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INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE TODAY: OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In a document published two years ago, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, three paragraphs are given over to listing obstacles to dialogue.¹

There comes first a one-line observation: "Already on a purely human level it is not easy to practise dialogue" (51). This may sound banal. It is a simple fact of experience. If dialogue at the purely human level means "reciprocal communication, leading to a common goal or, at a deeper level, to interpersonal communion" (9), it is only achieved with difficulty, even between married couples, in families or in religious communities. Qualities are required such as openness, acceptance, patience, honesty and unselfishness. If dialogue needs to be worked at, even when the partners are homogeneous, it will be readily understood that interreligious dialogue, supposing by definition a difference of religion, "is even more difficult" (51).

Two types of obstacles to dialogue are listed: internal attitudes and external factors. Before developing these further it may be fair to point out that the document also has a section on obstacles to proclamation. These are also classified as "difficulties from within" (73) and "difficulties from outside" (74).

What are the internal attitudes that impede dialogue? The first would be "self-sufficiency, lack of openness leading to defensive or aggressive attitudes" (52f). If I am convinced that I alone possess the whole truth and nothing but the truth, then I am not willing to learn from someone who has a different viewpoint. There may

1. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 19 May 1991, in *Bulletin. Pontificium Consilium pro Dialogo inter Religiones*, 77 (1991) 210-250. The paragraphs in question are nos. 51-53, pp. 231-232.

be a certain amount of "reciprocal communication", but there will hardly be "interpersonal communion." There is a great danger of the communication becoming a series of monologues, rather than a true dialogue. Moreover my communication may be expressed aggressively. "A polemical spirit when expressing religious convictions" (52i) is another enemy to dialogue. I am not really interested in discovering truth, but rather in winning an argument in order to defend my own position.

It may be, however, that defensiveness springs from a lack of knowledge, "insufficient grounding in one's own faith" (52a), or "insufficient knowledge and understanding of the beliefs and practices of other religions" (52b). In each case one may be afraid to engage in dialogue.

Perhaps the attitude which is most harmful to dialogue, which really prevents it from flowering, is "suspicion about the other's motives" (52h). If I am wondering all the time what religious, social or political advantage the dialogue partner is trying to gain, if not at my expense at least with my help, then I cannot really engage in conversation or cooperation with an open mind. Of course it would not be right to be naive. There may well be mixed motives in dialogue. Minority groups may be keener to engage in dialogue than the majority, because they stand to gain more. Yet if mistrust is allowed to get the upper hand there can be no progress. So one of the preliminary stages in dialogue will be to build up trust. As Christians we are called to do this on the basis of the Gospel, after the example of Jesus. Yet it will already be an expression of trust to admit that other believers can find motivation for dialogue in their own religions. So even here an attitude of superiority would be out of place.

Reference has just been made to minority or majority situations. These are among the external factors which can affect dialogue. The minority may be merely intent on survival, and perhaps be led by this to a non-dialogical ghetto-like existence. The majority may be almost unaware of the real conditions of the minority. In such cases there may be contact at the level of daily life, but no real interreligious dialogue.

"Cultural differences" (52c) may also impede dialogue. It is a real challenge to pass from one language to another, and so from

one perception of reality to another. Even where the same terms exist, they do not always convey the same meaning. Care will have to be taken to avoid misunderstanding. This requires much patience. Perhaps it also requires the ability to live with some questions unresolved, to allow for a certain ambiguity.

"Socio-political factors or some burdens of the past" are also mentioned (52d). As far as Christianity is concerned, the burden could be the taint of colonialism which may lead to even local Christians being considered foreigners, and prevent an open-minded examination of the Christian message. In some parts of the world where Islam has been associated with slave-trading, a similar attitude exists. It does require vision and courage not to allow the past to dominate the present and the future.

A further obstacle is intolerance, which is of course an interior attitude, but which is "often aggravated by association with political, economic, racial and ethnic factors" (52j). Many so-called religious wars are not basically religious at all. Disputes over land, clash of economic interests, rivalry for political power, are often the primary causes of tensions leading to conflict. It is true that religion may and often does colour the disputes, leading to an easy identification of the "enemy". So people are led to take sides on religious grounds where previously they had been living peacefully together. It is true too that religion is sometimes used, in a cynical fashion, by unscrupulous politicians in order to gain their own advantage. It will be readily understood that this renders dialogue difficult, but makes it all the more necessary. It also throws into relief the responsibility of religious leaders who must resist any form of manipulation and remain always at the service of truth and peace.

There seem to be so many obstacles to dialogue, what about the opportunities? Here one should take into account various factors, new sociological conditions, theological advances, and perhaps above all the experience of dialogue. I realise that I shall be speaking here very much as a Westerner, a European, for in India these factors are not really new.

The sociological condition I am thinking of is the growing religious pluralism in the world. That religious plurality which India

perhaps takes for granted is now a feature of many countries. It is not just a question of people of other religions, above all Muslims, but also Hindus and Sikhs, being found in what were the Christian countries of Europe. There is also the presence of Christians in the predominantly Muslim countries of the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf region. There is a great challenge here, to give the possibility to minority communities to express themselves culturally and also religiously. There is a temptation either to absolutize or to privatize religion. When a particular religion is identified with the State there is a danger that citizens or residents belonging to other religions will not be able to play their full part in society. If the State is totally secularized then religion may be deprived of its force to motivate social commitment. A balance has to be found, and this would be where dialogue should come in. A true dialogue of values would be a helpful contribution to the shaping of a society in which different religious groups would be able to live in harmony.

The theological advance of recent times, as an opportunity for dialogue, is put forward from an unashamedly Christian, perhaps even Catholic, point of view. There is no denying that the Second Vatican Council, with its renewed vision of the Church in the world, has brought about a new attitude towards religions. As Pope Paul VI said, at the opening of the Synod on Evangelization, religions are not to be seen as rivals or obstacles to evangelization, but rather as being in a relationship of friendship already begun and destined to grow. It is not necessary to spell out here the dogmatic foundations of this attitude, the conviction that the Word of God has been active in people and in religions, that the Holy Spirit is present in the religious life of the members of other religious traditions.² This leads to far greater respect and also to a real possibility of mutual enrichment.

It may be objected here that the Catholic Church has, in recent years, gone back on this vision in order to place a far greater emphasis on proclamation and on the "new evangelization". It is true that the coming of the third millennium seems to provide a convenient target date. Hence movements such as "Evangelization 2000". Some may wonder whether dialogue is being discouraged.

2. Cf. *Dialogue and Proclamation* nos. 14-32, especially 16-17, 28.

I think that if one looks carefully at the teaching of Pope John Paul II one will find that it is a case of "doing this and not neglecting the other". The Pope did in fact say with regard to dialogue and proclamation: "There can be no question of choosing one and ignoring or rejecting the other".³ In *Redemptoris Missio* which underlined strongly the Church's missionary mandate, John Paul II stated clearly "Interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission" (RM 55). This does *not* mean that it is just a tool for proclamation. It is "an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity" (RM 56). It is an authentic element of the Church's evangelizing mission understood in a broad sense. But beyond the written word there is also the example of the Pope. No Pope in history has been so much in dialogue with people of other religions. The theology then needs to be complemented by experience, even more so since experience can be considered a *locus theologiae*.

The experience I am thinking of is first of all that of Assisi, the Day of Prayer for Peace, in October 1986. Here again for you in India it is nothing new that people of different religions would come together to pray. You could hardly imagine their coming together without some time being spent in prayer. Yet the scale of the Assisi Day of Prayer, with religious leaders from all over the world taking part, struck the imagination. It gave a new image of the Church, and it has given a great impetus to interreligious dialogue.

There are other dialogue experiences which have taken place, and are still developing. There is the monastic exchange which has allowed monks and nuns of Catholic and Buddhist traditions to experience their respective forms of monasticism, and to discover both the commonalities and the differences. One of the most recent such exchanges took place last November here in India, between Catholics and Tibetan Buddhists. It was organized by the Indian Benedictine Federation.

A further domain where, it seems to me, dialogue is progressing, is that of cooperation. There is an increasing awareness that in

3. Discourse to the Plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 28.4.1987; cf. *Bulletin* 66 (1987) p. 225.

facing up to today's problems, whether they be the necessity of respect for the environment, care for refugees, or combatting drug addiction, the various religions have a potential for motivation which should be harnessed together.

Let me conclude these brief remarks by quoting a paragraph from *Dialogue and Proclamation*.

The obstacles, though real, should not lead us to underestimate the possibilities of dialogue or to overlook the results already achieved. There has been a growth in mutual understanding, and in active cooperation. Dialogue has had a positive impact on the Church herself. Other religions have also been led through dialogue to renewal and greater openness. Interreligious dialogue has made it possible for the Church to share Gospel values with others. So despite the difficulties, the Church's commitment to dialogue remains firm and irreversible (54).