DIALOGUE WITH NON-BELIEVERS

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The Secretariat for Non-Believers, in accordance with the purpose for which it was established, is hereby issuing a public document to encourage dialogue between believers and non-believers as well as to promote fruitful dialogue, carried out for ends proper to the very nature of dialogue. Thus the document contains considerations that aim at explaining clearly the nature of dialogue and how it differs from other types of contacts between believers and non-believers. It further states the conditions that are essential for and proposes the principal norms that govern dialogue.

Although dialogue, as the term is understood in this document, does not necessarily pursue an apostolic aim, it does include, for Christians, the witnessing of their faith and is likewise, in its own way, related to the commission of the Church to spread the Gospel. Furthermore dialogue with non-believers can somehow not only lead the faithful to a fuller recognition of human values, but also bring them to a better understanding of matters that concern religion.

This document is directed primarily to Christians and, from this point of view, it borrows various texts from Church documents which touch upon our subject. However, the matter is discussed in such a manner that non-believers may also understand and accept it.

INTRODUCTION

1. Mankind today comes to a better recognition of the dignity and value of the human person by considering, despite misgivings about the present evolution of the world, the general progress of culture and society.

In fact, the intensification of social interrelationships has greatly contributed to the recognition of pluralism and to the awareness that it is a characteristic dimension of our society. But there can be no true pluralism unless men and communities of different temperaments and cultures engage in dialogue. (1)

As stressed in the Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, dialogue is demanded, by "the custom, which has by now become widespread, of conceiving the relationships between the sacred and the secular in terms of the transforming dynamism of modern society, in terms of the pluralism of its manifestations, likewise in terms of the maturity of man, be he religious or not, enabled through secular education to think, to speak, and to act through the dignity of dialogue." (2)

Thus it is that, inasmuch as it rests on a mutual relationship between those involved, dialogue implies the mutual recognition of the integrity and worth of the other party as a person.

The Christian finds in man's supernatural vocation greater reasons for affirming this dignity and worth of the individual. Reflecting upon the Mystery of the Incarnation, the Church is aware of how important it is, rather, of how much it also pertains to her mission that the temporal order be rendered more human. (3)

Consequently, all Christians are called to promote in every way possible this dialogue with men of all classes, as an expression of a brotherly love which respects the requirements of a humanity come of age.

According to Vatican II, "By virtue of her mission to shed on the whole world the radiance of the Gospel message, and to unify under one spirit all men of whatever nation, race or culture the Church stands forth as a sign of that brotherliness which allows honest dialogue and invigorates it." (4)

Undoubtedly, the resolve to engage in dialogue and the nature of dialogue itself does not necessarily exclude other forms of contact, such as, among others, apologetics, confrontation, and discussion; nor does it exclude defending the rights of the human person. In general, moreover, an attitude of openness and understanding, which is the foundation of dialogue, is required in every social relationship.

This attitude presupposes "a willingness to be courteous, respectful, understanding, and kind" (5) which springs from a recognition and an acceptance of the other for what he is.

Willingness to engage in dialogue is an aspect of the general renewal of the Church, which also calls for a more positive appreciation of human freedom. The Second Vatican Council teaches that "truth... is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching and instruction, communication and dialogue. In the course of these, men explain

to one another the truth they have discovered, in order to assist one another in the quest for truth. Moreover, as the truth is discovered, it is by a personal assent that men are to adhere to it." (6)

As the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World expresses it, "For our part, the desire for such dialogue, which can lead to truth through love alone, excludes no one, though an appropriate measure of prudence must undoubtedly be exercised. (7)

The encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* indicates three concentric circles, each smaller than the former, to describe the three groups of interlocutors; all mankind, among whom there are many who profess no religion at all; the members of non-Christian religions; and our non-Catholic brethren in the Christian faith. To initiate dialogue which these different group, Pope Paul VI has established three secretariat, the Secretariat for Christian Religions, and the Secretariat for Non-Believers.

Entering into dialogue, especially with non-believers, gives rise to peculiar problems which are to some extent quite new. (8) Furthermore, in some of the initiatives and experiments undertaken to bring about this dialogue, Catholics, properly anxious to remain faithful to the truth and to Christian values, may meet with some difficulties. For this reason the Secretariat for Non-Believers wishes to present a number of reflections and directives which amplify those found in recent conciliar and papal documents.

In his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul VI gives a lengthy consideration to dialogue, especially from its apostolic aspect. By dialogue understood in this sense, the Church fulfils her principal mission, which is to proclaim the Gospel to all men, approaching them with respect and love, in order to offer them the gift of and grace of truth of which Christ constituted her the trustee.

The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, on the other hand treats primarily of dialogue between the Church and the world a dialogue that does not aim directly at proclaiming the Gospel. In fact the Constitution deals with a dialogue which Christians intend to establish with all men who do not share the same faith, either in order to join them in the quest for truth in various fields, or to collaborate in finding solutions to the great problems facing mankind today. It is this second type of dialogue, that between the Church and the world, to which the reflections which follow refer.

NATURE AND CONDITIONS OF DIALOGUE

1. DIALOGUE IN GENERAL

By the word dialogue, used in a general sense, we here understand every form of meeting and communication between individuals, groups, and com-

munities to bring about a greater grasp of the truth and to achieve better human relations in a spirit of sincerity, respect for persons, and mutual trust.

Dialogue is particularly important and complex when it is established between people of different and even sometimes opposed positions, who are attempting to overcome their mutual prejudices and broaden, as far as possible, their areas of mutual agreement, whether this take place on the plane of simple human relations or that of a quest for the truth or of collaboration to attain ends of a practical nature.

All these dimensions are to be found in each of the different forms of dialogue, but according as one of the other of them plays a central role, one can distinguish three fundamental types of dialogue, which can be classed as follows:

—Encounter on the plane of simple human relations, with a view to drawing the interlocutors out of their isolation and mutual mistrust, and creating an atmosphere of deeper understanding, mutual esteem, and respect;

—Encounter on the plane of search for the truth regarding questions of the greatest importance to the persons involved by striving in common to attain to a deeper grasp of the truth and to a fuller knowledge of reality.

—Encounter on the plane of action, which aims at establishing the conditions for collaboration towards fixed practical objectives despite doctrinal differences.

Although it is to be desired that dialogue be achieved at all three of these levels simultaneously, each of them, in so far as it is an interpersonal encounter, has its own peculiar value.

All dialogue, inasmuch as the parties involved both give and receive, implies a certain reciprocity. Wherefore it differs from teaching, which is ordered towards the doctrinal enrichment of the pupil. Since dialogue can, however, aim at the benefit of the public at large through the diffusion of information, it can in this sense be considered a form of instruction and even an implicit announcement of the truth of the Gospel message.

Dialogue, as it is here understood also differs from polemics and controversy in so far as these are ordered principally to the defense of a position and to the demonstration of the falsity of its opposite.

Furthermore, dialogue is not simply a confrontation of views, because it implies on both sides a movement of rapprochement and a deeper understanding. Finally, even if each of the interlocutors may legitimately aim at persuading the other of the value of his own position, dialogue is not of its nature directed towards this end, but rather towards a mutual enrichment.

2. DOCTRINAL DIALOGUE

1. *Possibility and Legitimacy of this Type of Dialogue*

The very possibility of doctrinal dialogue is often brought into doubt. The question is raised as to whether it is not necessary to set aside all absolute truth if dialogue is to be sincere—whether it is required that the participants remain indefinitely in an attitude of enquiry if dialogue is to be open. Further, if absolute truth is admitted, the very possibility of engaging in dialogue is questioned where one believes that he possesses the truth, real dialogue seems impossible, for it seems that a disposition to engage in dialogue demands that doubt about absolute truth be entertained.

Furthermore, is it possible to enter into dialogue if one starts from two different systems of thought? If it is true that each affirmation acquires its precise meaning only in relation to the whole of its system, is there any place for genuine dialogue when the points of departure are diverse systems?

Further yet, an analysis of the notion of truth held by men of our times shows that, for them, truth is immanent in man himself and depends on man and his freedom, to such an extent that there can be no truth, which does not derive from man himself. Thus all basis for dialogue would be lacking, as Christians, who reject the principle of immanence, have a completely different notion of the truth.

Concerning public dialogue, one wonders whether the faith of an assembly not sufficiently prepared for controversy can be legitimately exposed to the risk of challenge.

Doctrinal dialogue is a discussion conducted with courageous sincerity in an atmosphere of complete freedom and respect on doctrinal matters in which the participants are in some way personally involved. Though holding different positions, those taking part wish to reach a deeper mutual understanding, to discover their points of agreement and as far as this is possible, to enlarge them. It can thus come about that the parties can mutually enrich one another.

On the one hand, therefore, dialogue requires that one pay attention to the personal character of the acquisition of truth. The uniqueness of each individual in his particular situation, as well as the limitations under which everyone labors in his search for the truth must be taken into account. Awareness of the limitations of individuals and of historical communities creates a readiness to consider the opinions and the efforts of the other, and to embrace the elements of truth contained in both positions. By this process the minds are enriched and the greater truth is furthered.

On the other hand, in so far as it is also a quest for the truth, dialogue has no meaning unless one believes that the intellect can attain objective truth, at least to some extent; that it can always grasp some aspects of the truth, even

if these may be mixed with error; and, finally, that each individual has a contribution to offer in the search for truth which others should take into account because of the very fact that he attains a view of reality which is proper and unique to himself.

In these conditions the affirmation that it is possible to attain the truth is not only compatible with dialogue; it is a necessary condition for it. There can be no question then, of bringing the truth in doubt, as it were subordinating the demands of truth to those of dialogue, as certain forms of irenism seem to do. On the contrary, dialogue must come about as a result of the common moral obligation of seeking the truth in all matters, especially in religious questions.

Furthermore, the fact that each of the participants considers his own position to be true does not render the dialogue futile, for this persuasion is not contrary to the nature of dialogue. In fact, dialogue arises from the confrontation of two different positions and it aims, not at destroying them, but rather at clarifying them and, as far as possible, bringing them closer together. Thus it suffices that each of the participants believe that his grasp of the truth can increase through dialogue with another.

Now, such an attitude should be adopted and fostered in all sincerity by believers. Although the truths of the faith, since they are revealed by God, are in themselves absolute and perfect, they are always inadequately penetrated by the believer. Consequently he can always grow in his understanding of them. Besides, not everything that is believed by Christians is derived from Revelation. Thus dialogue with non-believers can help Christians to distinguish what is derived from Revelation from what is not, as well as to read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel.

Further, Christian faith does not dispense the believer from a rational enquiry into the rational presuppositions of his faith. Rather, it urges him to embrace whatever is rightly postulated by human reason, for the Christian is convinced by his faith that reason can never be contrary to faith. In fine, the believer knows that his faith does not provide all the answers to every question under discussion; for from his faith he only learns in what spirit and according to what norms he should guide his judgment, especially in the temporal order, in which vast areas are still open to investigation.(9)

Regarding the difficulty arising from the internal unity of a system of ideas, let us recall that dialogue exists even when the participants can agree only on certain points. If every system of thought contains certain truths and values which do not necessarily receive their sense and importance from the system itself and can thus be separated from it, it will suffice to place these truths and values in proper light to reach a certain degree of agreement.

Even amongst men separated by radical differences of opinion, some points on which agreement and communication are possible can always be found.

While keeping in mind the internal unity of the systems under discussion, one will have to distinguish, in any particular discussion, the different levels at which dialogue can take place, because it can happen that dialogue be possible at one level and not at another. Particularly, let it be recalled that the secular sphere retains a certain autonomy; (10) consequently divergences in religious matters do not exclude, in principle, a certain amount of agreement in temporal affairs.

Nor is it to be denied that dialogue may become more difficult because the participants hold different notions of what constitutes the truth and do not agree on the very principles of reasoning. If this occurs, the purpose of dialogue will be to try to come to a notion of the truth and of principles of reasoning that all participants can agree upon. If this is not possible, dialogue has nevertheless not necessarily been fruitless, it is no small matter to have found the limits beyond which the dialogue cannot proceed. After all, dialogue is not to be pursued at all costs.

The risk of diversity of opinions is in some way inevitable in a pluralistic society like ours. Hence it is necessary to prepare believers to face this risk, especially in public dialogue, which, if properly conducted, can contribute much to a maturation of the faith. Besides, public dialogue affords the interlocutors the possibility of proposing their positions to an audience which they would not otherwise be able to reach.

Dialogue between believers and non-believers, while involving certain risks, is not only possible but desirable. It can be brought to bear on all subjects accessible to human reason, such as for example philosophy, religion, politics, ethics, sociology, economics, the arts, and culture in general. Fidelity to all spiritual and material values obliges the Christian to recognize these values wherever he finds them. (11) Dialogue with non-believers can also deal with the benefits to human life and culture that can be derived from truths of the supernatural order.

2. *The Conditions for Doctrinal Dialogue*

To attain its objectives dialogue must respect the demands of truth and liberty. It must sincerely seek the truth. Thus doctrinal dialogue must be excluded when it is apparent that it is being "manipulated" as a means to attain particular political ends. Greater difficulties arise in dialogue with those Marxists who adhere to communism because of the intimate connection which they establish between theory and practice; a factor which makes it extremely difficult to keep the different levels of dialogue distinct, and which sometimes even reduces dialogue that pertains to doctrine to the level of practical dialogue.

Fidelity to the truth demands, furthermore, an effort to be clear in presenting and comparing the respective positions, lest the use of words that sound the same but have different meanings for the participants conceal differences

instead of resolving them. This requires that attention be paid to the sense in which the same words are used by both parties, so that, avoiding all ambiguity, the discussion may proceed properly.

Doctrinal dialogue also demands the courage both to expound one's own position with complete sincerity and to recognize the truth wherever it is found, even when this obliges the participants to revise, at least in part, their doctrinal and practical standpoints.

Dialogue will be really profitable only if those who prepare it and those who engage in it are truly competent. Otherwise the benefits obtainable would not outweigh the dangers involved. Finally, in dialogue truth should only prevail by its own innate force; (12) thus the freedom of the interlocutors must be juridically recognized and effectively safeguarded.

3. *Dialogue on the Plane of Action*

Dialogue can also be initiated with a view towards establishing collaboration, between individuals, or between groups or communities, with different or even opposed doctrinal positions.

In the first place, we must note that movements which have their origin in doctrines which a Christian may not accept are sometimes capable of evolving towards positions which are no longer essentially those from which they were derived. (13) In the second place, as we have already stated, divergences which render systems, taken in their totality, mutually incompatible do not prevent these same systems from agreeing with one another on certain points. In particular, divergences on the religious plane do not themselves exclude agreement in the secular sphere, which according to the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, retain autonomy in its own sphere.

Finally, even where doctrinal agreement is not attained, it is possible to reach mutual agreement concerning particular practical objectives. That this agreement and collaboration be legitimate, certain conditions must be fulfilled: The objective sought must be good in itself or reducible to good, (14) and what the parties to the dialogue agree upon must not compromise values which are more fundamental, such as integrity of doctrine and the rights of the human person (such as civil, cultural and religious liberty). To judge whether these conditions obtain when a particular dialogue is contemplated, the programmes proposed by the participants and past experiences must be taken into account.

Whether such cooperation is opportune will thus be determined by different circumstances of fact, time, and place. Although it is primarily the prerogative of laymen to evaluate these circumstance, it is the duty of the hierarchy to be watchful and to intervene when religious and moral values need to be safeguarded — always however, respecting the legitimate freedom and competence of the laity.

II

PRACTICAL DIRECTIVES

The following directives are to be understood as corollaries to the foregoing considerations on the nature and conditions of dialogue. They are necessarily of a general nature because situations vary considerably from country to country and because it is left to the prudence of pastors and the faithful to apply particular directives to different specific situations. For example, there are differences between countries which are traditionally Christian, countries in which the Gospel has so far not been preached, and countries in which atheistic rules govern over populations composed to a great extent of Christians. Besides, it is expected that further experiences may recommend the amplification of these directives in the future. It is the function of the episcopal conferences to lay down the general norms for each country, adapting them to the local conditions.

1. *Directives to Promote Dialogue*

In the light of Vatican II it is desirable that public opinion in the Church be awakened to the urgent need for dialogue.

1. In the education and formation of the clergy it is necessary that their philosophical and theological instruction be imparted in such a manner that, "equipped with a correct understanding of the mentality of their age, seminarians be thus properly prepared for dialogue with the men of our times," (15) including also the non-believers. Thus future priests should be led to a profound knowledge of the principal forms of unbelief, especially those prevalent in their respective countries, and to a knowledge of the philosophical and theological foundations of dialogue. These ends must be further pursued, at a more serious academic level, in ecclesiastical universities and faculties.

2. In promoting pastoral renewal of the clergy (through courses, seminars, congresses, etc.) special attention is to be given to the problems of dialogue with non-believers, above all in the concrete situations in which the clergy exercise their apostolate.

3. Likewise, courses of higher religious education on dialogue with non-believers, specialized courses for experts as well as workshops and congresses should be organized for the laity; this applies especially to young people and those who are engaged in the apostolate.

4. Preaching and catechetical instruction must also take this new dimension into account, for today the Church is open to it and ready for it in a special way.

5. Dialogue and the study of atheism will be carried out by diocesan and national organizations, attached in some way to the Roman Secretariat for

Non-Believers and established under the authority of the local hierarchy. These bodies will seek the collaboration of ecclesiastical and lay experts of both sexes to promote research, studies, courses, and meetings.

6. It is desirable that ecumenical collaboration between Catholics and other Christians be established in this field on an international, national, and on a local level.

7. This collaboration in establishing dialogue with non-believers must also be extended to those who belong to the non-Christian religions, especially Jews and Moslems.

2. *Particular Directives*

The first distinction to be made is that between public and private dialogue.

For *private dialogue*, that is for spontaneous discussions or organized meetings open exclusively to certain individuals or restricted groups, one cannot give particular directives beyond urging the exercise of prudence and understanding, virtues which must regulate all responsible human and Christian activity.

In particular we suggest the following:

1. To achieve more fruitful dialogue it is necessary to have sufficient knowledge about the subject under discussion, not only being familiar with the viewpoint of the other party, but above all with the Christian teaching on the subject.

2. Whenever a Christian realizes the inadequacy of his preparation, he must himself have recourse to the advice of a competent person or direct his interlocutor to such a person.

3. Also to be taken into account is the important moral responsibility of not betraying the authentic content of one's faith by ceding to irenism or convenient syncretism, and of not imprudently endangering one's personal adhesion to the faith.

4. Nor should the extent to which the testimony of an upright life led in conformity with one's faith can contribute to the efficacy of human encounter be underestimated.

Public dialogue, on the other hand, is dialogue between men who are qualified representatives of their communities, even if they do not participate in their official capacity. Planning such encounters between believers and those who hold different doctrines and belong to movements which differ from and may even be opposed to Christianity requires greater prudence in view of the repercussions on public opinion. Here too we limit ourselves to a few general recommendations:

1. Christians, whether they be priests or laymen, who take an active part in this type of dialogue, while possessing the moral qualities enumerated above for private dialogue, must excel both in doctrinal preparation, in which they must be truly qualified, and in the other qualities which public dialogue calls for, such as moral authority, efficacy of speech and presentation.

2. If, as is supposed here, it is a question of public dialogue at an unofficial level (without the formal authorization of the respective authorities), to guarantee the freedom necessary for true dialogue it seems opportune that persons who occupy positions of such importance that they could compromise the public authorities, their own office, or the institution which they represent should not take part in the dialogue. On the other hand, the participants must remain faithful to the general standpoint of the community in whose name they are speaking.

3. Official dialogue (formally authorized) cannot be excluded "a priori," but the conditions favoring such dialogue between Christians and non-believers are found only rarely, either because most non-believers represent only their individual positions and not that of some community or group, or because of the great differences that obtain between the Church or religious community on the one hand, and a political party or a cultural organization on the other. In such cases it is important to avoid all ambiguity regarding the meaning of dialogue itself, the objectives to be obtained, and the willingness of all parties to work together.

4. Dialogue may only be undertaken in circumstances of time and place which guarantee its authenticity. Thus, for example one should avoid excessive publicity and the presence of an audience not sufficiently well informed for this could disturb the serenity of the debate and cause it to degenerate into an unseemly argument. As a rule, then, discussion among a few experts on both sides will prove more profitable. At times the rules for the conduct of the debate will have to be established beforehand. Finally, when it is evident that public dialogue is intended purely as an instrument in the hands of one of the parties, it ought to be declined.

5. Sometimes, to avoid misunderstanding or scandal, it will be necessary to make a declaration beforehand, clearly stating the meaning, the aim, and the content of the dialogue in question.

6. Priests should obtain the consent of their own Ordinary and that of the Ordinary of the place in which the dialogue is to be held. All the faithful will respect the directives of the ecclesiastical authorities. These authorities, for their part, will carefully respect the legitimate freedom of the laity in temporal matters as well as the general conditions in which they live their daily lives.

Besides the spoken form of dialogue there also exists a written dialogue. This can be achieved through the collaboration between believers and non-

believers in newspapers, in editing and publishing periodicals, magazines, and journals, etc.

This form of public dialogue is more exacting because of the greater repercussions and wider diffusion of the written word. It is also more demanding because of the greater responsibility and obligation in conscience that falls upon the believers who participate in it. On the other hand, it offers greater guarantees in so far as it is easier to avoid improvisation and superficiality. For dialogue of this nature believers are advised to submit their writings before publication to the judgment of competent persons. All the faithful are further urged to faithfully observe the canonical norms already in force, as well as any new ones that may be passed in this connection.

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FOOTNOTES

(1) Gaudium et Spes, nos. 43, 3; 76, 1; 92, 2; Gravissimum Educationis, n. 6, 2; cf. also Populorum Progressio, no 39.

(2) A.A.S., X (1964), p. 644; cf. also no. 6.

(3) Cf. Apostolicam Actuositatem, no. 7.

(4) Gaudium et Spes, no. 92.

(5) Ecclesiam Suam, A.A.S., X (1964), p. 644.

(6) Dignitatis Humanae, no. 3.

(7) Gaudium et Spes, no. 92.

(8) Gaudium et Spes, no. 19.

(9) "Undeniably this conciliar program is but a general one in several of its parts, and deliberately so; given the immense variety of situations and forms of human culture in the world. Indeed, while it presents teaching already accepted in the Church, the program will have to be further pursued and amplified, since it often deals with matters in a constant state of development" (Gaudium et Spes, no. 91, 2).

(10) Gaudium et Spes, nos. 36 and 59.

(11) Gaudium et Spes, no. 57.

(12) Dignitatis Humanae, nos., 1 and 3.

(13) Pacem in Terris, A.A.S., V (1963), 300; Ecclesiam Suam, A.A.S., X (1964), 652-653.

(14) Mater et Magistra, A.A.S., VIII (1961), 47.

(15) Optatam Totius, no, 15.