



## **ARE ALL RELIGIONS EQUALLY VALID?**

For several decades, religious pluralism has presented new challenges for the pastoral activity of the Church. The Protestant and Jewish minorities and lately the increased presence of Muslims have made it necessary for Catholics to revisit their practices and beliefs with respect to those of other faiths.

Religious affiliation in Quebec has changed significantly since the Quiet Revolution. The influx of various religions and spiritualities, particularly Eastern traditions, has raised serious concerns not only for pastors of Catholic Churches, but for the faithful themselves. How do we nourish and deepen the faith, hope, and charity of the faithful assembled in Christian communities with respect to an authentic witnessing within a multi-religious context? In the face of contemporary opinion that believes *all religions are the same*, what approach should we take to convince others of the incomparable hope that the Christian faith gives us? How should we respond to the Holy Spirit's invitations that are offered through humanity's rich heritage of spiritual traditions? How can we contribute to build a world that is more just and fraternal?

The recently published document by the Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops on the training and development of a Christian life, *Jesus Christ, the way to humanization*, offers several pastoral reflections on these issues. Among the characteristics of a Christian profile that we should develop, this document indicates that Jesus' disciples *will learn to find partners for reflection, dialogue and commitment among religious experts and those who hold different worldviews. They will look upon these colleagues as brothers and sisters in communion with God's plan for the world.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Assembly of Bishops of Quebec, *Jesus Christ, the way to humanization, Orientations for the training and development of a Christian life*, Montréal, Médiaspaul, 2004, p. 35.

This characteristic of the Christian profile comprises both openness to others and their differences, and a commitment to deepen and witness to our own faith. The challenge of such inter-religious dialogue is how to function best within this atmosphere of openness and commitment. The purpose of this document is to develop a dialogical approach when encountering our brothers and sisters of other religions. It is prepared for priests, permanent deacons, lay pastoral agents, as well as everyone who wishes to reflect on the question of inter-religious dialogue.

## **Religious Pluralism or Culture Shock**

The appearance of religious and cultural diversity has become increasingly evident. It is no longer necessary to travel far to experience a plurality of beliefs, rituals and lifestyles that characterize the world of religions.<sup>2</sup>

Not only do we encounter people of different religious denominations in our neighborhoods, our workplaces, and sometimes even in our own families, but in thousands of ways the media connects us immediately with the religious traditions of humanity. This experience may awaken our curiosity and desire to learn about other people's beliefs. However, it may also give rise to perplexity and even hostility when the convictions of others question our own or are openly opposed to them. One challenge of religious pluralism is learning how to deal with these differences.

More than the simple fact of diversity, religious pluralism implies the recognition and acceptance of differences at the level of profound beliefs cherished by people and communities that inhabit the same social space. It's not easy to embrace religious pluralism with respect and tolerance, particularly if our most cherished values are questioned. Recent incidents, fueled by religious confrontations, have taught us that differences at this level are often profound, emotionally charged, and laden with prejudices and preconceived ideas.

Believers of one faith can neither ignore nor remain ignorant of another's, and the impact of these differences ultimately leads to asking what constitutes *truth* in religions. This radical and covert question could lead to a superficial assessment that declares *all religions are the same*. Questions about *truth* in religions can be asked several ways. They can focus on the salvific or liberating value when facing weighty issues such as suffering, evil, and death. These questions can also explore the ethical values promoted by different religions. Do these religions promote human life and its full development in justice and peace and with respect

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<sup>2</sup> For animation resources on the theme of religious diversity, see: Office de catéchèse du Québec & Centre Spiritualités et religions de Montréal (C.S.R.M.). *La diversité religieuses*, Fides, Médiaspaul, Novalis, 2001 (Coll. Le Coeur sur la main). See also: Assemblée des évêques du Québec, *Annoncer l'Évangile dans la culture actuelle au Québec*, Fides, 1999.

for the integrity of creation? These questions may also explore the mystical value of various religions as ways of knowing and participating in the mystery of God, of the Absolute, or of ultimate Reality.

### **What degree of openness? What degree of commitment?**

What responsible attitude should we adopt toward these differences? How should we express our openness to others and what should our commitment be to our own faith? A rigid categorization of positions leads us to identify two opposing poles: *relativism* and *absolutism*.

With the former, openness to another's religious heritage leads us to realize that believers of any faith are convinced that they possess the *truth*. Doesn't religious adherence often initially depend on a person's place of birth and culture? The various religious traditions offer an extensive choice of wisdom and spirituality. As these traditions lead to the same ultimate Reality, though by different pathways, a claim by one or another to universal truth only leads to exclusivity and intolerance, possibly resulting in violence and fanaticism.

In contrast to a relativist position, others refuse to believe that *truth* exists in any other religion, often in the name of their absolute commitment to the integrity of their faith. This absolutist position frequently reveals itself in a form of religious fundamentalism: a system of beliefs and practices based on scriptural absolutism, a literal interpretation of sacred text, an opposition to the pluralism and relativism of modern society.

For Christians, these attitudes represent extreme positions, neither of which is acceptable. Though the Second Vatican Council recognized that the practices and lives of people of other faiths often reflect a ray of the Truth that illuminates humanity, the position of the Church has always been to proclaim that Christ is *the way, the truth, and the life* (Jn 14:6) (cf. Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, 2). John Paul II wrote: *Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church: they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and of the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all.* (*Redemptoris misso*, 56).

Belief in Christ, *the way to humanization* for all, and in the Holy Spirit who acts through the members of other religions and their traditions, introduces a criterion of discernment to inter-religious encounters. In the light of the Gospel, the responses from the various religions to the mysteries of the human condition are not equally valid. Should we object to this discernment? Does it not imply a claim to superiority that threatens the inter-religious harmony that is indispensable for peace in the human family? How do we reconcile openness

to the religious truth of others and our commitment as witnesses to the Christian truth, without either taking a relativist or absolutist stance? These are some of the challenges to which the development of a dialogical approach must consider.

### **The paradox of inter-religious dialogue**

In raising questions about believers' identity and responsibility, religious pluralism reveals the challenges of a dialogue, of free encounters among people with a mutual openness that seeks to know others better, and of their commitment and witnessing to the service of *truth*. For Christians, the inter-religious dialogue is neither a strategy to convince others nor an exploration of another's spiritual benefits for their own gain. It is a means to test their own faith. This work of shared exchanges through dialogue, under all forms of expression where human relationships are woven, demands total loyalty to one's own faith, for *all dialogue takes place within the participants' claim to truth*.<sup>3</sup> (free translation)

Each participant's claim to religious truth is the core of inter-religious dialogue. The recognition of the participants' equal dignity is essential to this dialogue. However, this does not indicate that actual differences between religions are insignificant. *This would lead to indifference, which is not to take seriously the claim to truth, either of one's own religion or that of another's*.<sup>4</sup> (free translation) Such indifference would deprive any dialogue of its dynamism as vital research for truth through encountering others. However, radical relativism or scepticism concerning the existence of religious truth which transcends the limits of different religions would short circuit the dialogue to any new insight and render it useless.

Openness to others through an acceptance of differences and a resolute commitment to the service of truth comprise the framework for inter-religious dialogue. In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, the Church has committed herself irreversibly to this paradoxical dialogue. Claude Geffré describes the significance of actually facing the challenges of encountering people and cultures. *"I believe that it is the paradox itself of inter-religious dialogue that is exemplary and full of teachings for all encounters of cultures and people in general. It reconciles the absolute commitment that is implied in every religious process with an attitude of dialogue and openness to the convictions of others."*<sup>5</sup> (free translation)

The paradox of inter-religious dialogue involves the very essence of the Christian faith. The absolute commitment of Christians toward the truth does not call for blind and intolerant

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<sup>3</sup> International Theological Commission, *Le christianisme et les religions*, Paris, Cerf, 1997, p. 87 (No. 101).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.83 (No. 96).

<sup>5</sup> Claude Geffré, Pour un christianisme mondial: *Recherches de sciences religieuses*, 86/1, 1998, pp.61-62.

fanaticism. This commitment is precisely what establishes their openness to others' convictions to the point that we may even say that inter-religious dialogue is "co-natural to the Christian vocation".<sup>6</sup> (free translation)

In fact, the Christian faith is the response to a dialogue of salvation, or *God's plan for the world*, which manifests itself in the invitation to a communion of life that is open to all. The truth of Christianity is not about a doctrine, a law, or a religious ritual, but the Good News of God's attentive and universal love that is revealed and given to us through Jesus of Nazareth. Through their faith Christians welcome this incredible reversal of a religious quest which God has revealed to us. In Christ, the Word made flesh, God himself encounters human beings, *out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself*. (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 2).

As Christians respond to this vocation, their faith will grow as a result of the dialogue with their colleagues from other religious beliefs whom they consider *as brothers and sisters in communion with God's plan for the world*.<sup>7</sup> The document, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, expresses how the claim of the truth of the Christian faith does not justify any feeling of superiority and is itself deepened through dialogue.

The fullness of the truth received in Jesus Christ does not give Christians the guarantee that they also have fully assimilated this truth. As a final analysis, truth is not something that we possess, but a *Person* by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed. This is a continuous process. While keeping their identity intact, Christians must be ready to welcome and receive others, and through them to learn about the positive values of their traditions. Through this dialogue they may be led to overcome deeply-rooted prejudices, to revise preconceived ideas, and at times to acknowledge that their understanding of faith needs purification. If Christians undertake such openness and if they accept that their faith will also be tested, they will be able to harvest the fruits of dialogue. They will be awestruck to discover what God, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, has fulfilled and continues to reveal in the world and among humanity. Far from weakening their Christian faith, true dialogue will deepen their experience.<sup>8</sup> (free translation)

### **Promoting exchange and deepening our faith**

If religious pluralism is a primary concern for the pastoral activity of the Church, it also

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<sup>6</sup> International Theological Commission, *Le christianisme et les religions*, p. 98 (No. 114).

<sup>7</sup> Assembly of Bishops of Quebec, *Jesus Christ, the way to humanization*, p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of People, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations On Inter-religious Dialogue and The Proclamation Of The Gospel Of Jesus Christ*, Vatican, Pentecost 1991, Nos. 49-50.

offers the possibility of harvesting the fruits of dialogue which will nourish Christian life. The development of a dialogical attitude with the enthusiasm of inter-religious encounters necessitates an appropriate pastoral approach. To qualify this pastoral approach, we are inspired by the words of Bruno Chenu: *We are invited to respect the two phases of dialogue: a time for exchange, when the partners share what they believe and have set out to discover, and a time to deepen the experience, where concern for the truth leads the partners to a 'de-centering', to an attentive listening to the other whereby each will grow in their own truth.*<sup>9</sup> (free translation) Let us go back to these two points of reference: a time to exchange and a time to deepen the experience.

To encourage the development of a dialogical attitude within a context of religious pluralism, pastoral activities must first of all promote exchanges between people in a spirit of openness and welcome. Because accurate information about different religions is so essential, hearsay is never conducive to positive interactions, hospitality, and friendly gestures. Information will dispel fears, prejudices, and misunderstandings. Furthermore, only authentic human relationships will make reciprocal witnessing possible in time and place. Through dialogue, the value of each religion is demonstrated *by speaking the truth in a spirit of love* (Eph 4:15).

This pastoral approach must also promote the deepening of the Christian faith beginning with the awareness of differences. It may also purify the faith of forms of expressions previously accepted as absolute through lack of comprehension or by intransigence. This approach may lead to welcoming and recognizing the call to a more profound conversion to God. It is only by reaching out to the more specific and universal limits of what the Christian faith offers, which are service and gift of self, as Christ did, that Christians can have an authentic experience of openness and commitment that is required for inter-religious dialogue.

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<sup>9</sup> Bruno Chenu, *Disciples d'Emmaüs*, Paris, Bayard, 2003, p. 123. (free translation)

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- The exact references to the documents of the Second Vatican Council are the following:
    - Declaration *De Ecclesiae habitudine ad religiones non-christianas (Nostra Aetate)* on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions.
    - Dogmatic Constitution *De Divina Revelatione (Dei Verbum)* on Divine Revelation.
  - Jean-Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* on the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate, December 7, 1990.

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