents lived. I had prejudices and biases, because I really did not know those other religions. Unfortunately, like many others, I have grown to believe hear-say and false impressions. What I was not aware of was that interreligious consciousness was in fact slowly developing in me.

When I entered the seminary I realized that I had that hunger to discover and learn more about the peace process, first only in Mindanao, then later on in the country and the world. All my reflections and writings in the seminary and afterwards were about the Catholic relations with Muslims. I can cite three examples: ♦ "Tillich's Faith and Ultimate Concern in the Light of Terrorism Activities of Muslims in Mindanao" (during my philosophical studies); ♦ "The Spirituality of Dialogue: Its Dimensions towards a New Era of Christian-Muslim Relations (during my theological studies); and, ♦ "Understanding Islamization" (during my further studies). During those years of discovering, learning, reflecting, and meeting people, I realized I was ignorant about dialogue and relations with people of other religions. Even the Orthodox Church, closest to the heart of the Catholic Church, was foreign to me.

Broadening Horizons. The first international conference I attended alone was the Forty-fifth International Ecumenical Seminar in Strasbourg, France in July of 2011. At the registration, I learned with horror that of about eighty participants, only five were Catholics. What's more, after registering a



Lutheran pastor from New York jokingly remarked: “Let us take care of this Catholic!” Even when I knew he was just teasing me I really felt a chill go down my spine. With almost two years studying Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue, I thought I was already free of prejudices, specifically against Protestants. Yet, that *disturbing* feeling was telling me otherwise. My judgments were still present. After less than a day of being with the Lutherans, I said to myself: “They are good people, too!” The experience allowed me to challenge my childhood understanding of who the Protestants really are. I grew up in the time when the Church was shielding her members from learning non-Catholic interpretations and teachings. The incident, however, changed my way of looking at people and their faith.

When I started teaching Ecumenism (which also covered Interreligious Dialogue) at the San Carlos Seminary in Makati in 2013, I made it a point not to focus only on lectures and concepts. I made sure the seminarians meet other Christians and people of other faiths. In that way they see real persons whenever they think of a Muslim, a

Lutheran, a Buddhist, or a Mormon, or a person seemingly different from them.

I was under the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) missionaries for my primary education. Now I slowly understand why when we studied religion, my Muslim classmates would move to another classroom for their instruction in Islam. We were so impressed because they could write in Arabic. In high school we were under the Marist Brothers of Notre Dame of Cotabato, Boys’ Department; they had always encouraged the Muslims to pray after we pray in the school assembly and in the classrooms, giving us the opportunity to learn and respect each other’s faith, practices and traditions. In fact, in our innocence, we teased them with food during their month of fasting. Yet, there was no issue. No one went furious because of it. This is the reason why it confused me, knowing that it was so peaceful then in the classroom; yet, it was not automatically carried over in the community. There were kidnappings, extortions, killings, and bombings in many areas in Mindanao. Where was the peace seen in the classroom? Where was the respect that we genuinely shared? Were they limited

◆—————◆

“The Roman Catholic Church through Vatican II was very clear with her teaching on people of other religions when she said: ‘The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions’.”

◆—————◆

only within the boundaries of the schools? There was a void inside me that I needed to fill.

The Roman Catholic Church through Vatican II was very clear with her teaching on people of other religions when she said: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless, often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (*Nostra Aetate* 2).

Emerging Questions. Going back to the first ecumenical seminar I attended in Strasbourg, we had a break from the talks on a Sunday. I went from the Protestant seminary where we had the seminar to the Catholic cathedral with four of my Catholic companions. It was about a kilometer away. As we were leaving the seminary, we also saw the majority of the Lutherans leaving the place. I presumed they were going to their cathedral just behind the seminary. To my surprise they did not turn left. They were actually going with us. This intrigued me. Anyway, I went straight to the sacristy of the cathedral and talked with Walter Cardinal Kasper, head of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, as he was the main presider in that Sunday Mass. I concelebrated together with the other priests. I cannot actually identify what I was feeling during the Mass wherein among the congregation of Catholics were the Lutherans celebrating with us.

Now being new in this endeavor, I was already curious concerning the reception of Holy Communion. Will they be receiving communion

from the Cardinal? Will he be embarrassed to refuse them communion? Then, I saw them lining up towards the Cardinal distributing communion to the Catholics. I was literally observing everything: Catholic, Catholic, Catholic, and then now, the first Lutheran in the line. I did not recognize the cross they made with their arms, but then the Cardinal said: “The Body of Christ.” The Lutheran answered: “Amen.” But, the Cardinal did not hand him the holy host. He simply made a sign of the cross with it. Then, the next Lutheran faithful followed suit.

The next day they shared their experience with the group. What I remembered since that day were the words: “Your Eminence, yesterday’s experience at Mass was so painful for us. Jesus was only twenty centimeters away from us ... yet, we could not receive Him.” I truly understood what he was sharing. As I look back at those moments of receiving communion, I personally felt the pain that they felt. I felt the rejection. I felt the longing and the thirst for true communion with Jesus Christ in the Holy Sacrament of the Mass of the Catholic Church. *That was the only time I realized the pain of the separation.* And, for the first time I was able to grasp the true meaning of Ecumenism: “that they may be one.”

Admittedly the response of many in the Catholic world to the newer teachings, specifically on Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue, was not always enthusiastic. Celebrating fifty years of Vatican II, Mark Kernel of the *Washington Times* (October 10, 2012) said: “Not everyone in the pews received the teachings of Vatican II in the same

way. Many Catholics, particularly in the United States and Europe, took a much dimmer view of Rome's claims to central authority, leaving some lay members—and their children—confused.”

George Weigel of the *National Review*, on the other hand, said (October 11, 2012): “the truths that Vatican II taught remained bitterly contested in the fifteen years immediately following the Council.... The council was one dramatic event in a much longer 'moment' in Catholic history: a moment that stretches over more than a century and a quarter; a moment in which the Church underwent a deep and difficult process of reform; a moment in which the curtain slowly fell on the form of Catholicism that was born in the sixteenth-century Counter-Reformation, and the curtain slowly rose on the Catholicism of the Third Millennium—the Catholicism of what [Saint] Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI have called the “New Evangelization.” That is just a glimpse of the first fifty years of reform in the Catholic Church.

Deepening Integration. Now I realize how very blessed we had been because of the Oblates and the Marist Brothers. They embraced right away the teachings of Vatican II and tried as much as they could to incorporate them in our school system. And, it was not the only part of the Philippines that was responding. The Archdiocese of Manila was also updated in integrating the new teachings. Jaime Cardinal Sin, the late Archbishop of Manila, was committed to dialogue with the Protestants, the Muslims and the people of other faiths; he invited them in his residence. It was during this time that the Ministry for Ecumenical and Interfaith Affairs (MEIFA) of the archdiocese was formed. In 1999, he invited to his residence the president of the Lutheran Church in the Philippines to celebrate the first anniversary of the signing of the Agreement on Justification between the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation. According to the same report (*New City Magazine*, August 2, 2005), he once allowed his Muslim visitors to pray in the residence when





they asked permission to leave so they could do their fourth prayer for the day.

The Cardinal also was the first bishop of Manila to send a priest to Rome to study Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue. Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales, having been assigned in a diocese in central Mindanao and having first-hand experience with the Muslims, continued to support dialogue with other faiths. In 2009, he sent me to Rome to study Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue. Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle sent me to the Silsilah Foundation in Zamboanga to further expose me with the works of interreligious dialogue through the Italian dialogue practitioner, Father Sebastiano D'Ambra, PIME. Since 2012, he sent me to participate in seminars and conferences to deepen my knowledge and understanding of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. Today, we continue their legacy in the archdiocese.

The MEIFA continues to do its share in connecting with Christian leaders and those of other faiths. When Cardinal Tagle was elevated to the College of Cardinals in 2013, he started the tradition of *Breakfast with the Cardinal* where we invite religious

leaders within and outside of the metropolis to have a chance to engage with the archbishop of Manila. It became an annual event. It now coincides with the World Interfaith Harmony Week celebrated every first week of February in accord with the General Assembly Resolution 65/5 of the United Nations.

Renewed Perspectives. Many times we only see what is happening on the surface, the events that transpire in the city, and we do not realize the struggle is really inside, even in our families. A devout Muslim friend of mine who is married to a Catholic shared how he struggled with the questions of her young daughter. It is already a practice in the home that they pray, saying first the Muslim prayer being led by the father; then the child recites her Catholic prayer. But, one time after praying the Muslim prayer led by him, his daughter said: "Now let us pray the Catholic prayer *together*." He told her he cannot do it and the daughter asked, "Why can you not pray the Catholic prayer with me when I prayed the Muslim prayer with you?" His daughter cried until she was truly exhausted and went to sleep. He said that it was a most painful moment of his



life, seeing his daughter grieve because he cannot explain why they cannot pray together.

We do not really know what is ahead of us. We do not know if there is a ray of hope anytime soon. Yet, different factors from many areas, even individuals, propel people to find ways to achieve harmony and peace. Saint John Paul II reminded us when he issued the document, "Dialogue and Proclamation" in May of 1991: "It must be remembered that the Church's commitment to dialogue is not dependent on success in achieving mutual understanding and enrichment; rather it flows from God's initiative in entering into a dialogue with humankind and from the example of Jesus Christ whose life, death, and resurrection gave to that dialogue its ultimate expression" (Number 53).

What is important is that the chain of ecumenical and interfaith undertakings is being pushed by people of various faith groups, tirelessly

working for peace. When we are able to stop and listen, think and reflect, apologize and forgive, it means we believe we are still able to love. When we are triggered, angered, and moved to act by people who hurt others, it means we do care. When we feel mercy and compassion for the other, it means we still experience the presence of God in our midst. It means we silently listen to Him; because He is present in all of these, we can hope. This year, let us give dialogue a chance, and hopefully make it a part of our life. After all, there is hope because God unceasingly works in all of us.

Father Richard James M. Babao is parish priest of *Parokya ng Ina ng Laging Saklolo* at Punta Santa Ana, Manila; he is also the Assistant Minister of the Ministry on Ecumenical and Inter-Faith Affairs of the Archdiocese of Manila.