



Meeting with Religious Leaders at St. Mary's University College in Twickenham

30.09.2010 | Pope Benedict XIV.

Distinguished guests, dear friends, I am very pleased to have this opportunity to meet you, the representatives of the various religious communities in Great Britain. I greet both the ministers of religion present and those of you who are active in politics, business and industry. I am grateful to Dr Azzam and to Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks for the greetings which they have expressed on your behalf. As I salute you, let me also wish the Jewish community in Britain and throughout the world a happy and holy celebration of Yom Kippur.

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I would like to begin my remarks by expressing the Catholic Church's appreciation for the important witness that all of you bear as spiritual men and women living at a time when religious convictions are not always understood or appreciated. The presence of committed believers in various fields of social and economic life speaks eloquently of the fact that the spiritual dimension of our lives is fundamental to our identity as human beings, that man, in other words, does not live by bread alone (cf. Deut 8:3). As followers of different religious traditions working together for the good of the community at large, we attach great importance to this "side by side" dimension of our cooperation, which complements the "face to face" aspect of our continuing dialogue.

On the spiritual level, all of us, in our different ways, are personally engaged in a journey that grants an answer to the most important question of all – the question concerning the ultimate meaning of our human existence. The quest for the sacred is the search for the one thing necessary, which alone satisfies the longings of the human heart. In the fifth century, Saint Augustine described that search in these terms: "Lord, you have created us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you" (Confessions, Book I, 1). As we embark on this adventure we come to realize more and more that the initiative lies not with us, but with the Lord: it is not so much we who are seeking him, but rather he who is seeking us, indeed it was he who placed that longing for him deep within our hearts.

Your presence and witness in the world points towards the fundamental importance for human life of this spiritual quest in which we are engaged. Within their own spheres of competence, the human and natural sciences provide us with an invaluable understanding of aspects of our existence and they deepen our grasp of the workings of the physical universe, which can then be harnessed in order to bring great benefit to the human family. Yet these disciplines do not and cannot answer the fundamental question, because they operate on another level altogether. They cannot satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart, they cannot fully explain to us our origin and our destiny, why and for what purpose we exist, nor indeed can they provide us with an exhaustive answer to the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?"

The quest for the sacred does not devalue other fields of human enquiry. On the contrary, it places them in a context which magnifies their importance, as ways of responsibly exercising our

stewardship over creation. In the Bible, we read that, after the work of creation was completed, God blessed our first parents and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). He entrusted us with the task of exploring and harnessing the mysteries of nature in order to serve a higher good. What is that higher good? In the Christian faith, it is expressed as love for God and love for our neighbour. And so we engage with the world wholeheartedly and enthusiastically, but always with a view to serving that higher good, lest we disfigure the beauty of creation by exploiting it for selfish purposes.

So it is that genuine religious belief points us beyond present utility towards the transcendent. It reminds us of the possibility and the imperative of moral conversion, of the duty to live peaceably with our neighbour, of the importance of living a life of integrity. Properly understood, it brings enlightenment, it purifies our hearts and it inspires noble and generous action, to the benefit of the entire human family. It motivates us to cultivate the practice of virtue and to reach out towards one another in love, with the greatest respect for religious traditions different from our own.

Ever since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has placed special emphasis on the importance of dialogue and cooperation with the followers of other religions. In order to be fruitful, this requires reciprocity on the part of all partners in dialogue and the followers of other religions. I am thinking in particular of situations in some parts of the world, where cooperation and dialogue between religions calls for mutual respect, the freedom to practise one's religion and to engage in acts of public worship, and the freedom to follow one's conscience without suffering ostracism or persecution, even after conversion from one religion to another. Once such a respect and openness has been established, peoples of all religions will work together effectively for peace and mutual understanding, and so give a convincing witness before the world. This kind of dialogue needs to take place on a number of different levels, and should not be limited to formal discussions. The dialogue of life involves simply living alongside one another and learning from one another in such a way as to grow in mutual knowledge and respect. The dialogue of action brings us together in concrete forms of collaboration, as we apply our religious insights to the task of promoting integral human development, working for peace, justice and the stewardship of creation. Such a dialogue may include exploring together how to defend human life at every stage and how to ensure the non-exclusion of the religious dimension of individuals and communities in the life of society. Then at the level of formal conversations, there is a need not only for theological exchange, but also sharing our spiritual riches, speaking of our experience of prayer and contemplation, and expressing to one another the joy of our encounter with divine love. In this context I am pleased to note the many positive initiatives undertaken in this country to promote such dialogue at a variety of levels. As the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales noted in their recent document *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger*, the effort to reach out in friendship to followers of other religions is becoming a familiar part of the mission of the local Church (n. 228), a characteristic feature of the religious landscape in this country.

My dear friends, as I conclude my remarks, let me assure you that the Catholic Church follows the path of engagement and dialogue out of a genuine sense of respect for you and your beliefs. Catholics, both in Britain and throughout the world, will continue to work to build bridges of friendship to other religions, to heal past wrongs and to foster trust between individuals and communities. Let me reiterate my thanks for your welcome and my gratitude for this opportunity to offer you my encouragement for your dialogue with your Christian sisters and brothers. Upon all of you I invoke abundant divine blessings! Thank you very much.