

Dialogue and the Monks of Tibhirine

In 2010 the Catholic Church in England and Wales published a very fine teaching document, *Meeting God in Friend & Stranger* which contained guidance and encouragement for all Catholics involved in interreligious dialogue. This document encourages us to "cross the 'gulf of difference', and to be open to the truth and goodness we might find there. ... As far as we can we have to free ourselves of ... premature judgements, 'empty ourselves' so to speak, so that the other's real identity can be disclosed to us and we meet the real person and his or her real beliefs, and not some product of our imagination." (Nos 5 & 7) Breaking down the barriers caused by prejudice has become ever more urgent in our globalised world. With immigration, migration and the arrival of refugees to Europe and elsewhere, Christians are coming into more and more contact with people of other faiths. With increased contact people begin to get to know each other and very often prejudices and fears begin to melt away and, in many cases, friendships develop. This living side by side provides many opportunities for inter-religious dialogue. The influential 1991 Vatican document *Dialogue and Proclamation* highlights four distinct kinds of interreligious encounter. Many of these will overlap but the headings are helpful as they clearly show that dialogue with people of other faiths is open to everyone and not just to those with a theological training.

Firstly, there is the **'dialogue of life'** through which people get to know each other as neighbours, at work or through sport or other everyday encounters. They 'live in an open and neighbourly spirit' and share with each other the joys and sorrows of daily life. Monsignor Michael Fitzgerald, an Englishman who was recently made a cardinal, writes that this form of dialogue is indispensable: "I would add that these relations, founded on respect, sympathy, even friendship – what the Lebanese are wont to call conviviality – are perhaps the most important, and that the other forms of dialogue ought to serve to reinforce them." **Secondly**, there is a **'dialogue of action'** through which people of different faiths cooperate for the common good of society, for example, running a home for the disabled or an organisation to further the rights of women. In this type of encounter, people of goodwill, inspired very often by their own scriptures and religious tradition, will work for justice and peace in order to defend the human dignity of their neighbours, or what in Christian terms we might call "the bringing in of the Kingdom". **Thirdly**, there is the **'dialogue of theological exchange'** where suitably qualified theologians seek to deepen their understanding and appreciation of each other's faith and dispel prejudice and misunderstanding, while at the same time respectfully acknowledging their differences. **Finally**, there is the **'dialogue of religious experience'** where people "share their spiritual riches", their common search for God in their respective prayer and scriptural traditions.

And as the Vatican documents points out, these various forms of dialogue influence each other and overlap. The different levels of interreligious dialogue outlined above make it clear that it is possible for the non-expert to make a contribution, especially at the level of the dialogue of life founded on friendship. To engage in this form of inter-religious dialogue requires "an open and neighbourly spirit", a willingness to recognise that, whatever our religious differences, we all share a common humanity.

Of Gods and Men

All of these four levels of dialogue were lived out in Algeria by the Trappist monks of Tibhirine. The story of the love of the Tibhirine community for its Muslim neighbours in Algeria has lit a fire that refuses to go out. On 26 March 1996, seven monks from the Trappist monastery of Tibhirine, ninety-six kilometres south of Algiers, were kidnapped by Muslim fundamentalists and fifty-six days later on 21 May all of them were beheaded. There were nine monks present in the monastery on the night of the kidnapping but only seven were taken hostage. Fathers Amédée and Jean-Pierre were overlooked. Fr Jean-Pierre at the age of 95 continues to follow the full monastic round, Fr Amedée having died in 2008.

The inspiring witness of the Tibhirine monks came to the attention of the world thanks to the Xavier Beauvois film *Of Gods and Men*, winner of the Grand Prix at the Cannes International Film Festival in 2010. This film captured the imagination of countless people, many having little interest in religion or religious affiliation. Why was this? The film focuses on the dilemma facing the monks: should they risk their lives by remaining at Tibhirine in solidarity with their Muslim neighbours and the endangered Christian community? Or should they leave and seek refuge in a safer location? Why did the story of the monks' witness attract over three million viewers in the first eleven weeks of the film's release in France? One reason, I suggest, is that the witness of the monks shows how Christians and Muslims can live together in peace, and even more than that, it shows how they can become brothers and sisters to each other. In a world where Christian-Muslim relations have become tense, especially in the wake of 9/11, this revelation was a moment of insight and hope for many.

The Gritty Realism of Community Life

In an interview which he gave to *Le Figaro Magazine*, Fr Jean-Pierre warmly endorses the film. He was moved by its sensitive depiction of the life of the monks and of the strain and anguish they had to endure while living under the constant threat of violence. Fr Jean-Pierre talks about the fear which hung like a cloud over the community once the gates were locked in the evening. They all knew, having experienced an armed invasion of the monastery on Christmas Eve 1993, that their lives were hanging by a thread. However, the monastic routine of the office, work and *lectio divina* enabled them to draw closer together and strengthened them in the face of an uncertain and fear-filled future.

After the invasion of the monastery by the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) on Christmas Eve 1993, the first reaction of the monks was to leave Tibhirine. Fear wasn't the motive for this decision but rather a desire to avoid being compromised by the demands of the "brothers of the mountains", as they called the Islamic guerrilla fighters. They didn't wish in any way to support or to be seen to support their acts of violence. It was Mgr Teissier, the Archbishop of Algiers, and a frequent visitor to the monastery, who pointed out the demoralizing impact which their withdrawal would have on the tiny, beleaguered Christian community, counselling them to withdraw gradually. With time the community came to see that their place was with the harassed villagers and the endangered Church community.

The Presence of God in Each Other

One of the main themes of the film is the close relationship which the monks had with the local Muslim villagers. In their daily life together, the monks and villagers came to recognize and love the presence of God in each other. Fr Jean-Pierre remarked in an interview: "In monastic life one takes a vow of stability which involves promising to remain for the whole of one's life in the monastery. This vow took on a new dimension on account of the ties which we had developed with the local population. It was like being married to the people! We would have experienced it as an act of infidelity had we sought refuge whilst leaving our neighbours in disarray."

This remarkable friendship with their Muslim neighbours was built up over almost sixty years of living cheek by jowl. And undoubtedly the key person in developing this climate of mutual trust and brotherly love was Fr Luc. Fr Luc was a lay brother who had qualified as a medical doctor before entering the monastery. In the film we see his sympathetic, no nonsense relationship with his never ending queues of patients. For the villagers Fr Luc was a very talented doctor but even more importantly he was a brother who understood their sufferings and loved them as people. The covenant of love between the monks and the villagers is still being honoured. In the fifteen years, following the departure of the monks, in which the Tibhirine monastery remained unoccupied not a single pane of glass had been broken, not a single item stolen. After all it was the Muslim villagers who had dug the graves of the seven monks and laid them to rest.

A Continuing Dialogue of Friendship & Prayer

In their relationships with their Muslim neighbours and friends the monks had established a deep brotherly relationship of confidence and trust. Fr Jean-Pierre, the last surviving monk of Tibhirine, notes: "The example of the brothers in their relationships with people, with Muslims, shows that one can become real brothers, in communion, together, in depth and not only on the surface. In depth before God. Certain people have lived this. It's not uncommon." The final poignant scene of the film shows a column of monks and their kidnappers climbing a hill in the snow and slowly disappearing from view. Commenting on this scene, Mgr Pascal Wintzer writes in *La Croix*: "A column mixing up indistinguishably the monks and their gaolers; all brothers?"

In our present climate of fear and mistrust vis-à-vis Islam, this film helps us to realize that real friendship and love can flourish between Christians and Muslims. The teaching document of the Catholic Church in England and Wales', *Meeting God in Friend & Stranger*, draws attention to the key role of the Holy Spirit in our relationship with other faiths. It points out that this was a 'remarkable feature' of the teaching of Pope John Paul II. The Bishops state: "It is the Holy Spirit who is the hidden source of all that is true and holy in them [other religions], and so provides the common ground where each can reach out to the other." (No. 98) In the witness of the Tibhirine monks we see a Christian community which is able to recognize God's grace, the Holy Spirit, at work in their Muslim neighbours and friends. Their openness to the good in each other shows how far Christians and Muslims can progress in mutual esteem, admiration and love.

The secret of Tibhirine was, I think, to be found in the quality of the relationships that the monks had established with their Muslim neighbours. These relationships, however, were founded on a life of prayer. As Fr Jean-Pierre, one of the two survivors, stated: "Fidelity to the rendezvous of prayer is the secret of our friendship with the Muslims." As Trappists they pray seven times a day starting with Vigils at 4 a.m. and ending with Compline at 8.30 p.m. Muslims who pray publicly five times a day easily understand the value of a life centred on prayer. This was the very reason that prompted the late Mgr Hubert Michon, Archbishop of Rabat, to invite the monks of Tibhirine in the 1980s to set up a dependent house in his archdiocese. "A real spiritual dialogue," he wrote, could only develop with Muslims if they could see that the Christian community "contained people of faith and prayer."

Mgr Claude Rault, retired bishop of Laghouat-Ghardaïa in the Algerian Sahara, tells us that our efforts to understand people of different faith traditions will be regarded with scepticism, even within the Christian community, and we will be accused of naivety. However, we have no choice in the matter if we wish to remain faithful to the Gospel. The Bishop writes: "It's a matter of the very heart of our Christian vocation; it's a matter also of the condition in which we will leave the earth for future generations. We have a common future: it is in keeping with the meaning of peace, of mutual respect, of our belonging to the same one God, of our common concern for the human person: these are the pillars which we can help to build for to-morrow's world."

As we seek to explore and reflect upon what we can learn from the North African Church about dialogue and loving our Muslim neighbour and people of other faiths, the words of the great Cardinal Duval, Archbishop of Algiers (1954-88) - a person who tirelessly promoted dialogue with Islam - come to mind. He wrote: "There is no dialogue except among equals. If I think myself superior to my interlocutor, I have only to remain silent. Who can say that before God, the non-Christian to whom I'm speaking isn't superior to me in the homage which he offers to the Creator and in his practice of fraternal love?"

Possible Questions for small Group Discussion

1. How easy/difficult do you find it to "cross the gulf of difference"?
2. Of the four forms of dialogue - i) being a good neighbour, ii) working together for the common good iii) theological exchange iv) sharing one's search for God - which one appeals to you most?
3. What can we learn from the monks of Tibhirine about relating to people of other faith traditions?

Friends Before God

Christians and Other Faiths

A quotation from *The Second Coming*, a poem by W B Yeats, “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity”, comes to mind when I think about the current religious strife in our world, the most tragic and extreme being the recent bombings in Christchurch and in Sri Lanka. The Tablet reported recently, (20 April, 2019, p. 4), that Christians “are the most widely targeted body of believers in 144 countries - up from 128 in 2015”. A sense of hopelessness can easily prevail. However, the recent statement on Human Fraternity, issued jointly by Pope Francis & The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, in Abu Dhabi on February 4th, 2019 gives us some reasons for hope. And the Vatican II Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, on 28 October, 1965 is still a great source of inspiration; it encourages all Christians to recognise God’s presence and saving action among believers of other religions, thereby opening the doors to a rich collaboration with them for the common good.

In *Nostra Aetate* no. 2 we are told that “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy” in other religions as they “often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women.” The Council discerns “seeds of the Word” in them (AG no. 11) which the Church “uncovers with gladness and respect” and declares herself willing to learn from “the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations,” (Ibid., no. 11).

The theology of the *semina verbi*, ‘seeds of the Word’, according to The International Theological Commission’s Report, goes back to the teaching of Saint Justin Martyr. When confronted by the many gods of the Greek world, St Justin found common ground between Christianity and Greek philosophy in their pursuit of truth through the light of reason. And as Jesus Christ, the Logos, is the source of all reason, “the whole human race has participated in this Logos.” Although the participation by non-Christians in the Logos has been partial, nevertheless, “the partial and seminal presence of the Logos is a gift and a divine grace. The Logos is the power of these ‘seeds of the truth’.”

Perhaps the boldest and most fruitful statement contained in the Council Documents comes from *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22. It states that the benefits of the paschal mystery, which restore humankind to the likeness of God and bestow the new life of the resurrection, are accessible to all people of goodwill: “All this holds true not only for Christians but also for all people of goodwill in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for everyone, and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.” In this statement the riches of the Church, of Christ’s salvific death and resurrection, are declared to be already available to all people of goodwill regardless of their religious beliefs. “For, by his incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each individual”. In other words, the saving work of Jesus Christ is potentially active in the life of every human being through the presence of his Holy Spirit, producing the fruits of truth and holiness.

A Radical, Fundamental and Decisive Unity

While writing, *Dialogue of the Heart: Christian-Muslim Stories of Encounter*, I was particularly struck by the openness of John Paul II to dialogue with other religions, and by his fidelity to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. The Pope's commitment to inter-religious dialogue didn't appear to be equally shared by all members of the Curia. The gathering at Assisi in 1986, when numerous religious traditions assembled to pray for peace, led to some disquiet. Some were worried in case this event could be interpreted as an acceptance of syncretism, and the corollary that all religions can be seen as leading to God and are therefore equally valid as a means of salvation. John Paul II, in his address to the Roman Curia on 22 December, 1986 vigorously countered these fears.

It's worth recalling some of the key points which he dwelt on in this bold Address to the Curia as they sum up and reinforce the teaching of the Council. The Pope pointed out that *Lumen Gentium* (no. 1) saw the Church as a sacrament, i.e. a sign and instrument of the unity of the human family with God and with each other. The radical unity of the human race goes back to creation when the whole human race was created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen 1:26 ff.; 2:7, 18-24). As a result, the whole human race shares a common origin and a common destiny. "Accordingly, there is only one divine plan for every human being who comes into this world (cf. Jn 1:9), one single origin and goal, whatever may be the colour of their skin, the historical and geographical framework within which they happen to live and act, or the culture in which they grow up and expresses themselves. The differences are a less important element, when confronted with the unity which is radical, fundamental and decisive."

In the fourth section the Pope goes on to spell out God's saving plan for all people through the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This summarises current Catholic teaching and deserves to be quoted in full:

"The divine plan, unique and definitive, has its centre in Jesus Christ, God and man, 'in whom men find the fullness of their religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself' (*Nostra Aetate*, 2). Just as there is no man or woman who does not bear the sign of his or her divine origin, so there is no one who can remain outside or on the margins of the work of Jesus Christ who 'died for all' and is therefore 'the Saviour of the world' (cf. Jn 4:42). 'We must therefore hold that the Holy Spirit gives to all men the possibility of coming into contact with the paschal mystery, in the way that God alone knows' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

As we read in the first Letter to Timothy, God 'wills that all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is only one God, and one mediator between God and men' (1 Tim 2:4-6).

This radiant mystery of the created unity of the human race, and of the unity of the salvific work of Christ, which brings with it the birth of the Church as its minister and instrument, was manifested clearly at Assisi, in spite of the differences between the religious professions, which were not at all concealed or watered down."

The Holy Spirit at Work in the Heart of Every Person

In a very insightful book called *Le Prêtre Et L'Imam* (The Priest and the Imam) published in 2013, Christophe Rocou, the then adviser to the French bishops on relations with Islam, and Tareq Oubrou, the Grand Imam of Bordeaux, discuss their faiths' respective positions on various burning issue and seek to "deepen the understanding of the mystery of God". Referring to the development of Catholic teaching in the Documents of the Second Vatican Council, Fr Christophe remarks: "The main change brought about by Vatican II has, to my mind, to do with the understanding of truth. Before the Council, the Church still lived with the idea that Truth, with a capital T, cannot be divided. If the Church holds the Truth, the others are in error. Published in 1965, the declaration *Nostra Aetate* on the non-Christian religious traditions, will completely change the situation. ... We have left behind the all or nothing approach to think in terms of openness." In other words the Church has come to recognise that it is essential for Catholics to be open to learning from people of other religion as "seeds of the Word", or fragments of the truth, can be found outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church.

A fairly recent Vatican document, *Dialogue in Charity and Truth Pastoral, Orientations for Interreligious Dialogue*, published on May 19, 2014, although very cautious about dialogue with other religions and wishing to put the brakes on, nevertheless states very clearly that the Holy Spirit is active in them and in all of human history. "It is the Holy Spirit himself, at work in the heart of every person, who guides the Church to recognize his presence and action in the world even beyond her visible boundaries. Although the Spirit 'manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members', his presence and activity are universal, limited by neither space nor time and they affect not only individuals but also societies, peoples, cultures and religions as well as history itself."

It is this teaching about the Holy Spirit's presence outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church which gives Christians real hope about future relationships with other religions.

Learning From Other Religions

The understanding that the Holy Spirit is at work in the heart of every human being has opened up new possibilities for fruitful relationships between the Catholic Church and other religions. The recognition of the presence of the Holy Spirit in all of life creates a space in which people can grow closer to each other, discovering new insights, and breaking down barriers. As Pope John Paul II, declared at a General Audience, "It must first be kept in mind that every quest of the human spirit for truth and goodness, and in the last analysis for God, is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The various religions arose precisely from this primordial human openness to God," (Wednesday, 9 September, 1998).

On the other hand, focussing on the rather abstract idea of 'Truth' could, perhaps, have a constraining rather than a liberating effect; at its worst it could merely encourage speculative thinking divorced from everyday life and the lived experience of people. After all, for Christians truth is found primarily in *the historical person of Jesus Christ* and in our encounter with him. As a key statement from the Second Vatican council text *Dei Verbum* succinctly states: "The most intimate truth which this

revelation gives us about God and the salvation of man shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation.”

A good example of what I’m trying to say about the practical impact of the Holy Spirit at work in inter-religious relationships is given by Fr Christophe Roucou. He was visiting a young Egyptian friend in hospital who suddenly said to him: “You know, Christophe, the fact that you’re Christian and French and I’m Muslim and Egyptian isn’t important. What’s important is that we’re friends before God.” This was the breakthrough moment for Christophe who realised that the Holy Spirit was also living and active in people of religions other than his own. Moments such as these have the power to open us up to the truth, beauty and goodness of God present in the lives of people from other religious traditions.

Sharing Common Experiences

Getting to know each other is very important for genuine dialogue and healthy community relationships. For example, one of the key difficulties involved in dialogue with Islam is the deceptive similarities which it has with Christianity. As Fr Pietro Rossano put it: “Basic terms and concepts, such as faith, revelation, prophets, law, sacred books, freedom, human rights, ethics, and salvation, have different meanings and resonance in Christian and Muslim contexts. Hence there is a constant risk of misunderstanding and of reaching a point of incommunicability.” Mgr Pierre Claverie, the martyred bishop of Oran, suggested that the best way to overcome such misunderstanding was to be found in the shared dialogue of everyday life. In living side by side and sharing common experiences, glimmers of a deeper mutual understanding are possible. This living together is not “only in words and books, but in words lived out together, fitting words, a shared experience and not only concepts ... To learn the weight of words and stammer those of faith.” And, of course, being a good neighbour and working together for the common good are activities within the reach of all of us, regardless of our theological expertise.

It is this shared experience of a common life in society and a commitment to the common good which helps to dismantle the barriers of prejudice and fear. We all carry our share of prejudice and fear which we have consciously or unconsciously inherited from our own families, schools and society in general. To work for peace and mutual understanding requires a certain amount of courage and perseverance and the willingness to hold out our hand in friendship to the stranger. What a difference it would make if every parish priest reached out his hand in friendship to the local imam and vice versa. What a lead this would give to their respective communities.

The Second Vatican Council has encouraged Catholics to trust in the power of God’s Holy Spirit at work in the hearts of all people of goodwill, regardless of their religious labels. This work of the Spirit is dynamic and unpredictable, “The wind blows where it chooses (Jn 3:8)”; and the results of this vivifying presence of the Spirit can be wonderfully surprising. The message of *Nostra Aetate* and of the other Council Documents encourages us to recognise the fruits of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people of other religions. As Pope John Paul II passionately declared: “The differences [between human beings] are a less important element, when confronted with the unity which is radical, fundamental and decisive.” And this fundamental unity is a work of the Spirit. Our attitude and approach to people of other faiths can be summed up the

concluding words of the joint declaration on Human Fraternity by Pope Francis & The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb at Abu Dhabi on February 4th, 2019:
“In the name of God and of everything stated thus far ... [we] declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.”

Martin McGee osb, September 2019