

FAITH FORMATION IN A MULTI-RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

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Life is shaped from within and also by the environment. What plant or tree a seed will be and the suitable environment it needs is determined from within. This is also true for the teaching-learning process that aims to promote human growth. An effective pedagogy is guided by a certain vision, a frame of mind, a set of foundational ideas and principles. We are clear as to what we want to achieve through our teaching.

Effective pedagogy is less about information and more about transformation, giving people a way of thinking and living. It generates different attitudes and fosters a mode of living that embodies those attitudes. The formation process needs to be sustained by a community that embodies that vision. A proper vision makes the pedagogy meaningful. A credible community makes it trustworthy. This is provided by a mature faith-vision and an effective witnessing to that faith-vision.

We wish to enable our students to enter into more meaningful relations with peoples of other faiths not only at the social level, but also in the realm of religion, ethics, spirituality, but above all in

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service to humanity. As we move out of our secure religious frame, we are bound to be asked questions. We just cannot get away by saying: "It is in the Holy Bible!" "This is our tradition." Today such replies will not help. We encourage students to ask questions, providing them not just the verdict of some authority, but a reasoned out explanation.

Through faith formation we are not just aiming at fostering some nice inter-religious relations. What is even more important is that Christians experience a religious enrichment and a moral challenge through this encounter. Our formation strives to promote openness, a desire to dialogue with peoples of other faiths, seeing them as our co-pilgrims. Proper catechesis prepares young people for an *intra*-religious dialogue while engaging in an *inter*-religious dialogue, making them open to new ways of thinking about Jesus, creative forms of worshipping, and more contextualized patterns of being and animating the Christian community.

Above all, faith formation in a multi-religious context provides us a more Gospel-based approach to religion. Religion can become a social marker. We remain basically an inward-looking community, one among others, competing with them, ensuring that our identity is well taken note of. Our little church and institutions become the focus of our life and concern. Our beliefs are shaped by authority and tradition. On the other hand, religion can promote social reform. We become an outward-looking community, losing our identity to become the salt and the leaven that function only by disappearing. God's Kingdom becomes the focus of our life, and people become our concern. Our faith finds its expression in the heart of contemporary society: in our homes, in the market, in the place of our work, in the centres of our entertainment, etc. We get out of traditional ghettos and enter the modern world. We move towards a 'religionless Christianity'.¹

Our search for a suitable pedagogy begins with a deeper theological reflection. It can only be implemented if it is understood and appropriated by the local community and its pastors, and accepted and encouraged by the diocesan authorities. These in turn are guided by Rome. Hence it is very important that people in the Vatican appreciate more the complexity of our situation and sustain us in our struggle. Thus our presentation has two parts: theological and pastoral.

¹I am echoing Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), a martyr of the Nazi regime. See followingjesus.org/invitation/religionless_christianity.htm; a.o 15-01-2011.

A. From Dead Idols to the Living God

Our faith-vision emerges from the Biblical account of salvation history. God calls Abraham to Himself: he has to journey as the Lord tells him (Gen 12:1-4). He is called not to abandon one religion and embrace another, but to abandon his idols and follow the living God. The Psalmist gives us his evaluation of these idols: "They have mouths, but they speak not, they have eyes, but they see not..." (135:16-17). Unless we constantly reflect on what we believe, we too may abandon the living God and become idol-worshippers. Every heresy has some important truth. If it were totally false, nobody would follow it. Iconoclasm too has some truth: we need to destroy our idols to discover the living God.

A1. Slaves of Lifeless Idols

In the distant past there was no state, not as we have it today. The security of individuals and communities depended on some super-human power. Different communities or tribes had their territory. The super-human power too had its territory: some sacred space: a dark cave, a thick grove... Gradually even the super-human power is localized within that space by some prominent rock or a very tall tree, and eventually by a statue. This was the centre of the extended sacred space: the land inhabited by that people. The idol protected them. They protected the idol!

If properly understood, there is nothing wrong in venerating statues. In some cases, it may even be necessary. As decadence sets in the statue becomes an idol. The symbolized mystery is forgotten. The symbol becomes the reality. It is, then, absolutized: there is no salvation except through this idol. Decadence sets in when there is no theological reflection - faith constantly seeking to understand itself anew.

An idol needs to be housed. We build a temple. Just as the statue slowly eclipsed God so too the temple displaces the idol, becoming sacred in itself. Being lifeless, the idol needs to be 'taken care of': it is given a bath; its clothes are changed; etc. A team of attendants manage the temple. They generate a 'text': they have been especially chosen by the idol to serve it; they alone understand it; etc. These attendants gradually become more important than the temple and its idol. They need money. They generate texts that proclaim different ways of worshipping the idol: different rituals, each serving some specific need, and having a fee attached to it. As religion becomes lucrative, the beneficiaries need to protect their interests. They create more 'sacred texts'. These ensure that the devotees do not abandon

them. They are proclaimed the 'sacred people', chosen by the deity. They will be happy if they remain faithful to the deity. The temple attendants also make sure that only 'qualified' persons can officiate in the temple. Temple service is monopolized by a priestly class or caste.

The idol is dumb, unable to dialogue with anybody. The priests engage in a monologue in its presence. They are not used to dialogue. Their idol does not dialogue with them; they, in turn, do not dialogue with the devotees. At times they claim to have some message from the deity and the devotees accept their claim, but what they are proclaiming is what they want to say. The devotees become more dumb than their idol. People who worship idols cannot enter into dialogue with peoples of other faiths.

The idol is deaf and blind, not sensitive to the call of the moment, the signs of the times, the cry of the oppressed, and the groans of the poor. History does not exist for it. The blindness and deafness of the idol are infectious. The devotees too become deaf and blind. They cannot listen to the cry of others, or notice the changes in their society. Hence they do not have anything worthwhile to offer to others. Human concerns like social justice, environmental balance, honesty in public life, etc., are not their concerns. The cult of an idol is bound to be static, totally unrelated to real life, confined to meaningless rituals. The devotees become victims of the past: their liturgy, theology, rules, etc., are archaeological remains. On the other hand, because the idol is blind a lot of corruption within the religious community and also in the society at large goes unnoticed. Imitating their idol, religious leaders close their eyes.

The idol cannot walk and reach out to its devotees. They need to flock to it. Religion becomes more and more a temple-centred phenomenon. When this happens, religion serves as a social marker, dividing people, generating unhealthy competition. It is not interested in bringing people together, but in keeping them apart. It defends the right to 'convert' others to its fold, but speaks of sheep-stealing when its own members join some other religion. Greater emphasis is laid on what is visible and audible, and less on what makes us human and humane.

The Jesus-movement too can become the cult of a dead idol. Christians may not replace Jesus with an idol, but they can put aside the Gospel and embrace the vision of idolaters. Then human rules become more important. A lot of time, money and energy are spent on costly churches and chapels, elaborate ceremonies and celebrations. To a large extent, religion unfolds itself literally and

metaphorically within the church compound. Occasionally there are some public processions and prayer conventions that do become a public nuisance. New devotions are introduced that only serve to deepen the emotional dependence of the devotees. The Church is then dominated by a clergy that is not open to creative change, less inclined to dialogue, and more concerned about money, power and prestige. New sacred 'texts' are generated that legitimize and perpetuate this situation.

A2. Icons of the Life-giving God

The Bible presents us with a profound paradox. It condemns the cult of lifeless idols (Ex 20:4-5), yet it portrays the life-giving God as the supreme iconographer (Gen 1:26-27). The account of the creation of humans contains a very important message: our God finds Himself in our midst, among humans. Authentic religion is not the cult of some lifeless idol, but the service of living icons (Mt 25:34-46). God knows that we need to make icons and statues, to express our unseen depth through visible signs and symbols. Hence He provides us with the most appropriate icon: our neighbour in need, the sacrament of the real presence of the Risen Lord (Mt 25:40, 45). The living God can take care of Himself. He does not need our service. The only way we can serve Him is by caring for His children.

For this reason, the living God does not need a temple made of stones (Jn 4:21-24). What He wishes most is that the communion of love between His living icons brings forth a community, where humble service becomes the central concern - a community held together not so much by a confession of faith, but by an expression of love. Then He Himself comes anew to dwell with them (Mt 18:20). This community constitutes the *ecclesia*, the Church - formed by the Holy Spirit, and not some stone building. In this community there is no special group set apart, for all "are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9).

The living icons of God cannot be 'installed' in any particular house. They remain pilgrims, confident that the Lord walks with them (Mt 8:20; Lk 24:15). They cross the boundaries of space and time, of culture and ethnicity, and they do so with their eyes and ears open. As they gradually understand themselves through this pilgrimage, they grow in their understanding of God. They have a basic awareness of the God who calls them, but they are not burdened with a whole baggage of dogmas. For them no time, space, or culture is particularly sacred. The way they worship God, the rules needed to maintain the freedom of individuals and communities, the pattern of

leadership, are not determined once and for all. God respects His own icons. He has endowed them with the power of reasoning and discerning. There is scope for creativity and subsidiarity within His community. The God they confess is a living God, who constantly makes all things new (Rev 21:5).

The life-giving God constantly speaks to His people, inviting them to respond in freedom. To honour Him we need to learn the art of dialogue from Him. We need to dialogue not only with Him, but much more with His other living icons. In fact, only in and through them can we dialogue with Him. Being equally His icons, equally loved, chosen and called by Him, we do not need any particular set of people to mediate between us and Him. We cross the boundaries set up by religions, and dialogue with all humans, who are equally the icons of our God. Inter-religious dialogue becomes an essential element of our worship. The refusal to enter inter-religious dialogue would mean that our god is a tribal idol, not the one God of all.

The living God is sensitive to all His children. He hears and responds to the cry of the poor, the groan of the oppressed, the sigh of the victims of injustice, the weeping of orphans, widows and the victims of rape (Ex 3:7). He tells us that if we too do not take note of and respond to all this human misery, our worship is just hypocrisy (Is 1:7-17; Amos 5:21-25). Love of neighbour and commitment to social justice, gender equality and environmental integrity constitute authentic worship. The living God belongs to none, but all belong to Him. His loving gaze is towards all. Only in walking with all will we walk towards Him. Inter-religious dialogue is not an option, but an imperative. The living God makes demands on us; the lifeless idol does not unsettle us. For this reason, it is easier to be its slave than to be the icons of the living God. This is not merely a possibility, but a real temptation.

When we succumb to this temptation, then once again we deny the self-emptying God. Then empowering symbols are displaced by power-mongering institutions, inspiring ideals by insipid ideas; ecclesial communities by church buildings, the warmth of catholicity by the cold of insularity, the quality of life by the quantum of power, the Kingdom of God by our church. When this happens, then we cease to be friendly neighbours and become threatening competitors. We stop being the pilgrim people and confine ourselves to a ghetto. We lose sight of the invitation of the Incarnate Word to immerse ourselves in history and busy ourselves with rites and rituals. We forget the inspiration of the Triune God to enter into dialogue with others and indulge in soliloquies. We ignore the challenge of the

Unique Saviour and imitate the ways of the world. When this happens, faith formation in a multi-religious context is just not possible. Only discernment made possible through critical reflection and sustained by prayer will enable us to remain faithful to God who calls us, and continue our journey with Abraham, not knowing where we are going but trusting Him who walks with us (Heb 11:8).

B. From Closed Wells to the Unbounded Ocean

The more Christian life is shaped by the mystery of the Incarnation, the more authentic it becomes. Moses pitched the tent where he met God outside the residential area of the Israelites. To meet God he had to go away from his people. The people would stand at a distance and watch (Ex 33:7-8). In Jesus, God himself pitches his tent right in our midst (John 1:14).² We no longer need any special place to worship Him – neither the Jewish temple on Mount Sion, nor the Samaritan shrine on Mount Gerizim (John 4:20-24). The distinction between sacred and profane, between laity and priest, is abrogated.³ Life itself becomes worship.

Jesus is God's unique gift – totally different from other religious founders, other prophets and sages. This is because Jesus is Emmanuel – the very presence of the supremely personal God within our history. Hence his 'religion', the movement that was set in motion by his powerful presence, ought to be not just somewhat but completely different from all other religions. The difference will be understood only when we realize that Jesus is the supreme icon of the Father (Col 1:15), and all humans, especially those in need, are the icons of Jesus. By 'worshipping' them we worship Jesus (Mt 25:35-45), and through him the Father. We then become a community with adequate credibility to sustain faith formation in a multi-religious context.

The first Christians understood this radical difference between the way of Jesus and other religions. Luke describes their life beautifully:

And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people.

²Here John uses the Greek verb *skēnoō* (to pitch a tent – *skēnē*).

³In "Cultic Priesthood: From New Testament to Trent," *Third Millennium*, 13-15-26, I show that the New Testament provides no foundation for the claim that Jesus instituted the ministerial priesthood.

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:44-47).

We can notice the following significant elements in this narrative. 1. The first disciples were a community of deep love, caring and sharing. 2. They continued to be Jews. They did not think that to be disciples of Jesus they had to abandon their Jewish roots. They had a multiple identity. 3. Their celebration of the Eucharist did not require a special place or the service of some particular minister. 4. The people around them found them to be wonderful companions. 5. Their life itself was an effective proclamation of Jesus: it drew others to follow him. The goal of faith formation in a multi-religious context should be to lead Christians to this way of Jesus.

The mystery of incarnation reveals to us the mystery of God. God can enter into a profound communion with us precisely because He is the mystery of communion: the Triune God. The communion that constitutes the very nature of God is also a mystery of equality, difference, plurality, and dialogue. The Christian community must be an icon of this Triune God: a community where equality, difference, plurality and dialogue are taken very seriously. Inter-religious-dialogue is not just a gathering of people of different faiths, who spend some time in polite exchange. Real inter-religious dialogue seeks to free religion from its traditional boundaries and to globalize religiosity. We move more and more towards inter-religious prayer, celebration, entertainment, study, etc., but above all towards inter-religious service. Not God but human welfare is the real centre of inter-religious dialogue. The more the Church moves in this direction, the more will faith formation in a multi-religious context be possible and credible.

B1. The Domestic Church

The family is the primary school of Christian formation. The attitudes of the parents, their conversation and way of life, have more impact on children than catechism classes and homilies. Mahatma Gandhi tells us that his father would visit temples of Rām and Shiva, and that though himself a Vaishnav, he had Jain, Muslim and Parsee friends. These people, Gandhi says, "would talk to him about their own faiths, and he would listen to them always with respect, and often with interest... These many things combined to inculcate in me a

toleration [sic] for all faiths.”⁴ Thus Gandhi learnt from his father a deep respect for other religions.

Marriage is the natural school for dialogue, a sacrament of growth in the life of the Triune God – a communion of equals. Marriage is a call to live with differences, not merely to tolerate but to see them as opportunities for growth. The ability of the spouses to dialogue on all questions that affect them and their children becomes a powerful lesson in dialogue. Slowly the children are drawn into this dialogue: they realize that they are trusted and so learn to trust others. They begin to see that trying to understand the other is ultimately the struggle to understand oneself. They gradually get an insight into the Trinity: we can be ourselves only by being in communion with others.

The parents’ faith provides the child the first lesson in faith formation. The parents’ attitude to peoples of other faiths is conveyed to the children through their conversation, and the way they refer to them. Children are sensitive. They hear and understand not only the words spoken to them, but also the tone in which they are spoken. Even though they may not be able to articulate fully their perceptions, children know when the elders are sincere and when they are just trying to be polite.

In our country people send sweets to their neighbours even of different faith communities when they celebrate a feast. Thus there is a basic openness. We need to build on this. Visiting our neighbours on their feast, joining them in their religious celebrations, will deepen our mutual bonds. These visits are an occasion to know peoples of other faiths better. Parents encourage the children to ask their friends relevant questions. Such questions could be part of our conversation at home. Our children learn through ‘participation’.

Some Catholics think that they should not be present for the religious services of other religions, or visit their prayer centres. Some are not prepared to accept *prasāda* from Hindus. Similar difficulties are found already in the New Testament. Could Christians eat meat offered in the temples? Paul’s answer is simple. We all worship one and the same God. All our offerings are made to Him (1 Cor 8:4-6). Statues are symbolic, and if we understand their meaning we may even appropriate them.⁵

⁴Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1927-29 (14th rep., no date), 28.

⁵See, for instance, “Natarāja: The Lord of Dance,” in Subhash Anand, *Hindu Inspiration for Christian Reflection: Towards a Hindu-Christian Theology*, Aanand Gujarat: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 2004, 140-75.

Our faith is shaped by our prayer. The family prayer can be a school for inter-religious tolerance and appreciation. In our prayer we remember people in our neighbourhood, irrespective of their faith. We think of them in their joys and sorrows. We may need to have an anthology of suitable texts taken from other scriptures which could be part of our family prayer.⁶

There are days when Catholics can even take the initiative to organize an inter-religious prayer service in the neighbourhood. There are some moments when people are most willing to come together in prayer, as when there is a death in the locality, particularly an untimely death. So too, when there is special joy in the area, we can come together in prayer. Soon there will be a marriage. A child from our neighbourhood has topped his class in the final examination; etc. These are moments of celebration, and the celebration will be complete when we together invoke God's blessings for the individual concerned. Such neighbourhood inter-religious prayer services can also be held on days of national significance. Catholics, who are members of some prayer group, can give the lead in this direction, because in their prayer sessions there is a lot of spontaneous prayer. They must, however, remember that now they are with people who do not yet believe in Jesus, but they still accept his Father. It is enough that we address our prayer to this Father.

B2. The Local Church

Vatican II declared: "Animated by the spirit of Christ, this sacred synod is fully aware that the desired renewal of the whole Church depends to a great extent on the ministry of its priests."⁷ In the present setup, the parish is very significant for the faith formation of our people also in a multi-religious context. The commitment of the Church to inter-religious dialogue will not become a real way of Christian living without the involvement of the priests, especially of those who are engaged in the pastoral ministry. Yet "they [priests] are, however, rated very low on organizing the poor to fight for their rights, reaching out to the Non-Christians... and trying out new things in the Church."⁸ There are many other reasons why our priests are not involved in inter-religious dialogue and these need to be taken very seriously. First, there is the absence of adequate motivation. Most priests are more comfortable with traditional forms of ministry. Inter-religious dialogue is just not within their horizon.

⁶One such collection is A. J. Appasamy, *Temple Bells*.

⁷*Optatam Totius*, introduction.

⁸Paul Parathazham, "Catholic Priests in India: Reflections on a Survey," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 52 (1988) 379-389, here page, 382.

Second, inter-religious ministry calls for a more critical faith awareness. Given the type of candidates we are getting, this will be more and more a less visible characteristic of our priests. I am afraid, some of our priests do not even have the theological competence needed to minister to an educated community of Christians. In contrast to us, "many lay people are now well educated and we bishops and priests feel inadequate to dialogue with them..."⁹ If our priests and bishops find it difficult to dialogue with their own people how will they dialogue with peoples of other faiths?

Third, inter-religious ministry calls for a greater capacity to relate to others not as officially appointed leaders, as ordained ritualists, but as emotionally healthy adults, as persons of good will. Inter-religious ministry calls for greater credibility. Within the traditional boundaries we are very often accepted merely or primarily because we have a cassock!

Fourth, there are no readymade structures for inter-religious ministry, and it does not show quick results. It calls for a lot of creativity and courage. Fifth, inter-religious dialogue calls for greater generosity. This is intimately linked with motivation. "There are students who join the seminary for worldly motives."¹⁰ Many people think we in India have plenty of vocations. This is a myth that needs to be done away with as early as possible. "Safety, security, glory, comfort, position are all attractive factors in drawing a good percentage of people to priesthood."¹¹ When people become priests with such motivation, they will put in as minimum work as possible when they do not personally stand to gain anything from it.

Priests who are in the pastoral ministry can do much to promote the type of environment most supportive of faith formation in a multi-religious context. The Sunday Liturgy is a very powerful form of catechesis.¹² There are different ways it can incorporate our desire of entering into deeper relations with peoples of other faith traditions. We need to explore the possibility of using hymns from other scriptures and religious communities. Some of these compositions have a non-sectarian language and universal meaning. We are

⁹Opinions voiced during a CCBI Laity Commission group meeting during the CCBI Plenary Assembly, Ranchi, 4-8 March 2005, *CCBI News*, 16/1 (March 2005) 254.

¹⁰Victor Machado, "Motivation: the Cornerstone of Priestly and Religious Vocations," *Sathyadeepam*, June 1-15, 2005, 1.

¹¹Anthony Puthenangady, "A Trainer of Trainers for years: The Danger Lies in the Concern for Numbers Over quality," *Sathyadeepam*, June 1-15, 2005.

¹²My reflections here are based on what I know of the Latin liturgy.

already using some of the compositions of Rabindra Nath Tagore.¹³ Some other texts can easily be modified and incorporated into our hymnals. This suggestion is not asking us to do anything new, but to follow the lead given by the Old Testament. For instance, Ps 29 "is a Yahwistic adaptation of an older Canaanite hymn to the storm-god Baal."¹⁴ In the penitential rite we could use texts from other scriptures. For instance,

From untruth lead us to the Truth. Lord have mercy (2).
From darkness lead us to the Light. Christ have mercy (2).
From death lead us to Life Eternal. Lord have mercy (2).¹⁵

We could also use symbols that are shared by others. Water, for instance, is symbolic of purification in many traditions. Its use in the penitential rite, with this awareness, binds us to all those people who are in search of purification.

The Sunday homily gives us ample opportunities to instruct our people in the importance and urgency of inter-religious dialogue. In the Old Testament, we come across some people, who even though they do not belong to the 'people of God', have a significant role in the history of salvation. Melchizedek was a priest of God the most high, and he blessed Abraham (Gen 14:18-20).¹⁶ "It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior" (Heb 7:7). In blessing Abraham, Melchizedek blessed all his descendants, including the members of the priestly tribe. Cyrus is proclaimed by Yahweh as shepherd and as his anointed one - the messiah. Even though he does not know the God of Israel, He has called him by name for the sake of Israel (Is 45:1-6).¹⁷

Jesus admires some non-Jews of the Old Testament times. He praises the faith of Naaman who came from a distant town to Elisha to be healed. He remembers the poor widow in Zarephath, a town in Sidon, who provided hospitality to Elijah (Lk 4:21-30).¹⁸ Jesus praises the faith of the Roman: "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (Lk 7:1-10).¹⁹ At first Jesus ignores the Syrophoenician woman, who pleads for the cure of her daughter. She refuses to be turned away. Then he tells her: "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as

¹³See *With Joyful Lips*, 3, 4, 5. Sometimes it may be helpful to make people aware of what they are singing.

¹⁴Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I*, Anchor Bible 16, New York: Doubleday, 1966, 175.

¹⁵This is taken from *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-upanīśad* (1.3.28).

¹⁶First reading, Corpus Christ, C.

¹⁷First reading, 29th Sunday, A.

¹⁸Gospel reading, 17th Sunday, C.

¹⁹Gospel reading, 10th Sunday, C.

you desire" (Mt 15:21-28).²⁰ Jesus admires the outsider: the grateful Samaritan leper (Lk 17:11-19).²¹ He chooses a Samaritan to give us a model of love for our neighbour (Lk 10:25-37).²²

During the intercessions we remember our non-Christian brethren, especially when they are celebrating some feast. The intercessory prayer could be so formulated that, while being brief, it still draws the attention of the congregation to the significance of the feast being celebrated. For instance at Divali: "O Lord, on this festival of lights, may your light fill our hearts." During the offertory procession we bring symbols closely connected with that feast; e.g., at Divali we carry lamps; at Ramzan Eid we offer the prayer carpet used for *namāz*, etc.

I have noticed that in many places the non-Christians living very close to our churches and institutions are total strangers to us, and we to them. Allow me to suggest a way to improve this situation. Besides the church building, many of our parishes have some hall attached to the building, and a compound surrounding the church. We can win the goodwill of people by making this space available to them – especially the poor, irrespective of their religious affiliation. They need a hall to celebrate a birth or marriage, to assemble in prayer on the occasion of some death or sickness, to park their vehicles when they attend some function in the church neighbourhood, etc. On a regular basis, we can make the parish space available for poor children who do not have a suitable atmosphere at home for their study – no proper lights, silence, fresh air, etc. – or just to sit and relax and chat with their friends or play some games. I suggest that our other institutions – schools, colleges, seminaries, etc. – adopt a similar policy.

I like to go one step further. During the first two hundred years, Christians gathered in their homes to celebrate the Eucharist.²³ I am inclined to believe that their practice reflects a deeper grasp of the mystery of Incarnation. As I have already noted: with the Incarnation the distinction between sacred and profane space is done away with, just as the distinction between priest and lay person is abrogated. My question, then, is: Do we need to put up specifically designed 'churches'? Such buildings tend to generate an inward-looking mentality. The possession of our 'sacred space' makes us static. A

²⁰Gospel reading, 20th Sunday, A.

²¹Gospel reading, 18th Sunday, C.

²²Gospel reading, 15th Sunday, C.

²³J. Frank Henderson, "House/Family/Home/House Church," in Carroll Stuhlmüller, ed., *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1996, 447b-449a, here 448b.

multi-purpose hall, where we celebrate the Eucharist, but which is also made available to all people of good will for some social and even religious purpose, will not only serve a greater need, but also be a constant reminder that the Church is basically in the service of the world. It will engage the Catholic community more effectively in dialogue with other Christians and peoples of other faiths.

We can put the institutional infra-structure in the service of inter-religious harmony, and thus provide a more encouraging situation for faith formation in a multi-religious context. We can use our space and involve our personnel to promote inter-religious prayer. In the beginning we may not have many attending it, but if we make it a regular feature, with a lot of devotional singing it will attract more people. Slowly, as people become aware that their joys and especially sorrows are our concerns, they will come. This gives us an ample opportunity to explore the riches of other scriptures and ways of praying.

This commitment to inter-religious prayer will also mean that if and when we plan our church building, we think of it as a house of prayer not just for Catholics, but try to bring to fulfilment what the prophet said: "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Is 56:7). We tend to make the tabernacle the centre of our churches, but this need not be the case – for centuries that was not the case. It makes no sense to non-Catholics. A beautiful image of the Lord will draw many more for a *darśana*. Churches that do get regular visitors will need to find ways and means to make information easily available to them.

Even the regular services in our churches could have a wider significance. Thus every evening there could be an *ārati* to the central image.²⁴ Similarly on Sundays there could be a morning prayer with some meditation to which we invite all. Many parishes have a procession to mark the feast of Christ the King. During this procession, other people stand and watch; some think we are honouring some very special golden statue – the monstrance. This procession also creates traffic problems for the public. I am told that this procession is a manifestation of our faith. I have always found it very difficult to manifest my faith. Further, if the manifestation of my faith creates problems for others, then there is something wrong with my faith. I suggest another possibility. Jesus is the king of peace. Hence a peace-march will be a good way of celebrating his feast.

²⁴In Rajkot every evening peoples of other faiths join in the *ārati* performed in the cathedral – Preet Mandir: 'abode of love' or 'abode of the beloved'.

During this march others will walk with us; they will understand what we are doing; those who do not join the march will not mind the traffic problems, as they will perceive our march as a means to promote common good. What would Jesus say were we to ask him which of these two processions would he prefer?

All faith-formation leads to greater love of neighbour. The spirit of *diakonia* will lead the Church to cooperate with all people of good will. This was strongly recommended already in 1968, during the All-India Seminar: Church in India Today.²⁵ I am afraid we have not made much headway in this direction. This is not only because we do not trust enough men and women of other faith traditions, but also because we prefer to run our own show, because our institutions give us prestige and power. One of the best ways of bringing people together is by mobilizing them to work for the nation as a team. This will be dialogue in action. Hence faith-formation in a multi-religious context will enable our people to collaborate with peoples of other faiths in the service of others. This too needs to be experienced as a real possibility within our parishes. Let me just report two examples of grassroots dialogue.

We can have inter-religious youth groups. I wish to mention here the wonderful work being done in Pune by Fr. Cyril Desbruslais, SJ, with his youth group SSU (Searching and Service in Unity) founded in 1971. Searching is the inward-looking goal of the group: to help young people in their search for God, friends, meaning in life or whatever they are searching for. Service is the outward-looking goal of the group: to serve others less fortunate than themselves. Finally, to celebrate (not sweep under the carpet) what makes the members different (religions, culture etc.) and celebrate the Unity that grows out of this diversity. The Hindus, Muslims, Parsis and Christians are members of the group. They have weekly formation sessions and monthly inter-religious prayer service. They celebrate together the major religious festivals of the members. Outreach activities include social work with street kids, with sex workers and their kids, AIDS patients, and so on. The group puts up an annual cultural programme to raise funds for their training and out-reach programmes.²⁶

In some parts of Maharashtra, the Jesuits have watershed programmes involving the people of the village irrespective of religion. If we use our imagination we can do much more. In our village stations we need

²⁵All India Seminar: Church in India Today, Bangalore, 1969, New Delhi: CBCI Centre, n. d., 260.

²⁶I am grateful to Fr. Cyril Desbruslais, SJ, for supplying me this information.

to explore more and more the possibility of collaborating with all peoples of good will to promote rural development in all spheres. Together we can tap the different funds made available by the central and state governments. Together we can approach the well-to-do for their help. The more we collaborate with others, the less will our work be seen as a form of proselytisation, the more will it be welcomed.

What happens in the local church depends to a large extent on the vision and leadership the local ordinary offers. According to the *Catholic Directory of India 2005–2006*, of the 155 dioceses of India, almost all the dioceses have a commission for education, liturgy, evangelization, etc., but only 65 have a commission or its equivalent for inter-religious dialogue.²⁷ In most cases inter-religious dialogue is clubbed with ecumenism. In some instances it is combined with evangelization or with laity. Of the 65 dioceses that do have a commission for inter-religious dialogue, 15 have a religious priest as the director or chairperson. If this data is any indication, then inter-religious dialogue does not appear to be an important concern for the vast majority of our bishops. Why is this happening?

The first reason that comes to my mind is a certain helplessness on the part of the bishop. Inter-religious dialogue calls for greater generosity, greater intellectual ability, and greater emotional maturity. Given the type of people joining the seminary, the bishop may not have much to choose from. Inter-religious dialogue is a ministry that shows very meagre tangible and measurable results. It is a ministry that calls for financial investment with no returns. Also the bishop may not be giving visible encouragement to this ministry. His time is consumed by activities within the traditional boundaries of the church. I am afraid there is a deeper reason. Many observers feel that there is a trend to appoint 'safe' candidates as bishops.²⁸ Persons considered safe candidates by Rome may be wonderful people and devoted Christians, but they may not be the right persons to provide effective leadership in a multi-religious context. For them inter-religious dialogue may not be a priority at all.

B3. The Universal Church

Vatican II invited all Catholics to engage in inter-religious dialogue: "The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and

²⁷Six dioceses were created in the recent past, and still had to organize themselves.

²⁸Brendan McCarthy, "Against the Dying of the Light: Catholicism in Ireland," *The Tablet*, 27 (March, 2010) 4; Kevin Dowling, CSsR, Bishop of Rustenburg, South Africa, "The Church and Ecclesiastical Authority," *The Tablet*, 17 (July 2010) 11.

collaboration with the followers of other religions... they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men."²⁹ The special synod for bishops of Asia forcefully reminded us of the need for dialogue: "The actual celebration of the Synod itself confirmed the importance of dialogue as a *characteristic mode of the Church's life in Asia*."³⁰ Yet the situation is not very positive: "It must also be said that, with notable exceptions, the need for interfaith dialogue is not generally well appreciated nor supported on the ground by church members, though it is moderately well supported by those more on the fringes of the Church and by genuine seekers."³¹ If this claim is true, then it means there is no credible inspiration from the top. There are also some counter indications. Let me indicate a few.

On 6th August 6, 2000, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith made public the declaration *Dominus Iesus*, that was approved by John Paul II on 16th June, 2000. The declaration reminds us that "the full and complete revelation of the salvific mystery of God is given in Jesus Christ" (6). But revelation is the encounter between God and humans. Like any other human experience, it is situated within the pilgrim condition of being human. It becomes full and complete only when it is fully and completely understood. Hence the Church can only proclaim "the full and complete revelation of the salvific mystery of God is given in Jesus Christ" by presenting Jesus as he really was: the *servus* of all. "Jesus did not come to 'lord' (*dominus*) it over us, but to be our 'servant' (*servus*). We Christians are called to imitate him – and those who are 'leaders' among the Christian community are to be the *servus servorum Dei*, the servant of the servants of God."³²

The declaration insists that "the distinction between *theological faith* and *belief* in the other religions, must be *firmly held*" (7). We are justified by faith (*pistis*, Rom 3:28), and without faith (*pistis*, Heb 11:6) it is impossible to please God. Jesus, moved by the faith of the Roman

²⁹*Nostra Aetate*, 2, www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html; accessed on 29-04-2010.

³⁰*Ecclesia In Asia*, 3, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia_en.html; accessed on 27th March, 2010.

³¹Anthony O'Mahony & Peter Bowe, ed., *Catholics in Interreligious Dialogue: Monasticism, Theology and Spirituality*, Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2006, 15.

³²Leonard Swidler, "Dominus Iesus, Or Rather, Servus Iesus: A Comment on Cardinal Ratzinger's *Dominus Iesus*," *Jeevadhara* (2001), www.arcc-catholic-rights.net/dominus_iesus.pdf; accessed on 15-11-2010. See also "Vatican impedes interfaith dialogue ... CTAers, cardinals, theologians respond," www.cta-usa.org/reprint10-00/vatican.html; accessed on 15-11-2010.

centurion, told the crowd: "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith (*pistis*, Lk 7:1-10)." If this is so, then the original *Dominus Iesus* will not feel comfortable with the Vatican *Dominus Iesus*.

The declaration is critical of those by whom "the inspired value of the sacred writings of other religions is also put forward... The Church's tradition, however, reserves the designation of *inspired texts* to the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, since these are inspired by the Holy Spirit (8)." If we believe that God wants all to be saved, and that He has been guiding them from the beginning, and if so many people in actual life receive guidance through their sacred texts, then these texts are also inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The beatification of Pius IX in 2000, whose attitude to other religions was extremely traditional, betrayed the lack of sensitivity to the feelings not only of Jews, but also of peoples of other faiths. Jews in different parts of the world too were most upset with the Vatican decision.³³ In 2006, on his visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Benedict XVI reminded the gathering of Maximilian Kolbe and Edith Stein - both Catholics - who were martyred by the Nazis.³⁴ This provoked critical comments from Jews, as many great Jews and also Christians of other denominations were killed by the Nazis.³⁵ The pope said not a word about them.

In his lecture "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections," at the University of Regensburg (Germany), Benedict XVI reported a dialogue between emperor Manuel II Paleologus and an educated Persian on the subject of Christianity and Islam. At one point, the emperor challenges his partner in dialogue: "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."³⁶ This evoked a lot of criticism from

³³"ADL Statement on Beatification of Pope Pius IX", www.adl.org/presrele/vaticanjewish_96/3630_96.asp; accessed on 10-05-2010. "Jews protest Pius IX beatification", tvnz.co.nz/content/15021; accessed on 10-05-2010. See also Tom Heneghan, "Jewish Leader 'Astounded' by Pope's Praise for Pius XII," *The Tablet*, (11 December 2010) 29.

³⁴"Pope Benedict's Apostolic Journey to Poland," www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060528_auschwitz-birkenau_en.html; accessed on 01-10-2010.

³⁵For a comprehensive list, see "List of victims of Nazism," en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_victims_of_Nazism.

³⁶"Papal Address at University of Regensburg," www.zenit.org/article-16955?l=english; accessed on 15-11-2010.

Muslims and from others.³⁷ The Pope was arguing that authentic religion does not go against the demands of reason. He could have made his point using a lot of relevant data from the history of the Church, without bringing Islam into the picture.

When the visit of John Paul II to India in November, 1999, to release the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, was announced, some people here were not happy because they "allege that Christian missionaries are inducing illiterate and poor tribal Hindus to convert to Christianity."³⁸ They were all the more upset with what he said: "Just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the Third Christian Millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in this vast and vital continent" (1). This hurt many Hindus.³⁹

Speaking at the ten-yearly Lambeth Conference in Canterbury in 2008, the Vatican representative Cardinal Ivan Dias suggested that some were suffering from Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.⁴⁰ His words were understood as criticism of the US and English Churches. Such acts make dialogue difficult. "It can mean only one thing: Rome – and therefore the Pope – has given up on the Anglican Communion."⁴¹ Some months back Pope Benedict XVI was in England. He spoke about the Catholics martyred after Henry VIII broke away from the Church. "But there were far more burnt under Queen Mary. The 'Martyrs' Memorial' in Oxford commemorates them... A unilateral approach like this would not be obedience to Christ."⁴²

Providing young people a faith formation in a multi-religious context and preparing them for inter-religious dialogue properly understood is possible when within the Church we experience a real commitment to truth, a sincere respect for human dignity and a genuine spirit of dialogue. This will happen only if Church leaders reflect these values in their life and ministry. The situation appears to be different. For

³⁷"Regensburg lecture," en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regensburg_lecture; accessed on 15-11-2010.

³⁸www.upi.com/topic/Jawaharlal_Nehru/photos; accessed on 15-11-2010.

³⁹Gregory BAUM, "The Theology of Cardinal Ratzinger. A Response to *Dominus Jesus*," *The Ecumenist*, 37/4 (Fall 2000), www.culture-et-foi.com/dossiers/dominus_jesus/gregory_baum.htm; accessed on 15-11-2010.

⁴⁰"Anglicans have Alzheimer's: Vatican cardinal", www.cathnews.com/article.aspx?aeid=8244; accessed on 15-11-2010.

⁴¹John Zuhlsdorf, "Card. Dias to Lambeth: "spiritual Alzheimer's ... ecclesial Parkinson's," wdtprs.com/blog/2008/07/card-diaz-to-lambeth-spiritual-alzheimers-e; accessed on 15-11-2010.

⁴²Eoin de Bhaldrathe, "Papal Visit Lessons," *The Tablet* (2 October 2010) 17.

instance, the way Rome has gone about preparing the new English translation of the Missal is most unfortunate. In his book, Bishop Maurice Taylor “presents the authoritative inside story of how officials in the Roman Curia usurped the right of the bishops’ conferences to oversee the translations of the missal into English, and destroyed the bishops’ translation agency in the form they had given it.”⁴³

I have given retreats to over a hundred groups of priests. From what they tell me, I get the impression a good number of our bishops imitate the Vatican: they tend to be autocratic, not open to dialogue. From what I hear from the laity, I am tempted to conclude that a good number of priests imitate their bishop. Forty-one percent of the uneducated, but only eleven percent of the educated, think that priests are democratic.⁴⁴ Trying to understand why Catholics join Neo-Pentecostals groups, “a third of the Catholics and former Catholics identified the domination of the clergy as an alienating factor.”⁴⁵ When the leadership of the Church does not have respect and sensitivity for persons; when it is perceived as autocratic and gives the impression of acting in an arbitrary manner; when it resorts to secrecy and lacks transparency; when it does not encourage real dialogue within the community; when it does not support honest research; then credible faith-formation is almost impossible.

Starting with Vatican II, we have wonderful documents on inter-faith dialogue. Deeds, however, speak louder than words. The data that I have just provided does not inspire us with confidence. If, in spite of all our claims, inter-religious dialogue is very little part of the life the Catholic community, it is because the vast majority of us – priests, bishops, and the people in the Vatican – are not really convinced of our Christian duty to take very seriously the multi-religious context of our society, and to own and act upon what this implies. Unless we do that, speaking about faith-formation within a multi-religious context would make little sense.

Benedict XVI, explaining the need for Promoting the New Evangelization,⁴⁶ quotes Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: “This first proclamation is addressed especially to those who have never heard the Good News of Jesus, or to children. But, as a result of the frequent

⁴³John Wilkins, “Rite That Has Been Wronged,” review of Maurice Taylor, *It’s the Eucharist, Thank God*, Brandon, Suffolk: Decani Books, 21.

⁴⁴Parathazham, “Catholic Priests in India: Reflections on a Survey,” 387.

⁴⁵Paul Parathazham, “The Challenge of Neo-Pentecostalism,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 61 (1997) 307–320, here 315.

⁴⁶“Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontifical_Council_for_Promoting_the_New_Evan; accessed on 15-11-2010.

situations of dechristianization in our day, it also proves equally necessary for innumerable people who have been baptized but who live quite outside Christian life...⁴⁷ In like manner there is a need for new faith-formation in a multi-religious context, a programme meant for our priests, bishops and even people in the Vatican. Only if these are effectively committed to inter-religious dialogue, will we be able to create a suitable and credible pedagogical environment for faith formation in a multi-religious context for our people. We need to remember what Paul VI said: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."⁴⁸

⁴⁷www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html; accessed on 15-11-2010.

⁴⁸Address to the Members of the Consilium de Laicis (2 October 1974): AAS 66 (1974) 568, quoted in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41.