

Homily – 26 Year B: The Importance of Inter-religious Dialogue

Those of us who were ‘cradle’ Catholics were brought up to believe that in the person of Jesus, and in the teaching of the Church, we are given all that we need to know about God and our relationship with God. We are in possession of ‘privileged information’; we are blessed with a special awareness of God’s Fatherly love for us; we are graced by the guidance of the Holy Spirit in a unique and wonderful way.

But, as the stories in the Scriptures teach us today, we would not be acting aright if we sought to confine the action of God’s love and the movement of God’s Spirit in our world to our own fellowship.

In the First Reading we hear Moses correcting Joshua on this very point. Then, in the Gospel, Jesus challenges the disciples’ attitude towards the man who is not of their company. John says *he is not one of us*, but our Lord sees the man’s actions as evidence that God has touched his heart and life. Jesus recognises the Divine power at work in this stranger.

While the disciples regard the man as something of a threat, Jesus looks on him as a potential friend: *He who is not against us is with us*. Our Lord sees that the man has come some way in his understanding of and response to God – now is the time for further growth in his faith. The stranger’s good will is to be recognised, supported, built upon.

Nowadays the official teaching of the Catholic Church is that God approaches us through a variety of situations, a variety of individuals, a variety of cultures, and through many religious faiths.

Whenever men and women search for the truth and desire to concern themselves with the well-being of their fellow creatures; whenever we strive to live according to the dictates of our consciences; whenever we earnestly follow the lights we are given – God will reveal himself to us – *Ubi caritas et amor Deus ibi est*.

Thus its decree on the relationship of the Catholic Church to other world faiths the Second Vatican Council urged us to...

Reject nothing that is true and holy in these (other) religions. The Church has sincere respect for those ways of acting and living; for those moral and doctrinal teachings which may differ in many respects from what the Catholic Faith holds and teaches, but which, nonetheless, often reflect the brightness of that Truth which is the Light of all men...

The Church urges her sons and daughters to join with members of other religions in discussion and collaboration. While bearing witness to their own Christian faith and life they must acknowledge the good spiritual and moral elements, and social and cultural values found in other religions and preserve and encourage them. (Nostrae Aetate para.2).

And in their Decree on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, the Council Fathers stated:

Any good, any truth found among human beings, has value in the Church's eyes, and it is to be seen as a preparation for the Gospel: it is a gift from Him who enlightens every person so that they may end by possessing the fullness of life. (para.16).

So, while treasuring - and endeavouring to share - what we possess we must have regard for the presence and action of God's grace and light in others not of our faith.

Of course, putting such a large-hearted principle into practice is not so easy. Often our efforts at dialogue with people who have another religion are not reciprocated. We may be rebuffed altogether or our approaches regarded with considerable suspicion. Other believers can also be so sure of the importance of their faith that they are just as intent on converting us to their way of life. In such situations there is no real mutual trust or openness – or chance of progress in our relationships with each other.

There is also sad and bad historical experience to contend with.

For example, the alienation of Moslems through bloody crusades conducted in the name of Christ, and by the imposition of Christian creed and culture under Western colonial rule is a factor that must be acknowledged and repented.

Equally, attempts to spread Islam by the sword or its way of life by *jihad* and gross acts of terrorism are shameful and utterly destructive. Such actions only give rise to insecurities and fears that are a great obstacle to real communication and co-operation.

These negative attitudes must and can be overcome - which is hopefully the desire of the great majority of sincere believers in every religious community,

All the Popes of recent times from John XXIII to Francis I have urged earnest dialogue between representatives of all faiths, and practical cooperation between all believers. For example, Pope Benedict declared (September 2006) that, for the sake of world peace:

We are in great need of an authentic dialogue between religions and cultures... Christians must work together [with people of other faiths], as indeed they already do in many common undertakings, in order to guard against all forms of intolerance and to oppose all manifestations of violence. Religious authorities [of all faiths] have a duty to guide and encourage their believers in this direction.

The very meaning of the Holy Father's title *Pontiff* - or *Pontifex* - is *one who builds bridges*. **Bridge building** is surely urged upon us all by Jesus in today's Gospel.