

## **JOHN PAUL II on Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions**

1. In Nostra aetate, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, the Second Vatican Council teaches that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men” (Nostra aetate, n. 2). Taking up the Council’s teaching from the first Encyclical Letter of my Pontificate, I have wished to recall the ancient doctrine formulated by the Fathers of the Church, which says that we must recognize “the seeds of the Word” present and active in the various religions (Ad gentes, n. 11; Lumen gentium, n. 17). This doctrine leads us to affirm that, though the routes taken may be different, “there is but a single goal to which is directed the deepest aspiration of the human spirit as expressed in its quest for God and also in its quest, through its tending towards God, for the full dimension of its humanity, or in other words, for the full meaning of human life” (Redemptor hominis, n. 11).

The “seeds of truth” present and active in the various religious traditions are a reflection of the unique Word of God, who “enlightens every man coming into world” (cf. Jn 1:9) and who became flesh in Christ Jesus (cf. Jn 1:14). They are together an “effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body” and which “blows where it wills” (Jn3:8; cf. Redemptor hominis, nn. 6, 12). Keeping this doctrine in mind, the celebration of the Jubilee of the Year 2000 “will provide a great opportunity, especially in view of the events of recent decades, for interreligious dialogue” (Tertio millennio adveniente, n. 53). Even now, during this pneumatological year, it is fitting to pause and consider in what sense and in what ways the Holy Spirit is present in humanity’s religious quest and in the various experiences and traditions that express it.

2. 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. At their origins we often find founders who, with the help of God’s Spirit, achieved a deeper religious experience. Handed on to others, this experience took form in the doctrines, rites and precepts of the various religions.

In every authentic religious experience, the most characteristic expression is prayer. Because of the human spirit’s constitutive openness to God’s action of urging it to self-transcendence, we can hold that “every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person” (Address to the Members of the Roman Curia, 22 Dec. 1986, n. 11; L’Osservatore Romano English edition, 5 Jan. 1987, p. 7).

We experienced an eloquent manifestation of this truth at the World Day of Prayer for Peace on 27 October 1986 in Assisi, and on other similar occasions of great spiritual intensity.

3. The Holy Spirit is not only present in other religions through authentic expressions of prayer. "The Spirit's presence and activity", as I wrote in the Encyclical Letter Redemptoris missio, "affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions" (n. 28).

Normally, "it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their own conscience that the members of other religions respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their Saviour (cf. Ad gentes, nn. 3, 9, 11)" (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue - Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Instruction Dialogue and Proclamation, 19 May 1991, n. 29; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 1 July 1991, p. III).

Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, "since Christ died for all, and since all men 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 coming into contact, in a way known to God, with the paschal mystery" (Gaudium et spes, n. 22).

This possibility is achieved through sincere, inward adherence to the Truth, generous self-giving to one's neighbour and the search for the Absolute inspired by the Spirit of God. A ray of the divine Wisdom is also shown through the fulfilment of the precepts and practices that conform to the moral law and to authentic religious sense. Precisely by virtue of the Spirit's presence and action, the good elements found in the various religions mysteriously prepare hearts to receive the full revelation of God in Christ.

4. For the reasons mentioned here, the attitude of the Church and of individual Christians towards other religions is marked by sincere respect, profound sympathy and, when possible and appropriate, cordial collaboration. This does not mean forgetting that Jesus Christ is the one Mediator and Saviour of the human race. Nor does it mean lessening our missionary efforts, to which we are bound in obedience to the risen Lord's command: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19). The attitude of respect and dialogue is instead the proper recognition of the "seeds of the Word" and the "groanings of the Spirit". In this sense, far from opposing the proclamation of the Gospel, our attitude prepares it, as we await the times appointed by the Lord's mercy. "By dialogue we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God" (Address to Members of Other Religions, Madras, 5 Feb. 1986, n. 4; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 10 Feb. 1986, p. 14). May the Spirit of truth and love, in view of the third millennium now close at hand, guide us on the paths of the proclamation of Jesus Christ and of the dialogue of peace and brotherhood with the followers of all religions!