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A SYNODAL CHURCH IN MULTI-CULTURAL, MULTI-RELIGIOUS SOCIETIES

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Abstract

Premised on the fact that cultural and religious pluralism is a fact of life in most societies, the present article discusses what this means for the Synodal Church. It does this by exploring how the Church ministers to its members, especially those in interfaith marriages and also Christians embracing multiple religious practices. It also examines how the Church promotes interfaith learning in theological education, how Catholic schools attend to staff and students who are not Christians, and how the Church addresses the challenges of people moving across cultures and religions. Its thesis is that a Synodal Church has to be supportive of peoples crossing boundaries, encouraging them to live in harmony with those whose beliefs and practices may differ from that of the Catholic Church.

Keywords: Culture; Dialogue; Identity; Interfaith; Migrants; Mission; Pluralism

A Catholic priest visiting the United States was invited to preside at the morning Mass of the parish he was visiting. It was the first few days of Lent and so during the homily he shared his experience:

> When I was growing up in our village in Indonesia I knew it was Lent as mum would get up very early to prepare a hefty breakfast. She would wake

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> us up just before dawn so we can all have our meal with dad. We then went the whole day with just some snacks but dad would fast the entire day. Just after sunset we would gather at the dining table again and break the day of fasting together with a sumptuous meal.

Later, at the breakfast table, the parish priest asked his visitor: "Do you guys fast that way during Lent? At most we abstain from meat and maybe fast on Fridays." The visiting priest replied: "Oh, I forgot to mention that mum is Catholic but dad is Muslim and so we fast the same way in Lent as we do in *Ramadhan*."

Yes, interfaith marriages have become commonplace in Asia. Statistics show that the majority of Catholics in Asia are marrying across religious lines.[1] We have probably heard of the many sad and horror stories of how interfaith couples feel marginalized or unwelcome by the Church which does not seem to know how to offer pastoral support to interfaith couples, unless the religious "other" agrees to embrace Catholicism. That notwithstanding, this article will not be discussing the issue of interfaith marriages as such, but will focus on its implications and challenges to a Synodal Church. It examines specifically how the Church is or is not journeying with its members in a world that is becoming increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious. It discusses very briefly certain concerns that have become prevalent in view of raising questions that deserve attention.

Catholics and Multiple Religious Belonging

To begin with we know that there are increasingly more Catholics, such as the Indonesian priest, who experience interfaith marriages or who practice more than one religion at the same time, a phenomenon sometimes called multiple religious belonging. The fact that religious pluralism stares us directly in the face is one reason for its rise. Catherine Cornille spells this out bluntly:

> In a world of seemingly unlimited choice in matters of religious identity and affiliations, the idea of belonging exclusively to one religious tradition or of drawing from only one set of spiritual, symbolic, or ritual resources is no longer self-evident... Why search for answers to the

[1] "ASIA—Spouses with Different Faiths: A Growing Phenomenon, an Opportunity for Dialogue and Love," *Agenzia Fides* (22 Nov 2022), http://www.fides.org/en/news/73082-ASIA_Spouses_with_different_faiths_a_ growing_phenomenon_an_opportunity_for_dialogue_and_love.

> fundamental questions of life in only one religion when so many alternative proposals by time-honored traditions are readily available?[2]

Note that we are not talking here about adherents of different religions engaging with one another in an interfaith dialogue of spirituality where they experience one another's religious practices while keeping their respective religious identities distinct and intact. We are talking about Christians who consciously commit themselves to another tradition and not only accept but also incorporate some of its teachings and practices into their own spiritual life. For example, a Christian may convincingly accept the Hindu belief in reincarnation as well as engage in the Buddhist practice of *Vipassana or Zen meditation, while fully committed to being a practicing and faithful Christian. Many of these practitioners openly* claim they are Hindu-Christian or Buddhist-Christian, while others simply describe themselves as "hyphenated" Christians. They believe it is not only possible but even necessary to accept the teachings and practices of more than one religion as hybridity enriches rather than confuses their Christian living. For some, embracing another religion is a necessary consequence of a radically enhanced and enlarged vision of their life of faith. This means that they are not delving into another religion because of uncertainty or doubts about their own Christian identity or that they are disillusioned with its institution or ignorant of its teachings. On the contrary, it is precisely because their knowledge has been so deepened that they feel compelled to discover the truths of their Christian faith in another tradition. In other words, it is their firm belief that the revelation and salvation brought about by Jesus can also be found in the other religions that is prompting them in their spiritual quest to look beyond the boundaries of the church to simultaneously embrace another religion.

Theological Formation and Interfaith Learning

If Christians are already engaged in the practice of multiple religious belonging those undergoing training to serve the Christian communities should be prepared to at least deal with the basic reality of religious pluralism. This is one of the more pertinent implications for the church's ministries as it strives to find its place in the contemporary world. Gone are the days when Christian pastors and ministers work only with their own Christian flock without having

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[2]Catherine Cornille, "Introduction: The Dynamics of Multiple Belonging," in *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 1.

anything to do with those outside the boundaries of the church. A parish priest today should at least interact with the *imam* from the mosque across the street from where his church is; a Christian minister serving as a hospital chaplain might receive a sick call from a Buddhist patient or have to assist in end-of-life care for a member of the Sikh community; a religious education teacher of a Catholic school might have Hindu students asking questions about how Jesus is related to the other *avatars*; a Christian social worker of the diocesan justice and peace commission may be asked to collaborate in an interfaith prayer service in support of refugees or victims of a natural disasters. Or, some members of the priest's own congregation might be practicing different forms of yoga disciplines or Taoist ritual healings or have children in interfaith marriages or be assigned to work in a Muslim-majority nation. It is in view of these realities that every Christian minister being trained today should be sufficiently equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to at least understand other religions as well as discuss interfaith issues appropriately. In short, interfaith learning is essential if the Christian minister wishes to be relevant in contemporary multi-religious societies.

While the contextual realities seem to augur well for the serious engagement with religions other than Christianity, the practical reality is that not all Catholic seminaries and schools of theology actually incorporate interfaith learning into their educational curriculum. Those that do often place it as an appendix, relegated to an elective or optional course, attended to only after all the required courses have been fulfilled. This is partly because seminaries serve their sponsoring churches, where the immediate need is for trained personnel to take charge of parishes and the related Christian ministries. There are specific needs that are urgent in different contexts. In the global North this often means arresting the decline in church membership or strengthening the church's outreach aimed at attracting the unchurched into their communities.

In Asia where Christians are a tiny minority, concerns with protecting their religious rights and very existence often supersede any form of outreach to the religious "other" for the purpose of mutual learning, prompting Archbishop Felix Machado to frankly admit to his fellow bishops that "interreligious dialogue is not perhaps the easiest or, sometimes even happy part of our pastoral commitment, especially

in the present circumstances of 'our times.'"[3] In short, the seminaries' priorities are to strengthen the Christian identity of the future priests, in view of enabling them "to go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). Unlike mission and evangelism, the history of interfaith dialogue is brief and the benefits and incentives for putting it into motion are often less than obvious. It is not surprising then that interfaith learning has to content with being on the back burner in theological formation.

Religious Pluralism and the Identity of Catholic Schools

Aside from interfaith learning in schools of theology, Catholic education in general has also to deal with the fact of cultural and religious pluralism. Catholic schools are often the primary face of the church to peoples of other religions in Asia. However, they are not only immersed in multi-cultural and multi-religious communities but are also multi-cultural and multi-religious within their own institutions themselves. Catholic educational institutions are generally serving more than just Catholic students or employing only Catholic teachers. Some Catholic schools are even headed by principals who are not Catholic or even Christian. In such contexts, questions about how the school can remain faithfully Catholic—who they are (identity) and what they are supposed to do (mission)—in today's globalized and pluralistic world have often been raised.

A surface-level response would be to focus on the explicit and externals. If the presence of Catholic people—principals, teachers, and students—cannot be used as measure of a school's Catholic identity, attention is somewhat shifted to Catholic things and activities. Hence, the outward display of Catholic signage and symbols, statues and crucifixes, and naming school buildings after saints become important. Likewise, Catholic activities such as school Masses and daily prayers, the singing of Christian songs and religious school anthems, and the celebration of Christian holy days and feast days as well as the teaching of catechism or Christian knowledge are seen as markers of the school's Catholic identity. It may also be that Catholic identity is measured by the extent the school is of service to the parish. Hence, primary or grade schools are expected to help in the sacramental preparation of the children and in strengthening the *leitourgia* and *koinonia* dimensions of church life, that is, the most basic *ad intra* tasks of the church's mission.

[3] Felix Machado, "Living the Christian Faith in an Inter-Religious and Multi-Cultural Context" (15-18 January 2019), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/incontri/rc_con_cfaith_20190115_machado_en.html.

Secondary or high schools build on these to include the *ad extra* tasks such as the *kerygma* and especially the *diakonia* aspects of being Christian. Catholic colleges and universities do basically more of the same and are tasked with making better Christian disciples of the students.

While the abovementioned structures and programs may be relevant for a Catholic school or university with an enrolment that is still predominantly Catholic, questions need to be raised if many or most of the students do not affiliate themselves with the Catholic tradition. In such contexts, continuing with such programs is meaningless at best, not to mention how they can serve as a measure of the institution's Catholic identity. Imagine a Catholic school claiming that the provision of daily Mass is part of its Catholic identity and mission, but in reality only a few of its thousands of students participate in Mass voluntarily. This is an especially important issue to address as many students who enrol in a Catholic school or university today do so not so much because of its specifically Catholic practices, but simply because it offers an affordable and/or well-rounded quality education. Testimony to this is the fact that the vision and mission statements of many Catholic educational institutions do not insist on the exclusively Catholic dimension but instead contain variations of the following values: (i) the pursuit of truth and academic excellence; (ii) the provision of a total and holistic education; (iii) an education which does not negate the religious and faith dimensions; (iv) an educational environment which facilitates the building of community, a commitment to service, and the praxis of justice; and (v) an educational community which is welcoming of all regardless of creed, class, and culture. In short, Catholic schools and universities generally embrace a vision of a holistic and inclusive educational mission which is not narrowly defined but entails many aspects of evangelization including the promotion of a culture of respect and dialogue with traditions other than Catholicism and Christianity.

How these institutions actually deal with the reality of cultural and religious pluralism, however, remains a challenge. Few models exist as circumstances have not been critical enough to warrant their development. But, by and large, most Catholic educational institutions have been quite accommodative of their students and teachers who come from other cultures and religions in many aspects of school life. For instance, there are accommodations in the area of language (for everyday communication and also the teaching of languages of minority cultures), dress-code (e.g., those who wear the hijab), hair-

style (e.g., Sikh students whose hair must remain uncut), food (menu offered in the school cafeteria or at school functions), celebrations and holidays (to include religious or cultural feasts such as Eid-al-Fitr, Divali, Vesak, Chinese or Lunar New Year, etc.), school amenities (such as installing taps for Muslim ablution practices), and a host of other day-to-day needs and practices in schools.

But more needs to be done with regard to the specifically religious or faith dimensions of school life. Given that most Catholic educational institutions are explicit that they are not only open to all, regardless of cultural and religious affiliation, but will also see to the holistic development of all their students, questions need to be asked about how the spiritual development of the students who are not Catholics are attended to. For sure, it would not be appropriate to impose the same religious education or catechetical formation on those who are not Catholic or Christian. Likewise, there needs to be a rethinking on the practice of daily Christian prayers and monthly Masses for all, especially since students who are not Christians find themselves excluded from such practices. In short, Catholic educational institutions need to explore appropriate models for the expression of the faith life of their students where their student-body has become increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious.

Religious/Cultural Pluralism and People on the Move

Another concern that the Synodal Church should take notice of is the phenomenon of contemporary migration or people on the move in general. A Vatican document, entitled *Erga migrantes caritas Christi*, draws awareness to this:

> We are therefore face to face with a cultural and religious pluralism never perhaps experienced so consciously before. On the one hand, rapid progress is being made towards a world-wide openness, facilitated by technological means and the media, with the result that cultural and religious backgrounds, traditionally different and foreign to one another, are being brought into contact and even mingled with one another (EMCC 35).[4]

It is in this new universal reality of pluralism and diversity that the Asian Church sees itself as having the responsibility for educating its members to living out their Christian life and mission to the fullest.

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[4]Cardinal Stephen Fumio Hamao, "The Instruction Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi: A Response of the Church to the Migration Phenomenon Today," *People on the Move* No. 97 (April 2005), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/pom2005_97/rc_pc_migrants_pom97_sedos-hamao.html.

For example, with Christian migrants from the Philippines and Sri Lanka going to work in Muslim-majority countries in the Middle-East and in Malaysia or in Buddhist-majority countries such as Japan and Taiwan, the churches of sending countries have the duty to adequately prepare them to negotiate not only the legal, medical and social aspects of their move but also in encountering the religious differences and sensitivities in their new host country. *Erga migrantes caritas Christi* advises:

> Mention should also be made of the need to provide specific pastoral assistance for technicians, professional workers and foreign students temporarily resident in countries where the majority of the population is Muslim or of another faith. If left to themselves without any spiritual guide, these temporary migrants, instead of bearing Christian witness, may be the cause of erroneous judgments about Christianity (EMCC 51).

It is, therefore, very much in line with the Church's responsibility to at least offer some guidelines on how to attend to some of the following issues that impinge directly on their religious life: How do the migrants continue to practice their faith and engage in Christian mission while working in a foreign nation with a dominant foreign religion? What attitudes are they to embrace in attending to the religion and culture of the host country, especially one where its beliefs and practices differ significantly from what the Christian is used to? What elements of their own Christian faith should they be properly catechized on to assist them in confronting the challenges that are likely to be brought upon them by the peoples and situations in the host community? How does the migrant evangelize through witness and deeds to a host community that may view with suspicion the agenda of the Christian faith? In the light of the Vatican document's advice that interfaith marriages should be discouraged (ECMM 63), what might migrants expect of the Church if they still choose to marry a person who adheres to another religion? How does the Christian migrant, who is more familiar with the "teaching" dimension of Church, switch to appreciating their Christian faith from a "learning" dimension, and becoming a student and receiver of what the host culture and religion have to offer, albeit intelligently and critically? In what ways can the attitude of being "guest," instead of mainly playing "host," serve the Christian migrant when entering foreign lands with their equally foreign "gods" and religious practices.

Likewise, where local churches are receiving immigrants and refugees and providing social services to them and where the migrants

include Muslims from Myanmar or Buddhists from Vietnam or Hindus from Nepal, the local Church communities have to be sufficiently prepared so as to ensure that the immigrants are respected and served in a truly Christian manner: "In the case of non-Christian immigrants, the Church is also concerned with their human development and with the witness of Christian charity" (EMCC 59). Here, again, what attitudes do the host churches display toward the religious outsider and how are they supposed to be perceived? What does evangelization mean in a context where the immigrants are looking for social and material aid while also wanting to remain faithful to their own religion? How can the host community "witness to the Christian faith and life" while at the same time also "recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men [of other religions]" (*Nostra Aetate* 2)? To what extent is the entire Church involved in this hospitality of welcome and service to the migrants and refugees? Unless and until the local Christian community possesses the requisite dispositions of hospitality and welcome they are likely to display attitudes that are less than helpful to the already vulnerable and helpless migrants.

Along similar lines, local host churches have also to attend to the fact of the presence of Christian migrants from other cultures in their parishes and dioceses. This can be the case of the Singapore Church having to welcome Christian workers from India or the Korean Church having Pakistani Christians in their parishes or the Hong Kong Church having Filipino or Chaldean Catholics worshipping in their midst. What are the best practices for host communities when providing pastoral hospitality to Christians from other cultural backgrounds? When does the local Church adapt to the cultural backgrounds of the immigrant communities and when do they invite the new-comers to adapt to the ways and liturgical practices of the host country? How are the immigrants' expressions of their Christian devotional practices attended to? How does the local church assist in facilitating liturgical services for migrants so they can be celebrated according to their own rites and languages? *Erga migrantes caritas Christi* recommends:

> With regard to Catholic migrants the Church makes provision for a specific kind of pastoral care because of diversity of language, origin, culture, ethnicity and tradition, or of belonging to a particular Church *sui iuris* with its own rite... The uprooting that moving abroad inevitably involves (from country of origin, family, language, etc.) should not be made worse by uprooting the migrant from his religious rite or identity too (EMCC 49).

Attending to the Cultural and Religious "Other"

If encounters with other cultures and religions are unavoidable today, it would be useful if we can discern the different attitudes Christians adopt when encountering those who are geographically, culturally, and religiously foreign. How one responds has as much to do with the prevailing social and communal attitudes as with the way the "other" or "alien" is perceived pastorally and theologically. Are they perceived as problems to be eradicated or gifts for mutual transformation? This, in turn, is a function of how one conceives of oneself and one's culture or tradition. We can discern three basic approaches, attitudes or models that are generally adopted:

The first and probably most common attitude to embrace is one which advocates segregation, isolation and no engagement. It is also the most primal and instinctive response, thought through the limbic-system where the emotions, especially those of anxiety and fear, determine the way diversity is addressed. In the face of something or someone who is different or unfamiliar, the most natural reaction would be either to fight it off or take flight. The former is expressed in displays of outright hostility towards those who are alien, of another culture or religion, or by advocating for legal mechanisms to curb their entry into one's community. Where this is unsuccessful the next option would be to physically flee from the site where the aliens or persons of other cultures and religions are moving into. This has resulted in the formation of enclaves and ghettoes in many cities and states. Thus, in many countries across Asia and the rest of the world as well, there are specific locations known as Koreatown, Vietnamese Street, Muslim village, Filipino mall or Bangladeshi residence.

The ideology shaping much of these responses is that the other is impure and so cannot be allowed to exist or interact with us. *Erga migrantes caritas Christi* alludes to this:

> The precarious situation of so many foreigners, which should arouse everyone's solidarity, instead brings about fear in many, who feel that immigrants are a burden, regard them with suspicion and even consider them a danger and a threat. This often provokes manifestations of intolerance, xenophobia and racism (EMCC 6).

This attitude smacks of exclusivism, giving rise to attitudes of superiority. Theologically, it is augmented by the belief that our culture or religion is the only true or superior one and that and all others are false or inferior. The age-old axiom of "outside the Church,

no salvation" inspires these exclusivist attitudes. Missionary activity is aimed at the disappearance of the other culture or religion or in view of their members joining ours.

For those who are more sympathetic to the plight of the "stranger" and foreigner, the second attitude, which is that of offering hospitality and welcome, could be embraced. The foreigners are not turned away; instead, they are offered a hand of assistance to adjust into their new host community. The newcomers are encouraged to learn as much as possible about their new home because they are expected to assimilate into it. This is often the case where the dominant religion or culture also wields social, economic and political power. Thus, efforts are made to ensure that immigrants not only learn the language and cultural and religious practices of the host community but also accept them as normative. This is premised on the conviction that "our" way of life is the only one acceptable in this community which has no place for "your" way of life.

The assimilation attitude expresses itself in Christianity through the theology of fulfilment or inclusivism. This is based on the conviction that our own religion is true, but we are at the same time acknowledging that there is truth in the other religions as well. But we see ours as the fulfilment of all the truths that are found in the others. To be sure, persons of other religions can attain salvation even if they are not Christian but their salvation is ultimately, whether they are aware of it or not, in and through Christ. This is what Karl Rahner calls the anonymous Christian. The fulfilment position therefore accepts that other religions and cultures should be allowed to exist and not condemned but the task is to have them eventually assimilated into or fulfilled by our own religion. In a way they serve as preparation for their believers' encounter with Christ and assimilation into Christianity: "The Church is thus called upon to open a dialogue with these immigrants, and this 'dialogue should be conducted and implemented in the conviction that the Church is the ordinary means of salvation and that she alone possesses the fullness of the means of salvation'" (EMCC 59).

The third approach is where there is an acceptance of the other culture and religion without any thought of wishing they would go away or be absorbed into our own tradition. This begins with an acknowledgement that the various cultures and religions are basically different ways of expressing truth and ways of life, trusting that all will eventually meet at the end of the human pilgrimage. Our task is therefore to deepen everyone's adherence to their own religion,

avoiding muddy syncretism and eclecticism by keeping the boundaries between the religious traditions clear, without any intention of having them put into a melting pot of any sort. It is an acceptance model and can also be known as multiculturalism as emphasis is on the different cultures living alongside one another.

Theologically, the acceptance and multiculturalism model accepts that all religions are essentially pathways to God, the one and only absolute. This pluralism or multiculturalism approach essentially keeps the different cultures and religions distinct from one another. In multicultural parishes one sees the different ethnic communities existing alongside one another but each allocated its own separate space or time. The Vietnamese Christians in Thailand have their own churches, the Sri Lankan Catholics in Japan meet in the parish basements, and the Korean Christians in Indonesia have their own Mass times. There is little interaction across cultures except on very significant feast days.

Towards an Intercultural and Interreligious Synodal Church

While the multicultural or pluralist approach promotes dialogue and interaction, its thesis is that the different religions or cultures will remain distinct from one another: "Plurality is a treasure, and dialogue is the as yet imperfect and ever evolving realization of that final unity to which humanity aspires and is called" (EMCC 30). It is through dialogue that Christians will discover what the final unity of humanity really means. This is the task of the entire Church and a more conscientious program that enables this to happen has to be put in place:

> To this end both the ordinary Catholic faithful and pastoral workers in local Churches should receive solid formation and information on other religions so as to overcome prejudices, prevail over religious relativism and avoid unjustified suspicions and fears that hamper dialogue and erect barriers, even provoking violence or misunderstanding (EMCC 69).

Dialogue also enables Christians to strive towards not merely multiculturalism but also interculturalism, and not only multireligiousity but also interreligiousity. Ideally, the different religious and cultural traditions will be able to negotiate an outcome that will take the form of a new entity and new society where the characteristics and values of the different parties are respected and appreciated. This is where the ideals of a melting pot are expressed, that is, each community gives and receives so that all entities will be equally transformed through the interactions with the religious and

cultural other. The most important element for this is that it fosters positive relationships. Specifically, it has to be a relationship that is mutual, not one-sided, where both sides are relating with the other on a relatively level playing field. Neither side harbours feelings of superiority or inferiority; both are hosts and guests at the same time. Hosting and guesting means that both are in the relationship ready to share as well as to learn. The task of religious life, therefore, is to work together and engage one another so that a better world may result wherein the "stranger" or "alien" is welcome as brother or sister.

A Synodal Church is one which supports its members in their engagement with the religious and cultural "other" in view of birthing a world where the "People of God" are not only welcoming of all the Peoples of God, no matter their culture or religion, but also consider them as brothers and sisters and live harmoniously with them for the good and blessings of humanity and the peace and prosperity of the entire continent of Asia.