

CONFERENCE TEN

MISSION AND DIALOGUE

As we stand at the beginning of the third millennium, we find a variegated, changing, kaleidoscopic picture. In this conference I will speak of a twofold response to this situation on the part of the Church: mission and dialogue. The contemporary Church since Vatican Council II is committed to these two processes which are very different. It is of first importance to distinguish them. With regard to the mission of the Church, Jesus said in His priestly prayer reported by St. John, "May they be one just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me" (John 17:21 NJB). I will speak most especially of the Church's mission to Catholics. The Church must in this new millennium address the faithful. If the prayer of Jesus is to be heard, Catholics must change their outlook and attitudes. If the world is to believe in Jesus and His Church, as Jesus Himself declares, the faithful must be one as the Father and the Son are one. This is not the case at present.

Now we know well what the mission of the Church to preach the gospel is. This has been its mission since Jesus said to His apostles and disciples just before he ascended into Heaven, "Go and teach all nations to observe all that I have taught you, and I will be with you until the end of the world." This mission was fulfilled beautifully by St. Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, as we know from his letters and from the Acts of the Apostles. By tradition we know that all the Apostles worked assiduously to spread the faith; and all died witnessing to it. We know that at every age of the Church, its mission was fulfilled. We may think of St. Augustine of Canterbury, apostle of the English, St. Boniface, apostle of the Germans, Sts. Cyril and Methodius, apostles to the Slavs, the apostles to India like de Nobili, to China like Ricci, to Japan like St. Francis Xavier, the Franciscan, Dominican and Jesuit missionaries to the Americas, and the vast expansion of missionary activity and of missionary congregations of religious in the nineteenth century. Since Vatican Council II there has been a slowing, but not cessation of the Church's mission, with the dissemination of the idea that members of each culture and religion have their own way to go to God, a slowing not authorized by Vatican Council II or by the recent Pontiffs.

What is new is the emphasis on dialogue which began with Vatican Council II and Paul VI's first encyclical on this subject which has been promoted by the Church since then. Now dialogue is not a substitute for missionary activity. The Church of the new millennium faces widespread hostility, bias, and ignorance. The purpose of dialogue is not the conversion of dialogical partners. The purpose of dialogue is to overcome ignorance, bias, and prejudice. The Catholic partner must explain the teaching and discipline of the Church. But the object is not to bring his dialogical partner into the Church. Besides explaining the doctrine and practice of the Church, he is to listen to his partner and to sympathetically learn his position. The Catholic needs to understand other religions and secularism, and to overcome his ignorance, bias, and prejudices.

As mentioned, the first encyclical that Paul VI wrote after Vatican Council II was on dialogue. Dialogue is important because non-Catholics should not remain in ignorance

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of the Church and in their bias against it. Nor is it right for Catholics to ignore others, to be biased against them or to be hostile to them. This is not why Jesus Christ came. This is not the charity that He taught. This is not the action of the Holy Spirit, which He gave us. Rather, we must love each other, even our enemies. Do we love others by ignoring them or by being hostile to them? And perhaps without realizing it, we misrepresent and wound them. This has been the history, I will not say of the Church, but of Churchmen with regard to the Jews, as recounted by the diocesan priest of Providence, RI, recently deceased, Father Edward Flannery in his book *The Anguish of the Jews, Twenty-three Centuries of Antisemitism*.

Dialogue leads to the discovery of what religions have in common and in what they differ. Vatican Council II, speaking of the various Christian churches says that they contain rays of the truth and means of sanctification. They are united with us Catholics in having the sacrament of baptism which makes us a new creation. And John Paul II has repeatedly said that baptized or not, we human beings are all children of God. As such we are all brothers and sisters. To participate in dialogue with those of other religions one must understand his/her own religion. Only then can we make our beliefs and practices understandable and clear to others, answer their questions, and overcome their ignorance, prejudices, and biases. A fruit of this process is friendship between those with differing allegiances and cooperation in common enterprises.

The Church is committed to dialogue. The Anglican-Catholic Theological Commission met for decades. We have had a report from this Commission II which agreed on the importance of the primacy of the Pope and noted that his authority could be exercised differently with regard to the Anglican community if it were united to Rome, upholding those Anglican traditions that are legitimate from a Roman viewpoint.

Also in progress is the Jewish-Catholic dialogue. Leading Jewish rabbis have noted that the estrangement of the two faiths has been overcome, and now it is important to address the theological issues separating them. Moslem-Catholic dialogue is also in process, and the Catholic theologians are urging Moslem states to allow the free exercise of religion. Dialogue between Catholic monks and Hindu and Buddhist monks has been promoted by the Vatican's Secretariat of Religious Unity. Monks from different traditions recognize that they have much in common. Buddhist and Hindu monks are visiting Catholic monasteries, and Catholic monks are visiting Hindu and Buddhist monasteries.

How can the Catholic faithful profit by these dialogues? They can do so by reading the reports that give the results of the dialogues. But it seems to me that before all else Catholics need to be re-evangelized. So this brings me again to the mission of the Church to preach the Gospel to Catholics. Catholics need to be taught the spiritual program that is presented to them by Vatican Council II. Catholics need to be fed not only milk, but also stronger food. They need to be led into a real developing relationship with Christ, and if they are they will seek truth in earnest and accept all that the Church teaches. The conscious limitations that we put to our relationship with the Church place limitations on our relationship with Jesus. These limitations must be removed, and that can only be done by instruction in solid doctrine and by a life of prayer to which all are called. All are called to the same holiness whether monks, priests, the married, or single. As we enter more deeply into the mysteries of Christ through the Church's spiritual program, we will move towards each other, towards becoming one.

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Recently I was consulted by a priest about a parishioner who had very severe temptations which he was resisting. I inquired about his spiritual practices and recommended the spiritual program that is proposed by Vatican Council II in its *Constitution on the Church*. The priest objected, "He is a layman. How will a layman get the time in his busy life to spend half an hour a day in mental prayer, go to daily Mass, make a thanksgiving after Mass, and do spiritual reading?" Now this is typical. I asked how much time lay people spend watching television, six or eight hours a week? He replied, "Some spend four hours a day." Yes, the spiritual program takes time. To get to know and love Jesus takes time. But the spiritual program of the Church is for the People of God, whether they are lay or not. All are called to the same holiness. One gets to be a lover of Jesus by spending time with Him, by getting to know Him through meditation on His person, His teaching, and His parables. And the lover spends time with the Beloved.

Priests are busy too, busy working in the Lord's vineyard. They, especially, need to take time to following the spiritual program of the Church. Then they will teach this Catholic spirituality to the faithful. As the faithful pursue a deepening relation with Christ their hunger for truth and solid doctrine will increase. They will become one with each other and one with Jesus and His Father. Jesus declares in His priestly prayer that this unity is necessary if the world is to receive the faith. In the absence of this unity it is not to be wondered that the world does not believe. Moreover, Catholics who take the means to pursue union with Jesus will become more open to dialogue with other religions. They will become capable of participating in this dialogue, and they will begin to shed their ignorance, prejudices, and biases. As they do, the Catholic Church will become more attractive to non-Catholics and to non-Christians.

The Church constantly renews itself. It has in Vatican Council II a program for renewal that Pope Paul VI and John Paul II have assiduously pursued in the spirit of that Council. John Paul II's teaching will be a legacy to guide the Church in its renewal in the new millennium. What is needed is the renewal of the priesthood so that Christ is free to act in and through His priests. Then lay people will be instructed in their mission as the royal priesthood called to form a holy nation. The mission of the laity does not come from the hierarchy but from the sacraments of initiation: baptism and confirmation, but it is to be exercised in harmony with the teaching and discipline of the Church. For this, the instruction of priests is helpful. Both priests and people need an ongoing conversion which is promoted by the spiritual program.

Before discussing this spiritual program, let me situate it in the context of today's world. It is not surprising that the Catholic faithful are affected with the dominant movements in our society. The Enlightenment, emphasizing reason as the only way of arriving at truth, rejected revelation, faith, the Church, priesthood, and the sacraments. Many of the faithful as a result of this influence have a watered down faith. The Romantic Movement stressed affectivity, joy, beauty, and also rejected the sacraments, the Church, and the priesthood. This led in the Sixties to the sexual revolution and hedonism, the unlimited search for pleasure. We see this influence in cohabitation, sexual intercourse without love, adultery, abortion, euthanasia and in general, a rejection of the Cross of Christ, asceticism, discipline, and an easing up of moral standards. Accordingly, it is not surprising that many Catholics reject the moral teaching of the Church, finding that it places restrictions on the freedom they seek in the pursuit of their goals. Feminism and the gay movements claim many adherents who do not wish to accept the teaching

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and moral standards of the Church, preferring the laxity promoted by the world and by Hollywood. The Internet offers easy access to pornography and to casual sexual relationships. Children now stumble upon pornography on the Internet. Many good Catholic women spend a great deal of time watching soap operas which glorify adultery and illicit sexual gratification. Movies and videos do likewise.

Given this situation, it requires a profound conversion brought about by the grace of God to break loose from the bonds that these attitudes and practices produce. A program putting into practice what Christ and the Church teach is not going to be very appealing except to those who have hit bottom, those who have been disillusioned by the tragedy and meaninglessness of modern life, the futility of its practices, and who decide to get off the merry-go-round and turn their lives over to God and His Christ, and seek happiness where it truly can be found – the pearl of great price for which the merchant sold all he had (Matt. 13:45).

What makes this situation worse is that since Vatican Council II, through no fault of the Council, the faith has not been handed on. The catechetical movement has been experimenting with things other than teaching the faith – with feeling and experiencing, but not with the teaching of Christ and of His Church. Youngsters who do attend CCD are just waiting for Confirmation and then they are through with the Church until they marry, if they do marry, and have children to baptize. Many uninstructed Catholics learn about matters of faith from the newspapers. Now the teaching of the Church is not news, but every theologian who disagrees with the Church makes news, and many faithful get their instruction from the news. Finally, the Eucharistic liturgy, the Mass, as it is performed in too many parishes, fails to convey the faith to those who participate in it. It is too often an attempt at entertainment and fails to bring the participants into the mystery of faith which the Eucharist is. Parishioners who have not gone to confession for years receive communion blithely, whether they are committing adultery, or are in second marriages, or are practicing contraception, or attend Sunday Mass only occasionally. Hence many, perhaps most Catholics do not understand that the Sacred Heart of Jesus wishes His love to reign in their hearts.

A baby who is not in the middle of the bed but on the edge is apt to fall off. That is what happens to many of the faithful. They are leaving the Church in droves. And many that remain have left the Church without leaving it. This is not a severe judgment. Father Stanley Marrow, SJ in his *Gospel of John. A Reading* says, “In every age there are those who seek to pick and choose in the revelation, who try to make it fit their predetermined parameters, who want desperately to make it acceptable to ‘the modern world,’ whether the world of the first or twentieth century. This is why the fourth gospel does not hesitate to call all such responses to the revelation by their proper name: refusal to believe” (6:64-65).

Now given this situation, what Catholics need to do is to fall in love with Jesus. Should this be so hard? Is there anyone else who loves us as He does? Is there anyone else as beautiful as He? Is there anyone else upon whom our happiness depends as it does on Him who is our salvation?

Now to fall in love with Jesus requires faith. We have to know the story of Jesus, of His coming into the world, of His teaching and deeds and fellowship in this world, of His passing to the Father, of His coming back in life after death to talk with His disciples and continue His fellowship with them, of His going to the Father and sending into our

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hearts the Holy Spirit and His love. This is the greatest story in the world, the greatest romance, and we are called to the greatest adventure. Is this something that deserves just a half-hour on a Sunday, or should we turn over our entire life and will to Him? The recovering alcoholics of Alcoholics Anonymous do that in their third step, and they are then on their way to wholeness and physical and spiritual health. Can we do less, who eat the flesh and drink the blood of our God?

Granted this is something that is done in faith. Faith means that we do not see, but believe. And to nurture faith to the point of really knowing Jesus and coming to a full love of Him requires use of the means that the Church supplies us – the spiritual program which the *Constitution of the Church* teaches us.

Prayer is life, it is a participation in the divine life, and from it flow hope and confidence in facing all the trials and adversities of this life. We must nurture our faith and our prayer life by solid spiritual reading through which Jesus will speak to us and guide us and teach us. In the Eucharist we unite our lives our activities and sufferings with His putting them on the paten so that they can be offered in union with Christ's sacrifice by the priest who says, "May our sacrifice be acceptable to God the Almighty Father." Then Jesus comes to merge Himself with us in communion.

A youngster on his first communion said to Jesus, "I have waited all my life for this." Jesus answered, "I have waited all your life for this. Now we can both be happy." Jesus wants to make us happy. We have to get rid of sin and the occasions of sin, the persons, places, and things that if we frequent we know that we will fall into sin. And we must be faithful to the duties of our state of life, as good husbands, wives, parents, children, workers, employers, Christian and Catholics, for that is doing God's will. It does not stop there, but it does begin with these duties. As we pursue these means we will be lifted closer and closer to Jesus little by little, with a progress that will be invisible to us until we think back to what we were. And ahead of us is eternal life – a joy without end, without sorrow, with recompense for all the afflictions we have suffered and for all the good we have done. That is the beautiful prospect that our faith holds out to us. The best part of it is that this is all true.

To recapitulate, the spiritual program that leads us to Jesus to Heaven and to wholeness consists in prayer supported by sound spiritual reading, regular participation in Mass, frequent receiving of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and by fidelity to the duties of our state of life, including our duties as Christians; and finally by self-denial, the repentance for sin, the avoidance of the occasions of sin and the rejection of whatever would impair our union with Jesus Christ, including lack of charity towards other people, first of all the household of the faith, but without exception, and with the elimination of prejudices and biases against others and the forgiveness of injuries.

Such a program will lead to the fulfillment of the priestly prayer of Jesus. "May they be one, Father, as we are one, may they be one in us, your love in them and I in them. That they may be where I am and may see the glory that you have given me before the creation of the world."

Before we are equipped to participate in ecumenical dialogue we need to become more deeply rooted in our faith and understand it well enough to give a reason for the faith that is in us, as St. Peter advises. Then in ecumenical dialogue we can come to understand other religions. Three of these are monotheistic, that is, belief in one God who is different from creatures and is the cause of creation. These are: Judaism, Christianity,

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and Islam. Judaism is the parent religion of the three, all of which descend from the patriarch Abraham. Judaism and Christianity descend through Abraham's Isaac, and the Muslims through Abraham's son Ishmael. All three recognize the moral code given in the Ten Commandments. With so much in common, there is a strong basis for dialogue and mutual understanding.

Judaism has a particularistic component. That is, one people has been chosen by God, formed into a nation, and given the land of Palestine in order to transmit the true faith to all nations. The mission to transmit the truth of the one God to all peoples is Judaism's universalistic component. Genesis says that all nations will be blessed in Abraham's descendants.

Christianity believes that by baptism and faith its followers become the children of Abraham in faith, those to whom the faith of the one God is transmitted. Together with the Jews it believes that the promised Messiah will come at the end of the world, but it also believes that this will be His second coming, that He has already come as Jesus Christ who died and was buried and rose again. It believes that Jesus being God could extend the Jewish religion through a fuller revelation and new rites and sacraments which have their roots in the Covenant, including Baptism, Penance, and the Eucharist (the Mass) to all peoples.

Christians themselves are in dialogue. They are united in the belief in Jesus, who is both God and man, in baptism in His name, in the name of His Father the Son and the Holy Spirit. Eastern Orthodoxy, the heir of many of the original apostolic Churches founded by St. Paul in the Near East, and Roman Catholicism, heir to Christian Rome and the West, retain beliefs and structures in common. There is little that separates them. They believe in bishops, priests, and the Eucharist as the Real Presence of Jesus remaining with us. Protestant Churches on the other hand vary in their beliefs, but are united in the belief in Jesus the Savior, the redemption from sin through His sacrifice on Calvary, and of the existence of an afterlife in Heaven for the saved and Hell for the condemned. A principal doctrinal difficulty for all the non-Roman Christian Churches is the existence of a central unity in the Pope with jurisdiction over all the churches.

But besides the doctrinal and traditional differences of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity are the emotional blocks placed by historical antagonisms which are difficult to overcome. Jews rightly remember the centuries of Christian discrimination, contempt, and persecution, the Orthodox remember the sack of Constantinople by the Catholic Crusaders, and the Mohammedans remember the slaughter by these same Crusaders of Muslims in the Near East in their temporarily successful attempt to rescue the Christian Holy Places in Jerusalem and in the land holy to all three of these religions. Dialogue intends to remove these emotional resistances that solidify the prejudices, biases, and ignorance of each other.

We might mention one other inflammatory issue that divides Catholics from many Christians: the pro-life, pro-choice issue, the question of reproductive freedom, the freedom to engage in sexuality with the choice of removing the consequences if conception takes place. Besides this question of taking of the unborn life or the freedom of women to control the consequences of sexual activity, there is the question of racial and national preponderance. The West, having engaged in abortion for many decades is dwindling in population and unable to reproduce itself, while the peoples of Africa, the peoples of Asia, and the Latin Americans are increasing in population. While it is a

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known fact that with economic development population rates decrease, and that therefore the effort should be on helping them to develop and attain the freedom enjoyed by the West, meanwhile their numbers tend to overwhelm. The Catholic Church is accused of wanting to impose its values on others, while the powers of the West, especially the American government, wishes to bring about contraception and abortion in the developing countries, including by tying foreign aid to the acceptance of abortion and contraception. To this end, the foundations of billionaires like Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, the Packard Foundation, etc. are pouring millions and billions into Planned Parenthood and other providers of abortion for these countries.

These issues are difficult to resolve. The need for divine help to resolve them reminds us of the importance of prayer and the spiritual program. Meanwhile there are many social needs which the religions can work together to solve.



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