Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue as a Mission

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Don Giuliano Savina, named nearly one year ago by the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) as Director of its National Office for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue (UNEDI) seems to have been born for this job – which for him is actually more of a calling than a job.

He has in fact so far devoted most of his life to ecumenism and to a rapprochement between the Catholic Church and the world religions, following faithfully in the pathway traced out by Saint John Paul II who was among the first to recognize the importance of this area to peace in the world. He envisioned commitment to this dream by "ordained ministers, religious, lay people, men and women."

Don Savina was called to fulfill this new role, replacing don Cristiano Bettega (himself a distinguished and beloved trail blazer) while still completing his doctoral thesis at the San Bernardino Institute for Ecumenical Studies in Venice and while working on daily programs as parish priest in a neighborhood near Milan's central train station, characterized by a highly mixed ethnic and religious population. "Here the Catholic children learn ecumenism by going to school with Copts, Orthodox Christians, and Protestants while at the same time becoming acquainted with the customs and beliefs of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Jews.

The children take all this very naturally – they have no problems in accepting differences" he remarks. For the past ten years, Don Savina has been taking his parishioners and school children to visit the places where the "others" with whom they have daily contacts, worship: a mosque, a Buddhist Temple, a Monastery, a Coptic Church, an Orthodox Church, and above all a Synagogue He observed a "Day of Ecumenism" with them. He stresses the importance of catechism for children, as "their consciences are formed by the catechism", which is why he tries to integrate his teaching with direct experiences of other religions, and especially of Judaism. He explains that God's Covenant with Jews is a "Covenant with the Jewish People, and being Jewish also means belonging to a People."

When he accepted his new responsibilities, don Savina expressed deep appreciation for the committed and heartfelt work of his predecessor, don Bettega, who in turn evidenced his trust and good wishes to don Savina by presenting him with his UNEDI computer that contains a diary of his activities and notes on his encounters with the men and women committed to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue with whom he has met and created productive relations.

Don Savina often arranges for hospitality during Sabbath dinners in Jewish homes.

The main motive for him is that "Nostra Aetate and all subsequent documents written by the Catholic Church to combat antisemitism and strengthen bonds between the two fraternal religions have remained as mere print on paper in books that gather dust instead of being translated into the daily life of the people".

During his ten years of working on "living dialogue" he repeatedly shocked his parishioners and catechists by exclaiming that "Jesus was not a Christian and in fact he never entered a Church. He was a Jew, and he went to a synagogue." "Therefore", he concluded, "We too will visit a synagogue to experience just how Jesus observed his faith."

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To say that “Jesus was not a Christian” is an obvious truth but is totally ignored by many. As a valuable aid to his educational mission, don Savina produced a series of videos recording the synagogue and home visits. The loveliest reproduce trips such as the one to the Synagogue of Casale Monferrato and participation in Shabbat festivities at the home of Miriam Camerini (who is movie director and also a well known singer of Jewish melodies). She explains to the children that the Sabbath is observed in honor of our Creator, who rested on the seventh day after having created our world in six. The children thus experience the universal significance of observing the Sabbath.

Savina is very much concerned about the lack of preparation of priests who teach catechism because of the importance he attributes to the catechism in the formation of the conscience of believers.

“Many declare themselves to be Christians but have never met a Jewish person, nor have they been taught anything about our common roots. Ignorance is at the basis of fear, and fear turns into prejudice” he says.

“Moreover, this ignorance often extends to a lack of knowledge of their own religions. Many Muslims don’t read the Koran, and many Christians don’t read the Bible. I try to help all people to return to their sources and read their sacred texts” says don Savina.

His Dissertation ad Licentiam is precisely in line with his commitments, entitled, “L’urgenza permanente di una catechesi confessionale ecumenica e interreligiosa” (the permanently urgent need for a confessional, ecumenic and interreligious Catechesis). With a preface by Cardinal Walter Kasper (former President of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity and of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews) and a Postface by Rabbi Daniel Polish, President of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC), it is being translated into English.

Don Savina hopes that his new position in Italy will also have ramifictions and connect him with similar work in other countries. In view of his hopes for building more international connections, in fact, he decided to spend a month in Seattle this summer to heighten his command over the English language.

In conclusion, he says, “We must ask ourselves the all important question, ‘In our homes, what do we say about those with different traditions? How do we speak about them?’ We all need to learn more in order to live our own faith more truly, and also to combat intolerance and not least of all, to create a bulwark against the frightening antisemitism that is growing again in the world.”

* The author is AJC’s Representative in Italy and Liaison to the Holy See. First published in: Vatican Insider, 12/08/2019. Re-published with kind permission.

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