

7.7 The Need for Inter-Religious Dialogue

Aim

To help students become more aware of the need for dialogue

Materials Required

- Paper, pen, copies of *Nostra Aetate, Unitatis Redintegratio, Ad Gentes, Dialogue and Proclamation*.
- Exercises for groups from Procedure section.

Procedure

Divide participants into three groups. Give each group one of the following:

Group A: Read the following text and discuss the questions

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims and ever must proclaim Christ, "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to himself (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-19).

The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men. (Nostra Aetate 2)

1. From your experience and knowledge of other religions, write down as many good things as possible that you have found in them.
2. Recall one incident in your life where you promoted another religion.

Group B

Prepare a five minute skit depicting a multi-religious community where there is no tolerance, interaction or cooperation among them. What is likely to be the result?

Group C

This is an excerpt from the speech of Pope Benedict XVI on September 16 2006 at the University of Regensburg, Germany. It immediately set off passions in the Muslim world. Analyse it in the context of inter-religious dialogue and see how it contributes to or promotes inter-religious relations.

I read the edition by Theodore Khoury of part of the dialogue carried on, perhaps in 1391, by the erudite Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaeologus and an educated Persian on the subject of Christianity and Islam, and the truth of both. The dialogue ranges widely over the structures of faith contained in the Bible and in the Koran.

The emperor touches on the theme of the holy war. The emperor must have known that Sura (Koranic chapter) 2, 256 reads: "There is no compulsion in religion." According to the experts, this is one of the suras of the early period, when Mohammed was still powerless and under threat. But naturally the emperor also knew the instructions, developed later and recorded in the Koran, concerning holy war ... He addresses his interlocutor with a startling brusqueness on the central question about the relationship between religion and violence, saying: "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."

The emperor, having expressed himself so forcefully, goes on to explain ... why spreading faith through violence is something unreasonable....The decisive statement in this argument against violent conversion is this: not

to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature. Khoury observes: For the emperor, as a Byzantine shaped by Greek philosophy, this is self-evident. But for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality. At this point, as far as understanding of God and thus the practice of religion is concerned, we are faced with an unavoidable dilemma. Is the conviction that acting unreasonably contradicts God's nature merely a Greek idea, or is it always and intrinsically true? ...

The West has long been endangered by this aversion to the questions that underlie its rationality and can only suffer great harm thereby. The courage to engage the breadth of reason, and not the denial of its grandeur, this is the program with which a theology grounded in biblical faith enters into the debates of our time. "Not to act reasonably, not to act with logos, is contrary to the nature of God," said Manuel II, according to his understanding of God. It is to this great logos, this breadth of reason, that we invite our partners in the dialogue of cultures

Input

Dialogue is a phenomenon that has found its way into our religious language and practice, and therefore cannot be ignored. The world and even villages have grown from being one homogeneous entity in terms of religion. Gone are the days, when one family will be adherents of the same religion, let alone neighbours in the same community. Our society is now pluralistic in terms of religion.

People of different religions are day by day discovering that they are seeking the answer to the same basic human question: Who am I? Where am I going? What is the meaning of existence?

We have also become aware that the whole of humankind forms one family, due to the common origin of all men and women, created by God in His own image. We are all called to the same common destiny, the fullness of life in God.

The same Holy Spirit is present also in the traditions of other religions, as asserted by Pope John Paul II in *Redemptor Hominis* 6.

Christians (Catholics) are becoming more aware of other religions, especially as they emerge and increase in number.

Most of Christian persecution and condemnation of other religions stemmed from ignorance, prejudice, fear and wrong ideas, wrong information and misunderstanding. Over the years, meeting people of different religions in schools, workplaces, playground, market-places, we have come to know them better and therefore see the need to get rid of our prejudice and fear in order to live in peace and harmony with them.

We need to dialogue with other faiths, especially in our African context with traditional African religion, which at times is deeply tied with African identity. This is one of the major ways we can discover and promote African Christianity.

At times, religions have to come together to handle some common humanitarian situations like violence, floods, injustice, illiteracy, drought and hunger.

Nostra Aetate 2, speaks of 'a ray of Truth which enlightens all'. 'Ad Gentes 11 tells us of the presence of 'seeds of the word and riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations. Finally, Lumen Gentes 17 talks of the good which is found sown not only in minds and hearts, but also in the rites and customs of other peoples. All these statements go to show that Christianity has no monopoly or absolute over the Truth or on God. Some of the practices and customs of other religions can help purify some of our Christian values and ideas.

Having moved from an exclusivist to an inclusivist position on religion and lately to a pluralist reality, Inter-religious dialogue is more necessary than ever. It is not an option, but a duty and task to be carried out. In our African context, there are two religions that we have to and are dialoguing with. These are African Traditional Religion and Islam.

Concerning African Traditional Religion, this is what Ecclesia in Africa says 'With regard to African traditional religion, a serene and prudent dialogue will be able, on the one hand, to protect Catholics from negative influences which condition the way of life of many of them and, on the other hand, to foster the assimilation of positive values such as belief in a supreme being who is eternal, creator, provident and just judge, values which are readily harmonized with the content of the faith. They can even be seen as a preparation for the Gospel, because they contain precious semina verbi which can lead, as already happened in the past, a great number of people to be open to the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel. (no.67).

The same document has this to say about dialogue with Islam: "Commitment to dialogue must also embrace all Muslims of good will. Christians cannot forget that many Muslims try to imitate the faith of Abraham and to live the demands of the Decalogue.(111) In this regard the message of the synod emphasizes that the living God, Creator of heaven and earth and the Lord of history, is the Father of the one great human family to which we all belong. As such, he wants us to bear



witness to him through our respect for the values and religious traditions of each person, working together for human progress and development at all levels. Far from wishing to be the one in whose name a person would kill other people, he requires believers to join together in the service of life in justice and peace.(112) particular care will therefore be taken so that Islamic-Christian dialogue respects on both sides the principle of religious freedom, with all that this involves, also including external and public manifestations of faith.(113) Christians and Muslims are called to commit themselves to promoting a dialogue free from the risks of false irenicism or militant fundamentalism, and to raising their voices against unfair policies and practices as well as against the lack of reciprocity in matters of religious freedom. (no.66).

Review

1. Dialogue is a phenomenon that has found its way into our religious language and practice, and therefore cannot be ignored.
2. People of different religions are day by day discovering that they are seeking the answer to the same basic human question: Who am I? Where am I going? What is the meaning of existence?
3. Most Christian persecution and condemnation of other religions stems from ignorance, prejudice, fear and wrong ideas, wrong information and misunderstanding.
4. At times, religions have to come together to handle some common humanitarian situations like violence, floods, injustice, illiteracy, drought and hunger.

Reflection

People from every religion still grapple with the question of personal identity and mission.

Relevant Skills

List down common beliefs of Christians and Muslim and Christians and members of ATR.

References

Eilers, Franz-Joseph. Communicating between Cultures 2nd Edition. Manila: Lagos Publishers, 1992.