

**The Attitude of the Church
toward Followers of Other Religions :
Reflections and Orientations
on Dialogue and Mission**

Secretariat for Non-Christians, (May 10, 1984)

INTRODUCTION

1. A New Stage

The Second Vatican Council has marked a new landmark in the relations of the Church with the followers of other religions. Many Conciliar documents made explicit reference to them, and one in particular, the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, is entirely dedicated to "the relations between the Catholic Church and non-Christian religions."

2. A Changing World

The rapid changes in the world and the deepest consideration of the mystery of the Church as "the universal sacrament of salvation" (LG 48) have fostered this attitude toward non-Christian religions. "Thanks to the opening made by the Council, the Church and all Christians have been able to come to a more complete awareness of the mystery of Christ" (RH 11).

3. The Ideal of "Dialogue"

This new attitude has taken the name of dialogue. Dialogue is both the norm and ideal, made known to the Church by Paul VI in the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (August 6, 1964). Since that time, it has been frequently used by the Council as well as in other Church teachings. It means not only discussion, but also includes all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment.

4. The Vatican Secretariat

As an institutional sign of this desire to meet and relate to the followers of other religious traditions of the world, the same Pope Paul

VI instituted, on Pentecost 1964, in the climate of the Second Vatican Council, the Secretariat for Non-Christians as an organism distinct from the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. Its competence was defined in the constitution *Regimini Ecclesiae*: "To search for methods and ways of opening a suitable dialogue with non-Christians. It should strive, therefore, in order that non-Christians come to be known honestly and esteemed justly by Christians, and that in their turn non-Christians can adequately know and esteem Christian doctrine and life" (n. 99).

5. Twenty Years of Experience

Today, twenty years after the publication of *Ecclesiam Suam* and its own foundation, the Secretariat, gathered in plenary assembly, has evaluated the experiences of dialogue which are occurring everywhere in the Church. It has reflected on the Church's attitudes toward other believers, and especially on the relationship which exists between dialogue and mission.

6. A Special Document

The theological vision of this document is inspired by the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent Magisterium. A further in-depth study by theologians remains both desirable and necessary. Drawn from and enriched by experience, this reflection is mainly pastoral in character and encourages behavior formed by the Gospel in its encounters with believers of other faiths with whom Christians live in the city, at work, and in the family.

7. Support Materials for Christian Communities

This document, therefore, is proposed in order to help Christian communities and especially their leaders to live according to the directives of the Council. It offers elements of a solution to the difficulties which can arise from the duties of evangelization and dialogue which are found together in the mission of the Church. Through this document, the members of other religions might also come to understand better how the Church, views them and how it intends to behave toward them.

8. Ecumenical Spirit

Many Christian churches have had similar experiences in their encounters with other believers. Within the ambit of its Unit I on "Faith

and Witness," the World Council of Churches has a sub-unit for "Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies." With this latter body, the Secretariat for Non-Christians has stable and fraternal contacts of consultation and collaboration.

1. MISSION

9. God's Salvific Love

God is love (1 Jn 4:8,16). This saving love of God has been revealed and communicated to mankind in Christ and is present and active throughout the world by means of the Holy Spirit. The Church is the living sign of that love in such a way as to render it the norm of life for all. This mission, Christ's own, is one of love because in him it finds its source, goal, and way of proceeding (cf. AG 2-5,12; EN 26). Each aspect and activity of the Church's mission must therefore be imbued with the spirit of love if it is to be faithful to Christ who commanded the mission and continues to make it possible throughout history.

10. The Church, a Messianic People

The Church, as the Council has stressed, is a messianic people, a visible assembly and spiritual community, and a pilgrim people who go forward together with all of mankind with whom they share the human experience. They ought to be the leaven and "soul" for society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into the family of God (cf. LG 9; GS 9, 40). This messianic people has loved us and has as its goal the kingdom of God, which was already begun by Christ (LG 9). The pilgrim Church is therefore "missionary by its very nature" (AG 2, cf. nn. 6, 35-36). For every Christian, the missionary duty is the normal expression of his lived faith.

11. The Mission of the Church

"The mission of the Church is carried out by means of that activity through which, in obedience to Christ's command and moved by the grace and love of the Holy Spirit, the Church makes itself fully present to all persons and peoples..." (AG 5). The task is one but comes to be exercised in different ways according to the conditions in which mission unfolds. "These circumstances sometimes depend on the Church itself, sometimes on the peoples, groups or individuals to whom the mission is directed.... The appropriate actions or tools must be brought to bear on any given circumstance or situation.... The special end of this missionary activity is evangelization and the foundation of the Church among

peoples or groups in which it has not yet taken root" (AG 6). Other passages of the same Council have stressed that the mission of the Church is also to work for the extension of the kingdom and its values among all men and women (cf. LG 5, 9, 35; GS 39-45, 91, 92; UR 2; DH 14; AA 5).

12. Ways and Aspects of the Mission

The different aspects and manners of mission have been broadly delineated by the Second Vatican Council. The acts and documents of subsequent ecclesiastical teaching, such as the Bishops' Synod on Social Justice (1971) and those dedicated to evangelization (1974) and catechetics (1977), the numerous addresses of Pope Paul VI and John Paul II, and statements of the episcopal conferences of Asia, Africa and Latin America have developed various aspects of conciliar teaching, adding, for example, "as an essential element of the mission of the Church and indissolubly connected to it" (RH 15), the commitment to mankind, to social justice, to liberty and the rights of man, and the reform of unjust social structures.

13. Unified and Complex Reality

Mission is thus presented in the consciousness of the Church as a single but complex and articulated reality. Its principal elements can be mentioned. Mission is already constituted by the simple presence and living witness of the Christian life (cf. EN 21), although it must be recognized that "we bear this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Co 4:7). Thus the difference between the way the Christian appears existentially and that which he declares himself to be is never fully overcome. There is also the concrete commitment to the service of mankind and all forms of activity for social development and for the struggle against poverty and the structures which produce it. Also, there is liturgical life and that of prayer and contemplation, eloquent testimonies to a living and liberating relationship with the active and true God who calls us to his kingdom and to his glory (cf. Acts 2:42). There is, as well, the dialogue in which Christians meet the followers of other religious traditions in order to walk together toward truth and to work together in projects of common concern. Finally, there is announcement and catechesis in which the good news of the Gospel is proclaimed and its consequences for life and culture are analyzed. The totality of Christian mission embraces all these elements.

14. The Task of All

Every local Church is responsible for the totality of mission. Moreover, every Christian, by virtue of his faith and baptism, is called to carry out to some degree the whole mission of the Church. The needs of the situation, the particular position of the people of God, and an individual's personal charism dispose the Christian to direct his efforts principally to one or another aspect of that mission.

15. The Example of Christ

The life of Jesus contains all the elements of mission. In the Gospels, Jesus is shown in silence, in action, in prayer, in dialogue, and in teaching. His message is inseparable from his deeds; he announces God and his reign not only by word but by his deeds and works which complete his preaching. Accepting contradiction, failure, and death, his victory passes through the gift of life. Everything in him is a means and way of revelation and salvation (cf. EN 6-12); everything is the expression of his love (cf. Jn 3:16; 13:1; 1 Jn 4:7-19). Christians ought to act in the same way: "By this will they know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35).

16. The Early Church

Moreover, the New Testament gives a composite, yet differentiated picture of mission. There is a plurality of services and functions which arise from a variety of charisms (cf. 1 Co 12:28-30; Ep 4:11-12; Rm 12:6-8). St. Paul himself noted the particular character of his missionary vocation when he declared that he was not sent by Christ to baptize but to announce the Gospel (1 Co 1:17). For this reason, alongside the "apostles," the "prophets," and the "evangelists," we find those who are called to deeds for the community and for the assistance of those who suffer. There are the tasks of families, of husbands, of wives, and of children. There are the duties of masters and servants. Each person has a task of particular witness in society. The First Letter of Peter, sent to Christians living in situations of diaspora, gives indications which never cease to surprise by their relevance for today. A passage of this letter was cited by Pope John Paul II in 1979, to the Catholic community of Ankara as "the golden rule of contacts between Christians and their fellow citizens of other faiths: 'Revere the Lord Christ in your hearts, and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope which is in you. But give it with courtesy and respect and with a clear conscience'" (1 P 3:15-16).

17. Illustrious Missionaries

Among the many examples which could be drawn from the history of Christian mission, the norms given by St. Francis of Assisi, in the *Regola non bollata* of 1221, are significant. The friars who "through divine inspiration would desire to go among the Muslims...can establish spiritual contacts with them [Muslims] in two ways: a way which does not raise arguments and disputes, but rather they should be subject to every human creature for the love of God and confess themselves to be Christians. The other way is that when they see that it would be pleasing to the Lord, they should announce the word of God."

Our own century has seen the rise and affirmation, especially in the Islamic world, of the experience of Charles de Foucauld, who carried out mission in a humble and silent attitude of union with God, in communion with the poor, and in universal brotherhood.

18. Respect for Liberty

Mission must always revolve about man in authentic respect for his freedom. For this reason, the Second Vatican Council, while having affirmed for the whole Church the necessity and urgency of announcing Christ, "the light of life, with all apostolic faithfulness and fortitude, even, when necessary, to the shedding of one's own blood" (DH 14), confirms the need to promote and respect the true freedom of the other person, rejecting any form of coercion whatsoever, especially in the religious sphere.

"Truth, however, is to be sought in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication, and dialogue. In the course of these, men explain to one another the truth they have discovered or claim to have discovered in order to help one another in their search for truth. Moreover, as truth is discovered, it is by personal assent that men are to adhere to it" (DH 3).

"In spreading religious faith and introducing religious practices, everyone ought at all times to refrain from any manner of action which could seem to carry a hint of coercion or a kind of persuasion that would be dishonorable or unworthy, especially when dealing with poor or uneducated people. Such a manner of action would have to be considered an abuse of one's right and a violation of the rights of others" (DH 4).

19. Respect for Each Person

Respect for every person ought to characterize the missionary

activity of the Church today (cf. ES 77; EN 79-80; RH 12). "Man is the first path which the Church ought to traverse in carrying out its mission" (RH 14). These values, which the Church continues to learn from Christ its teacher, should lead the Christian to love and respect all that is good in the culture and the religious commitment of the other. "It concerns respect for everything which the Spirit, who blows where he wills, has produced in man" (RH 12; cf. EN 79). 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.

2. DIALOGUE

1. Foundation

20. The Reasons of Dialogue

Dialogue does not grow out of the opportunism of the tactics of the moment, but arises from reasons which experience and reflection, and even the difficulties themselves, have deepened.

21. Personal and Social Requirements

The Church opens itself to dialogue toward fidelity to man. In every person and group there is the aspiration and need to be considered responsible subjects and to be able to act as such. This is the case whether one regards the need to receive or, even more, when one is conscious of possessing something which is to be communicated.

As the human sciences have emphasized, in interpersonal dialogue one experiences one's own limitations as well as the possibility of overcoming them. A person discovers that he does not possess the truth in a perfect and total way but can walk together with others toward that goal. Mutual affirmation, reciprocal correction, and fraternal exchange lead the partners in dialogue to an ever greater maturity which in turn generates interpersonal communion. Religious experiences and outlooks can themselves be purified and enriched in this process of encounter.

The dynamic of human encounter should lead us Christians to listen to and strive to understand that which other believers communicate to us in order to profit from the gifts which God bestows so generously. Sociocultural changes in the world, with their inherent tensions and difficulties, as well as the growing interdependence in all sectors of society necessary for living together, for human promotion, and, above all, for pursuing the demands of peace, all render a dialogical style of

human relationships— today ever more urgent.

22. Faith in God the Father

The Church, however, feels itself called to dialogue principally because of its faith. In the Trinitarian mystery, Christian revelation allows us to glimpse in God a life of communion and interchange.

In God, the Father, we contemplate a pervasive love unlimited by space and time. The universe and history are filled with his gifts. Every reality and every event are surrounded by his love. In spite of the sometimes violent manifestations of evil, in the vicissitudes in the life of each individual and every people there is present the power of grace which elevates and redeems.

The Church has the duty of discovering and bringing to light and fullness all the richness which the Father has hidden in creation and history, not only to celebrate the glory of God in its liturgy, but also to promote among all mankind the movement of the gifts of the Father.

23. Christ the Redeemer

In God the Son we are given the Word and Wisdom in whom everything was already contained and subsisting even from the beginning of time. Christ is the Word who enlightens every person because in him is manifested at the same time the mystery of God and the mystery of mankind (cf. RH 8,10,11,13). He is the Redeemer present with grace in every human encounter, to liberate us from our selfishness and to make us love one another as he has loved us. As Pope John Paul II has said:

"Man—every man without any exception whatever—has been redeemed by Christ. And with man—with each man without any exception, whatever—Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it. Christ, who died and was raised up for all, provides man, each and every man, with the light and strength to measure up to his supreme calling" (RH 14).

24. The Action of the Holy Spirit

In God, the Holy Spirit, our faith allows us to perceive the force of life and movement, and continuous regeneration (cf. LG 4) by the Spirit who acts in the depth of people's consciences and accompanies them on the secret path of hearts toward the truth (cf. GS 22). The Spirit also works "outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body" (RH 6; cf. LG

16; GS 22; AG 15). The Spirit both anticipates and accompanies the path of the Church which, nevertheless, feels itself impelled to discern the signs of his presence, to follow him wherever he leads and to serve him as a humble and discreet collaborator.

25. The Realization of the Kingdom

The reign of God is the final end of all persons. The Church, which is to be "its seed and beginning" (LG 5, 9), is called from the first, to start out on this path toward the kingdom and, along with the rest of humanity, to advance toward that goal.

This duty includes the struggle against, and the victory over evil and sin, beginning always with oneself and embracing the mystery of the cross. The Church is thus oriented toward God's reign until its fulfillment in the perfect communion of all mankind as brothers in God.

Christ is the guarantee for the Church and the world that the "last days" have already begun, that the final age of history is already fixed (cf. LG 48) and that, therefore, the Church is equipped and commissioned to work so that there comes about the progressive fulfillment of all things in Christ.

26. The "Seeds of the Word"

This vision induced the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council to affirm that in the religious traditions of non-Christians there exist "elements which are true and good" (OT 16), "precious things, both religious and human" (GS 92); "seeds of contemplation" (AG 18), "elements of truth and grace" (AG 9), "seeds of the Word" (AG 11,15), and "rays of the truth which illumine all mankind" (NA 2). According to explicit conciliar indications, these values are found preserved in the great religious traditions of humanity. Therefore, they merit the attention and the esteem of Christians. Their spiritual patrimony is a genuine invitation to dialogue (cf. NA 2, 3;

AG 11), not only in those things which unite us, but also in our differences.

27. Sincere and Patient Dialogue

The Second Vatican Council has thus been able to draw consequences of concrete obligations, that are expressed in the following terms:

"That they may be able to give this witness to Christ fruitfully, (Christians) ought to be joined to the people of their time by esteem and love, and acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of people among whom they live. Let them share in cultural and social life by various exchanges and enterprises of human living. Thus, they ought to know well the religious and cultural traditions of others, happy to discover and ready to respect seeds of the Word which are hidden in them.... As Christ himself...so also his disciples should know the people among whom they live. They should establish contact with them, to learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth. At the same time, let them try to illuminate these treasures with the light of the Gospel, to set them free, and bring them under the dominion of God their Savior" (AG 11; cf. AG 41; AA 14, 29).

2. Forms of Dialogue

28. Multiplicity of Ways of Dialogue

The experience of recent years gives evidence of the many ways in which dialogue is expressed. The most important and typical forms which are listed below are seen as distinct from one another yet at the same time connected.

29. The Dialogue of Life

Before all else, dialogue is a manner of acting, an attitude; a spirit which guides one's conduct. It implies concern, respect, and hospitality toward the other. It leaves room for the other person's identity, modes of expression, and values. Dialogue is thus the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, as well as of every aspect of it, whether one speaks of simple presence and witness, service, or direct proclamation (CIC 787, n. 1). Any sense of mission not permeated by such a dialogical spirit would go against the demands of true humanity and against the teachings of the Gospel.

30. Dialogue in Daily Life

Every follower of Christ, by reason of his human and Christian vocation, is called to live dialogue in his daily life, whether he finds himself in a majority situation or that of a minority. He ought to bring the spirit of the Gospel into any environment in which he lives and works: familial, social, educational, artistic, economic, or political life. Dialogue thus finds its place in the dynamism of the Church's mission.

31. The Dialogue of Works

A further level of dialogue is that of deeds and collaboration with others for goals of a humanitarian, social, economic, or political nature which are directed toward the liberation and advancement of mankind. This kind of dialogue often occurs today in the context of international organizations, where Christians and followers of other religions confront together the problems of the world.

32. Collaboration

The field of collaboration can be extremely wide. Referring in particular to Muslims, the Second Vatican Council exhorts both parties to "forget the past" and to "defend and promote together social justice, moral values, peace and liberty" (NA 3; cf. AG 11,12,15,21). In the same sense, there are the statements of Pope Paul VI, especially in *Ecclesiam Suam* (nn. 110-112), and of John Paul II in numerous meetings with the heads and representatives of various religions. The great problems with which humanity is struggling call on Christians to work together with other believers by virtue of their respective faiths.

33. The Dialogue of Experts

Of particular interest is dialogue at the level of specialists, whether it be to confront, deepen, and enrich their respective religious heritages or to apply something of their expertise to the problems which must be faced by humanity in the course of its history.

Such a dialogue normally occurs where one's partner already has his own vision of the world and adheres to a religion which inspires him to action. This is more easily accomplished in pluralistic societies where diverse traditions and ideologies coexist and sometimes come in contact.

34. Comprehension

In this type of encounter, the partners come to a mutual understanding and appreciation of each other's spiritual values and cultural categories and promote communion and fellowship among people (cf. NA 1). In this manner Christians can also work together for the evangelical transformation of cultures (cf. EN 18-20, 63).

35. The Dialogue of Religious Experience

At a deeper level, persons rooted in their own religious traditions can share their experiences of prayer, contemplation, faith, and duty, as

well as their expressions and ways of searching for the Absolute. This type of dialogue can be a mutual enrichment and fruitful cooperation for promoting and preserving the highest values and spiritual ideals. It leads naturally to each partner communicating to the other the reasons for his own faith. The sometimes profound differences between the faiths do not prevent this dialogue. Those differences, rather, must be referred back in humility and confidence to God who "is greater than our heart" (1 Jn 3:20). In this way also, the Christian has the opportunity of offering to the other the possibility of experimenting in an existential way with the values of the Gospel.

3. DIALOGUE AND MISSION

36. Relations between Dialogue and Mission

Dialogue and mission have multiple relationships. We dwell here on several aspects which at the present time have greater relevance because of the challenges and problems they pose and the attitude which they demand.

1. Mission and Conversion

37. The Call to Conversion

According to the Second Vatican Council, missionary proclamation has conversion as its goal: "that non-Christians be freely converted to the Lord under the action of the Holy Spirit who opens their hearts so that they may adhere to him" (AG 13; CIC 787, n. 2). In the context of dialogue between believers of various faiths, one cannot avoid reflecting on the spiritual process of conversion.

In biblical language and that of the Christian tradition, conversion is the humble and penitent return of the heart to God in the desire to submit one's life more generously to him. All persons are constantly called to this conversion. In the course of this process, the decision may be made to leave one's previous spiritual or religious situation in order to direct oneself toward another. Thus, for example, from a particular love the heart can open itself to one that is more universal.

Every authentic call from God always carries with it an overcoming of oneself. There is no new life without death, as the dynamic of the Paschal Mystery shows (cf. GS 22). Moreover, "every conversion is the work of grace, in which a person ought to fully find himself again" (RH 12).

38. Respect of Consciences

In this process of conversion, the law of conscience is sovereign, because "no one must be constrained to act against his conscience, nor should he be impeded in acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters" (DH 3).

39. The Vivifying Spirit

In the Christian view, the principal agent of conversion is not man, but the Holy Spirit. "It is he who drives one to announce the Gospel and in the depths of one's conscience makes one welcome and understand the word of salvation" (EN 75). He determines the movement of hearts and gives rise to the act of faith in Jesus the Lord (cf. 1 Co 2:4). The Christian is but a simple instrument and co-worker of God (cf. 1 Co 3:9).

40. The Mutual Desire for Growth

In dialogue also, the Christian normally nourishes in his heart the desire of sharing his experience of Christ with his brother of another religion (cf. Acts 16:29; ES 46). On the other hand, it is natural that another believer would similarly desire to share his faith.

2. Dialogue for the Building of God's Reign

41. Collaboration in God's Plan

God never ceases to reconcile persons to himself by the work of his Spirit. The Church relies on the promise made by Christ that the Spirit will guide it in history toward the fullness of truth (Jn 16:13). For this reason it goes out to meet individuals, peoples, and their cultures, aware that the seeds of goodness and truth are found in every human community, and conscious that God has a loving plan for every nation (Acts 17:26-27). The Church therefore wants to work together with all in order to fulfill this plan and by doing so recognize the value of the infinite and varied wisdom of God and contribute to the evangelization of cultures (cf. ES 18-20).

42. The Promotion of Universal Peace

"We also turn our thoughts to all who acknowledge God and who preserve in their traditions precious elements of religion and humanity. We want open dialogue to compel us all to receive the inspirations of the Spirit faithfully and to measure up to them energetically. The desire for

such dialogue, conducted with appropriate discretion and leading to truth by way of love alone, excludes nobody. We include in this those who respect highminded human values without recognizing who the author of those values is, as well as those who oppose the Church and persecute it in various ways. Since God the Father is the origin and purpose of all mankind, we are all called to be brothers and sisters. Therefore, if we have been summoned to the same destiny, which is both human and divine, we can and should work together without violence and deceit in order to build genuine peace in the world" (GS 92; cf. also, the messages of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II for the World Day of Peace).

43. Dialogue, Wellspring of Hope

Dialogue thus becomes a source of hope and a factor of communion in mutual transformation. The Holy Spirit directs the carrying out of God's design in the history of the individual and of all humanity until the time when God's children who are dispersed by sin will be reunited as one (cf. Jn 11:52).

44. The Patience of God

God alone knows those days, he to whom nothing is impossible, he whose mysterious and silent Spirit opens the paths of dialogue to individuals and peoples in order to overcome racial, social, and religious differences and to bring mutual enrichment. We live in the age of the patience of God for the Church and every Christian community, for no one can oblige God to act more quickly than he has chosen to do.

However, before the new humanity of the 21st century, the Church should radiate a Christianity open to awaiting in patience the maturation of the seeds sown in tears and in trust (cf. Js 5:7-8; Mk 4:26-30).