

**Milestones in  
Interreligious Dialogue (2/2)**

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

(Omnis Terra, March 1977,  
Printing authorized by MPU)

### 8. World Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi

In the context of the international Year, of Peace, on October 27, 1986, John Paul II invited representatives of other Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the major World Religions to come on pilgrimage to Assisi to pray and fast for world peace. Explaining the event, John Paul II noted: «The event of Assisi can be considered as a visible illustration, a concrete example, a catechesis, intelligible to all, of what is presupposed and signified by the commitment to ecumenism and to interreligious dialogue which was recommended and promoted by the Second Vatican Council» (7). He added: «Either we learn to walk together in peace and harmony, or we drift apart and ruin ourselves and others» (5).

### 9. Theses on Interreligious Dialogue (FABC)

In April 1987, after two years of study and consultation by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) Theological Advisory Commission, the document *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue: An Essay in Pastoral Theological Reflection* was released. The aim of the document was to «facilitate a new insight into the identity of the Church in a religiously pluralistic world and a renewal of its mission» (0.9). The document presents a comprehensive vision of interfaith dialogue in seven closely reasoned theses with extensive commentary. They address important theological-missiological questions, consistently asserting that dialogue «is an integral dimension of the mission of the Church, which is the sacrament of the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus» (Thesis 2).

### 10. Encyclical: *Redemptoris Missio*

John Paul II's mission encyclical, dated December 7, 1990, addresses the «Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate». Within the fourth chapter. «The Paths of Mission» a specific section addresses (Dialogue with our Brothers and Sisters of Other Religions) (55-57). It is an exceedingly rich section: «Interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission;... dialogue is not in opposition to mission *ad gentes*; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions;... the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue» (55). «Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice dialogue... I [John Paul II] am well aware that many missionaries and Christian communities find in the difficult and often misunderstood path of dialogue their only way of bearing sincere witness to Christ and offering generous service to others. I wish to encourage them...» (57).

### 11. Dialogue and Proclamation

On Pentecost (May 19) 1991 the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples jointly issued «*Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*». The document explicitly affirms the holistic and integral nature of the evangelization process and mentions the five principal elements of mission (2). Discussing «the relationship between dialogue and proclamation» (4), the document quotes John Paul II: «Just as interreligious dialogue is one element in the mission of the Church, the proclamation of God's saving work in Our Lord Jesus Christ is another... There can be no question of choosing one and ignoring or rejecting the other» (6). «Both are legitimate and necessary» (77).

There are many «signs of the times» (social, cultural, religious and political) and a *religious* sensitivity and attentiveness is an important avenue to hear «the Spirit of God [who] is speaking, teaching, and guiding» (78). «All Christians are called to be personally involved in these two ways of carrying out the one mission of the Church, namely proclamation and dialogue» (82). «Yet more than tasks to be accomplished, dialogue and proclamation are graces to be sought in prayer» (89).

### 12. Continental Synods

As the Jubilee Year 2000 approaches, John Paul II has made his intention known to convoke and complete a series of continental synods. In those areas of the world where a variety of religious traditions are found and form an integral dimension of people's indigenous culture and faith, interreligious dialogue will necessarily be a key dimension in understanding the Church's presence and ministry.

On the Feast of the Triumph of the Holy Cross (September 14) in 1995, John Paul II released the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*. In reference to dialogue (65-67), the document notes: «Commitment to dialogue must also embrace all Muslims of good will» (66). «With regard to African traditional religion, a serene and prudent dialogue will be able... to foster the assimilation of positive values... They can be seen as *a preparation for the Gospel*... The adherents of African traditional religion should therefore be treated with great respect and esteem, and all inaccurate and disrespectful language should be avoided» (67). This is a task given to the Church in Africa in fulfillment of «her evangelizing mission towards the year 2000» (8).

The Church in Asia (home to more than 85% of the world's non-Christians) will necessarily devote attention to interfaith relations and dialogue as it prepares for its continental synod. The Preparatory Document (*Lineamenta*) notes: «God's offer of salvation to humankind is always a question of *dialogue*... The entire mission of Jesus was a constant dialogue with humanity... The whole mission of the Church is, therefore, one of dialogue. Dialogue is a part of the work of evangelization... In the Asian context, dialogue is of primary importance for the future of Christian mission... The Church in Asia, therefore, must enter into ever deeper dialogue with the great religions... (33).

\* \* \*

**Pope John Paul II** has given much emphasis to the role of dialogue within the evangelizing mission of the Church; in his missionary journeys he constantly seeks opportunities to respectfully interact with the followers of various religions and faith traditions. From his voluminous statements on the panorama of inter-religious themes, some short, representative quotes are presented here.

«Christians will, moreover, join hands with all men and women of good will [and] work together in order to bring about a more just and peaceful society in which the poor will be the first to be served» (Manila, Philippines; February 21, 1981).

«Christians and Muslims, in general, have badly understood each other, and sometimes, in the past, we have opposed and even exhausted each other in polemics and in wars. I believe that today, God invites us *to change our old practices*. We must respect each other, and also we must stimulate each other in good works on the path of God» (Casablanca, Morocco; August 19, 1985).

«By dialogue we let God be present in our midst, for as we open ourselves to one another, we open ourselves to God» (Madras, India; February 5, 1986).

(Interreligious dialogue) is «a Christian work desired by God» and «one element in the mission of the Church»; «the commitment of the Catholic Church to dialogue with the followers of other religions remains firm and unchanged» (Rome, Italy; April 28, 1987).

«Throughout my Pontificate it has been my constant concern to fulfill the apostolic and pastoral task of both dialogue and proclamation. On my last visit to Africa, I met leaders of African traditional religions and witnessed their awareness of God's nearness and their appreciation of the ethical values of a godly person» (Rome, Italy; April 28, 1987).

«Respectful dialogue with others also enables us to be enriched by their insights, challenged by their questions, and impelled to deepen our knowledge of the truth. Far from stifling dialogue or rendering it superfluous, *a commitment to the truth of our religious tradition* by its very nature *makes dialogue with others both necessary and fruitful*» (Jakarta, Indonesia; October 10, 1989).

(Interreligious dialogue at its deepest level is always a *dialogue of salvation*, because it seeks to discover, clarify and understand better the signs of the age-long dialogue which God maintains with humanity» (Vatican City; November 13, 1992).

## Summary

This essay has presented a synopsis of recent thought within the Roman Catholic tradition on interreligious dialogue. It has been purposely succinct, highlighting only twelve pivotal moments within the Vatican II era; pertinent citations from John Paul II were provided. The material available in this presentation clearly indicates the Church's current thought and direction vis-a-vis dialogue and evangelization.

At the heart of recent Catholic literature on dialogue is an operative vision of evangelization that is broad, comprehensive, and holistic; it is often named «integral evangelization». Several elements - including dialogue - are seen as constitutive dimensions of this evangelization process. The Church consistently affirms her commitment to «integral evangelization», realizing that evangelization culminates in the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ - whenever, wherever, and however this is practically and respectfully possible.

Again, in fulfilling her mission of evangelization, the Church engages the followers of various faith traditions, because She believes that in this encounter all dialogue partners will experience a mutual evangelization under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Dialogue remains an important bridge for the Church to cross into the third millennium of Christianity. •