

ROLE OF THE FAMILY AMIDST DIVERSE BELIEFS AND CULTURAL DIALOGUE

We are living in a globalizing world. The media, both of communications and of travel, are making the world a global village. Commercial interests are promoting the globalization of a consumer culture. Commerce is being supported by political and military power. Globalization is not promoting a democratic order, but the attempted global domination of a particular cultural and political power. Such an attempt at domination inevitably provokes resistance. So globalization is also leading to fragmentation. There is the increasing gap between the few richer and the many poorer countries. There is also a growing differentiation of the haves and have-nots within each country. The people deprived of economic power are searching for identity and self-affirmation in their cultures and religions. Sometimes they are ready to defend it with violence. Cultural and religious pluralism in the world is a fact. But it is becoming a conflictual experience because of globalization. In the era of colonialism, the domination of one part of the world by another was endured in a spirit of resignation. But today the subalterns are asserting themselves. Some religious groups have become fundamentalist and communalist. This conflictual experience is true not only globally, but also locally in countries and cities. Even in villages, castes and religions may oppose each other. The USA may be considered a global actor for globalization. But within itself it has become a salad bowl rather than a melting pot, as it pretended to be. So one talks today about multi-culturalism, the dialogue of faiths and ideologies and overlapping consensus. Thanks to internal and external migrations, cultural and religious pluralism has become a living experience in most parts of the world. The experience is not always smooth and free of conflict. The question before us today is: What is the role of a Catholic family in such a pluralistic situation?

Our Mission

In reflecting on this question we have to keep two factors in mind. The first is just the fact of living peacefully and in harmony and perhaps creatively in a pluralistic world. This would be required of any family, Catholic or belonging to another religion. The second is the realization that the Catholic family feels called to live in mission, on which it has been sent by God. I shall keep both these factors in mind while reflecting on the question. But the second factor may need an explanation before we proceed. The Second Vatican Council, in its decree on mission, underlined the fact that the whole church – that is, all of us, all the baptized – are missionaries. God is on mission, wanting to share God's life, out of the abundance of God's love, with all humans. God sends the Word and the Spirit to further this mission. The Word becomes flesh in Jesus and chooses us and sends us to continue his mission in the world. The goal of this mission is to gather all things in the Kingdom of God, so that God will be "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28) The church is called to be the symbol and the servant of this Kingdom. Our mission therefore is to promote the values of the Kingdom in the world and to build up the church as its witness, welcoming people who wish to become disciples and collaborators of Jesus, attracted by our own witnessing to God's love and Jesus' mission. Here we have a first answer to our question: the role of a Catholic family, as of all Christians, is to witness to and promote Jesus' realization of God's kingdom and to welcome people who wish to become disciples of Jesus in view of this mission.

What does promoting God's Kingdom mean? The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences spelt it out many years ago as the dialogue of the Word of God with the realities of Asia, namely the many poor, the rich cultures and the living religions. The focus is the dialogue with the poor, seeking to establish a community of freedom, fellowship and justice. We can do this in Asia only through dialogue and collaboration with all people of good will, which involves a transforming dialogue with cultures and religions. This is our challenge. Why is this a challenge?

In the past, the church, not only proclaimed the Good News of Jesus, but also imposed its own culture on every one, seeing all other cultures as inadequate and even evil. In India, for instance, the other religions were seen as untrue or only partially true. They had, therefore, to be conquered and suppressed. Indians who became Christians had also to become Portuguese culturally. Today the church accepts that all cultures have their own merits and shortcomings. The gospel is not tied to one culture, but has to become incarnate in every culture and transform it from within. Similarly the church, which used to look on all other religions as ignorant if not devilish, accepts today that the Spirit of God is present and active in all cultures and religions, though they may also be characterized by human imperfection and sin. So we have to dialogue and collaborate with them in the promotion of the justice and equality of the Kingdom, discerning the action and call of the Spirit. The real enemies of this Kingdom are Satan, as the personal principle of evil, and Mammon, the power of money. Against these common enemies, the other religions would be our allies rather than enemies.

Our Starting Point

Our starting point, then, is that, in the divine plan, what unites us is more fundamental and divine than what differentiates us, as John Paul II used to say. That was reason why he invited leaders of all religions to come together at Assisi to pray for world peace in October 1986. He said that every authentic prayer is from the Spirit. At a meeting of leaders of different religions in Chennai in February 1986, John Paul II said:

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... As followers of different religions we should join together in promoting and defending common ideals in the spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood, education, culture, social welfare and civic order.

Such a common orientation cannot make us forget that we are culturally and religiously different. Even at a purely secular level, people who have explored the problems of multi-cultural living have suggested that people need to recognize, respect and accept the others. But, accepting the differences, we also want to live as a community. This involves dialogue and collaboration. So the primary duty of a Catholic family in a multi-cultural and multi-religious community is dialogue and collaboration at the secular, cultural and religious levels. At the secular level this may involve collaboration in common economic and political action. At the cultural and religious level this would mean dialogue leading to a consensus around a common action plan to defend and promote common human and spiritual values, even if the inspiration and justification for it come from different religious beliefs and convictions or even ideologies. There can also mutual learning. What would this mean in

practice? I shall be speaking of the Christian community, taking for granted that what I say about the community will apply to the families, since the families make up the community. Besides, specially conscientized families can also provide leadership to the community.

Dialogue with Culture and Cultures

Culture is the way people live and make sense of the natural and human world around them. They express and transmit this in symbols and rituals. But culture is a complex reality. India, for instance, is a mosaic of cultures. A variety of cultural encounters all through its history has shaped it. Still we can discern a certain stable cultural identity in a group in a given region. A catholic couple living in a particular place has a twofold challenge. Thanks to missionary policies, many Christian groups in Asia are culturally alienated. In India, for instance, the Christians are considered culturally foreign, not without any reason. Even when the people live like others in their social life, their religious life is marked by symbols and rituals that are legacies of a missionary past. The church itself speaks of the need for inculturation. Not only the Word of God, but the Christian community in a particular place has to become incarnate in the local culture and become part of the wider cultural community. It is only in this way that it can hope to transform that culture from within. This is the incarnational way of Jesus. Of course, it is always possible to live in a ghetto. But it is not the ideal way to be on mission to promote the Kingdom.

The second challenge is inter-cultural. Inter-cultural encounter, though it is more frequent and intense in a globalizing world, it not new in history. Through military conquests, commercial contacts and migrations it has been happening. The Christians, as part of an international organization, have the possibility of living such an inter-cultural encounter creatively and being models and facilitators for others in the community. The people who are not able to do this tend to migrate elsewhere. But as long as we are living in a particular cultural situation we have to respond to it creatively.

Dialogue as Conflict-resolution

At the level of inter-religious encounter the Church documents speak of four kinds of dialogue: the dialogues of life, of common action, of intellectual and spiritual exchange. But today, given the atmosphere of inter-religious violence and fundamentalist and communalist movements, conflict resolution may have to precede this four-fold dialogue. Fundamentalism is the clinging to what one considers the fundamentals of one's religion, which seem to be threatened by other religions or ideologies in the area. Communalism is the use of religion as a political force. The Christian community need not be fundamentalist or communalist. But it cannot prevent other people from attacking it for whatever reason. On the one hand, we have to stand for truth and justice. On the other, we should be guided, not by a spirit of revenge, but of reconciliation. We should not indulge in violent reactions. We should rather be ready to forgive, provided there is an acknowledgement of guilt. We should always focus on peace. In some situations in India, the Christians may be able to be peacemakers between different communities – for instance, Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs – in tension. Being a small, non threatening minority and given the many educational and other developmental institutions catering to different sections of the population in which it is involved, its peacemaking efforts may be welcome and

fruitful. The only place in recent history where an active movement for reconciliation has been successful is South Africa with its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, presided over by Bishop Desmond Tutu. It has been widely suggested that the Christian spirit that animated Bishop Tutu played a big role in the process. Bishop Tutu himself has clarified that they were pursuing, not retributive, but restorative justice, seeking, not revenge, but reconciliation and restoration of community.

Secular Dialogue

The possibility and effectiveness of interreligious dialogue depends on the situation. Occasionally, we have official encounters between the leaders of different religions in the public space. Such summit encounters do have a symbolic value. But they have to be supported by life and work at the ground level. In some secular societies like France, for example, religion is considered a private affair that should not be given any public space. In such a situation inter-religious dialogue may not have much social impact even though it remains possible. Such a negative attitude does not exist in Asian countries, except those with communist regimes like China and North Korea.

In some places we have the Basic Christian Communities. Without abandoning them and benefiting by the human and spiritual nourishment they offer, we can build around them Basic Human Communities, which include also members of other religions. They could start with a common focus on civic problems and slowly move towards social issues like drug addiction, exploitation of children and women, help for the poor and the marginalized, etc. Ashutosh Varshney, who has studied interreligious conflict in six Indian cities has shown how the initiative of a police officer to bring together the community leaders for regular meetings on common issues in Bhiwandi, near Mumbai, has protected the locality from communal riots. Christian families can think of themselves as participating or even organizing such groups. This would be an example of dialogue at a secular level where religion does not figure directly.

The Fourfold Interreligious Dialogue

If we are living in an area that is not exclusively Christian then there will be families belonging to other religions who are our neighbours. It depends on us whether we limit our relations only to the Christian families in the area or also seek to become friendly with other neighbours. Friendliness would mean an occasional visit or some help offered or at least a greeting and smile when we meet them on the way. Our children may be studying in the same school or belong to the same sports club or learning music from the same teacher or just playing together in the street. Such friendly contact becomes interreligious dialogue of life when we show some interest in their religious ceremonies and festivals or share sweets during Christmas and Diwali. We may even help them in their celebrations. We learn to respect and perhaps appreciate each other's religious belief. We have examples of Muslims offering fresh water to Hindu pilgrims or giving technical assistance for their festivals. We are not afraid of witnessing to our own beliefs, but not in an offensive manner. The Indian Constitution adopts such an approach officially by recognizing minority rights of religions other than Hinduism.

Interreligious dialogue can become more active when we join together to defend the rights and liberties of the members of the community irrespective of their religious affiliation. We can also

collaborate in common civic projects for the welfare of every one. This is an affirmation of basic humanity and common citizenship that transcends religious identities, without denying them. We can make our common voice heard when there is some religious persecution somewhere. We may not be experts in Christian theology, much less in the theologies of other religions. There is a dialogue group in Bangalore bringing together members of many religions which has been meeting regularly every month for over thirty years. Recently they had a series of lectures on mystics of various religions. They also have the habit of visiting the sacred places of the different religions once a year. We need not engage in interreligious discussions. But we can get to know each other's tradition more deeply. Doubts and prejudices can be cleared. In such an atmosphere of acceptance mutual challenge of particular beliefs or traditions is also possible.

An example of the dialogue of spiritual experience would be common praying. I have had the experience of successful common prayer meetings on occasions of common tragedies like a Tsunami, an earthquake, a flood, a devastating fire. People easily feel a sense of community before God. Common prayers to God without reference to any particular religious symbols are possible. Respectful attention when a religious group offers its prayer is also possible. We hear of Hindus reading the New Testament and profiting by it. I know Hindu disciples of Jesus. Hindu scriptures are read in Christian ashrams. Fr. Sebastian Painadath leads retreats based on the Bhagavad Gita and St. John's gospel. Many Christians practice yoga or Vipassana, a form of Buddhist meditation. We may have a chance of participating in one or other such event. Such participation is helpful in building a sense of community and experiencing the solidarity of all God's children.

Conclusion

Our openness to other cultures and religions must have a twofold foundation. The pluralism of religions seems to be the plan of God for the world at this moment as we know it. We have to experience it and live it in dialogue as God's will for us. Our mission is to witness to Jesus Christ and his Kingdom in a multi-cultural, multi-religious world without imposing ourselves in some violent way. We are not the only ones busy with God's mission. The Word and the Spirit of God are active everywhere in the world in ways unknown to us. All we can do is to discern God's ways and collaborate with it. We cannot really know how God is active in other cultures and religions without dialoguing with them. We may not succeed in making every one Christian. But we are still doing God's mission, as John Paul II reminds us, if we are promoting the values of the Kingdom of God – freedom, fellowship and love – among peoples of all cultures and religions.

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