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WITNESSES OF HOPE IN AN ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS SURROUNDING

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Introduction

I wish to thank H.E. Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino, President, and H.E. Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, Secretary, of the Pontifical Council for the Spiritual Care of Migrant and Itinerant People, for inviting me to be part of this XXII World Congress in promotion of the *Apostolatus Maris* (Apostleship of the Sea).

At the very outset I must unequivocally affirm that there is a fundamental difference between the goals the Church sets concerning Ecumenical dialogue and those concerning Interreligious Dialogue. The Church is committed to Ecumenical dialogue, namely, dialogue between Christians who belong to different churches and ecclesial communities, because of the very words of Jesus Christ: “*Ut unum sint*” : “That they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me” (Jn 16:21). Whereas the ecumenical dialogue is “dialogue in veritatis”, that is the communion in the profession of faith and having its final goal as the restoration of the unity Christ willed among his disciples, interreligious dialogue does not and must never aim at cancelling or playing down the fundamental differences which exist between various religious traditions, especially the serious differences between the Christian faith and any non-Christian religion. Bearing this truth in mind, one must not ignore commonalities between Christianity and other religions, particularly with those religions, such as Judaism and Islam, which believe in the One Creator God who is the Judge of humankind.

The two dialogues, namely, ecumenical and interreligious, may be seen as related to each other: there is a need for us Christians to bear common witness in so far as it is possible to people of other religions. *The Directory for the Application of the Principles and Norms of Ecumenism* takes notice of this fact. It states: “There are increasing contacts in today’s world between Christians and persons of other religions. These contacts differ radically from the contacts between the Church and ecclesial communities, which have for their object the restoration of the unity Christ willed among all his disciples, and are properly called ecumenical. But in practice they are deeply influenced by, and in turn influence ecumenical relationships. Through them, Christians can deepen the level of communion existing among themselves, and so they are to be considered an important part of ecumenical cooperation”¹.

What exactly is the purpose of interreligious dialogue? A document from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue states the following: “Interreligious dialogue does not merely aim at mutual understanding and friendly relations. It reaches a much deeper level, that of the spirit, where exchange and sharing consist in a mutual witness to one’s beliefs and a common exploration of one’s respective

¹ Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Directory for the Application of the Principles and Norms of Ecumenism*, n. 210

religious convictions. In dialogue, Christians and others are invited to deepen their religious commitment, to respond with increasing sincerity to God's personal call and gracious self-gift"².

Our world has increasingly become multi-religious. The question I would like to reflect upon is: how do I as Christian must live my faith in God in this pluralistic world? It is my deep conviction that a common witness of Christians, through following the principles and norms on ecumenism, makes effective and credible God's love in Christ for each and every human person. When multi-religious situation of our world is speculated by some as part of the problem, we Christians are called by the Church to be signs of hope and manifest to the world that the multi-religious situation can, in fact, be part of solution to many conflicts and violence in the world. Where prophets of doom preach clash of civilizations and cultures, we Christians remain committed to promote reconciliation, peace and harmony in the midst of religious plurality.

The Catholic Church, through the "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions" (*Nostra Aetate*) teaches its faithful to enter into positive, respectful and friendly relation with the followers of other religions. *Nostra Aetate* came to be promulgated on 28 October 1965. Before that date, scholars of one religion, particularly Christians, did study and read about other religions; cordial relationships also existed among people of different religions. What changed, however, is that, founded on the truth of faith *Nostra Aetate* made Christians aware the reasons for their meeting, relating and encountering people of different religions. *Nostra Aetate* made people aware of the characteristic of our time, namely, that in this age "men are drawing more closely together and the bonds of friendship between different peoples are being strengthened". By examining "with greater care the relation which the Church has to non-Christian religions, and even among nations" Christians have been encouraged to engage in dialogue with their respective followers. Please note that it is not so much **dialogue** among religions, if by this is meant purely cerebral and speculative discussion, that *Nostra Aetate* primarily encourages. As a document of pastoral nature, *Nostra Aetate* encourages positive, friendly and constructive **relationships** between peoples of different religious traditions.

Let us ask some further questions: Has the map of religious world changed since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* forty years ago? What fruits can we gather as a result of *Nostra Aetate*? What are the difficulties still to overcome in our relationship with followers of other religions? What are the challenges for the future? Before I attempt to answer these questions let me briefly explain to you the reason why we as Christians should engage in meeting, in respecting and in building bridges of friendship across religious boundaries.

Witnessing to God's love in a religiously pluralistic world

God's love, manifest in Jesus Christ, gives decisive direction to our life. Love impels us to go out of ourselves to reach out to others. The ultimate aim of our life is to share God's love with others. "(Love) consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, even affecting, my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend. Going beyond exterior appearances, I perceive in others an interior desire for a sign of love, of concern...Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave"³.

In today's world, the simple witness of an authentically Christian life becomes the first means of evangelisation. In his Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Paul VI says: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are

² Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples and Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, n. 40.

³ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 2006, n. 18

witnesses”⁴. Moreover there are contexts where the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour is not possible. In such circumstances the witness of a reverent and chaste life, the witness of detachment from riches, of freedom, in the face of powers of this world, in a word, the witness of sanctity – even if it is given silently is already a fulfilment of the duty of mission.

Lest it be wrongly presumed that to bear witness would mean an attitude of anonymity, ambiguity, mediocrity or passivity, we need to reflect on this theme in the context of the apostolic times. Deriving from the Greek word *martyrs*, which means “one who bears witness”, this term came to be applied at the end of the second and at the beginning of the third century to the baptised persons who bore testimony to Christ and his teaching by offering their lives. The Apostles are those who bear witness to Christ, to his passion, death and resurrection, by sacrificing their own life: “...you will be handed over to the Sanhedrin, you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will be brought before governors and kings for my sake, as evidence to them” (Mk 13:9; cf. Acts 22:17-21).

Far from implying an attitude of passivity and weakness, to bear witness, therefore, means to participate actively and fully in the life and mission of Christ, taking him as the model. It takes firm faith in Jesus and unshakable courage to be true witnesses of Christ. Martyrs are those who not only profess their faith in words but confess it, above all, by imitating Jesus, the Lord and Master, in the willing offering of their lives.

Although for the majority of us it is difficult to imagine being arrested, brought to trial and condemned to death, like a heroic victim, for our faith and practice, we still need to be witnesses in today’s world in which evil has become endemic and institutionalised. The world today is dominated by atheism, hedonism, materialism, relativism, indifferentism, etc. All the baptised are invited to respond to these and many other challenges, first of all, by being witnesses. In concrete this means to live in simple fidelity to God in the midst of today’s materialistic society in which God and his precepts are often ridiculed and marginalised. Alluding to the supreme testimony of love for all in imitation of Christ, *Lumen Gentium* exhorts Christians: “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him” (1 Jn 4:16), God pours out his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us (Rom 5:5). Thus the first and most necessary gift is that charity by which we love God above all things and our neighbour because of God” (n. 42).

In our increasingly secularised society, in a world which is a complex but diversified reality, accent on “witness” is necessary. Without detracting from the profound theological meaning of martyrdom, a Christian is invited to bear witness today by being a person of charity, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, self-control, mercy, pardon, reconciliation and peace (cf. Gal. 5:22). May a disciple of Christ never be the cause of division or provocator of polemics or controversies. May she never have antipathy towards anyone; may all triumphalism and spirit of superiority be avoided and may humble spirit be shown before all by Christians. Pope John Paul II exhorts : “The followers of Christ must have the gentle and humble heart of their Master, never proud, never condescending, as they meet their partners in dialogue (cf. *Mt* 11:29)”⁵.

Christian witness through the promotion of human dignity

Many people in our world have to struggle to live in dignity worthy of human life. What are the causes of the origins of social conflicts such as the ever growing gap between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-not, etc. In the light of the Gospel society must change for better and radically transform itself so that the reality of the Kingdom of God continuous to progress.

A Christian needs to ask: What is my relationship with the poor, the marginalised, the oppressed, the exploited, the unjustly treated, regardless of his race, religion or nationality? The “social

⁴ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n.41

⁵ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* (6 November 1999), n. 31

doctrine of the Church” aims at guiding people’s behaviour, it consequently gives rise to a ‘commitment to justice’, according to each individual’s role, vocation, and circumstance.

Christians today, in collaboration with people of other religions, can also promote human dignity. “There is a need to stand up for human rights, proclaim the demands of justice, and denounce injustice not only when their own members are victimized, but independently of the religious allegiance of the victims. There is need also to join together in trying to solve the great problems facing society and the world, as well as in education for justice and peace”⁶.

Christian witness through collaboration among followers of different religions

Based on clear, specific and precise guidelines which are rooted in the teachings of *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church understands interreligious dialogue with a definite meaning. In her practice the Church approaches interreligious dialogue in different ways: reciprocal communication, attitude of mutual respect and friendship, constructive common action, obedience to truth which transcends all and respect for freedom of conscience.

Through their dialogue with the followers of other religious traditions Christians “strive in order that non-Christians come to be known honestly and esteemed justly by Christians, and that in their turn non-Christians can adequately know and esteem Christian doctrine and life”⁷.

The Catholic Church teaches that interreligious dialogue is part of the Church’s evangelising mission. Therefore, while on the one hand, the Church encourages Christians to open themselves up in dialogue with people of other religions and their respective traditions, the Church, on the other hand, also asks Christians to remain uncompromisingly rooted in the essential truth of their Faith. The Church teaches that the more a Christian remains integrally faithful to his/her tradition – faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh and universal Saviour – without surrender or compromise in matters of faith, the more his/her dialogue will become authentic and fruitful.

Although the Bible does not directly pronounce any definite teaching on interreligious dialogue one can discern, particularly in the New Testament, that Jesus praises one’s faith in God and one’s readiness to convert even when one belongs to other religious tradition. In fact, what Jesus denounces unequivocally is the practice of idolatry.

According to the faith of the Church “the full and complete revelation of God’s saving mystery is given in Jesus Christ, while the understanding of this infinite mystery is to be explored and deepened in the light of the spirit of truth, who guides us in the era of the Church ‘into all the truth’ (Jn 16:13)...(And) connected with the uniqueness of Christ’s salvific mediation is the uniqueness of the Church he founded”⁸.

The Christian partner in dialogue must always remain faithful to his/her faith profession. To do this she need not pretend to be superior to the other, nor should she present herself in the spirit of triumphalism to the partner in dialogue. The Christian must not forget that “Equality, which is a presupposition of interreligious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content, not even less to the position of Jesus Christ – who is God himself made man – in relation to the founders of the other religions”⁹.

The Church encourages every Catholic to enter into dialogue with other religions because, every Christian, by virtue of his faith and baptism, is called to carry out to some degree the whole mission of the church. The needs of the situation, the particular position of the people of God, and an

⁶ Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples and Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 44.

⁷ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Mission*, 4.

⁸ John Paul II, *l’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. Ed. n. 5, 2nd February 2000

⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Dominus Jesus*, n. 22

individual's personal charism dispose the Christian to direct his efforts principally to one or another aspect of that mission.

The experience of recent years gives evidence of the many ways in which dialogue is expressed. Four forms of dialogue are identified: 1) dialogue of life – it implies concern, respect, and hospitality towards others; 2) dialogue of collaboration or deeds – it calls every Christian to work together with each and all for goals of humanitarian, social, economic, or political nature which are directed towards the liberation and advancement of humankind; 3) dialogue of specialists – it involves confrontation, deepening and enrichment of respective religious heritage; and 4) dialogue of religious experience – it implies sharing one's experience of prayer, contemplation, faith and duty, as well as one's expressions and ways of searching for the Absolute.

According to the the Catholic Church respect for human dignity is the foundation for interreligious dialogue. The Catholic Church teaches that the human person is created by God. In His own image and likeness God created the human person. The Catholic Church further teaches that Jesus Christ, full and final revelation of God, became human person in order to redeem every human being; he offered his own life to save the human person from sin and death. The Catholic teaching, therefore, unequivocally affirms the inviolable dignity of every human person. Every human person deserves utmost respect of all because every human life is sacred. Pope Benedict XVI enlightens us on the theme of human dignity in the following words: "The life of every human being is sacred...The dignity of the person and defence of the rights which that dignity confers must represent the goal of every social endeavour and of every effort to bring it to fruition. This message is conveyed to us unmistakably by the quiet but clear voice of conscience. It is a message which must be heeded and communicated to others: should it ever cease to find an echo in people's hearts, the world would be exposed to the darkness of a new barbarism. Only through recognition of the centrality of the person can common basis for understanding be found, one which enables us to move beyond cultural conflicts and which neutralises the disruptive power of ideologies"¹⁰.

The Church's call to interreligious dialogue is not to be understood as something of a private nature or merely on an individual capacity. It is an engagement of the whole Church. All Christians, personally as well as collectively, must engage in forging relations with people of other religions. Interreligious dialogue is a common project, a *diakonia*, a service which the Church offers in love for the good of all people.

Promotion of the human family through interreligious relations

Nostra Aetate stresses the fundamental unity of the human race: "All men form but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth (cf. Acts 17:26) and also because all share a common destiny, namely God" (NA, 1). Search for unity is not something new, and since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* various interreligious groups have emerged claiming to bring people together. *Nostra Aetate* insists on having a clear idea of "being together" or living in interreligious harmony. This is important to take note of because there are also confused and incorrect ideas for and approaches to "being together" or living interreligious harmony. There is a serious danger when various and fundamentally different religious expressions are considered equally valid and religions are simply juxtaposed one next to the other. Far from inducing mutual respect, this attitude encourages indifference. To say that one religion is as good as the other encourages adhesion to no religion at all. Contrary to this attitude *Nostra Aetate* promotes the respect due to every human being, without watering down the fundamental differences between religions. *Nostra Aetate* also asks Christians to adhere to Christ, "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6), in whom men find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (cf.

¹⁰ Cologne, 20 August 2005

2 Cor. 5:18-19) and thus to discern in different religious traditions “a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people”, although, according to the faith of the Church, these religious traditions do not contain the fullest expression of truth. An uncritical attitude, therefore, towards other religions does not contribute to the cause of unity. In their search for unity of the human family Catholics are exhorted to follow the guidance and the orientation given by *Nostra Aetate*, the “magna carta” for interreligious relations.

Another tendency or rather a temptation is to want to achieve unity by choosing the best from every religion and by creating a sort of “do-it-yourself-religion”. Religions today are presented as commodities in a supermarket. One buys what one wants and makes for oneself a religion of his taste and convenience.

In this era of globalisation there is a tendency to emphasise the *praxis*, as in the example of searching for “global ethic”. Only the common elements of religions are selected. This then becomes a sort of reductionism. The efforts towards the project of “global ethic” are not altogether useless; however, the results should be considered, not as conclusions, but rather points of departure for further dialogue.

Finally, those seeking a quick path to the union of religions often seek to create their new religion by taking elements from all others. In this way they not only try to destroy the other religions but they fail to create a new one, because they deny the basic inspiration which is at the heart of every religion.

A document from the World Council of Churches gives some guiding principles for genuine dialogue among religions: “Dialogue must be a process of mutual empowerment, not negotiation between parties who have conflicting interests and claims. Rather than being bound by the constraints of power relations, partners in dialogue should be empowered to join a common pursuit of justice, peace and constructive action for the good of all people.

In dialogue we grow in faith. For Christians, involvement in dialogue produces constant reappraisal of our understanding of the Biblical and theological tradition. In dialogue we affirm hope. In the midst of the many divisions, conflicts and violence there is hope that it is possible to create a human community that lives in justice and peace. Dialogue is not an end in itself. It is a means of building bridges of respect and understanding. In dialogue we nurture relations. Building bonds of relationship with those considered “the other” is the ultimate goal of all dialogues. In dialogue we must be informed by the context.

Dialogue takes place in concrete settings. Awareness of such realities as historical experience, economic background and political ideologies is essential. Further, differences in culture, gender, generation, race, and ethnicity also have an important impact on the nature and style of interaction. The purpose of dialogue, once the context is taken seriously, is not to remove or run away from differences but to build confidence and trust across them. In dialogue we strive towards mutual respect. Dialogue partners are responsible for hearing and listening to the self-understanding of each other’s belief. Trust and confidence comes from allowing partners to define themselves, refraining from proselytism, and providing an opportunity for mutual questioning, and if appropriate justified criticism.

In dialogue it is important to respect the integrity of religious traditions in the variety of their structures and organisations. Equally important is to recognise the way that participants in dialogue define their relation with their community. Dialogue is a co-operative and collaborative activity. All partners involved need to be included in the planning process from the very beginning. The strength of setting the agenda together lies in the fact that all partners own the agenda and become committed to making it work.

In dialogue we strive to be inclusive, since dialogue can easily become an elitist activity and be confined to certain strata of society. Care should be taken to ensure that dialogue takes place at different levels, between different groups and on subjects that affect the lives of all sections of the community”.

Fruits and challenges

To the new Ambassadors of Various Countries to the Holy See Pope Benedict XVI said: “Our world is facing numerous challenges that it must successfully confront so that the human person may always triumph over technology. A just future for peoples must be the primary concern of those who have undertaken to manage public affairs, not in their own interest but with a view to the common good. Our heart cannot be at peace while we see our brothers and sisters suffering from lack of food, work, a home or the other fundamental goods. To make a concrete response to the appeal of our brothers and sisters in humanity, we must come to grips with the first of these challenges: solidarity among generations, solidarity between countries and entire continents, so that all human beings may share more equitably in the riches of our planet. This is one of the essential services that people of good will must render to humanity. The earth, in fact, can produce enough to nourish all its inhabitants, on the condition that the rich countries do not keep for themselves what belongs to all”¹¹.

The Catholic Church can proudly say that with zealous determination she has accomplished its singular “service” (*diakonia*) in promoting positive interreligious relations for the good of humanity. The importance of this service has been understood and recognised by many organisations of other religions which have, and still continue today to maintain, positive contacts with the local and universal Church. I would like to share with you one example, namely, the fruits of the Church’s dialogue with Muslims in different parts of the world.

Nostra Aetate states that the Church has a “high regard” for the Muslims. The Council had underlined, in a summary fashion, the values that are found in Islam. Attention could be drawn to some features of the teaching of Pope John Paul II who emphasised the need to strengthen the spiritual bonds that exist between Christianity and Islam. This is surely important since a political, rather than a religious viewpoint tends to dominate relations. There has been a definite increase in Muslim engagement in dialogue with Christians of different denominations, and sometimes efforts have been made to enter into dialogue with Jews.

Moreover Muslims have set up their own structures for dialogue, such as the International Forum which has its president the Sheikh al-Azhar, or the Permanent Committee of al-Azhar for Dialogue with Monotheistic Religions. These bodies have agreed to form joint committees with the Catholic Church in order to foster dialogue between Muslims and Christians. In recent years these and other Muslim bodies have taken the initiatives to arrange regular meetings. The Al Albait foundation, in Jordan, has been conducting separate dialogues with Anglicans, Orthodox, Roman Catholics and German Evangelicals. The World Islamic Call Society, which has its headquarters in Tripoli, Libya, has engaged in a series of meetings with our Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The Centre for Dialogue in Teheran, depending on the Council for Islamic Culture and Communications, has organised encounters with the Orthodox Church of Greece, with the Catholic Church and with Protestants. A joint Catholic-Muslim Liaison Committee has been set up since 1995 and it brings together annually staff members of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue with representatives of various International Islamic Organisations to discuss matters of mutual concern and to monitor the state of Catholic-Muslim relations around the world. A further forum of dialogue which has been developing is that of university exchanges. To speak only of the Catholic Universities in Rome, academic agreements have been signed between the Pontifical Gregorian University and the University of Ankara, between the same Pontifical Gregorian University together with the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies and the University al-Zaitouna in Tunis. More recently a link has been made between the Pontifical University of St Thomas in Rome and the Faculty of Religious Sciences of al-Azhar.

¹¹ *l'Osservatore Romano*, English Weekly Edition, N. 25 - 22 June 2005, p. 3.

Among efforts to dialogue with Muslims mention should be made of the Commitment to dialogue of the World Council of Churches, of the Middle East Council of Churches, of the Conference of European Churches which together with the Council of Episcopal Conferences of Europe has its own "Islam in Europe" committee. Nor should one forget the activities of interreligious bodies such as the World Conference of Religions for Peace.

Muslims are found in many countries of the world, including on the territories of the so-called Christian West. It must be borne in mind that in the first years of the last wave of migrations, religion was not the central concern of Muslims. As a labour force they were looking for employment. It is now the workers are able to have their families join them that religious needs began to be felt. Not only are temporary places for prayer sought, there is also now desire to build mosques for purposes of religious education and as social centres. When Muslims gain strength, they begin to express demands in the area of ritual, celebration of feasts, their own schools to provide moral and religious values, their own cemeteries, which is an indicator that they are no longer looking towards their countries of origin, obtaining halal meat, which for example in some countries has led to serious conflict with civil authorities, since the Muslim method of slaughter is strictly forbidden as being completely barbarous, etc.

It is also interesting to see two tendencies among Muslims who have migrated in recent times in different parts of the world: the first is among those who consider that Islam cannot live in a minority situation. According to this idea, it will always try to get the upper hand, to change the 'house of war or of truce' into 'house of peace or of islam'. But there are countries where Islam appears to accommodate to its minority status. Therefore, what is needed is to recognise Islam as one of the components of society. The second tendency is that of wanting to win the Christian West over to Islam. This desire is motivated by the conviction that Islam is the ultimate revelation of the original religion; hence it is the religion for all. In addition, there is the conviction that atheistic communism and liberal capitalism are both failures. The Christian West, according to Muslims, is in a state of patent moral degeneracy. It is Islam, and Islam alone, that can offer salvation. In this context, it needs to be said that no mistake should be made about the intention of some young Muslims to seek out a Christian wife and convert her to Islam. Even if the wife remains Christian, the children will be Muslims. By way of large families, the growth of the Muslim community will be ensured, and one day it will achieve a majority. However, there is no reason to be alarmist and to assume that all Muslims entertain a project of this sort, but it is not wise, on the other hand, to ignore it.

Pope John Paul II's words in Kazakhstan, shortly after the terrorist attacks in the USA, could give sure orientation to our dialogue with Muslims. He said: "I wish to reaffirm the Catholic Church's respect for Islam, for authentic Islam: the Islam that prays, that is concerned for those in need. Recalling the errors of the past, including the most recent past, all believers ought to unite their efforts to ensure that God is never made the hostage of human ambitions. Hatred, fanaticism and terrorism profane the name of God and disfigure the true image of man"¹².

Nostra Aetate ends with a paragraph that contains a forthright condemnation of all forms of discrimination. It has to be said that, unfortunately, this paragraph too retains its relevance today. The Church responds to this challenge by promoting the dignity of every human life from its conception to its natural death.

Difficulties to overcome

Among difficulties in dialogue the first is the confusion some tend to make between dialogue and mission of the Church. *Redemptoris Missio*, the Encyclical Letter of John Paul II, clarifies the parametres of dialogue by situating it in the evangelising mission of the Church. The Pope writes:

¹² Astana, Kazakhstan, 24 September 2001.

“Interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church’s evangelising mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions. This mission, in fact, is addressed to those who do not know Christ and his Gospel, and who belong for the most part to other religions...In the light of the economy of salvation, the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue. Instead, she feels the need to link the two in the context of her mission *ad gentes*. These two elements must maintain both their intimate connection and their distinctiveness; therefore they should not be confused, manipulated or regarded as identical, as though they were interchangeable”¹³.

It is necessary for Christians to be rooted in the truth of their faith as they engage in interreligious dialogue. But Christians need, at the same time, to be respectful of others and the latter’s respective religious traditions. To be rooted in the truth of their faith without respectful openness towards others may end them in fundamentalism, just as to be open towards others without their rootedness in their faith may make them relativists and syncretists. According to Pope Benedict XVI, it is only when Christians are deeply rooted in their own faith that they will be able to open up to people of other religions and become part of a fruitful interreligious dialogue. In his homily as the Dean of the College of Cardinals he said: “How many winds of doctrine have we known in recent decades, how many ways of thinking. The small boat of the thought of many Christians has often been tossed about by these waves – flung from one extreme to another; from Marxism to liberalism, even to libertinism; from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism; from agnosticism to syncretism and so forth... Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be ‘tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine’ seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognise anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires”¹⁴.

Difficulties in dialogue also stem from the problem of language. It is important to find out what our partners in dialogue are saying or trying to say and what they are not saying. It is important in dialogue to come to a proper understanding of the partner’s religious teachings. A Catholic friend, who is engaged in dialogue with Buddhists, gave me this example: “A Buddhist nun was invited to speak to a group of Roman Catholics about the relationship between meditation and compassion in Buddhism. Later the nun complained that the Catholics learned little about Buddhism that evening because they kept telling her that her practice of compassion is due to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The nun knew very well that Christians and Buddhists have their own ways of speaking about what Catholics call “the dynamics of the spiritual life”. In this case, a problem of understanding arose because of the Roman Catholics’ preoccupation with an *a priori* theological interpretation of Buddhism. The Buddhist nun was trying to talk about compassion (*karuna*) in terms of Bodhisattva practice and its implications for meditation. Unfortunately, the Roman Catholics “didn’t get it”, according to the nun, so eager they were to recast everything she was saying in terms of their own fulfilment theology of religions”. My Catholic friend asked, “At what point does our theology of religions so interfere with our ability to listen to our dialogue partner that we fail to understand what they are saying on their own terms?”

Dialogue will be impossible, or at least extremely difficult, where minds are closed. If there is a conviction that only I have the truth, and that the other person is completely in error, then there can be no true meeting of minds. Such a closed mentality will have to be overcome. This does not mean that I have to give up my own convictions. The Christian believes that the fullness of revelation is given in Jesus Christ, but this does not exclude the presence of “rays of the Truth”, of what the early Church

¹³ Remptoris Missio, n. 55.

¹⁴ Homily, 18 April 2005

Fathers have called “seeds of the Word”, in other religions. The Church acknowledges that there are seeds of the Word to be discovered in other religious traditions. The Church also admits that “the action of the Holy Spirit” can accompany, not only an individual of other religion but his religious tradition as well (*Gaudium et spes*, 22 and *Dominum et vivificantem*, 1986). Pope John Paul II said in one of his Wednesday General Audiences: “It must first be kept in mind that every quest of the human spirit for truth and goodness, and in the last analysis for God, is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The various religions arose precisely from this primordial human openness to God. At their origins we often find founders who, with the help of God’s Spirit, achieved a deeper religious experience. Handed on to others, this experience took form in the doctrines, rites and precepts of the various religions”¹⁵.

Presence of other religious traditions on the Western soil also creates anxiety for many traditional Christian families when marriages between partners across religious boundaries are contracted. The Church cannot remain unconcerned to problems which may be caused by mixed marriages; the pastors of the Church are rightly worried since these marriages raise a number of problems. Sometimes one has the impression that the issue is reduced to whether or not a dispensation is to be granted, whereas in fact many other questions arise. Should there be an effort to try to prevent mixed marriages by warning young people about the difficulties involved? What preparation should be offered to mixed couples? How can contact be maintained with the Christian partner, even – or especially – when the wedding is only celebrated before civil authorities? European Churches have given serious thought to the matter, and there are several documents to help ministers (e.g. SRI of the French Episcopal Conference, issued in 1983 and revised in 1995; document by “Islam in Europe”, ecumenical committee; the jointly published document by the Office for Inter Religious Relations of the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1997).

With the increasing fear of terrorism which has spread and which is active through global networks throughout the world, the Governments in different countries have taken keen interest in the promotion of interreligious dialogue. Security of the State is their prime objective in these undertakings. One must be aware that there can be a shade of difference between the call of the Church to promote interreligious dialogue and the religious harmony which Governments encourage, often under the control of the State. It is not sufficient to control people through legislation; rather, it is necessary to promote the art of living together for believers of different religions in one society. Religion is not only a private affair; it is also inevitably a public reality. Religion must never be allowed to be instrumentalised for any vested interests.

There is a galaxy of sects and new religious movements which have spread around the world and they should not be too quickly identified with any religion in its proper sense. Sects are often the result of a confused understanding by their adherents of the original religions out of which they branch out and therefore sects cause difficulties for authentic interreligious dialogue. I would like to mention just some of these: Organisation of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, Sri Chinmoy, Hare Krishna, Brahma Kumari, Sahaja Yoga, Osho Rajneesh, Ananda Marga Pracharaka Sangha, Soka Gakkai, Sukyo Mahikari, etc. Other sects prevalent in the world are: Church of Scientology, Unification Church (Moon), Jehovah’s Witnesses, and also including those many groups associated with satanism, occultism and those engaged in evil practices which are destructive of human life. In the post-modern world there is also widespread phenomenon of New Age, manifestations of which are many and different. The phenomenon permeates cultures, which are its markets and vehicles. Since expressions of New Age are constantly changing, it is a difficult phenomenon to define. New Age is a form of gnosis that incorporates various spiritual insights and methods eclectically adopted from traditional religious and ancient medical practices. Combining them with scientific and pseudo-scientific approaches to healing,

¹⁵ General Audience, 9 September 1999

it is a search for a positive transformation of consciousness through precise techniques. Often at the heart of the New Age worldview is a false opposition between spirituality and religion.

Finally, the list of difficulties to overcome in interreligious dialogue cannot be complete without the mention of widespread indifferentism, which, sad to say, is also found among Christians. The problem of indifferentism is closely related to culture and Europe has gone through several cultural phases, from classical (about the will, virtue and doing the good) to modern (about the intellect, reason and order) and then to post-modern (with the rise of advertising, radio, television, is about experience, feelings and the imagination). There has been thus 'shifts' in 'controls of meaning'. In the present time the new controls of meaning are focused on self. Whereas classical culture was focused upon God, modern culture on man, the post-modern culture is focused on self. The sources of authority are no longer external and objective, but personal and subjective. The truth is 'what you make it' and this leads to the moral relativism Pope Benedict warns of. Western Europe, increasingly forgetful of its Christian heritage, is the common home today for people of many different beliefs, and none. Its classical culture has been overlaid with modernity, and its modernity overlaid or suffused with post-modernity, whilst particularly in Northern Europe, waves of overseas immigration have placed a world-religions' supermarket on everyone's doorstep. This melting-pot has created a feeling of indifferentism. As a result of this the cause of authentic interreligious dialogue suffers greatly¹⁶.

Conclusion

More than ever Christians in many parts of the world live in societies which are marked by tension and conflict between and within religious communities, widespread distrust and fear, and a climate of helplessness and resignation. The Church has been encouraging Christians to live their faith by building bridges of friendship across religious boundaries. Thus, by inviting people of different religions to cooperate at all levels of society, from local to international, Christians are able to bear witness to the values of the Kingdom of God which has been preached by Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour of all.

Relations across religious boundaries need to be cultivated, especially when times are favourable. One should not wait for crisis to overtake us. Living the truth of the Christian faith in religiously pluralistic world is a challenge which the Church has been responding to in a praiseworthy manner. By bearing witness to hope in ecumenical and interreligious surrounding, you, as active and committed protagonists through the apostleship of the sea, have an indispensable contribution to make in the heart of the Church.

¹⁶ cf. Philip Egan, "Towards a Renewed Understanding of the Christian Faith in a Pluralist Society", *Pro Dialogo*, 121, 2006/1, pp. 52-66