



Apostles for Today

Prayer and Reflection - August 2016

Dialogue, Relations and Cooperation between People of Different Religions with the Common Purpose of Mercy.

"Go forth, as missionaries, to bring the message of the Father's tenderness, forgiveness and mercy to every man, woman and child" and follow Jesus' example "by reaching out to others, in a spirit of respect and openness, in order to share with them the gift we ourselves have received." (Video message of Pope Francis for the 51st International Eucharistic Congress in Cebu City, Philippines)

Every follower of Christ by Christian vocation is called to live dialogue in daily life, which is motivated by the teaching of the Gospel, and shown in human action through mercy and love of others (Luke 10:27; Rom. 13 9-10). Dialogue is a significant approach to persons of other faith communities for the purpose of mutual understanding, cooperation, and transformation. Our dialogue doesn't end with meetings and conferences but it is a way of living out Christian faith in relationship and commitment to those neighbours.

Scripture gives us many images of neighbourliness which extend across conventional boundaries. In the Old Testament (Genesis 12), we find God challenging Abram and Sarai to go and live among strangers. In the New Testament, Jesus breaks convention by speaking with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:6-30)

and shows how she can be reached through dialogue. Speaking with a lawyer (Luke 10:25), Jesus reminds him that his neighbour, the one to whom he should show love and compassion, and from whom he may receive grace, may be a stranger. Today, our Lord's call to neighbourliness (Luke 10:27) includes the “strangers” of other faith traditions who live in our towns and cities.

Testimony of Relations and Cooperation with other religions:

At this juncture, I would like to share something of my life experience of working with people of other faiths for the common purpose of mercy.

In my 30 years of Consecrated Life, I have been sent to different states of India on mission. Without realising the challenges, I was ready to accept the task entrusted to me by my Congregation. Though I come from a very strong Catholic background, it is here in my ministry that I have discovered my vocation is to give witness to the merciful God in dialogue with the people of different religions.

In one of the Hindu villages, my congregation proposed beginning the ministry of taking care of senior citizens, and eventually I was given the responsibility of constructing a residential building for this purpose. Before I arrived at the place, I was warned about the danger of wearing a religious habit which is not accepted by Hindu fundamentalists in the village. But I was not discouraged or anxious but, rather, was determined to pursue my work from the beginning clothed in the religious habit. Initially, I faced many obstacles which caused sleepless nights, fear and doubts within me. Yet, my trust in the merciful God didn't let this spirit in me die, but urged me to demonstrate his love through my daily service.

Ultimately, one rainy morning, as I was walking towards the village, I saw a man lying under the tree on the water. Though many people passed by no one reached to help him. As every human being, I too hesitated at first, but with the encouragement of my co-sister, a nurse by profession, we lifted the man who was covered with maggots, and washed him in the presence of many bystanders who were of other religions.

This witness of love and mercy towards a Hindu brother transformed the hearts of many fundamentalists around the village, who came forward to render their support. Soon the news of good deeds done by two women of Christ spread around the town. The misconceptions towards a different faith began to disappear in the hearts of the people. At this point I realized that this was a God-given opportunity to visit the families of people of other faiths and take part in their celebrations. This interaction gradually opened dialogue between us to deepen our mutual understanding, and to focus on shared concerns for the common good.

The most joyful event of Christ's birth is celebrated in our village and town with much spectacle. The procession of the live crib is done together with people of other faith traditions. It is remarkable to realise how all faiths teach us to love one another, and encourage building harmony while honouring the integrity of our differences.

Today there is no longer fear of hindrance in my ministry. Most of the workers in our campus are of other religions. We work together by listening and speaking in openness and respect. Our Home for Senior Citizens has become a centre of service for the cause of humanity, where people of other religions become our partners in spreading Christ's message of love and mercy to others.

Conclusion

In this Jubilee Year of Mercy, God is calling us into a new millennium with its own challenges and opportunities. We need to understand how the Holy Spirit works among all peoples of the world, especially among those in other religious traditions. We do not hide our differences, nor avoid conflicts, but seek to make them constructive. Thus, the greater our engagement in interreligious dialogue, the fuller our respect and trust become, leading us to an increase in cooperation and common action. Pope John Paul II, on his first visit to India, said: “Dialogue between members of different religions increases and deepens mutual respect and paves the way for relationships that are crucial in solving the problems of human suffering” (Address to non-Christian leaders, Madras – Chennai, 5 February 1986).

Let us pray with St. Vincent Pallotti

“My God, my mercy, I would like to say – but in looking at You in me, I lose myself; I say little or almost nothing: [...] Work in me, all the more [...]. Since I feel and I believe that in my inconceivably greater misery, [...] I alone am the creature fit to form the most specific object of your infinite mercy. In me alone does your infinite mercy find the capacity to shine, to stand out and to produce its infinite effects” (OO CC, X, p.313-314).

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