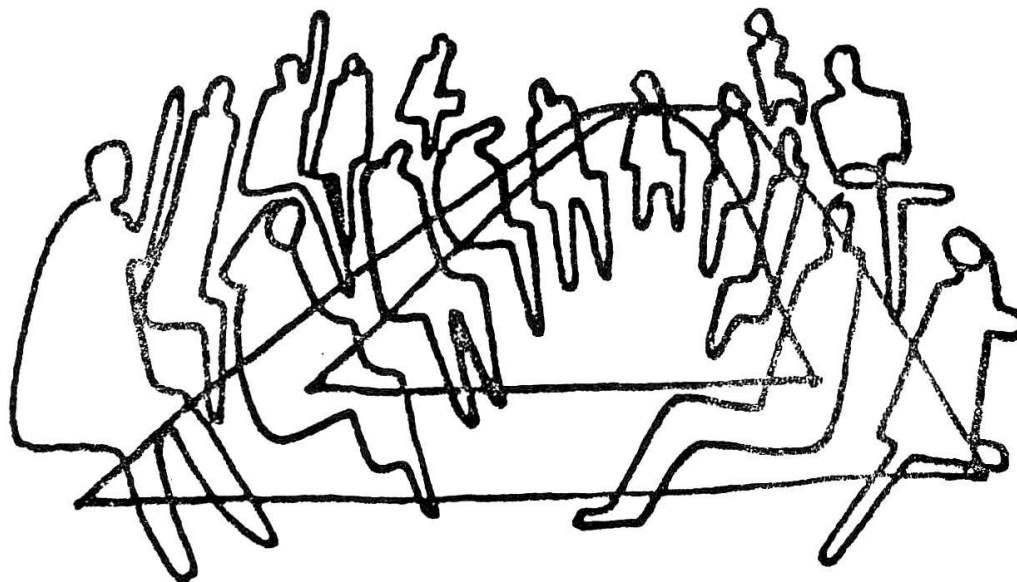


A Sincere Dialogue Creates Fraternity



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Twenty years ago Vatican II, the solemn council of all the Catholic Bishops of the world, ended its fourth and final session. From the start, it had aimed at a spiritual renewal of the Church through a return to the sources of her faith. But it learnt that this very faithfulness called for a renewal of the Church's attitude to the world. It saw that this attitude should not be one of isolation nor of a priori condemnation nor of offensive polemic nor of mere confrontation but one of comprehension and compassion, of involvement and co-operation.

In 1963 the newly elected Pope, Paul VI, opened the second session of the Council by describing the various areas of dialogue in which the council and the Church must engage today. In 1964, before the third session, the Pope issued an encyclical letter, Ecclesiam Suam, addressed not only to members of the Church but also to "all men of good-will". He dwelt in detail on the contacts which the Church ought to maintain with the different sectors of the modern world. The Second Vatican Council made this attitude its own. It

not only produced a decree on Christian Ecumenism, and another on inter-religious dialogue but in the decree, Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World), it called for "dialogue with all men, believers and non-believers, who ought to work for the rightful betterment of this world in which all men live". No one is to be excluded except the one who excludes himself. "We include those who cultivate beautiful qualities of the human spirit, but do not yet acknowledge the Source of these qualities" (n.92). This article will directly speak of dialogue with non-believers though much of what is said will apply to other kinds of dialogue.

THE FRUITS OF DIALOGUE

Dialogue is a meeting of minds and hearts. It is not superficial talk but a conversation in which the life of the partners is involved. Neither is it negotiation nor bargaining but an exchange of views and experiences. Each one has something to give and should feel free to give it. But before we speak, we need to listen to the other—not only to his mind but also to his heart—and allow what we hear to challenge us. Listening, however, is a difficult art.

Dialogue can lead us to a comprehension of the partner and his position as he sees it. It can help us to overcome misunderstanding, prejudices, easy generalizations, and latent aversions. Partners in dialogue can discover common ground and seek to widen it. This common ground could be the basis of collaboration for peace and justice, for the building of a more human world. Dialogue should be for the partners a common search for a higher truth. It could help each to discover new aspects of the truth in himself and in the partner and his position. Different are the ways which lead to the truth. For both the partners, their personal encounter could mean a growth at least in human values. It could lead to personal enrichment and that of society.

The existence of atheism in the world finds its ultimate explanation in the mystery of divine grace and in man's acceptance or rejection of it. The refusal of God could be due to a violent protest against the evil in this world, impatience with the mediocrity of believers, unilateral emphasis of one human value, a reaction to a fallacious idea of God, or a misguided search for a scientific explanation

of the universe. Dialogue should help "the Church to detect in the mind of the atheist the hidden causes of the denial of God which raise weighty questions which have to be examined seriously". This knowledge should help the Church to understand better modern man and his world and help her members to recognise the possible caricatures in their concept of God, the idols they may in practice be setting beside Him and the inauthentic elements in their religious practice. It should help them to distinguish what in their religion is of divine origin and what is only a human accretion, perhaps even a perversion. In brief, dialogue with atheists could help Christians to purify, enlighten and deepen their faith, and help them to express the divine teaching with greater fairness and clarity and more adequately, taking note of the objections of the other.

For the non-believer, dialogue could mean a breakthrough in what blocks his way to a transcendent God or, at least, a recognition of unconscious ideological options, or the assumption of a more personal and responsible stand before the ultimate questions of life to ignore which would be a debasing of the dignity of man. From dialogue with the believer, he could learn that "the recognition of God is in no way hostile to man's dignity since this dignity is rooted and perfected in God"; and that "Christian hope, related to the end of time, does not diminish the importance of intervening duties but rather undergirds the acquittal of them with fresh incentives" (G.S., n.21).

REQUIREMENTS OF DIALOGUE

An important condition for fruitful dialogue is sincerity. There must be no deceit or sly manipulation. For the Church, though her enemies may not want to admit it, dialogue is not a tactic or strategy for ulterior goals. Her newly emphasized attitude of dialogue and friendship for all is for her an effort to imitate the way God, whose love is gratuitous and long-suffering, acts on the world. "Dialogue is fundamental for the Church, which is called to collaborate in God's plan with its methods of presence, respect and love toward all persons... (It) is based on the very life of God, one and triune. God is the Father of the entire human family, Christ has joined every person to himself, the Spirit works in each individual: the dialogue is based on love for the

human person as such..." (Pope John Paul II, March 3, 1984, to the Secretariat for Non-Christians). This sincerity and honesty of dialogue will require one to be lucid—his language must be understandable, acceptable and well-chosen.

Meekness is another requirement of dialogue. Dialogue is not proud, it is not bitter, it is not offensive. A partner in dialogue does not seek to browbeat his partner or to impose his views on him—their authority is intrinsic to the truth he testifies to, to the charity he communicates. The partners approach each other in an attitude of courteous esteem, understanding, goodness, sympathy and respect for the dignity and freedom of the other. The Christian should approach the atheist as a brother or sister with common nature and as a fellow creature and child of God.

Dialogue, however, is not based on blind emotion. It does not imply a renunciation of reason nor a denial of facts. Though there must be readiness to change in openness to the truth, neither partner is called to be disloyal to what he sees as the truth. Neither is called to surrender his inalienable rights. One must always accept the other's good faith (unless the contrary is proven) but one cannot always accept his position. The Catholic Church, for instance, sees atheism as a human tragedy and repudiates it but she wants to listen to atheists and has acknowledged that she has received much even from those who persecute her (G.S., n.44).

Every Catholic can and should make the spirit of openness, friendship and service that characterizes dialogue one's own. But not every one is competent to enter into doctrinal dialogue with Non-believers. This requires a solid knowledge of the position of the other and "well structured convictions about one's own faith joined to a life of prayer and Gospel witness".

DIALOGUE WITH CULTURES

The Church is interested in dialogue not only between persons but also between cultures and nations. In an interdependent world no culture can afford to isolate itself from others. While wishing to remain quite laudably true to itself and to all that is best in its traditions, it can grow in openness to other cultures. Servant of humanity as

she wishes to be, the Catholic Church desires to promote this encounter of cultures in the world.

But the Church herself is not identified with any culture. She would like to take the message which she has received from God to all peoples without imposing any foreign culture on them. She would like rather to be at home, to be inculturated in all nations, to be enriched by them. Nothing human is foreign to her. She would like to enter into a fraternal dialogue with all cultures. In turn, she, with her support and promotion of universal values, could be of service to these cultures as they modernize themselves and build, with people of other cultures, a civilization of peace and love. (Cf. G.S., n.58).



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CONCLUSION

This then is the attitude to peoples and cultures which Vatican II saw as demanded of the Church by its very nature. It is true that the Church has failed at times in the course of her long history in living up to this teaching. It is true also that even 20 years after the Council, she must confess that she has not fully assimilated this teaching. But the Church has not remained in the realm of pious desires. Since Vatican II, the Popes have repeatedly exhorted Catholics to promote dialogue with other Christians, with other religionists and with those of no religion. Already before the Council drew to a close in 1965, there were in existence in the Vatican three secretariats for each of these three fields of dialogue: the Secretariat for Christian Unity, the Secretariat for Non-Christians and the Secretariat for Non-Believers. And three years ago, the present Pope, John

Paul II, established the Pontifical Council of Culture as a sign of the Church's profound interest in the progress of all cultures and of its desire to promote an enriching dialogue between them; the Council for Culture has already forged links with UNESCO, with national ministries of culture and with other cultural organizations. Other organs through which the Vatican promotes dialogue with the modern world are the Vatican Observatory and the Pontifical Academy of Sciences.

To give but one example of this dialogue, the Secretariat for Non-Believers of the Vatican and the Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts jointly organized a colloquium on "Science and Faith" at Ljubljana, Yugoslavia (the papers of which have been jointly published by these two institutions under the title, Science and Faith.) In a concluding speech the President of the Slovene Academy said that the colloquium had contributed "to the realization of a wider climate for the cooperation among people whose life's conceptions are different". This positive appreciation of the meeting was shared by the Yugoslavian Government.

The Secretariat for Non-Believers is assiduously promoting dialogue also through its local organizations in various parts of the Church. For instance, the Dialogue Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India sponsored in 1979 in Kerala a Christian-Marxist Dialogue on "Man, Religion and Social Change". This meeting, jointly organized by Catholics and Marxists and in which prominent Marxist intellectuals participated, was conducted in a most cordial atmosphere.

As Cardinal Casaroli, the Vatican Secretary of State, said last year, "between nations as between persons a sincere dialogue is creative of fraternity". But the path of dialogue often demands courage and patient effort. The Catholic Church remains committed, in a spirit of service, to the task of building such communion and cooperation between peoples and cultures.