

Discourse by Archbishop Felix Machado

This coming together for *Interfaith Dialogue for Peace and Harmony* is indeed a timely one.

With believers of other religions dialogue is always possible on the basis of culture. Culture is a common terrain in which believers and nonbelievers or believers of diverse religions can dialogue. The culture of the People of God, which exceeds national, linguistic, regional, etc., limits, enters into dialogue with other cultures, vitally permeated by other religions. In this dialogue there is mutual enrichment, and the Gospel, incarnated in a concrete culture, can heal and fertilize new cultural expressions.

Asia with its diversity of cultures and creeds, some of which are more ancient than Christianity, presents itself as a cultural mosaic. In any mosaic, every piece, howsoever small, is important to complete the whole picture. If one piece is missing we have an ugly gap. In Asia the mosaic is already there; what we need to do is to illumine it with the Light of the Gospel, so that its beauty shines forth with greater splendour. Let me make use of a parallel. A couple of years back Michelangelo's Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel was restored. This masterpiece, which has been viewed and admired by millions of pilgrims, tourists and art lovers now stands out in all its radiant beauty. The restoration work that took years did not add to the genius of Michelangelo. It only took away what prevented and obstructed his genius from being seen more clearly. It got rid of the soot and dirt that dulled the painting and robbed it of its inner glow.

I like to compare the exposure of diverse cultures to the Gospel as a kind of "restoration". In his Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II dealing with the encounter between the Gospel and cultures clearly states that "the proclamation of the Gospel in different cultures allows people to preserve their own cultural identity. This in no way creates division, because the community of the baptised is marked by a universality which can embrace every culture and help foster whatever is implicit in them to the point where it will be fully explicit in the light of truth" (No. 71). He further adds that "the Gospel is not opposed to any culture, as if in engaging a culture the Gospel would force it to adopt forms which are alien to it. On the contrary, the message which believers bring to the world of cultures is a genuine liberation from all the disorders caused by sin and is, at the same time, a call to the fullness of truth" (ibid.). The encounter of the Gospel with cultures far from diminishing them only further develops them as they open up and blossom more fully.

The human person can achieve true and full humanity only by means of culture. But at the same time, we humans are both child and parent of the culture in which we are immersed. Today we are living in a fascinating world where cultures are encountering each other, influencing one another in the global world. This cultural mix brings a new opportunities as well as challenges.

In this context, it is important to remember that all culture(s) is an effort to ponder the mystery of the world and in particular of the human person. The heart of every culture is its approach to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God. In short, we can say that culture is a particular way in which persons and peoples cultivate their relationship with nature and their brothers and sisters, with themselves and with God, so as to attain a fully human existence. Culture only exists through man, by man and for man. It is the whole of human activity, human intelligence and emotions, the human quest for meaning, human customs and ethics. Culture is so natural to man that human nature can only be revealed through culture.

Man always exists in a particular culture, but it must also be admitted that man is not exhaustively defined by that culture. Moreover, the very progress of cultures demonstrates that there is something in man which transcends those cultures. This 'something' is precisely human nature: this nature is itself the measure of culture and the condition of ensuring that man does not become prisoner of any of his cultures, but asserts his personal dignity by living in accordance with the profound truth of his being.

Contemporary society has been experiencing both a crisis and resurgence in culture which would uphold this dignity of human person.

The crisis in culture is manifested in terms of doubt in the very nature of human person to know the truth. One of the things that characterize the times we live in is the breakdown of absolutes. In morals – sexual anarchy; in metaphysics – doubt; in epistemology – confusion and ambiguity. Symptoms of this cultural and intellectual malaise are everywhere discernible. It often derives meaning or excitement through experiments with sensation, sex and drugs, and if confronted with teachings promoting traditional values or Wisdom of the Ages, it proudly rejects them as outdated and no more relevant to contemporary man. A gradual secularization, increasing prosperity of some people as a role model for others to imitate, liberal education are questioning many of the traditional values and cultural presuppositions. Science and technology are becoming increasingly powerful. Scientific progress and technological advancement is transforming our world and overturning our cultures.

At the same time, we also observe the resurgence of people's movements for an authentic culture which will safeguard human dignity. The revival of this humanistic culture has taken place, according to social scientists, largely because science, technology and rationalism have failed to give meaning in both the personal and occupational lives of individuals and have failed to resolve some of the institutional problems of modern society. They have also failed to provide a guide to the human quest for ultimate meaning. The cultural world of today has led to the deterioration of our environment. The ecological disaster is leading mankind for self-destruction. The deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human existence.

Thus, we are living in a confused world between ethnocentric and relativistic cultural orientations. Some social scientists characterize the present world as Post-Modern World. The Post-modernism seems to be a fluid, multi-dimensional or pluri-cultural and, therefore, transitory phenomenon. However, it suggests that we have gone beyond modernism but does not specify *Where we are going*. But if does not specify where we are going, does it mean that we must remain rudderless and just drift along with low and high tides? Or, and this seems to be more appropriate and relevant, must we seek for a guiding compass?

So, in what direction shall we look and what truths and values shall we endeavour to pursue in keeping with our higher interests and purposes? The breakdown of traditional value complexes, without their replacement leads to moral ambiguity and value confusion.

To build a New Civilization, a civilization of life, we need new vision

Here is the role of Education. True education will teach its students to understand and discern, evaluate and incorporate the true value of science and technology, the usefulness of modern means of communication in the world of globalization. Our education should conscientize people to understand and respond creatively and constructively to the innovative scientific ideas and impressive technological breakthroughs which are transforming the way we live, the way we think and the way we act. People should be made aware that today science is fast becoming a worldview shaping our value systems and rewriting our meaning system. All the same, it is important to understand science is dealing with empirical facts and not with metaphysical realities. Education must be rooted both in reason and faith. Education should incorporate insights both from science and religion. According to the late Pope John Paul II, "Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world, a world in which both can flourish".

There is a need for a creative and constructive dialogue between modern science and religion. Similar sentiments are expressed by Pope Benedict XVI in his latest Encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*. True education will promote integral human development. Pope Benedict says, “The development of individuals and peoples is located on a height, if we consider *the spiritual dimension* that must be present if such development is to be authentic. It requires new eyes and a new heart, capable of *rising above a materialistic vision of human events*, capable of glimpsing in development the “beyond” that technology cannot give. By following this path, it is possible to pursue the integral human development that takes its direction from the driving force of charity in truth”.

I wish to conclude with the appeal that the Holy Father makes in the same Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* to India in particular, and to the great cultures of China and Japan, and the other countries of Asia as well, inviting and encouraging them to explore the riches of their respective cultural heritage to discover therein the elements that are compatible with the faith. “It is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements with their faith in order to enrich Christian thought” (No. 72). Let this be our focus and our goal as we begin this Convention. Thus will Asia be able to reveal anew the face of Christ, thus will Asia make Christ feel at home, for it is in Asia that He was born, for it is to Asia that He gifted the Church and it was from Asia that He sent His first disciples to preach the Good News to the very ends of the earth! May these days together fill us with greater zest and zeal as we approach the Third Millennium to be joyful messengers of the Gospel illuminating with its Light the Mosaic of Asian Cultures and knowing that He is with us always as He promised to be “to the end of time” (Matthew 28:20).