



A Woman's Decalogue of Interfaith Dialogue

Journeying towards Fullness in God

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I come from a journey of over two decades in the field of interfaith dialogue. Lessons have been learned from the challenges I have had to face along the way that brought me this far in my endeavors. I share them in a “decalogue of reflections” against the backdrop of the spiritual quest that got me here.

My quest for God began early. I was born to devout Catholic parents in Mindanao and raised Catholic. Growing up I had always taken for granted that everyone I met was Catholic. I had never questioned my faith until I experienced fear. It happened one day when I was seven and I witnessed the burial of a close family friend. Fear struck me when I saw her body in a coffin being lowered into the ground. As a child I imagined not being able to breathe, and it made me inordinately afraid of death. Two years later when my mother suffered a stroke and fell into a coma, fear struck me again. She did not wake up for days, so my father flew her in a plane to Cebu to undergo brain surgery. My eight siblings and I were left at home in the care of an aunt. I was the eldest, I was nine years old, and I feared that we would never see our mother again.

I prayed so hard every day, but God seemed like the “stone god” up there on the church pedestal, cold, distant, and unmoving. About a month later, my mother was brought back home, but she was never the same again. Half of her body was paralyzed and we had to teach her how to walk and talk again. She was only thirty-nine years old.

Continuing Search. Those childhood experiences affected me deeply and, since then, my journey through life had been a journey of seeking for the light of a “big enough God” who could liberate me from the darkness of my fears and give my puny existence new meaning and direction. I was restless inside, unable as I was to settle for the punishing image of God that I had known and feared since childhood.

Many years later, my search for God intensified when my brother committed suicide. In quiet desperation, I sought for God in many places. One day I found myself along unfamiliar eastern spiritual paths where I learned to tune-in to stillness in meditation. There, in the silence of my listening heart, I finally found God! I realized that God was not so cold and distant after all. God was in my heartbeat, and in my every breath!

I experienced many turning points in my spiritual journey since then. I later realized that all of them eventually lead me towards the field of interfaith dialogue where I related not only with peoples of different religions, but also of diverse spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions.

My introduction to interfaith dialogue began in 1998 when I saw a friend wearing a white t-shirt and on it was printed the image of the globe surrounded by symbols of the different religions of the world. I was then taking a master's degree in Theological Studies, and was rather uncertain about where they were leading me. The image struck me so much and provoked in me burning

questions about my faith. I asked myself: “What does it mean to be Catholic today? What makes my Christian faith unique among other faiths?”

Those questions compelled me to seek for a “big enough God” who could hold the diversity of faiths without breaking. In the process, I found myself reaching out beyond my comfort zone to peoples of diverse religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions, despite the words of caution of well-meaning priests. In 2001, I and my newfound friends of different faiths established The Peacemakers’ Circle Foundation, Inc., a non-profit Manila-based non-government organization (NGO) through which we learned how to organize and facilitate various forms of interfaith dialogue.

A Transforming Experience. One fateful day seven years later a significant turning point in my experience of God and my Christian faith happened. I was at the Burbank Mosque in Fairview with my Muslim friends with whom I worked to promote Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Relationship-Building among the leaders of the

community there. Our meeting was only halfway through when we had to stop for the noontime prayers. Because I was the only other woman in the group, my friend, Alnahar, accompanied me to the mezzanine level of the mosque where the other women were gathered.

Not being Muslim, I thought I would remain at the back of the hall and respectfully observe silence while the prayers were going on. But, to my consternation, the women urged me to join them in performing the ablution! I refused vehemently at first, struggling with feelings of being hurt by their not respecting me and my faith, feelings of being violated and our friendship somewhat abused. But the guileless smiles on their faces and their apparent eagerness to share the experience that was meaningful to them humbled me. I did not have the heart to hurt them by refusing their invitation.

So I imitated Alnahar and meekly went through the motions of ablution. As she murmured her prayers in Arabic, I very softly



whispered “Our Father, who art in heaven ...” feeling very self-conscious at first, knowing that many eyes were on me. Two Muslim women (who were covered from head to foot) came and assisted me in donning a *malong* over my clothes, and they covered my head with a long white *hijab* (a veil that cloaked everything about me except my face). I imagined myself an Arabian princess being attended to by gracious servant women who were eager to please! The *hijab* was so voluminous that I could have drowned in it! But when everything was done and I was appropriately dressed to their satisfaction, I felt gratefully inconspicuous.

Being Christian praying like a Muslim in the midst of praying Muslim women wrought havoc to my inner landscape! I was an impostor from another planet deserving contempt! As they recited their prayers in Arabic, I saw in my mind’s eye the image of Christ on the cross, and could not help the tears that flowed inside where no one could see. Though outwardly I went through the motions with my Muslim sisters in prayer, inwardly I held Christ’s pain in my heart and struggled to hold back my tears. Was I betraying him? Was I being unfaithful?

Continuing the Journey. In my mind’s eye, I imagined the good bishop whom I had asked about interreligious dialogue many years ago standing before me with an expression of concern. So, while I went through the motions of praying like a Muslim amidst praying Muslim women, the sense of betrayal and self-condemnation kept growing in me. Then suddenly, just when it felt unbearable, I heard a small voice deep within me saying: “Bishop, come and see! This is how far I would go in my dialogue with Muslims ... as far as my heart would take me! I must decrease ... so His love can increase through me!”

These words came to me like a mantra and the lump in my throat seemed to melt away. I found myself able to breathe again, though the pain remained. As I looked around at the smiling faces of the women and children milling around me after

the prayer, a comforting feeling came over me. It felt good to see how pleased they were that I had honored them with my presence and participation! They treated me like a long-lost sister and invited me graciously into their homes. I wondered how they would have felt if I had stood my ground and refused their graciousness.

I realized later that nothing in me was diminished by the experience. On the contrary, I had been richly blessed with the realization that Christ was with me all the while; that love was not just a choice, but that it was good, life-giving, and real!

The meeting with the men resumed downstairs, and I joined them as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. But, deep within me I was aching with an unfamiliar pain. It must have been the pain of Christ’s wounds throbbing in me like my heartbeat! At no other time in my life had I ever experienced loving like Christ as intimately as I had experienced His love for me at that moment!

Today, many years since that fateful veiling experience at the mosque, I realize that I am a Catholic Christian in the “universal” sense of being catholic. The Triune God is the “big enough God” whom I had been seeking throughout my life. God is “big enough” for me because there is no place in the entire universe where God is not. God is in every aspect of my human experience as Creator of all, as fully human and fully divine in Christ Jesus and, in the Holy Spirit, as Love that embraces us in oneness.

In this light, I learned that to be truly Catholic in Christ is to rejoice in and honor the diversity of Creation that is manifest in many different forms and expressions. In this, I am moved to transcend the boundaries of fear in order to love even those who are different from me.

As a lay woman who has been engaged for two decades in the field of building relationships through interfaith dialogue, I also learned that part of the challenge is to respond to the need for

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restoring the balance between heart and mind—between the masculine and feminine forces—that has been lost in this largely male-dominated field of endeavor. In the hope of humbly responding to the need, I share here my **Decalogue of Interfaith Dialogue**:

1. Check your heart. Ask yourself why you wish to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths. If your intent is not to convert them to your faith but to build mutually respectful and harmonious relationships with them, then your heart is in the right place.

2. Disarm and make room within. Be aware of your prejudices, fears and apprehensions about relating with those who do not share your faith. Disarm yourself by making an effort to

understand and accept them while also reaching out beyond your comfort zone to them. Learn about the beliefs and practices of those whom you wish to engage in dialogue with, and find something in them that is good and admirable.

3. Prepare a common ground. Reflect on hopes, dreams and aspirations that you might have in common with those of other faiths whom you wish to engage in dialogue. Listen to your common humanity. Underneath the unique identities, personalities, interests, and values that make you different from one another, there are basic human needs that you share. Prepare to meet each other there.

4. Respect diversity, honor differences. Diversity is in the divine scheme of





things. It is evident in nature all around us. There are birds that fly, insects that crawl, fish that swim, high mountains and low-lying meadows. Diversity is evident among people, too. People come from different backgrounds, races, cultures, beliefs, etc. Respect and honor those differences. They are what make our lives challenging and meaningful, our relationships enriching, and our world wonderful.

5. Invite and be gracious. Reach out beyond your comfort zone to people who are different from you. They are human beings, too. Humbly share with them your hopes, dreams and aspirations for a better community, a better world. Invite and encourage them to share theirs with you, too.

6. Create safe spaces and build trust. Provide a “safe space” where people can feel that you accept them for who they are and not for who you want them to be. It would be helpful to: ♦ Prepare a neutral meeting place where no symbols or articles of your faith might be perceived as imposing or threatening. ♦ Sit everyone in a circle, leaving an open space in the middle whenever

possible. The circle enables everyone to see and relate with each other better with no hierarchy of status or rank getting between you and them. ♦ Be modestly garbed and respectful that your ways of being and your manner of speaking are sensitive to the culture and religious practices of your dialogue partner(s) (e.g. their ways of worship and prayer, of relating with women and with each other, the food they eat or do not eat, etc.). ♦ If possible, provide separate serving tables for the different dietary preferences (e.g. vegetarian, *halal* food, etc.) during meals. ♦ When engaging in dialogue with Muslims, remember to provide them with a place for ablution and a separate area for their prayers.

7. Listen deeply. Be fully present and in the moment. Practice deep listening by focusing your attention away from yourself and fully on the “other.” When you free yourself from the conditionings of the past and anxieties about the future, it is possible to hear that which wants to be said in the silences underneath the words.

8. Speak humbly. True dialogue is about listening and speaking from that place beyond



words where one's vulnerability as a human being is held sacred. It is a place within the self where compassion for the human condition is awakened and where words spoken in response to the "other" arise humbly from the sense of awe and reverence for our oneness in God (whom we call by different names and experience in different ways).

9. Appreciate uniqueness. We humans are relational beings. In each of our human relationships we bring who we are and our unique personalities with us. While we share a common human condition with people of diverse cultures and beliefs, our differences can give rise to conflict. Learning to accept and appreciate our differences is a difficult process of "dying unto ourselves" so that "the other can be true to the best of who they are" in us. Inner capacities for loving beyond fear are developed in those who dare to persevere and transform conflict into opportunities for growth in our relationships with "others."

10. Inspire co-creative action. Interfaith dialogue is about relationship-building. Good and steadfast relationships are built on the foundation of trust. When we trust that we can be ourselves and not be expected to be like the other, and when we can accept our differences and appreciate each other's uniqueness, then our shared vision of a

better world can inspire co-creative and mutually respectful actions.

At this point in my journey my quest for God has found fruition in interfaith dialogue. I learned from my struggles to be Christ-like in my ways of relating with "others" that dialogue is more than just the exchange of words. It is "Love in Action." Love is the force within us that creates common grounds where we can meet and build mutually respectful relationships with fellow human beings. If dialogue is true, then conversion is of the heart that sees the goodness of God also in them.

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