

My dear Brother Priests, Pastoral Associates, Friends,

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to address you this afternoon. The topic given to me is “Interfaith Dialogue – new understandings, skills, and strategies”. I have narrowed the Interfaith dimension to dialogue between Islam and Christianity, and particularly Catholicism, because that is where my experience lies. I stress that I am speaking to today from my pastoral experience in Muslim – Christian dialogue, and not from the perspective of a scholar of Islamic studies.

Organisation of Session

I propose to divide my session into two parts: The first will contain my reflections on some of the issues which raise difficulties in Christian – Muslim dialogue, and the second, briefer part will turn to obstacles/ opposition and strategies to overcome them.

After that there will be some small group discussion and then time for questions and comments from the floor.

Recently, on October 13 the *Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders to Christian Leaders* was published. It is a welcome initiative and I will return to it later in the talk.

Part One

In this Part, I will address three matters:

- The Catholic position on dialogue.
- What are the issues that have surfaced?
- Why it is important to let differences come into the open

The Catholic Position on Dialogue

For me the first reason for my involvement in interfaith dialogue is that the Church asks us to engage in it!. Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI commend it, and insist on

its importance. Along with the representatives of world religions, gathered in Assisi 24 January 2002, Pope John Paul II affirmed”¹

“ we commit ourselves to frank and patient dialogue, refusing to consider our differences as an insurmountable barrier, but recognising instead that to encounter the diversity of others can become an opportunity for greater reciprocal understanding”.²

Secondly, “ in explaining the faith that is in us” as St Paul puts it, we learn more about our own faith. This is not an exercise of the rational part of our being only. It is a true encounter with a human person. A Turkish student summed it up well: ‘ we must be in dialogue to see God in someone’s face. It is something felt, not just learned’ ”.³

Thirdly, interfaith dialogues contributes to the search for peace in the world. Justice is the foundation for peace. The Vatican representative at a UNESCO conference stated

(the international community) “ *must do everything possible so that all peoples have land and autonomy of existence, and so that they may be able to make decisions in internal matters so that inhabitants of a nation may be the first to benefit from their country’s riches.*”⁴

Pope Benedict XVI has very recently reiterated the role of dialogue in conflict resolution and peace. In the Annual Message for End of Ramadan, 28 September, he stated

“Dialogue is the tool which can help us to escape from the endless spiral of conflict and multiple tensions which mark our societies, so that all peoples can live in serenity and peace”.

¹ Declaration of Religious Leaders, Assisi, 24 January 2002, number 2.

² Declaration of Religious Leaders, Assisi, 24 January 2002, number 5.

³ *Zenit* 12 April 2003 cited in *Bridges*, 22, June 2003p. 2

⁴ Magra Francesco Follow, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to UNESCO, speech 4 October.

All of this, while known to you, perhaps, is not all that widely known among Catholics so we do need to educate Catholics for dialogue. In educating for dialogue, four key principles are recognised:

- All dialogue either with individuals or communities is aimed at mutual respect, understanding and enrichment;
- There must be humility in dialogue, a rootedness in one's own religious identity and openness to encounter with the other;
- Interfaith dialogue reflects the patience of God. It is about walking together;
- The Church must be open to dialogue with everyone.⁵

What are the issues that have surfaced?

In this section I will treat some theological issues which can arise in dialogue and cause misunderstanding between Muslims and Christians. First of all, let us take a little time to summarise what Muslims believe.

I turn first to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*

“Upon the Muslims, the Catholic Church looks with esteem. They adore One God living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful Maker of heaven and earth, and Speaker to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as did Abraham, with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself”.

In that passage is the firm belief in One God who has revealed Himself to humanity, and to whom Muslims respond by submitting themselves to the will of God.

The passage continues:

“ Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a Prophet. They also honour Mary, his virgin mother. At times they call on her, too, with

⁵ Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, “ Developments in Interfaith Dialogue from Assisi 1986 to Assisi 2002”, lecture delivered Canberra, 2002 cited in *Bridges*, 20, November 2002.

devotion. Further, they await the Day of judgment when God will give each man his due after raising him up. Consequently, they prize the moral life and give worship to God, especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting” (Nostra Aetate, 3).

This section of *Nostra Aetate* states the remaining key elements of Islam: Jesus is esteemed as a prophet, but not the Son of God; Mary is honoured as the mother of the prophet Jesus; Muslims worship God by prayer, almsgiving and fasting. They await the Day of Judgement

A similar statement is to be found in the Qu’ran itself ‘

“ True piety is this, to believe in God, and the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets, to give of one’s substance, however cherished, to kinsmen, and orphans, the needy, the travelled, beggars, and to ransom the slave, to perform the prayer, to pay the alms.”

Issues Centre on Revelation

The issues that cause some confusion centre on Revelation, the Trinity and Jesus. These issues come together if we examine the understanding of Revelation of the two traditions.

The Qu’ran is the verbatim revelation of God to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel, first in Mecca and then in Medina. The Revelation was complete before Muhammad’s death in 632. It was left to Muhammad’s followers to assemble the revelation into codex or book. This was completed c. 650.

Jesus

The important point is that Christians do not stand in exactly the same relation to the Bible as Muslims do to the Qu’ran. Let me elaborate. For Muslims, the Qu’ran is the Revelation of God. For Christians, the Bible is the revealed word of God but Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God in a way in which the prophet Muhammad is not for Muslims.⁶

⁶ Revelation: Catholic and Muslim Perspectives, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006, 9.

Migrant Chaplains Conference Address

This explains why the Qu'ran is held in such reverence by Muslims and why any disrespect to the Qu'ran is very difficult for Muslims to accept.

The monotheism of Islam prevents them from accepting Jesus as the Son of God, and as Divine. Their understanding of God as One God means that He cannot be shared with another. His divine substance is His alone. God could never be incarnate or embodied, and of course, has no image. Therefore Jesus cannot be Son of God and He cannot be divine.

Islam has no concept of redemption by a mediator. Muslims believe in Adam and Eve, and that Adam and Eve sinned, and were banished from Paradise, but they do not believe in original sin; that the sin of our first parents was passed on to us. Therefore there is no need of a mediator.

Trinity

The same strong monotheism makes it impossible for Muslims to accept the Trinity; a concept made all the more difficult by the Christian use of the term 'persons'! Divinity cannot be shared, partnership is out of the question. Therefore Muslims simply cannot conceive how the One God can have His substance shared or divided amongst persons.

A Common Word

The very welcome document, "A Common Word between Us and You", signed by 138 leading Muslim scholars, and originating in Jordan, offers a consensus, which, in Islam, has the technical meaning of a "studied agreement of scholars and the foundational belief that the whole community will not agree on error ... It is both an invitation to dialogue and common articulation of faith". It is a document which holds the promise of a rich

harvest, perhaps the most widely representative theological Muslim response to Christian interreligious initiatives since the Second Vatican Council.⁷

In their statement, the authors do not attend to any theological discussion of Jesus or the Trinity. They quote the words of Jesus in the New Testament but in relation to the Oneness of God. The Muslim leaders affirm that the two foundational principles of Islam and Christianity are love of the One God and love of the neighbour and that “ these principles are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity”.

Why Consider Differences

Obviously, If the dialogue is to be real, then we cannot pretend that we are the same. Muslims and Christians share the same foundational principles but we do not share other foundational beliefs.

Apart from that, I believe it is good to consider differences for at least three reasons:

First, it helps us to clarify our thinking about our own faith and to appreciate what is unique and to grow in respect for the convictions of others; for Muslims to engage in inter-religious dialogue, strengthens rather than diminishes their Muslim faith; for Christians to engage in inter-religious dialogue, strengthens rather than diminishes their Christian faith.

Secondly, the discourse of difference frees the members of each group to be authentically who they are because we come to understand why they think and act the way they do;

Thirdly, with an understanding and listening heart, we can develop ways of talking about our differences so that the end result is greater mutual understanding of our identity as Muslim or Christian. Willingness to talk about our differences grounds the dialogue in reality; challenges us to explain the differences in language and concepts which are

⁷ John Borelli, “Uncommon Overture”, 20 October 2007.

meaningful for the dialogue partner. The dialogue partners reciprocate by being open to extending their habitual frameworks of meaning, thus enabling the dialogue of the heart as well as the dialogue of the mind.

I do not pretend that interfaith dialogue is always easy and is without difficulties. We'll consider those in Part II.

Part II: Obstacles/ Opposition and Strategies

Due to our human frailty, interfaith dialogue is not without difficulty. I am not speaking now of the theological matters of which I spoke earlier.

The opposition I have encountered comes from three quarters: non-Catholic evangelicals; Catholics who think I am encouraging Muslims too much; and Catholics of various rites whose family origins are in countries where there is a Muslim majority, and whose experiences range from completely harmonious relations with Muslim neighbours to hostile relations, and, occasionally, violent encounters.

The nature of your work means that you are likely to be engaged with the third group to some extent. It is important to separate two elements when engaging with this group: that is, to differentiate between religious persecution, or lack of freedom to worship which must be condemned, and cultural differences which may apply in some circumstances.

Cultural Differences

Let me give you an example of the latter. At one dialogue I attended, a woman questioner gave us a lecture on female circumcision as an Islamic custom! Nothing and no-one could convince her that it was not a general Islamic custom but a custom in some cultures and practised in those cultures by Muslims and non-Muslims.

Awareness of the cultural background of Muslims may help explain some behaviour which differs from group to group. For example, members of one group I know will not shake hands with women, while another group willingly shakes hands with women.

Strategies

What can be done when things get difficult in interfaith dialogue?

I offer five suggestions:

1 Keep the dialogue in the present.

This refers to time and place. Christians today do not have take responsibility for defending the Crusades and there is no reason to allow dialogue to flounder in Australia because of events which have happened or are happening in other parts of the world.⁸

2 Attend to the Purpose

Understand the difference between explain and prove. You are not there to prove the Trinity, even if such a thing could be done! You are there to dialogue, to learn, to understand, to appreciate, to share, to express differences respectfully.

3 Interpret the Faith of your Partners in its Best Light

Presume the good will of your dialogue partners and interpret what they have to say in the best possible light. Every religion has people who are determined on disruptive behaviours. At one dialogue in Parramatta, we had one non-Catholic Evangelical group picketing the entrances to the Church grounds while inside there was a particular cultural group heckling the Muslim speakers from the same cultural group! Yes, patience is needed!!

⁸ Suggestions 1, 3, 4 are adapted from *Catholic Evangelisation in an Ecumenical and Interreligious Society* United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004, 19,20.

4 Search for ways to turn increased understanding into collaborative action.

Encourage collaboration on some local issue. The issue may not necessarily be overtly religious but the acts of inclusion and of working together help to forge community bonds.

Generally, Muslims share Catholic pro-life values. It may be possible to invite the worshippers at the local Mosque to contribute to a petition on some pro-life issue.

5 Neighbourliness and Hospitality

You can have all the high-powered dialogues in the world but nothing beats a chat over the back fence! In the fast-paced world we live in now, these opportunities are rarely spontaneous but have to be planned.

You could encourage your communities to invite Muslims living nearby to their homes for coffee or tea or a meal. If Catholics are unsure about Muslim food customs, they can simply say: tell me what you can eat. Anyone who has traveled in Muslim countries or who has Muslim friends here will know that Muslims are most hospitable. They will regard an invitation to a home as a great honour and will return the hospitality. What better way could there be to learn to know one another!

At one gathering, a Muslim woman told us of how moved she was to be asked to look after her Catholic neighbour's two small children when the third child had to be taken to hospital in an emergency. She thought 'they must trust me because they have entrusted me with their most treasured possessions'.

Living community in a multi-faith society does not require a theology degree, rather the milk of human kindness!

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to the discussion and questions.

Migrant Chaplains Conference Address