



# Exploring Diverse Pathways in Dialogue

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The Second Vatican Council, held in Rome in 1962-1965, was a pivotal turning point in the Church's 2,000-year history. Epitaphs by respected theologians have described the Council as "the most significant Church assembly of the twentieth century" and "the most important event in the history of the Roman Catholic Church since the Protestant Reformation" in the 1500s. It was "a Council of the universal Church *about* the entire Church." Saint Pope John XXIII (1958-1963), who called the Council, desired a profound *aggiornamento* (renewal, updating) of the entire Church. The fundamental ecclesiological vision of Vatican II has been termed "communion ecclesiology."

Saint Paul VI (1963-1978), who succeeded John XXIII and continued the Council, noted that the vision of the Church as a "community of dialogue" would be achieved as the Church entered into various dialogues on four levels: ♦ within the Catholic Church itself, ♦ with other Christians

(Ecumenism), ♦ with people of other living faiths (Interreligious Dialogue), and ♦ with the world and all its peoples. Paul VI described these four levels of dialogue as represented by four concentric circles.

It is enlightening to imagine these "four dialogues" as a series of four interconnected circles; there is a Vatican II document for each circle. The innermost circle is dialogue within the Catholic Church itself [*Lumen Gentium* (LG) = Church]. The next circle represents dialogue with other Christians [*Unitatis Redintegratio* (UR) = Ecumenism]. The third circle shows dialogue with peoples who follow various world religions [*Nostra Aetate* (NA) = Interfaith or Interreligious Dialogue]. The largest, outermost circle symbolizes dialogue with the world and all peoples of good will [*Gaudium et Spes* (GS) = Church in the Modern World]. This current presentation highlights three areas of dialogue: Ecumenical Relations, Interfaith/Interreligious Dialogue, and Engagement with Indigenous Peoples.

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*"Restoration of unity has to be understood as the convergence of the Roman Catholic Church with other Christian Churches, as shared gifts are rediscovered—in our own Church and in others—so that the unity willed by Christ for his Church is realized (Jn 17:21)."*

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## Ecumenism and Christian Unity

Pope John XXIII said that the unity of the Church was the “compelling motive” for his calling of the Second Vatican Council. When he spoke at the opening of the Council, he made it clear that he regarded the unity of Christians as a major concern of the Catholic Church: “The Catholic Church ... considers it her duty to work actively so that there may be fulfilled the great mystery of that unity which Jesus Christ invoked with fervent prayer from his heavenly Father on the eve of his sacrifice.”

To promote his vision of ecumenism, John XXIII established the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity in 1960. Later on, Saint John Paul II penned an entire encyclical on ecumenism (*Ut Unum Sint* - 1995); he noted: “It is absolutely clear that ecumenism, the movement promoting Christian unity, is not just some sort of ‘appendix’ which is added to the Church’s traditional activity. Rather, ecumenism is an organic part of her life and work, and consequently

must pervade all that she is and does.” Indeed, ecumenical dialogue forms part of the renewed vision of being the Church today.

**Insights from Vatican II.** The Council rejected the view that the Church of Christ is to be identified *solely* with the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), with its implication that other Christians have no part in Christ’s Church. The Council Fathers spoke of the Church of Christ as *subsisting* in the RCC. “This Church, constituted and organized in the world as a society, *subsists* in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter ... although *many elements of sanctification and of truth* can be found outside of her visible structures” (LG 8).

The implication is that all those elements that Christ willed for his Church are to be found in the RCC, but nevertheless Christ’s Church cannot be totally identified with the RCC. Also, this does not imply that the RCC always fully lives and uses these gifts to their best effect. The Council was trying to balance the tendency to identify the one Church only with the Catholic Church. “That



unity which Christ bestowed on His Church ... subsists in the Catholic Church, as something she can never lose" (UR 4). Yet, although this gift is found in the Church, often "its members fail to live" by this ideal (UR 4). "The Church, embracing sinners in her bosom, is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal" (LG 8). She is *simul justus et peccatur* (both holy and sinful); her self-understanding is an *ecclesia semper reformanda* (Church always needing reform, conversion, and renewal).

What is the relationship between the RCC and other Churches? True, there are "splits in the garment of Christ"; this does not mean fragmentation into separate pieces. Restoration of unity has to be understood as the convergence of the RCC with other Christian Churches, as shared gifts are rediscovered—in our own Church and in others—so that the unity willed by Christ for his Church is realized (Jn 17:21).

Clearly, the Council is asserting that the Catholic Church does not exclusively possess all the Lord's gifts: "many elements of sanctification and truth are found outside its visible structure. These elements [Baptism, Eucharist, Scripture, faith, Holy Spirit, grace, deeds of Christian charity, prayer], as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity" (LG 8); see UR 3. We Christians really are in a fraternal relationship.

**Additional Council Insights.** These other Christian communities are validly termed: *churches*, *communities* and *ecclesial communities* (cf. UR 3, 4, 22 in several places). Why? They validly possess (in varying degrees) those elements which make the baptized a church, "and the Catholic Church embraces them as brothers, with respect and affection. For people who believe in Christ and have been truly baptized are in communion with the Catholic Church even though this communion is imperfect.... All who have been justified by faith in Baptism are members of Christ's body and have a right to be called Christian" (UR 3).

"The Spirit of Christ ... uses them [ecclesial communities] as means of salvation" (UR 3). "The Sacred Council exhorts all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism" (UR 4).

The "sin of separation" has been jointly caused; "people of both sides were to blame" (UR 3). "Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature" (UR 1). "The children who are born into these Communities and who grow up believing in Christ cannot be accused of the sin involved in the separation" (UR 3).

#### **Practical Steps to Promote Ecumenism.**

- ♦ Pray regularly for Church unity.
- ♦ Know your own faith well.
- ♦ Seek to renew your own Church.
- ♦ Be willing to learn about other Christians and come to personally know them.
- ♦ Cultivate a historical consciousness.
- ♦ Work together in common social projects.
- ♦ Feel the scandal of divisions.
- ♦ See the Holy Spirit's action in others.
- ♦ Have biblical patience (creative waiting).

## **Interfaith and Interreligious Dialogue**

In appreciating the Church's invitation to engage in dialogue with the followers of other living faiths, it is helpful to recall Pope Paul VI's four circles of dialogue (mentioned earlier in the introduction). This dialogue with other religions or other faiths is the *third* area of engagement. Some recent Church milestones illustrate the role of dialogue in contemporary Christian living.

The Second Vatican Council and recent Popes have affirmed that interreligious dialogue is integral to a comprehensive understanding of the Church's mission in the contemporary world. This perspective emerges from the Council document *Nostra Aetate* (NA) which exhorts Church members to enter into "dialogue and collaboration with the



followers of other religions” and to “recognize, preserve and promote” the “spiritual, moral, and sociocultural values” in these faith traditions (NA 2).

Saint **Pope Paul VI**, in his first great encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) promoted dialogue as the way forward for mission; his insights remain a sure guide for us today. He established a new department in the Vatican which now bears the name: Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Certainly, Paul VI, a man of humility and openness, who visited the Philippines in November 1970, showed us the way forward by following the “road of dialogue.”

In his mission encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (55-57) Saint **Pope John Paul II** affirmed that “Interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church’s evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to mission *ad gentes*; indeed it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions” (55). Recall that John Paul II met with the Muslim community from Mindanao in Davao City on February 20, 1981 during his Philippine sojourn.

Clearly **Pope Francis** continues this same interfaith dialogue perspective. In his beautiful *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*) in sections

250-254, Francis speaks about interreligious dialogue; he asserts that “Evangelization and interreligious dialogue, far from being opposed, mutually support and nourish one another” (251). Francis believes that “Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities” (250). During his February 3-5, 2019 visit to the United Arab Emirates, Pope Francis met with Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar; together they mutually signed the document “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.”

**Implementing Dialogue.** Given this strong and constant affirmation of the pivotal role that interfaith dialogue is to play in society and the Church today, it becomes imperative to understand its principles and to practice it in daily life. Certainly, some will ask: “How can I engage constructively in promoting authentic dialogue?” This brings me to offer a series of ten brief guidelines; one might call them a “**Dialogue Decalogue**.” For these guidelines I draw on my own personal experience as well as the writings and insights of others, particularly the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC). Each of these “ten commandments” deserves greater







elaboration; however, they are simply offered here as “beginners’ guidelines.”

(1) The purpose of dialogue is to learn, to change and grow in our perception of people and reality so as to build solid relationships. (2) Interreligious dialogue must be a two-pronged project, *within* and *between* religious communities. (3) Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity. In brief, if no trust exists, then no dialogue occurs. (4) In interreligious dialogue we must not compare our *ideals* with our partner’s *practice*, but, rather our *ideals* with our partner’s *ideals*, our *practice* with our partner’s *practice*. (5) All participants must define themselves. Only the Muslim, for example, can define from the inside what it means to be a Muslim. Conversely, those interpreted must be able to recognize themselves in the interpretation.

(6) Each partner should listen to the other partner with openness, while maintaining one’s own tradition; dialogue does not require a “compromise” in one’s faith. (7) Dialogue takes place only between equals; both partners come to learn from each other. (8) Dialogue grows only on the basis of mutual trust. It should begin with those issues most likely to provide some common ground, helping to thereby establish human trust.

(9) Persons entering into interreligious dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical both of themselves and their own religious tradition; one sees the strengths and weaknesses of one’s own tradition. (10) Each participant eventually must attempt to experience the partner’s religious framework “from within” or “as a believer” of that faith; this means “passing over” into another’s religious experience and then returning enlightened, broadened and deepened.

Interreligious or Interfaith Dialogue is a difficult undertaking; it has its frustrations as well as its rewards. It is, in fact, a “faith journey,” requiring patience and commitment. However, it is **not** optional, because, as John Paul II has noted, it is an integral part of the Church’s evangelizing mission. We are most grateful to have the Church’s guidance and encouragement to assist us in this challenging endeavor!

## Engagement with Indigenous Peoples

The Philippines is undoubtedly a culturally diverse country. Government estimates assert that there are 14-17 million Indigenous Peoples (IPs) belonging to over 100 ethno-linguistic groups.





They are heavily concentrated in Northern Luzon (Cordillera Administrative Region: 33%) and in Mindanao (61%), with some groups in the Visayas area. The Philippine Constitution mandates state recognition, protection, promotion, and fulfillment of the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Republic Act 8371, often known as the “Indigenous Peoples Rights Act” (IPRA, 1997), recognizes the right of IPs to manage their ancestral domains. This legislation is to serve as a cornerstone of national policies and procedures related to these diverse peoples.

The indigenous peoples are commonly known as *katutubo* in Tagalog and *lumad* in Cebuano; they are also distinguished from the *dumagat* people who live in the low-lands along the coast. The *lumads* are peoples belonging to distinct socio-cultural and linguistic groups. Some *lumad* communities still maintain historical continuity with pre-colonial societies. They are peoples blessed with knowledge systems that are close to nature, often having a unique form of government and system of justice, as well as a pervading spirituality that sustains their communities which are genuinely human, participatory, and

communal. They are genuine, simple people, though this trait is sometimes misunderstood as naiveté. They also have a strong community spirit, helping one another as a tribe.

The direct experience of this author with *lumad* people has been in Northern and Eastern Davao. The mountainous peoples in those areas are the Mandaya, Mansaka, and Aeta (Atta). Each community has its own unique culture, language, dress, and form of social organization and leadership. Whatever their unique characteristics may be, they should be viewed as God’s beloved sons and daughters like us. They certainly are blessed with a noble dignity, being created in God’s image and likeness. As manifested in their various rituals, they are called, like us, to be in communion with God, the source of all that we have and are.

Various dioceses in the Philippines have established a “Native Apostolate” (original name) which is now commonly known as the “Indigenous Peoples Apostolate.” This is demanding work, since the pastoral agents need to become familiar with the customs, traditions, and languages of *each group* of the *lumads* (though in many areas they have come to know and speak simple Tagalog or



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Visayan). Pastoral workers must also be “self-aware” and examine their own possible biases and prejudices. In a word, the challenge for anyone who does apostolic work among the *lumad* is to be immersed in their life, their culture, and their world, so that one can truly and effectively evangelize them and they, in turn, can reach out and spread the Gospel among their own relatives and neighbors.

**The Spirit’s Presence and Action.** One dimension of being a “missionary” to indigenous peoples is to have a deep knowledge and appreciation of the role and gifts of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The *katutubo* or *lumad* peoples of various cultures generally have a deep awareness of a presence and power that is the Source and Creator of “life and breath” in all things; it is experienced and often expressed in religious terms. This “God-encounter” is manifested in their rituals, moral precepts, and way of life. As Christians we believe in the presence of the Holy Spirit who continually sows seeds of truth among all peoples, their religions, cultures and philosophies (cf. *Nostra Aetate* 2). The Spirit moves them to act individually and collectively against evil and to serve life and everything that is good. It is by recognizing the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives and cultures that we can have a profound encounter with the indigenous peoples and learn to regard them with deep respect.

Other areas of the indigenous peoples that can serve as “bridges” to the Christian faith can be identified. The traditional practices of sharing food and communal celebrations are easily linked to the

celebration of the Eucharist. The indigenous peoples have much to teach us about ecology and how to be stewards of God’s creation. The Church should make efforts to develop “IP liturgies” for the celebration of the sacraments; inculturated approaches to education and catechesis are essential. Joint efforts for the promotion of human rights and justice will bear much fruit; this is particularly true in the current struggle to counteract the onslaught of mining in the ancestral domains of the indigenous peoples.

Despite the many challenges to missionary evangelization, we remain hopeful for a mutually beneficial encounter between the Christian faith and the indigenous peoples. Indeed, we are “saved in hope” (cf. Rom 8:24-25). We pray with the Holy Spirit, “the Lord and Giver of Life,” that the Church’s efforts will bear fruit through concrete action and contribute to the integral development of our indigenous brothers and sisters.

## Concluding Reflection

This short presentation has focused on the three themes that the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has proposed for our meditation and concrete action during the year 2020, the final year in the preparation for the celebration of the 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines in 2021. While diverse in their focus, these three “dialogues” (with other Christians, with peoples of other living faiths, and with our indigenous brethren) share many communalities.

There are divergences in the points of origin, yet all three dialogues are seeking for

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unity and harmony in community. They hope to concretize our Lord's desire "that all may be one" (Jn 17:21). They share a common methodology and approach: only through open, honest, loving, and respectful dialogue will unity and solidarity be achieved. All demand a commitment to the dialogue of life, prayer, and action, achieved through both individual and communal commitments. The three dialogues seek to implement and concretize the Church's mission of integral evangelization. All demand strong faith and courageous action. They share the same goal of bringing diverse peoples into harmony and unity under our One, True God.

Indeed, one finds a short, clear summary statement of the ultimate goal of the "Year of Ecumenism, Interreligious Dialogue, and Indigenous Peoples" expressed in the CBCP theme for 2020: **Dialogue towards Harmony**. Harmony through committed dialogue is always the *guiding vision* and *concrete plan of action*. Thus,

we Christians are most grateful to have the Church's wisdom and encouragement to assist us in this pivotal missionary endeavor. Therefore, we frequently and fervently pray: *Veni, Creator Spiritus*. Come, Holy Spirit!

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