

## **The need for Interreligious Dialogue**

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### **Introduction**

Since the Second Vatican Council and more exactly since the Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter "Ecclesiam Suam", the question about the interreligious dialogue and its connection with the mission of the Church arose in the Catholic Church. What is the reason why the Church must dialogue with other religions? The Second Vatican Council did not originate the concept "interreligious dialogue". Neither the previously quoted encyclical letter mentions exactly the expression "interreligious dialogue"; the word that was used in this document was "colloquium", that is to say, "conversation". To tell the truth, the complete expression of this document was: The Church becomes "word, message, conversation" (ES 77). Who are the conversational partners to maintain this conversation? We can find out four circles of interlocutors reading the letter: first circle "all the mankind", second circle, "the Worshippers of the One God", that is to say, the monotheists; third circle, "Christians"; fourth circle, "Catholics", that is to say, just the inside of the Church.

Although the exact definition of interreligious dialogue was not yet elaborated (built), the Pope speaks about the need to talk with the others and also with the Catholics themselves. Our task in this short speech is to emphasize the reasons or the grounds to motivate the Church as a whole to carry out this "conversation" which later is going to be called "dialogue"

and “interreligious dialogue”. In this enterprise we can try to explain three main fundamentals to justify this need for dialogue: the social and cultural reason; the ethical reason and the strictly speaking theological reason.

### **1. The social and cultural reason.**

We all know that we live in a plural world. A world where the different cultures and religions do not have strict geographical borders; on the contrary they take up the same global space. This is the reason why the men and women belonging to different religious cultures and traditions cannot live in this miscellaneous world giving their back one to another. Neither religious institutions, churches and religions, can avoid these continuous contacts, which “call” them in an unavoidable way inside this “global town”, this “world-town”, with its great social, cultural and religious mobility. This is a mobility, which can work in several levels: carrying media, virtual mobility, instant communications devices, and so on.

Furthermore, we have to consider the migration phenomena. Until the final of the Britain Empire in the West, there existed only the different branches of Christianity. But since the migrations began to expand, the so-called Christian Europe –excluding the borders of the Islamic region of the Balkans- became a plural Europe. In Spain, for instance, after the last expulsion of the Moorish in the beginning of the sixth century, there was no other religion than the Catholic Church. But since 1980 the immigration began: Muslims, Orthodox, Protestants, several new religions and extraneous religious movements. Spain is currently a plural country, even if the Catholic Church provides the majority of the sociological population.

The Catholic Church was not able to be indifferent before these current phenomena: The presence in the West –in the traditional territory of the

Christianity- of several groups of people who confess different faiths and belong to a great diversity of churches and religions. The western world is composed by open societies; inside them ethnic groups, nationalities, cultures and a mix of religions. It seems that to all of us, as a whole, the hour of the dialogue has come. We perceive the dialogue as convergence and divergence, as encounter and confrontation, as meeting point and frontier. The Second Vatican Council and the subsequent doctrine of the Church put this issue before our eyes.

## **2. The ethical reason.**

After the attacks on the Twin Towers -11-S-2001- an extraordinary conscience arose among the religions on their responsibility for promoting the peace in the world. By means of the announcement for the world day of peace, the Pope Benedict XVI made a call to the shared responsibility of the religions to prepare a world conscience in support of the peace, respect and human dignity on the basis of the unity of mankind. (24-february-2002). Here you have his call to the field of dialogue:

“The religious leaders have a specific responsibility in this great effort. The Christian confessions and the big religions of the mankind have to cooperate among them to remove the cultural and social causes of the terrorism. They must teach the greatness and dignity of the person and spread a greater conscience of the unity of mankind. This is a concrete field to dialogue and cooperate in an ecumenical and interreligious way to provide by the religions an urgent service for peace among peoples.

Particularly, I am convinced that the religious leaders, Jews, Christians and Muslims, must promote an initiative condemning publicly (openly) the terrorism and denying any religious or moral

legitimacy to everyone who participates in it” (n. 12).

After that, the Pope said that the mutual understanding, the respect and the confidence set in motion a path to forgiveness among people and communities. The prayer for the peace in Assisi had a specific religious motivation:

“We want to make known that the authentic religious feeling is a permanent inspiration to the mutual respect and harmony among peoples; more, it is the main antidote against the violence and conflicts” (Asis, 24.01.2002).

The religions must testify their communion before the mankind. We have the words of the Pope John Paul II during the meal with religious leaders after the day of prayer in Assisi on January 25, 2002:

“In spite of our differences we are sitting at this table, joined in our commitment in favor of peace. This commitment is born from a true religious feeling. That is surely which God expects from us. That is what religious people look for. This commitment is the hope which we have to offer in this special occasion. May God grant us to be humble and effective instruments of peace”.

As we can verify there is an obvious and clear fundamental of the need for interreligious dialogue. This is the need to work together in order to avoid violence among individuals and communities as well as to implement the guarantee of peace in the world as a whole. Without religious understanding and peace we cannot claim for peace into the world community of the mankind.

### **3. The religious and theological reason.**

By means of the hermeneutics of our own Sacred Scripture we Christians have found out that God wanted to have a common world with us, the mankind. In the Christian religious sources the word has the power to create a world. The first chapter of the Bible opens with a narrative of the creative word, the so-called poem of the creation. Every symbolic day, one Word gives the existence to one being. By means of the word a world was created. In the same way, the first chapter of John's gospel opens with the Word –the Logos, the Son of God- who becomes flesh, a man. This Logos – Word was the Word, which, from the beginning of the world, spoke to the men. The ancient prophets were its spokespersons. And we find their words written in the sacred books of the Ancient and New Testament. We are not a religion of the book, as Muslims call us, but a religion of the Word. We can say with Saint Agustin that “The Word –capital letter- became word –small letter-” before telling that “The Word became flesh” according to John 1,14. Our God has never stopped giving us His Word. He always and constantly looks for speaking with us.

We, who are the followers of the “God of the Word”, the God who is Word made man, cannot deny our word to the others, to our fellow men. For us the dialogue is –as well as the announcement of Jesus Christ- an unavoidable deed. Jesus spoke with all the men and women who met in his way through this world in the Holy Land, even if they did not belong to His Jew religion and culture. We can read the narratives about the Samaritan or Canaan women, or the story on the Roman centurion, or the young man who finally did not follow him. But He never denied His word to the men and women He met in His path.

Until the Second Vatican Council the word of the Church was only one-

way. The Church spoke and the other had to listen to it. But after a deeper study of its foundational sources the Church became aware of its need to hear also the others, because the seeds of the Word were in their cultures and religions.

The Constitution *Lumen Gentium* says in its number sixteen that the grace of God is at work also outside the boundaries of the Church according to the universal will of salvation of the Creator. There are religious men who have not yet received the Gospel, but they are related in various ways to the people of God.

In the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (About the rapports of the Church with non-Christian religions) we can read in its introduction that the divine design embraces the mankind as a whole. The common humanity is a basis to maintain rapports inside it and to look for answers to the human problems. The two fundamentals that the Declaration argues are the common origin and destiny of the entire mankind:

1. One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth.
2. One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men. (NA.1).

In the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* number 92, we can find the same four circles of dialogue than in the encyclical letter *Ecclesiam Suam* but in inverse (contrary) order:

- a. Thus all those who compose the one People of God, both pastors and the general faithful, can engage in dialogue with abounding fruitfulness (this is the circle of the Catholics).

- b. Those brothers and communities not yet living with us in full communion (that is to say, Christians in general).
- c. All who acknowledge God, and who preserve in their traditions precious elements of religion and humanity (It refers to all religious men).
- d. Those who cultivate outstanding qualities of the human spirit, but still do not acknowledge the Source of these qualities (it is referred to all mankind).

In the encyclical letter *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) the Pope affirms that the Holy Spirit works outside the visible boundaries of the Church (n. 6).

A few days before the publication of the instruction *Dialogue and Mission* (04.09.1984) the Pope John Paul II explained the five theological bases for the interreligious dialogue:

1. The first one, the universal fatherhood of God.
2. Second, the union of the mankind to Jesus Christ by means of the Incarnation.
3. Third, the action of the Holy Spirit in every man. (DM 2).

These three primary fundamentals give rise to other two in addition:

4. The necessary love to mankind.
5. The link between the culture and the several religions of the mankind (DM 2).

In its number five, this document affirms that interreligious dialogue is one element of the mission of the Church, as well as the proclamation of God's

saving work in Our Lord Jesus Christ is another one.

An important thing in this document is that in it we find for the first time an official definition of interreligious dialogue:

“It means not only discussion, but also includes all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed for mutual understanding and enrichment” (DM 3).

Another thing we must keep in mind is that interreligious dialogue is “an element of the mission of the Church”. To dialogue means to carry out the mission of the Church even though the mission reaches its perfection with the announcement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the discourse of John Paul II to the Roman curia at Christmas 1986, he justified the day of prayer in Assisi –October 1986- as an exercise of interreligious dialogue, explaining –once again- the bases for this task of the Church:

1. The common origin of the mankind as a whole in the creation and the call to the salvation for all the peoples (nn. 5-7).
2. The unity of the redemption mystery of Jesus Christ (nn. 6-7).
3. The dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit in the sincere prayer of the members of other religious traditions (n. 11).

In short: Radical unity in the creation and fundamental unity in the universal redemption of Jesus Christ.

After the important encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) the Instruction *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991) provides once again the

fundamentals for the interreligious dialogue. But the theological document published by the International Theological Commission entitled “Christianity and Religions” (1996) is, I think, the most scientific explanation about this issue of the relation of the Church with other religions. But the subsequent Declaration Dominus Iesus in 2000 provides us a summary of the position of the Catholic Church related to the interreligious dialogue:

- a. The interreligious dialogue is one of the elements of the mission of the Church; nevertheless, the Church cannot abandon its strong aspiration related to the truth: Jesus Christ as the only universal mediator of creation and salvation.
- b. However, the religious traditions of the mankind contain and propose religious elements which have their origin in God.
- c. These elements are integrated into the work of the Holy Spirit in the history of the peoples, as well as into their cultures and religions (DI 21)

#### **4. Conclusions**

Along these last fifty years the Catholic Church has established the fundamentals to justify the need for interreligious dialogue. We can abstract these fundamentals in a few sentences.

1. Inside the Church, the consciousness that the Holy Spirit is at work outside the visible boundaries of the same Church and even of the Christianity has arisen step by step. (John 3,8). The closeness to the others and the dialogue improve in direct proportion to this consciousness.

2. In the same way, the Church has found out as a truth belonging to the catholic faith that God wishes the salvation of all the mankind, certainly in Christ our only savior, according 1 Tim 2,4-5.
3. The Church has arrived at the conviction that it needs to open itself to the interreligious dialogue as result of the effort of the theological thinking and of the moving forward on behalf of its magisterial teaching.
4. The dialogue began to be considered an authentic element of the mission of the Church. The magisterial teaching has dedicated very important documents in several levels to teach this doctrine.
5. In these documents we can find the valuation of several elements of the religious traditions of the world, the ways to dialogue, their main goals, the spiritual aptitudes to carry out the dialogue, the real obstacles and dangers, specially the loss of their spirit to do the unavoidable task of the announcement of the Gospel.
6. Despite these dangers, the Church has stated that the interreligious dialogue is for the Church itself a resolute and solid commitment.
7. The Church has also clearly stated that its mission is complete and perfect only by means of the announcement of the Gospel: this is not an optional task for the Church
8. But the Church also states that its mission as a whole must be carried out through the dialogue, that is to say, with respect to the conscience of the believers and their religious traditions which sustain and hold their search for God; they have achieved a providential function in the economy of the salvation.

The current doctrine of the magisterial teaching advises that announcement and dialogue are difficult tasks. God only knows the times and the stages of the long search of the mankind. The commitment of the Church with the interreligious dialogue is resolute and solid. On this path of the dialogue the Christianity is going to reveal itself as a religious tradition that has offered to the mankind more and better human and moral values to its long historical way.