

Editorial

Dialogical Turn in the Catholic Church

In his opening address to Vatican II on October 11, 1962, Pope John XXII wanted the council to avoid condemnation and to move from monologue to dialogue, showing herself to be, “the loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of goodness and mercy.”¹ Pope Paul VI, who succeeded Pope John XXIII, promulgated his first encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, in August 1964 and halfway through the Vatican II, renewed Church’s motherly embrace and care for the whole humanity.² The term dialogue was used seventy-seven times in the encyclical and two-thirds of the document was devoted to its meaning and application. He wanted “to demonstrate with increasing clarity how vital it is for the world, and how greatly desired by the Catholic Church, that the two should meet together, and get to know and love one another” (ES 3) and suggested dialogue as the preferred and natural means for such an encounter and living together in harmony.

The Pope wanted the Church to have a deeper self-knowledge and renewal leading to a mutual relationship “with the surrounding world in which it lives and works” (ES 12). The Church is deeply rooted in a world as “it exists in the world and draws its members from the world. It derives from it a wealth of human culture,” shares “its vicissitudes and promotes its prosperity” (ES 26). The world offers her “a hundred forms of possible contacts, some of which are open and easy, others difficult and problematic, and many, unfortunately, wholly unfavourable to friendly dialogue” (ES 13).

¹John XXII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* 17, <<https://jakomonchak.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/john-xxiii-opening-speech.pdf>> 3 March 2017.

²Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 94 <http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html> 3 March 2017. Henceforth references are given with ES followed by the number in the text.

The theological base for dialogue, according to the encyclical, "is God himself." Creation, incarnation, revelation, salvation and prayer are forms God's dialogue with humankind: "the whole history of man's salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which marvellously begins with God and which He prolongs with men in so many different ways" (ES 70). The dialogue, Pope exhorts, is not self-seeking, limited or coercive (ES 74); it is a universal appeal of love to establish and foster a relationship with the world in which church lives, moves and has her being. It is a divine mission for the Church and she should take initiatives for a fruitful dialogue with all people. Dialogue "characterizes the man who realizes the seriousness of the apostolic mission and who sees his own salvation as inseparable from the salvation of others. His constant endeavour is to get everyone talking about the message which it has been given to him to communicate" (ES 80). Though confident and clear about the truth of one's message, the dialogue itself is open and humble in which "truth is wedded to charity and understanding to love" (ES 82).

The encyclical speaks about dialogue in four concentric circles, beginning with the whole human race in the outermost circle and the members of the Catholic Church in the innermost circle. "All things human are our concern. We share with the whole of the human race a common nature, a common life, with all its gifts and all its problems" (ES 97). The Church is eager to play its part, especially in the realm of moral values in human consciences and in the efforts of national and international bodies to establish human rights and duties. The second circle consists of people who believe in God, including Judaism, Islam and Afro-Asian religions. The third circle consists of "all those who take their name from Christ" and the ecumenical dialogue aims at "a perfect union of faith and charity" (ES 109). The fourth and the innermost circle is the dialogue within the members of the Catholic Church. In all these levels, while the Church remains a teacher and mother offering her gifts, she is also humble enough to learn and receive from her dialogue partners.

Since the promulgation of the *Ecclesiam Suam* dialogue became the characteristic note of Vatican II and the preferred

means of achieving its goal of *aggiramento*. Dialogue and its synonyms appeared in ten of the sixteen Council documents. In these documents we find a change of vocabulary and tone with words such as collegiality, friendship, partnership, brotherhood, sisterhood, respect, freedom, conscience, holiness, and human dignity, opening the doors of the Church to have dialogues with other religions, with mutual respect and promoting human solidarity for peace and harmony. The Council documents affirm that in the religious traditions of non-Christians there exist elements of truth and grace, which are found in individuals and the rites and customs of peoples.

Nostra aetate, the document that deals with the relation of the Church with other religions, took an optimistic view of the inter-cultural and interreligious environment as shown by its opening words: “In this age of ours, when men are drawing more closely together and the bonds of friendship between different peoples are being strengthened...” The dialogue begins with “what human beings have in common and what promotes fellowship;” “all men form but one community” and “God’s providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all persons,” oriented to the eschatological gathering “in the holy city illuminated by the glory of God, in whose splendour all peoples will walk.”³ The document exhorts Catholics for dialogue and collaboration with people of other religious traditions: “Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral good found among non-Christians, as well as their social and cultural values” (NA 2).

At Pentecost in 1964, Paul VI announced the institution of the Secretariat for Non Christians, later to become the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue: “To search for methods and ways of opening a suitable dialogue with Non-Christians. ... that non-Christians come to be known honestly and esteemed justly

³Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate* 1 <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html> 3 March 2017. Henceforth references are given with NA followed by number in the text.

by Christians, and that in their turn non-Christians can adequately know and esteem Christian doctrine and life.”⁴ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue published a document,⁵ in 1984 situating interreligious dialogue within the mission of the Church, along with other aspects of mission like Christian presence, prayer and worship, and proclamation of the Gospel. The commitment to human welfare, social justice, liberty and human rights, and the reform of unjust social structures are also seen as integral part of the mission of the Church (DM 12). According to the document, there are four types of dialogue – dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of discourse and dialogue of religious experience. It also distinguished conversion as the return of the heart to God from conversion as the adoption of another religion, the first being the goal of interreligious dialogue. The document reaffirms the importance of dialogue: “The fact that Christian mission can never be separated from love and respect for others is proof for Christians of the place of dialogue within that mission” (DM 19).

In 1991, The Council for Interreligious Dialogue jointly with the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples published another document, detailing the relation between dialogue and proclamation.⁶ Though evangelization in the broad sense

⁴Paul VI, *Regimini Ecclesiae*, 99 < http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/la/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_19670815_regimini-ecclesiae-universae.html > 3 March 2017.

⁵Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, “The Attitude of the Church toward the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission” <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html> 9 March, 2017. Henceforth references are given with DM followed by number in the text.

⁶Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, “Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ ,” <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html> 9 March, 2017. Henceforth references are given with DP followed by number in the text.

embraces all the activities of the Church, including interreligious dialogue, in the narrow sense it refers to explicit proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ. Interreligious dialogue and proclamation, though not on the same level, are both authentic elements of the Church’s evangelizing mission. Both are legitimate and necessary and the Church is committed to both the ministries despite the challenges and difficulties (DP 54, 76). They are intimately related, but not interchangeable: “true interreligious dialogue on the part of the Christian supposes the desire to make Jesus Christ better known, recognized and loved; proclaiming Jesus Christ is to be carried out in the Gospel spirit of dialogue” (DP 77). As Pope Paul VI said, during his visit to India, “We must meet as pilgrims who have set out to look for God, not in buildings of stone, but in the hearts of men.”⁷ We shall together “preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice, and moral values” (NA 3), in conversation and collaboration, in truth and love.

As Raimon Panikkar rightly observed, “One of the most urgent tasks of the world today is the establishment of bridges between different religions.”⁸ Religions are to find their family resemblances, similarities and differences, and join together for the glory of God and the well being of all. Christians who profess faith in one God, who is the creator of all and one Saviour, Jesus Christ, should all the more obliged and privileged to work for the unity of humankind, as we are all united in origin and one destiny. Christian experience of God is unique and universal. It is open to all cultures and traditions and takes different forms in expressions in different places and times. The *Journal of Dharma*, in this issue explores the dialogical efforts of Catholic Church in general, and particularly in Asia.

William Sweet, in his paper, “Can there be Genuine Dialogue between Religion and Democracy?” provides clarity on some of the relations between religion and democracy, and addresses the

⁷Address to Non-Christians in Bombay, December 4, 1964; *Il viaggio di Paolo VI in India*, 77.

⁸Raimon Panikkar, *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery*, Joseph Cunneen, trans., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006, 28.

more general issue of dialogue between the two. After a brief discussion of some of the values characteristic of democracy and religion, the author considers the place of religion within the traditions that have given rise to the contemporary understanding of democracy, and examines to what extent democratic values and institutions exist within, or are compatible with some of the major religious traditions. This is to show what is involved in the issue of dialogue between religion and democracy.

“Unity and Truth: Goals and Presuppositions of Dialogue” by Sebastian Athappilly examines the biblical-Christian vision, according to which there is plurality within God as well as the creatures, as God-willed reflection of his own plurality. Plurality in the world, beginning with our own selves and senses, is to be understood as emerging out of a unity. Dialogue is based on the two poles: unity and plurality. Plurality of human society as well as human cultures and religions is an outcome and reflection of the basic theological truth of Trinity. Without accepting the underlying unity we are unable to launch any project of dialogue or interreligious dialogue. The single economy of salvation is based on the vision of the whole humankind as one family. Whatever God has revealed in the history of salvation has salvific bearing to every human person and even to the whole world. Through dialogue among the religions we seek to find the fuller scope of the salvific truth of God definitively revealed in Jesus Christ. For this each partner of dialogue is demanded and expected to share one’s own faith openly and truthfully.

Agnes M. Brazal in her paper “Dialogue and Proclamation of Truth: Reception of *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* by the FABC” explores the relationship between dialogue and proclamation of Christ in the Vatican II documents *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* and their reception by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) – its plenary assembly, as well as the Bishops Institute for Religious Affairs (BIRA) and Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs (FIRA) seminars under the FABC Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. The author argues that FABC has appropriated as well as gone beyond the teachings of *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* on dialogue and proclamation. For

FABC, the triple dialogue with religions, cultures, and the poor is not just a means but the mode of proclaiming Christ in Asia. Furthermore, unlike *Ad Gentes*, proclamation of Christ is not aimed at conversion to Christianity, but is, instead, understood as the promotion of God’s reign. In continuity with *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes*, the FABC plenary documents however do not go as far as the BIRA IV and FIRA documents where the discourse on Christianity as fulfilling all the other religions had disappeared.

The article “Inter-Religious Dialogue: An Asian Christian Response to Religious Pluralism” by Davis Varayilan showcases a Christian response to the religious pluralism in Asia. Religion has a unifying power that promotes peace and harmony and also divisive power which devalues the diversity and generates violence in the society. The author suggests inter-religious dialogue as a creative and positive response to bridge different religions and promote its unifying power and to prevent the divisive forces from using religion for one’s own interest. The requirements for the effective inter-religious dialogue are the rootedness in one’s own religion, relatedness to the followers of other religions and openness to the Spirit. Based on the experiences in Samanvaya Vidya Dham in Rishikesh, the author proposes a progressive model of inter-religious dialogue as tourists, pilgrims and seekers of God experience. The article concludes with a recommendation to develop a culture of dialogue that is open and inclusive through a dialogue of life, prayer, discourse and action.

The concepts of humanism, secular and Christian humanism, were very active in the debates of academic circles and related areas for a long time. The application and understanding of Christian humanism in Indian context was felt necessary in the context of the life and contributions of many Christian humanists. Joseph Chacko Chennattuserry, in his article “Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Christian Humanist in Dialogue with Society,” presents St Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a socio-religious reformer of nineteenth century Kerala. His life and that of others were made closer to God and it resulted in getting more meaningful life

patterns in the society. His efforts at providing a platform for God experience, education for all, women empowerment, uplift of dalits and the poor and extending concern for the sick and the dying were the fruits of his dialogue with the society. It has got rare parallels in the history of nineteenth century Kerala.

Jojo Parecattil in his article, "Celebration of Christmas as a Symphony of Interfaith in *Ātmānutāpam* of St Chavara" reflects on the interfaith consciousness of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara, by making an Indian reading of his classical work *Ātmānutāpam*, specifically focusing on how the incarnation of Christ is presented and celebrated with an open and inclusive approach. In *Ātmānutāpam*, while explaining the episode of the Infancy Narrative, St Chavara addresses Child Jesus with the significant Indian name, *Brahmanāthan*, and Jesus is being worshipped by *Brahmacāriṇis* with unique Indian offerings. The addition of an Indian character called Śānti as an aged shepherdess making conversation with Mother Mary makes the narrative Indian. Because of his deep and affective knowledge of Indian culture and religion, and having a moving openness and a dialogical approach to them, St. Chavara could develop a relevant cultural modification of his faith, which will have its unique stamp in the Indian Christian Theology.

Paying tribute to St Kuriakose Elias Chavara, his dialogical vision and mission for Church and society of his times, may I submit this issue of the Journal of Dharma on "Dialogue and Religion" for your reading, reflection and research.

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