

Nostra Aetate and Interfaith Dialogue (*For The Pastoral Review*)

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The ratification of *Nostra Aetate* in October 1965 by the bishops of the second Vatican Council set in motion a dynamic that continues to shape the modern Church. It is intended to be a teaching about the relation of the Church to people who belong to other religious traditions, with particular attention paid to Jews (the longest section of the Decree), Moslems, Hindus and Buddhists. It is useful here briefly to summarise some of the (always positive) things which the Council acknowledges about these religious traditions:

- • In *Hinduism* people explore the divine mystery and express it in myth and philosophy; they seek release from the trials of life by asceticism, meditation and recourse to God in confidence and love.
- • *Buddhism* proposes a way of life in which people can attain a state of perfect liberation and reach supreme illumination either through their own efforts or with divine help.
- • *Muslims* worship the one, merciful and almighty God; they endeavour to submit themselves to God's decrees, venerate Jesus as a prophet, revere the Blessed Virgin and await judgement and the rewards of heaven.
- • *Jews* are linked by spiritual bonds to the Church which springs from what God brings about in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets; Israel is the olive tree on which Gentile branches have been grafted; Jews remain very dear to God because God does not take back his gifts and promises to them.

These positive evaluations are grounded in a sense that throughout human history there is a universal 'awareness of a hidden power': it is this awareness that the Council suggests comes to expression in the teachings, ethics and rites of the world's religions. It is as though the religions of the world are ways in which human beings express and channel their orientation towards God the Creator, ways in which the 'one community' of humanity moves towards God who calls all to share his life. This movement of humanity towards God is something which the Council evaluates positively because our response to God and our search for the divine mystery are grounded in God's self-gift: as Augustine saw, the search is already and partly the contact -- 'you would not seek me if you had not already found me'.

The Council is also aware that this dimension of God's creative action within the human community needs to be brought into contact with the supreme moment of God's self-giving revelation in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh and the unsurpassable sign of hope whom God bestows on humanity as its Lord and Saviour.

This last point is important because the Council's approach to other religions is not relativist: it does not say that all religions are of equal validity and merit, willed by God as effective communications of his reality to different peoples at different times and places. How could it say this? If this were held, the consequence would be that that Jesus is no more than one revealer/redeemer figure among many and that therefore Christianity is one facet among others of the diamond of human religiosity which, in its totality, constitutes divine revelation. The Church cannot say this because it holds that what is given to humanity in Christ is nothing less than the self-expressiveness proper to the being of God: as the Creed puts it, Jesus Christ is 'of one substance with the Father' and so in him, God's very self enters the creatureliness of our existence

in order to lead the creation to glory. Everything fades in comparison with the radiance of this self-gift. The point is worth exploring because this insistence that religions can only be understood in relation to Christ is a distinguishing feature of modern Catholic reflection on world religions.

In a talk given towards the end of his life, Karl Rahner, the most important Catholic theologian of the 20th Century, considered the question of why and how Christ is the only one to whom we can entrust ourselves in life and death – the question, in other words, of why Jesus alone saves and mediates the divine life and how he differs from other religious founders and teachers. Unless Jesus is able to do convey what no one else can bring – unsurpassable participation in the divine life – then he may be the founder of a particular religion among others, but this religion cannot be what Rahner calls ‘the absolute religion’ by which God’s self-gift is so conveyed to the world that humanity is bound irreversibly to God. So what is distinctive and unique about Jesus? Rahner says:

The answer can only be the confession that the actual self-communication of the infinite God, transcending all creaturely reality and any finite divine gift, is given in Jesus and in him alone, and is promised, offered and guaranteed to us through him. If this were not the case, then the reality of Jesus could perhaps *one* religion, perhaps the best religion, namely the Jesus-religion. But it could not be the absolute religion solemnly pledged to all humankind, because the reality of Jesus and its message would remain in the realm of the finite and the contingent.^{1[1]}

Rahner is suggesting that the reality of Jesus, because he is the unsurpassable *self*-gift of God, is not confined to particularity and incompleteness: there is no other for whom we might or should wait, no completion of the form of his presence through anyone or anything else. Instead, what God conveys through him determines the meaning and destiny of all finite, contingent things: hence the significance of those often confusing statements in Scripture and the Creed that say that ‘through him (the Son) all things were made’. All created things originate in the divine Word that becomes flesh and so all created things – including religions – find their meaning in relation to this enfleshed Word and in what comes to expression in the human family through him.

Rahner here is following that line adopted by the Council that everything must be understood in relation to God’s unsurpassable self-gift in Christ and, indeed, can only be understood in relation to this supreme moment. While rejecting nothing of what is true and holy in these different religions, and highly esteeming the precepts and doctrines of these religions which reflect a ray of truth enlightening all, the Council proclaims Christ as the one in whom ‘people find the fullness of their religious life’. This generous acknowledgement of the divine action in the diversity of religious traditions also surfaces in Vatican II’s Decree on Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*, which recognises the presence of the ‘seeds of the Word’ in the cultures of the world and points to ‘the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations’ (AG 11). The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, similarly points to the good that is ‘found sown’ not only ‘in minds and hearts’, but also ‘in the rites and customs of peoples’ (LG 17). *Nostra Aetate*, in other words, brings into explicit focus important themes which occur in other conciliar decrees and which are part of Catholic Christianity’s generous acknowledgement of the blessings bestowed by God in the created order.

^{1[1]} K.Rahner, ‘Experiences of a Catholic Theologian’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. D.Marmion & M.E.Hines (Cambridge University Press, 2005) , 301

If the Church's engagement with other religious traditions is not conducted in a *relativist* context, neither is it conducted in an *exclusivist* perspective in which the possibility of contact with God is restricted only to those chosen to know Christ and receive the Gospel. Instead what *Nostra Aetate* sets in motion is the development of an account of the Church's mission in which dialogue with other religions becomes part of Catholic reality. This is new, and forty years later, it is unfinished; indeed, it is hard to see how there could be an end to the process of dialogical engagement which the Church has set for itself. This conversation is, we might say, an attempt to listen to the ongoing dialogue which God sustains with humanity in the light of the uncreated Word that comes among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

The dialogical engagement with other traditions which *Nostra Aetate* prescribed for the Church became in the pontificate of John Paul II a major feature of Catholic life. It is instructive to chart some of the features of the reception of *Nostra Aetate* in the official teachings of the Church during that remarkable pontificate. In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II presented dialogue with other religions as an integral feature of the Church's evangelising mission which does not stand in tension with the Church's obligation to proclaim Christ:

In the light of the economy of salvation, the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue. Instead, she feels the need to link the two in the context of her mission *ad gentes*. These two elements must maintain both their intimate connection and their distinctiveness; therefore they should not be confused, manipulated or regarded as identical, as though they were interchangeable. (55)^{2[2]}

The fullest official exploration of the relation of these two dimensions comes in *Dialogue and Proclamation*, an authoritative document issued in 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples. The foundation of the Church's commitment to dialogue, it says, is primarily theological: 'God, in an age-old dialogue, has offered and continues to offer salvation to humankind. In faithfulness to the divine initiative, the Church too must enter into a dialogue of salvation with all men and women.' (38) *Dialogue and Proclamation* goes on to identify four interdependent forms of dialogue by which this dimension of the Church's life is to be expressed:

- a) The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
- b) The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
- c) The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.
- d) The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute. (42)

This scheme is deliberately comprehensive: it shows how the Decree can be implemented in ways that involve the whole Church, and not just specialists in interfaith dialogue. It covers everything

^{2[2]} *Redemptoris Missio* identifies seven dimensions which constitute the total mission of the Church: Witness, Proclamation, Conversion and Baptismal Adherence to Christ, Formation of Local Churches, Inculturation of the Gospel, Interreligious Dialogue, Promotion of Social Development. If Catholicism is characterised by its commitment to fullness, then this list gives a deeply Catholic account of the fullness inherent in the Church's mission.

from living alongside members of other religions as neighbours, sharing common experiences and aspirations, to acting in concert with them for social betterment; it encourages in addition an academic and theological exploration of religious distinctiveness and, finally, it encourages an exchange based upon the experience of prayer and spirituality in different traditions. It commends a fourfold scheme for the implementation of *Nostra Aetate*: a shared life; a common commitment to social values; theological exchange and spirituality. Were dialogue to be reduced to theological exchange, the 1991 document says, 'dialogue might easily be taken as a sort of luxury item in the Church's mission, a domain reserved for specialists'. On the contrary, it insists, 'all local Churches, and all the members of these Churches, are called to dialogue, though not all in the same way'. (43)

I draw attention to *Dialogue and Proclamation* because it is the fullest authoritative treatment of the delicate issues raised by the Church's commitment to dialogue which *Nostra Aetate* proposed. A major point to bring out in the discussion presented in *Dialogue and Proclamation* is the aim of dialogue. It is directed, it says, towards 'a deeper conversion of all toward God', and thereby has its own validity. It is not a covert way of proclamation, but is to be viewed (and experienced) as a contact with the divine life because through Christ's resurrection, God's Spirit is universally active:

In this dialogue of salvation, Christians and others are called to collaborate with the Spirit of the Risen Lord who is universally present and active. Interreligious dialogue does not merely aim at mutual understanding and friendly relations. It reaches a much deeper level, that of the spirit, where exchange and sharing consists in a mutual witness to one's beliefs and a common exploration of one's respective religious convictions. In dialogue Christians and others are invited to deepen their religious commitment, to respond with increasing sincerity to God's personal call and gracious self-gift which, as our faith tells us, always passes through the mediation of Jesus Christ and the work of his Spirit. (40)

Dialogue and Proclamation relies upon the illuminating scheme put forward by Pope John Paul II by which Catholics could begin to think of how Christ and Christianity related to the diversity of human religions and traditions. The late Holy Father suggested that we think of a threefold mystery of divine self-gift that unfolds as a *mystery of unity, salvation and completion*.^{3[3]} This is expressed in important paragraphs in the document:

First comes the fact that the whole of humankind forms one family, due to the common origin of all men and women, created by God in his own image. Correspondingly, all are called to a common destiny, the fullness of life in God. Moreover, there is but one plan of salvation for humankind, with its centre in Jesus Christ, who in his incarnation "has united himself in a certain manner to every person" (*Redemptor hominis* 13; cf. GS 22.2). Finally, there needs to be mentioned the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the religious life of the members of the other religious traditions. From all this the Pope concludes to a "mystery of unity" which was manifested clearly at Assisi, "in spite of the differences between religious professions."

From this mystery of unity it follows that all men and women who are saved share, though differently, in the same mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ through his Spirit. Christians know this through their faith, while others remain unaware that Jesus Christ is the source of their salvation. The mystery of salvation reaches out to them, in a way known to God,

^{3[3]} I do not have the space to develop a discussion of the 'mystery of completion': it represents the completed form of God's self-giving action, when incompatibilities are resolved, tensions eliminated and God is all in all. In other words, it is eschatological and has to do with resurrection and heaven: it is the point towards which all of God's action in creation and salvation is moving.

through the invisible action of the Spirit of Christ. Concretely, it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their conscience that the members of other religions respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their saviour (cf. AG 3,9,11). (*Dialogue and Proclamation* 27-8)

In the first of these paragraphs, *the mystery of unity* of the human family is established with reference to it having a common origin, a common destiny and a common plan of salvation: we come from God, we're destined to be in God and through Christ we get there. The unity of humanity is also signalled by the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the religions of the world: God's evocative presence, calling humanity to belong in his love, is poured out everywhere. Pope John Paul II had spoken in *Redemptor Hominis* of the phenomenon of strong belief among followers of the non-Christian religions as 'an effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body'.

The second paragraph is important because it deals with how human beings have contact with *the mystery of salvation* which comes to humanity through Christ alone and the Spirit of divine love which he bestows. (The presumption is that there are not multiple ways in which God saves human beings: God's action is unitary and is focused on his saving self-gift in Christ. Consequently, the document states, everyone who is saved (the Pontifical text, like the decrees of the Council never presumes to say who will be saved) shares in *the mystery of salvation* in Jesus Christ, whether they acknowledge this or not. In concrete terms, the document says, God's salvation comes to them through 'the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their conscience'. This takes place 'in a way known to God, through the invisible action of the Spirit of Christ'. This repeats the important teaching given in *Gaudium et Spes* which revises the traditional theological axiom that there is no salvation outside the Church: 'For since Christ died for all, and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the Paschal Mystery'. (22)

Jacques Dupuis points to the discussions which focused on this important paragraph of *Dialogue and Proclamation*: some in the preliminary discussions feared that this conceded too much to other religions as constituting ways of salvation. But the final statement is, he judged, 'a weighty statement, not found before in official documents of the central teaching authority', and whose theological import must not be underestimated:

It means, in effect, that the members of other religions are not saved by Christ in spite of, or beside, their own tradition, but in it and in some mysterious way, 'known to God,' through it. If further elaborated theologically, this statement would be seen to imply some hidden presence – no matter how imperfect – of the mystery of Jesus Christ in these religious traditions in which salvation reaches their adherents.^{4[4]}

This 'hidden presence' of Christ in the religions of the world is something which Christians are surely invited to discover and explore. God is active in the religious traditions of the world, and his action there is unfinished; nor, fundamentally, is God's action in them divergent from what God does in the lives of those who stand in the dynamic of covenants which flow from his action in Israel, beginning with Abraham and culminating in Christ. God does not do different things: this surely is at the heart of what a Catholic theology of dialogue is trying to disclose – a

^{4[4]} J.Dupuis, 'A Theological Commentary: *Dialogue and Proclamation*' in W.R.Burrows (ed.), *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation* (Orbis, 1993), 136

fundamental coherence between Christ and the human aspiration for goodness and completion that surfaces in the world's religions. From *Nostra Aetate* to the teachings of John Paul II, one detects certainly an organic continuity of principle and consistency, at the same time as one detects the presence of new insights as the theology and experience of dialogue bears fruit in the life of the Church. It is hard to imagine what contemporary Catholicism would be like without the vibrancy of its dialogue and engagement with Jews, Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists and others.

By comparison with the developed features of a Catholic theology of dialogue as presented in *Redemptoris Missio* and *Dialogue and Proclamation*, in which the deeper currents offered by dialogue are explored and widened, *Nostra Aetate* is very reticent. Yet all that has taken place in the Church since then springs from this brief, historic statement which acknowledges in general terms all that is of value in non-Christian religions and encourages Catholics 'to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions.' The work is still unfinished.