

ECUMENISM AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Essential Dimensions of Mission Today

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), convoked by Saint Pope John XXIII (1958-1963), sought a profound transformation of the entire Church. The fundamental vision of the Church in Vatican II has been termed both a “communion ecclesiology” and a “missionary ecclesiology.” Saint Paul VI (1963-1978), who succeeded John XXIII and continued the Council, noted that this vision of a renewed Church would be achieved as the Church entered into dialogue 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 humanity. 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 people of good will [*Gaudium et Spes* (GS) = Church in the Modern World]. This current presentation highlights two of these areas of dialogue: Ecumenical Dialogue and Interfaith Dialogue.

A. ECUMENSIM. 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 advance 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 a missionary 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 alone. Also, this does not imply that the RCC and her members always fully live and use 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 and renewal). This is a realistic description of the Church and her members.

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; Vatican II humbly admits: "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). In short, we do not blame other Christians today for historical events that have happened in the past.

Practical Steps to Promote Ecumenism. Catholics can promote harmony with other Christians in various ways: ► Pray regularly for Church unity. ► Know your own faith well. ► Seek to renew your own Church. ► Be willing to learn about others 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).

B. 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 or circle 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 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” (RM 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” (EG 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” (EG 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 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 question brings this writer 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.” They could also become the basis for further group discussion.

Rule 1: The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn—that is, to change and grow in our perception and understanding of reality, to build relationships, and then to act to promote harmony and mutual respect.

Rule 2: Interreligious dialogue must be a two-sided project—within (*intra*) and between (*inter*) religious communities. There must be dialogue with coreligionists—with fellow Catholics, as well as with followers of other faith traditions.

Rule 3: Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity. Conversely, each participant must assume complete honesty and sincerity in the other partner. In brief, if there is no trust, then no dialogue occurs.

Rule 4: In interreligious dialogue we must not compare our *ideals* with our partner’s *practice*, but, rather we compare our *ideals* with our partner’s *ideals*, our *practice* with our partner’s *practice*.

Rule 5: All participants must define themselves. Only the Muslim, for example, can define from the inside what it means to be a Muslim. We seek to appreciate the other’s “self-understanding.”

Rule 6: Each partner should not only listen to the other partner with openness and sympathy, but also attempt to agree with the dialogue partner as far as possible, while still maintaining integrity in one’s own religious tradition. Dialogue does *not* require a “compromise” in one’s faith.

Rule 7: Dialogue takes place only between equals. Therefore, for example, if the Christian views Hinduism as inferior, or if the Hindu views Christianity as inferior, there will be no dialogue.

Rule 8: Dialogue takes place only on the basis of mutual trust. Thus, it is *not* wise to begin with difficult problems or differences in faith. Seek first to establish trust; then, gradually, the more thorny matters can be addressed.

Rule 9: Each participant eventually must attempt to experience the partner’s religious framework “from within.” John Dunne here speaks of “passing over” into another’s religious experience and then coming back enlightened, broadened and deepened.

Rule 10: Seek God’s guidance to bless your efforts to promote interfaith understanding and harmony.

Conclusion. Interreligious or Interfaith Dialogue (as well as Ecumenism) 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. We frequently and fervently pray: *Veni, Creator Spiritus*. Come, Holy Spirit!

Reflection Questions: What is your personal experience of ecumenism or of interfaith dialogue? Describe the admirable qualities of your neighbors or acquaintances who are members of another church or religion. How does dialogue foster harmony and peace? Describe an action you have personally taken to promote ecumenism or interreligious dialogue.

[J. Kroeger]