Dialogical Encounters
Mission in the Context of Religious Diversity

Gemma T. Cruz

The significance of interreligious dialogue to the mission of the church calls parishes to make it a priority as well. Cultivating basic attitudes and dispositions and building relationships and experiences with people of different religions can be a way forward.

It has been said that the United States of America is a nation built by immigrants. Migrations affect the nation at various levels including the local and the regional. While our churches reflect the changing demographics brought about by immigration, so does the religious plurality that presents new opportunities for dialogue across a rich variety of faith traditions and religious communities.

Migration is a phenomenon that is as old as humankind. People have moved from one place to another over the ages for various reasons: out of fear of invasion, to escape political or religious persecution, in search of better pasture, to establish new commercial links, or in pursuit of a vision to (re)create a new mode of society. Today, however, the intensification of migration is radically defining national histories and redefining human demographics. The United Nations reports, for instance, that there are roughly 191 million migrants worldwide. More than 60 percent of these migrants are in developed countries like the United States while the rest are in developing countries like Thailand. Not surprisingly, the volume of

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migration in the last decades is such that it is believed to be responsible for two-thirds of the population growth and the cultural diversification in industrial countries.

The United States is an appropriate example of this significant increase in diversity and population in industrial countries. Consider the following reports: (1) Annually the United States accepts about one million legal immigrants, which is more than all other nations combined. (2) The number of minorities in the United States has reached the 100 million mark, making them now a third of the U.S. population. (3) Minorities have become the majority in 10 percent of U.S. counties. These reports do not even include the undocumented migrants whose numbers have reached 11–13 million. The tremendous implication of this intensified mobility to population and cultural diversity is captured in the Census Bureau’s prediction that minorities will account for half of the U.S. population by 2042.

The Challenge of Religious Diversity

When people move, they not only bring their culture or their food, language, and music but also their faiths. Migration then brings not just cultural diversity but also religious diversity. Worldwide, migration has drastically changed not just the cultural landscape but also the religious demographics, and nowhere is this most deeply illustrated than in the United States. Described by Harvard professor Diana Eck as “the most religiously diverse nation in the world,” the United States is home to numerous religions.

Gregg Easterbrook directly attributes the rise of spiritual diversity in the United States to the influx of immigrants. For example, many Asian immigrants bring their religious traditions which include among others Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Immigrants celebrate their own festivals and even build their own places of worship. Within driving distance in the small city in Iowa where I used to live, for instance, are a Sikh temple, two Jewish synagogues, two mosques, a Buddhist temple, a Catholic and Protestant church, and numerous other Christian places of worship.

Generally the religious diversity that characterizes the United States today has made the majority of those who identify themselves as Christians not just knowledgeable but also tolerant of non-Christian religions. However, the general atmosphere of tolerance could sometimes serve as a mask for indifference and conceal that interfaith or interreligious relations among Americans are not always congenial, much less, smooth. In recent years Muslim Americans have been especially vulnerable.
to such strained relations, particularly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania and in view of the perceived and continuing threat to U.S. national security by what the media have labeled as fundamentalist or militant Muslims.

Today, indeed, religious diversity carries certain difficulties that we must engage, especially in the face of global terroristic attacks by persons who associate their destructive acts with religion. From New York to London, Madrid to Glasgow, Dallas to Milwaukee, never before has religion been intertwined with violence in such devastating proportions in just a few seconds. Here I think it is important to clarify three things.

• Religion-related violence is not just a western phenomenon. The violent conflicts in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sudan, and Nigeria, for example, have religious dimensions.

• Violence is not only perpetrated by Muslims. Christians and Jews are as much plagued by terrorists as are Muslims. The powerful documentary series, *God’s Warriors*, aired by Cable News Network in August 2007 on Muslim, Jewish, and Christian extremism.

• The recognition of the need for and efforts toward interreligious dialogue is happening not just on the secular level but more so in the religious realm.

The last point is perhaps the most crucial agenda which must be brought to bear on all peace-loving religious people. As Swiss theologian Hans Küng puts it: “There can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There can be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.”

**Dialogue: New Way of Being Church**

In recent years people have become more aware of the word *dialogue* and the need for it partly due to the rise in conflicts influenced by religion and the various initiatives toward dialogue among cultures and religions. The United Nations, for example, designated 2001 as the “Year of Dialogue among Civilizations” with former U.N. secretary-general Kofi Annan pointing to dialogue as “a chance for people of different cultures and traditions to get to know each other better, whether they live on opposite sides of the world or on the same street.” The most recent Catholic Church efforts in interreligious dialogue trace to Vatican II (1962–1965) where it emerged as a key theme.

Five documents of Vatican II, for example, contain important elements for understanding the Church’s role vis-à-vis the world religions. These include *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (LG), *Decree on the Mission Activity of the*
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Interreligious Dialogue as a Mission of the Church

Clearly the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions stressed interreligious dialogue as a task and thus a mission of the church. Moreover, Paul VI’s On The Church identifies it as a level of dialogue Christians ought to engage in. To drive home this point Paul VI established in 1964 the Secretariat for Non-Christians and mandated it to serve as an institutional sign and structure of the Church’s desire to meet and relate with the followers of other religious traditions of the world (the secretariat was renamed in 1988 as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue [PCID]).

In 1984 the Secretariat for Non-Christians, evaluating the experiences of dialogue taking place everywhere in the Church, published, “The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission.” The document has since been more popularly known as Dialogue and Mission. It explicitly locates interreligious dialogue within the Church’s evangelizing mission and defines dialogue as “not only discussion, but also includes all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment” (3). Dialogue and Mission and Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a document issued in 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, give four forms of interreligious dialogue that could inform programs and activities including within the parish:

• Dialogue of life—where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.

• Dialogue of action—in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.

• Dialogue of theological exchange—where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values.

• Dialogue of religious experience—where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute. (DP 42)

Aside from our own Catholic tradition, there are other established institutions within global Christianity that also shed some light on the mission and ministry that is interreligious dialogue. Let us take, for example, the World Council of Churches (WCC) that brings together more than 560 million Christians coming from 349 churches, denominations, and church fellowships in more than 110 countries and territories throughout the world. According to the WCC dialogue begins with a single act. In other words it is set in motion by one person’s decision.
to be open to another who is of a different religious tradition. Such acts are by no means insignificant as they can serve as inspiration to others, especially those who would never dream of opening up to the religious “other.” At times these single acts can even seem like enlightenment or conversion experiences.

Ultimately, WCC says, dialogue ought to go beyond the individual and become communal endeavors. The Christian community within the human community, the WCC maintains, has a common heritage and a distinctive message to share. It needs therefore to reflect upon the nature of the community. Christians seek together with others and upon the relation of dialogue to the life of the churches, as they ask themselves how they can be communities of service and witness without diluting their faith. Such an enquiry needs to be informed both by a knowledge of different religions and ideologies and by insights gained through actual dialogues with their neighbors. Moreover, when sought and done with deep interest and integrity dialogical encounters usually have ripple effects. In fact, the WCC points out that in many places small beginnings have resulted in the growth of communities that have built strong ties across religious barriers.

**Interreligious Dialogue in the Asian Church**

Asia, particularly through the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), is a place where we can look to for examples in doing interreligious dialogue. For centuries Christians have been a minority in the culturally and religiously-diverse continent of Asia. This means Asian Christians have more experience in living with people of other religious traditions than the rest of the world. We probably could then learn a thing or two from them about what it means to be Christian while at the same time be concerned about unity not only of the Christian community but also of the wider human community.

The FABC believes that in a multicultural and multireligious context like Asia dialogue is the mode of being church, that is, dialogue is the church’s mission as well as its means of mission. The Asian bishops refer to their approach as “triple dialogue,” in other words they dialogue with other religions (interreligious), with the poor of Asia (integral liberation), and with Asia’s many cultures (inculturation).

Interreligious dialogue’s significance to the mission of the church is deeply recognized by the Asian bishops as early as 1978 when they established the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and put it in the predominantly Buddhist country of Thailand. The bishops have stressed why dialogue is important:

> Only in dialogue with these religions can we discover in them the seeds of the Word of God. This dialogue will allow us to touch the expression and the reality of our people’s deepest selves, and enable us to find authentic ways of living and expressing our own Christian faith. It will reveal to us also many riches of our
own faith, which we perhaps would not have perceived. Thus, it can become a sharing in friendship of our quest for God and for brotherhood among His sons [sic] (FABC I, 16)

**Interreligious Dialogue in the American Church**

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) also gives us guidance on interreligious relations. The USCCB has, for instance, the Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (BCEIA), which also has relations with the Interfaith Relations Commission of the National Council of Churches of the USA. The establishment of this committee served to affirm the bishops’ recognition of the significance of interreligious relations. It also reflected the bishops’ commitment to work with the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Synagogue Council of America. Twice a year since 1987, for instance, BCEIA has been doing consultation meetings with the National Council of Synagogues.

Over the years the committee engaged in building relationships and worked with, among others, the American Muslim Council, the Islamic Society of North America, the Islamic Circle of North America, Imam W.D. Mohammed’s Muslim American Society, the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California, and other groups on various projects.

Reflecting the changing signs of the times, the committee’s work increased significantly in 1987 and by 1999 three regional dialogues (Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, and West Coast) with Muslims, each with a Catholic bishop as co-chair, were meeting on a yearly basis. At the same time, the committee staff members were joining several other projects with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. Recognizing even more strongly the growing importance and urgency of forging interreligious relations the Subcommittee on Interreligious Dialogue was created in 2000 tasked primarily to hold annual interreligious meetings. In 2003 the subcommittee organized a series of institutes for bishops on interreligious relations, with an initial focus on Islam. Today the BCEIA has twenty-five bishops who serve as members and consultants and work with over ninety Catholic theologians and other experts.

**Doing Interreligious Dialogue in Local Parishes**

All this talk about dialogue comes to nothing if it does not happen at the grassroots level. The challenge probably could be at its most difficult at the level of the local churches or parishes. For one, running the already numerous ministries usually associated with local churches can be time-consuming. Inevita-
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A. Attitude Change Toward Others

The most crucial first step to take is to encourage a change of attitudes. Many Christians continue to harbor prejudices against other religions. Without accurate information Christians resort to profiling and stereotypes when encountering people of other religions. What we can do, therefore, is to provide avenues and forums where Christians may gain unprejudiced knowledge about other religions. Lecture series on Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism conducted in parish halls are a good start. The next thing to do is to facilitate an attitude of openness to others. Christians have to cultivate more positive attitudes toward other religions and believe that dialogue is integral to Christianity.

B. Be With One Another

The second step to take is to encourage Christians to physically meet with and encounter persons of other religions. Not only can our active presence with one another help dispel prejudices, it can also help us learn more about each other’s dreams and hopes. More often than not we discover that they, like us, are as concerned about peace and justice as they are about truth and meaning. Excursions and outings to places of worship of other religions are a good start. Or, contact can also be facilitated when one participates in their religious festivities or even...
a sports event organized by the Muslim Youth or Buddhist Women’s Club. What is important is that these contacts lead to friendship. The parties should at least leave each other knowing they have made another friend, this time of another religion. Or, they can simply consider these as opportunities for the building of basic human relationships. Indirectly what is happening is that the walls and barriers between the religions are also being broken down.

C. Collaborate With Other
After having developed friendships across religions, the next logical step is to find occasions where people can work together on a project. These need not be mammoth projects but can be as simple as cleaning a park, bringing bread to the hungry, or even advocating for peace. There are more than enough causes that Christians would certainly be concerned about. Why not use them as occasions where not only the causes are attended to but the dialogue dimension is also factored in? Ideally these projects become truly collaborative ventures when Christians work with their Muslim or Hindu friends to organize them from start to finish.

D. Dialogue With Other
When we have developed such close working relationship with our neighbors of other religions it would make sense that we then go a step further and want to find out about their religions. This is when Christians can sit down with their neighbors to talk about the sources of their faith and especially what motivates them to help others and to be concerned about the environment and about life in general. These dialogues can be informal and can actually be happening when people are raking leaves or while doing the dishes in a soup kitchen. Whatever it is, they are graced occasions where Christians learn more about the faith of their neighbor as well as share their own faith in Jesus Christ. Other ordinary life contexts in which relationships can be built by parishioners include:

- Encouraging our children to befriend and play with children who belong to other religions
- Greeting or joining non-Christian neighbors during their religious feasts
- Inviting neighbors who do not identify themselves as Christians to feasts and celebrations in our homes
- Joining neighborhood groups or book clubs with members who hold different religious backgrounds

E. Experience Faith With Other
Where relationships have become deep the dialogue partners find themselves wanting to share in the experience of the religion of the other. This is when Christians would invite their Buddhist or Hindu friend to attend Sunday Mass with
them and the Buddhist or Hindu friend would invite the Christian other to a meditation center or the local temple. What is important is that both parties share a degree of trust and are secure in the relationship and have no sense whatsoever that the other is attempting to proselytize them. In this experience of religion, each person goes in with an open mind to discover more of God’s mysteries as expressed in the other’s religion.

To be sure there is a growing awareness among Catholic parishes to be active contributors to the ministry of interfaith dialogue. Like true pilgrim churches, taking their cue from Pope Benedict XVI, they are more and more open to working with persons of other religions for the betterment of society. For them dialogue is not just a social action but one that is also an integral component of one’s Christian faith. By their participation in and organization of the various interreligious activities they acknowledge that this is a Christian call...this is a Christian mission. It is their concrete form of participation in God’s dialogue of salvation as expressed in God’s dialogue with humanity.

**Resources and References**


