

Milestones in Interreligious Dialogue (1/2)

Fr. James Kroeger, M.M.
*Asia Pacific Area Assistant
on the Maryknoll General Council*

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Pope John XXIII in his call for *aggiornamento* and his convocation of the Second Vatican Council envisioned a wide and encompassing renewal of the whole Church. Today, from the vantage point of over three decades of experience after the close of Vatican II in 1965, a keen observer can now evaluate those areas in Church life where authentic renewal has been received, taken root, effected growth and change, and borne concrete fruit. How has interreligious dialogue fared within the panorama of an entire Church renewed for its task of mission and evangelization?

Modest progress has been achieved both in understanding and implementing dialogue as a central element of the Church's evangelizing mission. Bold and creative initiatives have been taken; yet, for both Church leadership and ordinary Christians, dialogue remains on the periphery of Christian life and ministry.

A twelve-stop journey on the Church's dialogue road will reveal key milestones where growth and understanding have been achieved. Each milestone noted in this essay contains a brief description of the event itself, the progress it contributed, and the paths it noted for future growth in dialogue. On the one hand, the Church's milestones or signposts have been clear and encouraging however, on the other hand, the general Church membership has been a reluctant pilgrim in walking the dialogue road. This succinct overview of significant milestones aims to encourage a fuller integration of dialogue within the Church's mission and ministry.

1. Secretariat for Non-Christians

On Pentecost (May 17) 1964, in the climate of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI instituted the Secretariat for Non-Christians as an entity distinct from the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of

Peoples. Renamed the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue in 1988, it was to serve as an institutional sign and structure of the Church's desire to meet and relate to the followers of other religious traditions of the world. Its task, as noted by Paul VI, was «to search for methods and ways of opening a suitable dialogue with non-Christians... 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».

2. Encyclical: *Ecclesiam Suam*

Pope Paul VI published his programmatic encyclical letter *Ecclesiam Suam* on August 6, 1964 (between the second and third sessions of Vatican II). This *magna carta* for dialogue is the first time that the term «dialogue» is found in an encyclical (over half of the document is devoted to a discussion of the need, sources, characteristics, modes, partners, challenges and goals of dialogue): «The Church should enter into dialogue with the world in which it exists and labors» (67). «The dialogue of salvation was opened spontaneously on the initiative of God: He [God] loved us first» (74). We «need to wait for the hour when God may make our dialogue effective» (79).

«Dialogue is, then, a method of accomplishing the apostolic mission» (83). «The Church is not unaware of the formidable dimensions of such a mission» (98). It is also directed towards «the followers of the great Afro-Asiatic religions» (110). We «recognize and respect the moral and spiritual values of various non-Christian religions, and we desire to join with them in promoting and defending common ideals of religious liberty, human brotherhood, good culture, social welfare and civil order» (112).

3. Second Vatican Council

Five documents of Vatican II contain important elements for understanding the Church's role vis-a-vis world religions (*Nostra Aetate*, *Lumen Gentium*, *Ad Gentes*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Dignitatis Humanae*). Some general themes are: the need to recognize within religions «elements of truth and grace» (AG 9), «treasures which the bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth» (AG 1 1), «a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men» (NA 2); recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit (GS I 1; AG 4); the presence of treasures of the ascetical and contemplative life (AG 15, 18) and the presence of «Seeds of the Word» (LG 17; AG 11).

The Council promotes an attitude of profound respect toward all world religions (AG 10), specifically primitive and traditional religions (NA 2), Hinduism (NA 2), Buddhism (NA 2), Islam (NA 3; LG 16), and Judaism (NA 4; LG 16). It encourages dialogue and collaboration (NA 2); it is through dialogue that

Christians can «receive the inspiration of the Spirit and follow them ardently» (GS 92). The Council challenges all Christians: «we are obliged to hold that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in the Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God» (GS 22).

4. FABC First Plenary Assembly

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) met in Taipei, Taiwan (April 22-27, 1974) to prepare for the Synod on Evangelization. Their landmark document *Evangelization in Modern Day Asia* spoke of «the integral preaching of the Gospel» (23), «the building up of a truly local Church» (9) and the triple dialogue with people, cultures, and religions (12). The Church in Asia especially needs to engage in «a dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples» (13), which are «significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation» (14); «they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors» (14). «And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?» (15). FABC recommended the need to «evolve a working concept of evangelization that embraces, as integral to that concept, genuine dialogue with the great living religions of Asia" (3a).

5. Synod on evangelization of the modern world

The short declaration at the end of the 1974 Synod proclaimed: «Confident in the action of the Holy Spirit which overflows the bounds of the Christian community, we wish to foster dialogue with non-Christian religions, so that we may reach a better understanding of the gospel's newness and of the fullness of revelation, and thus may be in a better position to show to other how the salvific truth of God's love is fulfilled in Christ» (11).

6. Apostolic Exhortation: *Evangelii Nuntiandi*

One year after the Synod Paul VI published *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975). Evangelization is seen as the «vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize» (14). The understanding of evangelization in EN is a broad one: «evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity» (18). «Any partial

and fragmentary definition which attempts to render the reality of evangelization in all its richness, complexity and dynamism does so only at the risk of impoverishing it and even of distorting it. It is impossible to grasp the concept of evangelization unless one tries to keep in view all of its essential elements» (17).

EN speaks of the Church's esteem and respect for non-Christian religions (53) because «they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people... they have taught generations of people how to pray... they are all impregnated with innumerable 'seeds of the Word' and can constitute a true 'preparation for the Gospel'». The Church needs «to offer to the missionaries of today and of tomorrow new horizons in their contacts with non-Christian religions» (53).

7. Dialogue and Mission

On Pentecost (June 10) 1984, the twentieth anniversary of the creation of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, the Church published «*The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*». Approved by the Pope, the document expressly places interreligious dialogue within the purview of the Church's evangelizing mission: «dialogue finds its place within the Church's salvific mission; for this reason it is a dialogue of salvation» (Introduction, 5; cf. *Ecclesiam Suam* 74).

The document gives interreligious dialogue a broad definition: «It means not only discussion, but also includes all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment» (3). Its main concern is «the relationship which exists between dialogue and mission» (5). The document presents the five dimensions of integral mission/evangelization and notes how they are understood «in the consciousness of the Church as a single but complex and articulated reality» (13). Both local Churches and missionaries are «responsible for the totality of mission» (14), because «Christian mission embraces all these elements» (13). Four forms of dialogue are presented in detail (25-35).

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