

THE NATURE OF DIALOGUE
(ecumenical and interfaith)

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As we move toward a new millennium, the wisdom of the fathers of Vatican II becomes clearer. In an effort to deal with the countless and complex issues dividing humanity in the name of the one God, the fathers called for dialogue, both ecumenical and interfaith. This dialogue requires a move beyond the mere tolerance of other faith beliefs and has as its objective the knowledge and acceptance of other religious communities as they choose to define themselves. Without dialogue, societies – usually out of fear – generalize, or even demonize, one another. And demonization, as best illustrated in Bosnia, Rwanda and Sudan, often leads to anarchy, violence and death.

The process of dialogue must take place on four levels. Dialogue of the heart enables us to share in God's creation as partners. Dialogue of daily life calls us to promote human values that we share with God as our guarantor. Dialogue of speech invites us to speak of the Lord and put aside our distractions with power, wealth and all that is not essential to God and humankind. And dialogue of silence asks us to listen, that God may speak with us, touch our hearts and inspire us to act and speak as the Lord's servants.

The objective of ecumenical dialogue is reunification of the Christian churches. The Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity provides a forum for Catholics to engage in dialogue with members of the non-Catholic Christian churches.

Within this council a special commission has also been set up to manage religious relations with representatives of the Jewish community.

A substantive rapprochement between non-Christians and Catholics is the goal of interreligious dialogue, which is encouraged by the Pontifical Council for interreligious Dialogue. Religious relations with Muslims are conducted by a special commission of the council.

Although these official organizations guide the dialogue process, it is actually conducted by the actions

of people of faith. Numerous exchanges take place on the local level, which may be best suited to fulfilling the four levels of dialogue. And those agreements that are forged by the local exchanges are then channeled to the official church-led dialogues for review.

The process of dialogue is complex; certain elements are essential. In his May encyclical, "Ut Unum Sint" (That All May Be One), Pope John Paul II dedicates several paragraphs to the nature of dialogue. The Holy Father notes that charity, forgiveness, humility and reconciliation are indispensable if those in discussion are to deal objectively with the cultural, psychological, social and theological factors that have contributed to humanity's division, which the Pope speaks of as our "sin of separation."

In genuine dialogue we must listen to the story of our partner. Dialogue of the heart demands that we hear and genuinely respond to those wounds that may have been inflicted by our forebears. We must also make every effort to understand the faith truth that is imbedded in a cultural context, language and worldview that may differ from our own. Is the truth, though presented differently, absolutely false, or is it valid?

An integral part of dialogue is the absence of all forms of reductionism or agreement for the sake of protocol. Serious questions must be resolved with clarity and sincerity. Crucial to this endeavor is the effort to move beyond polemics to discover that often we are simply dealing with different interpretations of the same reality.

As an active participant in the dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, I have witnessed in these past five years intense fraternal exchanges and a humility born of the Spirit. Last November the discussions of the local groups bore fruit – the Pope and the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church signed a Christological agreement, healing a 1,500-year-old disagreement over the nature of Jesus Christ. Although full communion has not yet been achieved, the Assyrian and Catholic churches have professed their common faith in the Redeemer, while choosing to express that faith through different formulas and traditions.

A strong belief and knowledge of one's own sacred writings and traditions are crucial elements of dialogue. As co-chair of the Islamic-Roman Catholic dialogue of the Archdiocese of New York, I have come to know the many beliefs shared by Catholics and Muslims. However, we differ in a fundamental way: Catholics believe that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the Son of God. Muslims venerate Jesus as an honored prophet of the one God.

Although it is not our purpose to convert one another to our belief of the nature of Jesus, nevertheless we must articulate clearly our own positions; an uninformed participant in dialogue is an obstacle. For any participant in these exchanges, it has become a test of

one's own faith and knowledge to be able to present sophisticated thoughts and formulas that are rooted in another time and culture.

One must also be astute in dealing with the complexities and tensions generated by injustices in the past. Although the Crusades and the colonial empires enriched Western Europe, more often than not they sowed the seeds of discord in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

Thus theological discourse may become ambushed by these historic grievances.

Dialogue may also assume different characteristics depending on the circumstances or urgency of the situation. Official dialogue, with its papers and discussions, is often preceded by shared prayer or scriptural reading. Occasionally, dialogue may be held in response to an emergency that adversely affects a dialogue partner. Special sessions of our regular Muslim-Catholic dialogue have been called to prepare statements about Bosnia and Sudan, countries where each faith group has experienced injustices.

Another form of dialogue is cultural; participants share in a communal gathering. Once again our local Muslim-Catholic dialogue has been quite active. Catholics have attended celebrations of World Muslim Day while Muslims attended the Pope's presentation of his World Day of Peace message in October at New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral. Implicit in such activities is the deep respect and selfless love of those participating in dialogue.

"Nostra Aetate" (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) proved to be formative in the long-term effect Vatican II was to have on interreligious dialogue. The declaration discussed the church's relations with non-Christian religions, but especially with the Jewish community.

As with those dialogues with the non-Catholic and Muslim communities, my experiences with the Jewish-Catholic dialogue in the New York Archdiocese may be categorized as official, occasional and cultural. Often, centuries-old wounds that have devastated the Jewish community were channeled into one issue: the lack of diplomatic relations between the state of Israel and the Holy See. Occasionally such geopolitical imperatives nearly over-whelmed the religious dialogue found in experiences of the same God.

Historical difficulties must be openly discussed in every process of dialogue. Proselytism, with all the implications it carries to exert economic, psychological

or spiritual pressure on non-Christians, has to be replaced with the new dialogic position that participating parties must accept one another as equal partners. It must be clearly understood that inter-religious dialogue is confessional, with each participant speaking from the experience of his or her own faith tradition. This requires careful and dedicated listening. However, it is an interactive process and must never be reduced to an exchange of monologues.

The very essence of dialogue is rooted in the person and in the dignity of that person:

"Dialogue is an indispensable step along the path toward human self-realization, the self-realization both of each individual and every human community," Pope John Paul II states in "Ut Unum Sint."

"Although the concept of dialogue might appear to give priority to the cognitive dimension," the Pope continues, "all dialogue implies a global existential dimension."

For genuine dialogue one must: state positions clearly, search for what is true in the common patrimony of the participants, reject proselytism and embrace the faith of one's own scriptures and traditions. Dialogue should provide an opportunity to renew and deepen one's own faith. Also, participants in dialogue must view their new understanding of religions in terms of genuine religious values, not merely the accidents of history, culture or politics. Finally, participants must be committed to enabling others to see dialogue as a tool for grasping that which is true in all faiths, which may then be shared and celebrated.

The path of dialogue provides an opportunity to listen, not to lecture. In a world often disfigured by selfishness and greed, the tool of dialogue puts each individual in contact with the truths and realities experienced by others. Enlightened by the Holy Spirit, we journey along that path which helps us to see in one another our diversity and our humanity.

Clearly, for a Catholic, the universality of dialogue calls upon the Holy Spirit to break through the cliches, reject stalemate and resignation, and open our own hearts, convert our minds and inspire in us to take concrete and courageous steps, "that all may be one." •

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