



Reflections on the Theological Nature of Dialogue

01.10.2021 | Bertram Meier

Keynote address at the G20 Interfaith Forum, 13 September 2021 in Bologna.

“We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God.”^[1] This sentence brings together the esteem, based on the idea of equal dignity, with which the Church has approached people of other faiths since the Second Vatican Council. The *Nostra aetate* declaration is quite rightly regarded as the Catholic “Magna Carta” of interfaith dialogue. This document, which was adopted in October 1965 by the Council Fathers after intensive deliberations, soon took on such an impact that an only slightly older – more detailed – doctrinal letter might easily be forgotten, namely Pope Paul VI’s inaugural encyclical *Ecclesiam suam*.

The term “dialogue” is largely unused in earlier documents of the Roman magisterium – and interestingly also does not explicitly come up in *Nostra aetate*. Paul VI however elevates it to a key term in *Ecclesiam suam*: “The Church must enter into dialogue with the world [...]. It has [...] a communication to make.”^[2] Dialogue is not conceived here as a pragmatic necessity that is to be grudgingly accepted. In fact, it becomes clear that dialogue forms part of the essence of the Church for genuine theological reasons. This encyclical published in August 1964 can therefore be described without exaggeration as the dialogue encyclical par excellence. There is virtually no way around this text if one wishes to approach the theological nature of dialogue as understood by the Catholic Church.

The starting point for Paul VI is the conviction that “the noble origin of this dialogue [is] in the mind of God Himself” (ES 70). If one understands religion by its nature as a “relationship between God and man”, then the entire history of the Church can be understood as a dynamic of dialogue: “Indeed, the whole history of man’s salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which marvellously begins with God”. Because God loves humankind, He reveals Himself to him, and enters into dialogue with him. God first loved us (cf. 1 *John* 4:10), each and every one of us, without preconditions. This gives rise to the inner need to enter into dialogue with others: “We, therefore, must be the first to ask for a dialogue with men, without waiting to be summoned to it by others.” (ES 72). The certainty that Christians, like all other human beings, are children of the one Father who means us well, enables, prompts and obliges us to engage in dialogue.

But dialogue with whom and for what purpose? Is it a matter of exchanging random pleasantries with more or less random interlocutors, or is there more behind the mandate to engage in dialogue? Starting from the conversation between God and His creatures, Paul VI outlines in *Ecclesiam suam* the image of a Church characterised by a diversity of forms of dialogue. Three concentric circles of dialogue rotate around a common core.

First of all, there is a wide, immense circle which is made up by “the entire human race, the world” (ES 97). This is about a selfless, objective, honest dialogue in which the Church engages with all people in order to serve the cause of peace (cf. ES 110). Ideological positions which elevate “godlessness” to a programmatic level constitute a serious obstacle, but must not cause us to exclude dialogue partners from the very beginning. Higher priority must be given to the goal of working towards true peace among the peoples.

The second circle in the dialogue encompasses “all those men who worship the one supreme God, whom we also worship” (ES 107). Jews and Muslims are particularly emphasised, without failing to mention the “followers of the great Afro-Asiatic religions”. Interfaith dialogue, as outlined by Paul VI in *Ecclesiam suam*, focuses on the faithful of different religions promoting and defending common ideals in the spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood, and social, cultural and governmental concerns. The basis is formed by an attitude of mutual respect and acknowledgement. The third circle then describes ecumenical dialogue with the “separated Christian brothers” (ES 109). It is carried out with respect for the traditions of the other denominations, but also in hopes of one day being able to overcome the separation.

That having been said, dialogue is not only to determine the relationship of the Church with the respective others, but also to shape Her inner life: a dialogue in the “fullness of faith, with charity, and with dynamic holiness”, between the members of a “community founded upon love” (ES 113–114). It becomes clear here that Paul VI thinks of the Church entirely as a dialogical community, which for him does not entail the abolition of different vocations and talents.

These multiple dimensions of dialogue found their way into the texts of the Council – a good year after the publication of the encyclical. The idea is now developed in the opposite direction by the various dialogue circles that are contained in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*^[3]. There is first of all a need to be able to engage in a dialogue within the Church. This requires “mutual esteem, reverence and harmony”, and is followed by ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, and finally by a dialogue with all people worldwide. A strong theological rationale is given here as well: “Since God the Father is the origin and purpose of all men, we are all called to be brothers.”

If we take a somewhat closer look at the dialogue with Jews and Muslims, we find in the texts of the Council an important theological foundation for the special bond with the monotheistic brothers and sisters. Like all human beings, they are children of the one God. But the Council further states that they also worship the same God. God has never dissolved the Covenant which He made with the Jewish people; He does not repent of the gifts He makes (cf. NA 4). And with regard to Muslims, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church emphasises that they are “professing to hold the faith of Abraham” and “along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind^[4]”. The decisive word in the Latin text is: *nobiscum* (“with us”).

Dialogue is not a matter of relativism or syncretism; the Council’s texts by no means seek to hide striking differences. Nor can there be any question of the Church putting Her mission of proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ into second place in favour of superficial harmony, in fact quite the contrary. On the one hand, sincere dialogue must be conducted without ulterior motives and tactical considerations. The decisive factor is respect for others. On the other hand, dialogue and proclamation must also not be seen as a contradiction. As Pope John Paul II – whose name is closely associated with the cause of interfaith encounters because of the Assisi prayers of peace – stated, dialogue – beyond self-interest – “is an activity with its own [...] dignity”. John Paul II pointed out at the same time that other religions are certainly to be considered a “positive challenge” in spiritual terms, since “they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ’s presence and of the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all.^[5]”

The multiple dialogues in which Christians engage show in highly-concrete terms what the Church is: “in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely-knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG 1). Because of the Incarnation dialogue is the very essence of the Church; for Jesus Christ is a dialogue between God and humankind. The dialogical character of the Church, both externally and internally, corresponds to Her mission. A non-dialogical Church would ultimately run the risk of becoming a vain end in Herself.

With the exception of a few isolated voices, the Church long had a hard time acknowledging

religious diversity as anything more than a regrettable fact. But an appreciative view of the faithful of other religions – encompassing defence of their religious freedom – has been a constitutive part of the Church's teaching since Vatican II.

The motif of the “brotherly” connection between all people, which was laid down by Paul VI and in the Council texts, has been taken up and developed further by Pope Francis in recent times. It runs like a red line through his Pontificate. The central concepts are now an “attitude of openness”, “universal fraternity” and “social friendship^[6]”. From the faith-based promise that each and every one of us is a beloved child of God comes the fundamental anthropological assumption that all human beings are fraternally connected to one another. We are all related to one another through our relationship with the Creator, who has entrusted us with caring for the earth, our common home. God's history with human beings, like the history of human beings with one another, is a history of relationships.

The theological orientations that Pope Francis has given for interreligious dialogue are manifold. Let me pick out one thought here which appears to be especially significant in a time marked by crises: The deep bond with people of different religions and world views springs not least from a capacity for empathy and compassion. When Pope Francis visited the island of Lampedusa shortly after taking office, he linked God's question to Cain in the face of fratricide (*Gen 4:9*) with Europe's indifference in the face of the death of people seeking protection: “Where is your brother?” And he adds another question: “Who wept at the death of these brothers and sisters?” In the face of human suffering, those who take seriously the fact of all human beings being children of God must overcome what divides them and seek what they have in common^[7]. It is therefore no coincidence that the interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan forms to some degree the spiritual focal point of the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*: “love does not care if a brother or sister in need comes from one place or another.” (*FT 62*) Or as Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb stated together in Abu Dhabi in 2019: “Faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved.^[8]”

This was also the attitude with which Pope Francis visited Iraq in March of this year. In this country marked by war and violence, he said a prayer recalling the common suffering and responsibility of the “children of Abraham”. He also paid tribute to the commitment of all those courageous Iraqis who, day after day, engage in a dialogue of life: “amid the silence and indifference of the world, [they] have embarked upon journeys of fraternity^[9]”. Those who believe in God are called on to make brotherhood among people a tangible experience. This is a strong, theologically-based motivation to seek dialogue again and again – even and especially under adverse circumstances. Without dialogue, much is lost, but with dialogue we can gain a lot: greater peace and understanding among the religions.

Dr Bertram Meier is Bishop of Augsburg/Bavaria, Germany, and President of the sub-commission for interreligious dialogue of the German Bishops' Conference.

Source: [German Bishop's Conference](#).