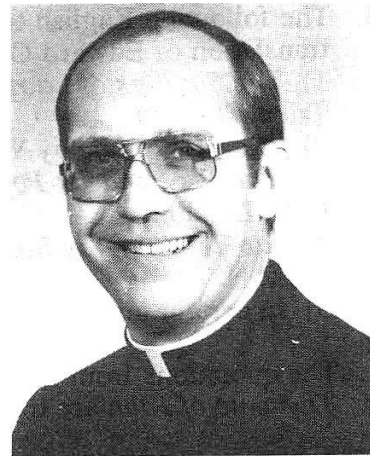


"Dialogue and Proclamation" : A New Resource

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"Dialogue and Proclamation," prepared by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, is the result of extensive consultation with episcopal conferences around the world and five years of work. The new document emphasizes once again the importance of dialogue as an integral part of the Church's evangelizing mission. As such "Dialogue and Proclamation" provides an important resource for all involved in mission and interreligious-intercultural dialogue.

For anyone wishing to grasp the meaning of contemporary mission, especially within the Asian context, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, the Holy See's latest document on mission, is required reading. *Dialogue and Proclamation*, however, does not stand apart from any mission renewal initiated by the decrees of Vatican II: mission (*Ad Gentes*), religions: (*Nostra Aetate*), evangelization: Paul VI's exhortation (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*), the Secretariat for Non-Christians' 1984 document (*Dialogue and Mission*), and John Paul II's recent mission encyclical (*Redemptoris Missio*). These six resources form the core of the universal Church's recent magisterium on mission and proclamation.



Dialogue Integrates Mission

John Paul II treated dialogue with our brother and sisters of other religions in *Redemptoris Missio* (55-57). He noted that "Interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission.... The Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue." *Dialogue and Proclamation* stands in continuity with the papal encyclical (24),

and affirms and elaborates on the necessity of dialogue and demonstrates its relationship to proclamation.

Although some people in the church "fail to see the value of interreligious dialogue," it is "gradually coming to be understood" (4). In today's world with instant communication, mobility and interdependence, a new awareness of religious plurality has emerged; world religious traditions and their adherents demand a sensitive response from Christians. This response is reflected in the very title--"Dialogue and Proclamation". As John Paul II has noted, "There can be no question of choosing one and ignoring or rejecting the other" (6).

Dialogue is not a mere accessory or technique of pre-evangelization. It is "one of the integral elements of the Church's evangelizing mission" (9). Again, dialogue along with proclamation must be viewed as "component elements and authentic forms of the one evangelizing mission of the Church" (2). In a word, interreligious dialogue has found its home within the church's evangelizing mission (33-41). The meaning of the above statements is deepened by careful reading of the sections clarifying the terms evangelization (8), dialogue (9), proclamation (10), conversion (11), religions and religious traditions (12-13).

Underlying this positive concept of dialogue within the church's mission is a vision of evangelization best described as comprehensive, integral and holistic. In accepting that the church's evangelizing mission is a "single but complex and articulated reality," one consequently understands that the "principal elements" of mission are "presence and witness; commitment to social development and human liberation; liturgical life, prayer and contemplation; interreligious dialogue; and finally proclamation and catechesis" (2). Stated succinctly, all mission envisions integral evangelization (2, 8, 55, 75, 76). Jesus himself accomplishes his Abba-given mission in this holistic manner (21-23, 55).

If Jesus' mission and the church's continuance of it are viewed holistically, then dialogue-within-mission will refer to "all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment" (9). The church is firmly and irreversibly committed to promoting and enhancing this multi-faceted dialogue (54).

Attitudes Are Pivotal

The Pentecost 1984 document from the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians (now renamed the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue) bore the cumbersome yet descriptive title: "The Attitude of the Church toward the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission." If we focus on the church's "attitude" toward those whom she approaches in mission, we can identify a pivotal element in dialogue. In short, all authentic dialogue demands an "attitude of respect" which must "permeate all those activities constituting the evangelizing mission of the Church" (9). The task of promoting a *renewed dialogical outlook* is a key purpose of both the 1984 (cf. title above) and 1991 (*Redemptoris Missio*) Pentecost documents. This is a Herculean task, one which requires enough faith to overcome many and diverse difficulties (52).

Certain "attitudes" are essential for dialogue: Anyone serious about engaging in dialogue should begin with a realistic view of the challenge dialogue presents. "Already on a purely human level it is not easy to practice dialogue. Interreligious dialogue is even more difficult" (51). History is replete with religious conflicts, cultural and ethnic domination, territorial wars and destruction--the list is endless. Yet the church stands committed to the Kingdom and to transforming biased and prejudicial attitudes. Challenges abound, but "the obstacles, though real, should not lead us to underestimate the possibilities of dialogue or to overlook the results already achieved" (54). Dialogue requires "a balanced attitude", one that is "open and receptive" and which demands "unselfishness and impartiality, acceptance of differences and of possible contradictions. The will to engage together in commitment to the truth and the readiness to allow oneself to be transformed by the encounter are other dispositions required" (47). Dialogue demands integrity of faith and religious conviction. One enters dialogue precisely as a religious person; "the sincerity of interreligious dialogue requires that each enter into it with the integrity of his or her own faith" (48). Dialogue demands openness to truth. "Moreover, the fullness of truth received in Jesus Christ does not give individual Christians the guarantee that they have grasped that truth fully" (49).

Christians accept God's self-manifestation to the followers of other religious traditions; thus Jesus' followers experience that "Far from weakening their own faith, true dialogue will deepen it...Their faith will gain new dimensions as they discover the active presence of the mystery of Jesus Christ beyond the visible boundaries of the Church and of the Christian fold" (50).

Indeed, the success of dialogue within the church's evangelizing mission requires nothing less than radical attitudinal conversion. This fact cannot be overemphasized (cf. 47-54, 83); in addition, it is "an unending process" (49). Dialogue demands commitment and transformation!

Dialogue vis-a-vis Proclamation

The structure of this document is simple and clearly focused. After an introduction which contextualizes the debate (1-13), a lengthy treatment is given to "interreligious dialogue" (14-54) and to "proclaiming Jesus Christ" (55-76). A brief conclusion (87-89) rounds out the presentation.

A few descriptive passages capture the current understanding of the dynamics of the dialogue-proclamation relationship. Though not on the same level, both are "authentic elements of the Church's evangelizing mission. Both are legitimate and necessary. 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" (77).

This document is written in the same creative style as *Dialogue and Mission* (Pentecost, 1984). Each numbered paragraph is preceded by a phrase which summarizes the central idea of that paragraph. When all these phrases are read continuously, they form a series of sentences summarizing the whole document. This approach results in a succinct overview of the main content of the entire work; it is both helpful and creative.

With dialogue as the main theme, the document sensitively avoids giving offense by its choice of language. For example, the negative term "Non-Christian" is never used; and inclusive language is used whenever the discussion is meant to include both men and women. (e.g. 28, 48).

Continuing the clarification, the document notes that "All

Christians are called to be personally involved in these two ways of carrying out the one mission of the church, namely proclamation and dialogue.... They must nevertheless always bear in mind that dialogue does not constitute the whole mission of the Church, that it cannot simply replace proclamation, but remains oriented towards proclamation insofar as the dynamic process of the Church's evangelizing mission reaches its climax and its fullness" (82).

Holding dialogue and proclamation in a harmonious, fruitful tension is a delicate balancing act. Yet, that is precisely what local churches and missionaries are asked to do (43, 78, 82). There are clear obstacles to be faced both in dialogue (51-54) and in proclamation (72-74). Evangelizers through prayer and the Eucharist will be able to "draw the grace of discernment, to be able to read the signs of the Spirit's presence and to recognize the favorable time and right manner of proclaiming Jesus Christ" (85).

This document contains many other insights worthy of our reflection. Among these are:

Conversion: The reality of *conversion* is best understood as a dynamic process on two levels. Mission always includes a call to open one's heart to an experience of the living God (11, 41). This call is to all peoples--Christians included (32). Based on this general or foundational conversion, one *may* also be called in conscience "to leave one's previous spiritual or religious situation (41), "to a change of religious adherence" (11). Today's evangelizers need great sensitivity in interpreting the workings of God's grace in their own lives and in the lives of the followers of other faiths.

Pneumatology: Current mission thought rightly places important emphasis on the theology of the Holy Spirit (Pneumatology). John Paul II's mission encyclical devoted an entire chapter to "The Holy Spirit, the Principle Agent of Mission." *Dialogue and Proclamation* continues this pneumatological thematic (17, 21, 26, 29, 353, 64-65, 68-69, 845, 86, 89). In God's loving plan of salvation, the universal action of the Holy Spirit is operative in the world, and interreligious dialogue becomes an important key to discovering the Spirit's befriending presence. Today, all Christian mission must possess "a universality which is both Christological and Pneumatological in character" (21).

Dialogue of Salvation: Affirming the centrality of dialogue in the church's mission, Paul VI always spoke of interreligious interaction as a "dialogue of salvation" (38-39, 67, 80). When peoples of diverse faiths interact to search for the divine will, God is in dialogue with these believers; thus, "interreligious dialogue is truly part of the dialogue of salvation initiated by God" (80). Current efforts in dialogue affirm that "God, in an age-long dialogue, has offered and continues to offer salvation to humankind" (38, cf. 53).

A theme common to both the 1984 and 1991 documents is "the patience of God" in the church's commitment to dialogue. "Much patience is required" (53) to engage in dialogue and proclamation! "All, both Christians and the followers of other religious traditions, are invited by God himself to enter into the mystery of his patience" (84; cf. *Dialogue and Mission*, Pentecost 1984, No. 44). Any seasoned missionary, particularly in the Asian context, will attest to the validity of this insight.

As an Asian missionary, however, I lament that the excellent work and reflective insights of the Asian local churches are not mentioned--even in the endnotes. Asian bishops, theologians and missionaries have valuable insights to share about interreligious dialogue. These are drawn from their lived experience; they are theologically rich, they are creatively and competently expressed. The "Theses on Interreligious Dialogue" prepared by the Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC) is one example of the competent work done by the local churches in Asia. Such work deserves recognition.

Dialogue and Proclamation, with its subtitle, *Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, forms an integrated whole. Its contents are informed and its language carefully thought out. The document does not minimize the obstacles to dialogue, but it prefers to lay stress on its necessity. In this way it challenges (89) all Christians to be personally involved in dialogue and proclamation as they endeavor to carry out the mission of the Church (82).
