

Our Journey in Dialogue

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I was assigned as Minister for Ecumenism and Interfaith Affairs for the Archdiocese of Manila by the late and great Jaime L. Cardinal Sin, just a few years after my ordination to the priesthood. I did not have a clue what to do. I considered myself as one of the most dogmatic and probably unyielding members of the clergy, when it comes to matters of the Faith, given my background. I was a former member of the Neo-Catechumenal Movement and I hold a licentiate in Patristic Theology. The Cardinal, however, wanted a Catholic priest to dialogue with our Christian sisters and brothers and friends who are members of other faith traditions. He wanted that Catholic priest to be truly Catholic because it is presupposed by dialogue. Catholics must bring themselves and their Catholic Faith and Traditions into the universal sphere of dialogue. In retrospect, the Cardinal was right.

I stumbled my way into dialogue, reading books, publications and Church documents while engaging in dialogue at the same time. I must admit that initially, I had my prejudices and biases, which I was trying to hide or hopefully suppress. I still felt that I was the wrong man for the job [I considered my assignment as a job then]. Everything was new and foreign: the hijabs, Temples and Mosques, the headgears and the food. My co-religionists, my Catholic collaborators, were talking strangely and I simply was not getting into it. My conversion, so to speak, began when in collaboration with the Communications Foundation for Asia, we conducted a Muslim-Christian Youth Camp in Manila. The participants were high school students from the Ramon Avanceña High School near the Golden Mosque and the Basilica of the Black Nazarene.

The school population was a fifty-fifty mix of Muslim and Christian students, and there were the unavoidable tensions between them. The participants were given training and formation, not only in dialogue, but also in the different expressions of mass media, like arts and craft, music, dance, photography and movie making. At the end of the session, the young people presented their longings for peace and friendship through the various media. One group presented their output through modern dance and I witnessed the high school Muslim girls doing modern dance in the same manner as our high school Christian girls. I realized then that our Muslim friends are also human beings like me! They have mothers and fathers, they laugh and cry, they love and hate, they experience joy and sorrow, much like us. We are human beings. We share the same clod of humanity, created in the image and likeness of God. The discovery of that secret, a secret that is hiding in plain sight, opened up for me the door of dialogue. We are human beings after all!

With our Christian collaborators, we extended our hands in friendship on all levels. We were engaged in the “dialogue of life” where we made friends with everyone. We shared in their joys and their sorrows, in their laughter and tears. We engaged ourselves in the “dialogue of action,” especially during times of calamities and disasters. We engaged ourselves in the “dialogue of theological exchange,” where we conducted seminars on matters of each one’s faith and beliefs. We also engaged in the “dialogue of religious experience” when we came together as spiritual persons who pray, each according to his or her own belief and religious tradition.

We are fortunate that God, through the Holy Spirit, has inspired specific groups and persons to immerse themselves in interreligious dialogue. We make mention of the Focolare Movement, the Peacemakers' Circle, the University of Santo Tomas, the Ateneo de Manila University, the Philippine Women's University and the De la Salle University.

A United Nations Resolution mandating all members to observe the United Nations' Harmony Week during the first week of February has helped create in 2012 the Uniharmony Partners Manila, an interfaith umbrella group of religious men and women of dialogue in Metro Manila. Its partners now include some twenty-five or more organizations that are committed to dialogue. We are looking for more ways to go forward in dialogue by combining each other's resources, talents and genius.

At the start of my ministry, I strived to comprehend the Church's understanding and teaching regarding dialogue. More than a decade since I became minister, I think that the deep meaning of dialogue, as understood by the Church, is at last being revealed to me, thanks to my engagement in dialogue and the personal friendships that I have established with friends from the various faith traditions. While the prevailing opinion is that *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II would be the basic document on dialogue, I think that the foundational Church document regarding dialogue is *Gaudium et Spes*, the *Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*. Its opening lines are: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of people. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every person. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with humanity and its history by the deepest of bonds" (GS 1).

These opening words are indeed words of dialogue. It is through this spirit that the Church opens herself to dialogue with all the men and women of this day and age and in the days to come. The Second Vatican Council is an Ecumenical Council like no other; its spirit is different. Its theological approach is conditioned by its Universal, thereby Catholic, pastoral approach. This is a departure from the legislative-judicial language of some Councils that went before it.

This pastoral approach is reflected in the expanded the way that the Church sees herself as was expounded in *Lumen Gentium*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*. It notes: "All people are called to be part of this catholic unity of the people of God, which in promoting universal peace, presages it. And there belong to or are related to it in various ways, the Catholic faithful, all who believe in Christ, and indeed the whole of humanity, for all people are called by the grace of God to salvation" (LG 13).

All people are called to be part of the universal unity of the people of God. There are those who belong to the Church in various ways. The document did not make of listing of the various ways. In addition, there are those who are related to the Church in various ways. Again, the document did not specify the various ways. Indeed, the ways of relating and belonging to the Church are various and open-ended. The Spirit of God is the one who provides ways of relating

and belonging. It is not an accident that we see ourselves as Catholic Christians. We must remember that the word “catholic” means “universal.” A religion that sees itself as Catholic must also see itself as all inclusive and not at all exclusive. The Kingdom of God is still more extensive than the Church, which is the initial budding forth of the Kingdom, as it strains toward the completed Kingdom. To be Catholic is to be in dialogue with the whole of humanity because Jesus, the Founder of the Church, is the dialogue of God the Father with humanity.

Given these premises, I see Intra-faith Dialogue as a challenge. There are very few proponents of dialogue within the Catholic Church. Interreligious (or Interfaith) dialogue must be taught and inculcated in Catholic communities even as some Catholic practitioners engage in dialogue with men and women of other faith traditions. Dialogue is part and parcel of the Church’s evangelizing effort. To be Catholic is to be in dialogue.

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