

The Necessity of Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue to Promote the Common Good in Asia

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The Asian Continent is the continent of religions and cultures. This provides a concrete platform for the people of Asia to meet together as believers and to work together to promote peace and harmony. Asians develop their identity in a unique way: rooted in one's own religion and culture yet open to others.

*"The 'seeds of the Word' present in other religious experiences and traditions are touches of the Spirit of God, 'a sort of secret divine presence' (AG 9); this in the last analysis is why members of the Church are exhorted by her to 'acknowledge, preserve, and promote' (NA 2) through dialogue the spiritual values found among them."*¹

Inter-religious Dialogue

Far from competing with each other, the different paths proposed by the different religious traditions can become a powerful source to discern and recognize Christ's presence and the working of the Spirit, to become conscious of one's own identity and to promote the common good in Asia.

*"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."*²

This is made possible through joint collaboration and conscious efforts to pool resources together.

*"As an operative life-force within a people, religion offers new perceptions, new commitments, new patterns of social relations, as well as a series of new freedoms – from fear, from external pressures, even from certain civic laws. Thus early Christian communities were able to question, though not perhaps as radically as we today would have wished, slavery, marriage customs, military service, the place of women and children in society, and the like."*³

In the Asian Continent, dialogue between believers of various religions is carried out with the clear awareness that each one has his/her religious identity which needs to be strengthened and developed.

*"For today to be a person I must be inter-personal, to be religious I must be inter-religious. In other words, to be human and religious, besides tolerance, even more necessary is dialogue. Only thus can we genuinely be our authentic selves, true believers and truly human."*⁴

Inter-religious dialogue is considered as one of the powerful means to get to know other's religion and to deepen one's own.

*"I am convinced that the increased interest in dialogue between religions is one of the signs of hope present in the last part of this century (cf. Tertio Millennio Adveniente, 46). Yet there is a need to go further. Greater mutual esteem and growing trust must lead to still more effective and coordinated common action on behalf of the human family."*⁵

Inter-religious dialogue calls for standing in one's own religious world. Standing within and moving with believers of other religions. It is necessary that in the depth of any effort for interreligious dialogue there ought to be great openness and profound respect for the God of the other. Only when believers learn to dialogue with the language of their encounter with the Other, we can speak of genuine dialogue. The religious vision of a person can colour highly one's whole perspective.

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*"This is the central data of revelation which the Church brings to interreligious dialogue. It is the unending task of the Church to draw out the full significance and implication of this Jesus Christ-event for man's life and future and for the world. For this, the Church needs the religions and cultures. Through such dialogue the Church will learn 'what the Holy Spirit has taught others to express in their religious books, in a marvellous variety of ways, different perhaps from our own, but through which we too, may hear His voice calling us to lift our hearts to the Father' (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 2nd Plenary Assembly, 1978)."*⁷

Today, the phenomenon of inter-religious encounters has sharpened, obscured and subsequently changed how believers understand themselves, even when they continue to insist on their uniqueness and incomparability. The fact of a plurality of living religious traditions now influence believers of all traditions and strongly affects how those believers think about themselves, their most basic beliefs, their cultural and theological reflections. Obviously intelligent and open dialogue with people of other religions calls for significant changes in every field of knowledge. In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, John Paul II emphasised that: "Ecumenical dialogue and interreligious dialogue constitute a veritable vocation for the Church".⁸ Much has been accomplished in the field of interreligious dialogue⁹ at various levels. The FABC¹⁰ documents¹¹ offer us a glimpse into the Asian Church's journey. In interreligious dialogue, Christians "are continually

evangelising the others and being evangelised by the others."¹² It is worth mentioning The *Hong Kong experience of interreligious dialogue*¹³ which has two decades of experience of relations between the believers of six religions: Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Taoism and Catholic and Protestant Christianity.

Understanding religions in the light of experience

"A religion fades out of history when its symbols and institutions lose their capacity to evoke among its followers the distinctive salvific experience [including its behavioural consequences] that defines its essence. Did not this happen to the great religions of ancient Egypt, Rome, Greece, and Mesopotamia".¹⁴

Experience is made up of theory and practice. In order to initiate and sustain meaningful dialogue religions ought to be understood in the light of experience. Our focus here is on real experience of love, joy and suffering shared with others. From personal subjective experience is born a community. We can transfer this very same logic to a religious experience and why not remember here the first group of disciples of Jesus, the 12 of them who have shared and believed in the experience of Jesus the Lord and the five disciples who followed Buddha who shared and believed in the experience of Siddharta's illumination? In both the above-mentioned cases, **experience** is at the basis and remains as the starting point. It is from experience narrated that the community of believers and followers is formed. Experience urges toward expression, or communication with others. As social beings we want to narrate what we have learned from experience. The hard-won meanings have to be said, painted, danced, dramatized, put into circulation.

"I began to point out to students that no religion could be adequately conveyed via a text book. They were not hard to convince, since few of them could relate the textbook's rather academic portrayal of Christianity to their own faith experience. Concluding that in all likelihood devotees of other faiths would have similar difficulty identifying their personal faith experience with the textbook's abstract renderings of faith, I restructured the course, dousing less on learning about the religions (academic content) and more on learning from those who actually believed and tried to practice them."¹⁵

Apostle Paul the great missionary of the Church even today stands out as the champion of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. In him we meet one who was able to take his experience with Jesus to different cultures and religions. Marvellous results are brought to light when one is able to share the fruits of one's religious experience with people of different religions and cultures. In this regard the figure of Paul shines out even today for his ability to cross barriers of every kind to encounter people of different cultures and religious backgrounds.

"It seems clear that for Paul effective or power-laden preaching about Christ is possible when the preachers reflect in their personality the quality of authentic humanity about which they speak and it could hardly be otherwise once we recall that the sending of Jesus Christ inaugurates a new era in the Creator-creature relationship."¹⁶

Human development takes place through cultural innovations. Religion, ritual and its symbolism play a significant role in helping the human person to become what he/she is called to be. The challenge is to place ourselves in some way inside religious processes in order to understand them. As a result the conversion experience can take place. A quote from Victor Turner may help to make this point clear.

"After many years as an agnostic and monistic materialist, I learned from the Ndembu that ritual and its symbolism are not merely epiphenomena or disguises of deeper social and psychological processes but have ontological value, in same way related to man's condition as an evolving species, whose evolution takes place principally through its cultural innovations. I became convinced that religion is not merely a toy of the race's childhood, to be discarded at a modal point of scientific and technological development but it is really at the heart of the matter. Deciphering ritual actions may be more germane to our cultural growth than we have supposed. But we have to put ourselves in some way inside religious processes to obtain knowledge of them. There must be a conversion experience."¹⁷

Inter-cultural Dialogue

The term inter-cultural dialogue is used specifically to denote the dialogue that takes place between people of different cultures. This dialogue is not only expressed and shared in elements of various traditions but also becomes a force that animates, orients and allow the culture to grow. In this way it contributes to the renewal of the cultures in question and enriches the lives of many.

Seen in this perspective, the kind of interaction that takes place between people of different cultures becomes one of mutual enrichment, of constant returning to the sources. As a consequence radical questions that touch the very existence of each person and the life of each community are addressed on a regular basis. While the local culture is enthusiastically engaged in making present the experience in the context of the people, the flow, acceptance and active insertion of people of other cultures and migrants into the worshipping and serving community forces her to open wide her doors and hearts.

"When we bear witness to our religious faith, we make an offer of friendship; we expose what is most intimate and vulnerable in ourselves, most subject to ridicule and rejection. Trustingly we invite others to enter into a personal

*communion of shared faith, a communion constituted by a network of interpersonal relations. Whoever accepts such religious testimony becomes a member of a new community and is changed as a person by that very fact*¹⁸

The socio-cultural realities of Asia urge the Asians to get to know other peoples and cultures. The urgent need to search for better jobs, the strong desire to come up in life, search for higher and specialized education are all factors that favour inter-cultural exchanges. The growing phenomenon of migration and the rapid growth of globalization indeed hasten the process of such dialogues.

Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue in an Era of Migration

Migration challenges us to set hearts on fire, to be open to learn and above all to pay attention to an interreligious and inter-cultural anthropology. The secret is the art of learning to make room in our hearts by a constant process of conversion. The affirmation of Buber *"Man no more has a home"*, is becoming a growing reality also in the world of migration. According to the International Organisation for Migration¹⁹ there are about 150 million international migrants worldwide.

*"The global, nature of migration in our age is what gives it a particular prominence. More people today choose or are forced to migrate than ever before, and they are travelling to an increasing number of countries. International migrants come from all over the world and travel to all parts of the world"*²⁰

A new identity has to be formed in the modern world: an identity that is fashioned by dialogue between religions and cultures in respectful listening to the cries of migrants.

*"I teach Hindus from Bengal and Confucians from the Chinese mainland. Muslims from Turkey meet and discuss issues with Jews from Israel and Buddhists from Vietnam. [...] Even more significant is the fact that increasingly my Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu and Muslim students are Americans, born and raised in places like Sacramento and Pittsburgh. The contributions these Americans are making in my classroom are part of the legacy of the 1965 Immigration Act, which began to undo the racism institutionalized in immigration laws such as the first Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) and the Johnson Reed Act (1924), which effectively stopped immigration from Asia. In barring Asians, these laws also barred their religions."*²¹

Already in 1990 John Paul II had offered the new horizon on which we need to look at the phenomenon of Migration:

"Among the great changes taking place in the contemporary world, migration has produced a new phenomenon: non-Christians are becoming very

*numerous in traditionally Christian countries, creating fresh opportunities for contacts and cultural exchanges, and calling the church to hospitality, dialogue, assistance and, in a word, fraternity"*²².

This new phenomenon produced by migration is truly one full of opportunities. It provides possibilities for contacts and cultural exchanges. Anyone who had the privilege of living in an International or Intercultural community would not hesitate to highlight the tremendous learning process that is being activated in such settings. The cultural exchanges are often so rich that one is able to learn much more than one could ever dream of. The human heart has an incredible ability to expand and explode. Expansion and explosion of hearts takes place when hospitality is given and accepted, when one is welcomed as he or she is, when the other is ready to take an extra step to stoop down and understand. "The participants are convinced that clearly and consciously defined communication policies form an effective method to realize and improve the promotion of the rights of migrant workers."²³ Programs that respond to the needs of the migrants ought to be designed. Migrant workers should not be seen only as receivers of information or objects of cultural adaptation but also as subjects of communication and cultural creation.

*"In our contemporary world, we are all involved with one another. In this sense, our frontier crossing can be a moment of grace when we encounter one another. Such encounters need to make us listen to one another, learn and un-learn from one another and even correct one another. For no one, not even a religion is an independent, self-sufficient island. God uses each of us to speak to one another, especially in and through our frontier crossings and the ensuing encounters."*²⁴

In an atmosphere of fraternity cultural exchanges thrive. Ethnic boundaries do play a significant role.

*"There is a twofold way these ethnic boundaries function: as a demarcation line between, between 'us' and 'them' inside and outside the familiar and the different; and also as an enclosure in which forms a basis of trust and solidarity, and a forum of communal expression which can transform strangers into members of the group."*²⁵

Already a variety of initiatives are carried out in this direction. Inter-cultural forums are at work in some countries with well defined objectives.

*"Objective of the 'Forum' is that of favouring a positive reading of migration in view of a society, called to live together with new cultures, and of a Union, not only more integrated within it's inside but also solicited to be more open to nations from where the migrants come from".*²⁶

It is joint collaboration and networking that helps to discover new areas of collaborative intervention. A research by the International Labour Organization of Geneva, highlights the role of migrant as “mediator for development”.²⁷ The presence of migrants in the families is very often a healthy and positive one. Communities today are becoming more and more pluralist and inter-cultural.

“The ‘cosmopolitan’ make-up of the People of God is visible [...] because migration has transformed even small and formerly isolated communities into pluralist and inter-cultural realities.[...], a mark of the Church expressing her essential openness to all that is the work of the Spirit in every people”²⁸

The new scenario that is created through inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue requires that efforts are made to create new ministries within the Asian Continent and in the human community that can respond to the modern situations and individual needs drawing abundantly from the professional competence and personal holiness of the people. Any reflection on inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good today needs to be contemplated as part of a new way of being brothers and sisters in humble dialogue and sincere openness.

In Asia, the thrust is on offering a more abundant life²⁹, and to “ Use the mobility and migration of the faithful as an opportunity to spread the Gospel of Christ. We should inspire, educate, and organise our migrants to be witnesses of Christ wherever they may go”.³⁰ America is reflecting on “Many faces in God’s house’ and theologians are focussing on “a new way of doing theology called cross-cultural, inter-cultural, or contextual theology”.³¹

Adequate discernment is needed to ensure that the cultures and religions of different people contribute to development.

“Discernment is needed regarding the contribution of cultures, and religions, especially on the part of those who wield political power, if the social community is to be built up in a spirit of respect for the common good. Such discernment has to be based on the criterion of charity and truth.”³²

A new human family

The field of migration and more specially the dynamic interaction among migrants belonging to different religions and cultures open a challenging and fascinating frame of reference to live daily the dialogical nature of the human being. The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference (FABC) in the past years has put stress on Dialogue for a new human family

“We wish to facilitate a further dialogue with the great religions about the meaning of faith and service in daily life. All mankind is rooted in the Christ-event. This anthropology is operative even in those who do not know Christ.

Our main point of contact is the search for a new humanity and a new human family".³³

The further dialogue with the great religions that the FABC wish to facilitate is about the meaning of faith and service in daily life. Making the search for a new humanity and a new human family as the main point of contact, this dialogue is focused on the significance of faith and service in daily life. Great things happen when personal faith of each believer interacts with the faith of his/her partner in dialogue. All great religions uphold the role of service in daily life.

Today, family life is going through tough times, yet in Asia family still remains the sanctuary of life. There is no option for staying connected in the family circle of love. Research has proved that every opportunity for gathering together is exploited to the full and fresh possibilities for such encounters are multiplied.

The family and the common good is indeed a beautiful theme to reflect up on. "By exercising its mission to educate, the family contributes to the common good and constitutes the first school of social virtue, which all societies need"³⁴. In the Asian Continent the task of education is oriented towards the integral formation of the human person and it is heart-warming to see that even the poorest of the poor takes utmost care to educate their children communicating to them lasting values.

The option for the poor of the Asian Church united with the respect for life that all religions and cultures aim to promote permit that conscious efforts are made to make life in abundance possible for all even in the midst of enormous difficulties.

Researches that focus on the experiences of people who spend large amounts of time in cultures other than their own have proved that there is a great amount of similarities in people's experiences despite the wide range of roles they had and the many different countries in which they lived.³⁵

Despite such diverse roles as business person, doctors, diplomat, Peace Corps, professors, people go through similar experiences when adjusting to life in countries other than their own and/or to extensive interaction with people from other cultures. Among these experiences the common ones are a sense of uprootedness, feeling that one has been singled out for special attention, difficulties in developing relationships, and the realization that one's previous knowledge may be inadequate.³⁶

Inter-religious and inter-cultural friendship among people of various religions and cultures are being strengthened today. These 'inter-religious friendship' are a good way for those involved to practice their faith. We are in dialogue with persons who practice various religions and our dialogues are never with Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam. We dialogue with actual Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims etc .

with all their personal strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures, aspirations and ideals. In the genuine spirit of inter-religious and inter-cultural friendship, sharing of spiritual experiences is carried out.

"I celebrate these quite new possibilities of sharing spiritual practices and experiences across our different faith traditions as one of the golden opportunities for discovering new horizons and new spiritual meaning for human life, not only for particular individuals, but for all humanity."³⁷

Common Good from an interdisciplinary perspective

In every continent and also in Asia there are those who are called upon to make public policy. It is a decision for "others" who are not at the decision making table. Looking at common good from an interdisciplinary perspective means illuminated by the light that human sciences and theological disciplines are capable of shedding on the human person, to see how plans and policies could be made and implemented keeping the common good in mind. While respecting diversity every policy must find enough values to make a decision for the common good.

"The principle of the common good, to which every aspect of social life must be related if it is to attain its fullest meaning, stems from the dignity, unity and equality of all people. According to its primary and broadly accepted sense, the common good indicates 'the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily'. "³⁸

The inalienable dignity, unity and equality of all people that is at the basis of the common good makes inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue a possible reality and a lofty ideal to which every human person has to commit self. The human family is capable of expressing global processes, local identities, and above all an inseparable interconnectedness; all that humanity³⁹ holds dear: all that unites, a strong bond of solidarity, compassion and concern for common good and truth. Speaking of concern for truth Bryan Massingale writes:

"A recognition of the valuable but limited insight of every culture into the reality of God means that faith communities are also called to be communities of conscience, that is places where the truth is spoken about the ways in which particular cultures have both formed and malformed our public lives".⁴⁰

Pooling together of insights of every culture not only enriches the human family but also challenges it to be ever on the alert to be constructive and creative in finding ways and means to promote common good.

"Truth is the appropriate object of the mind and intellect, since reason is a kind of light by which we perceive the evidence of what is true and by which we can decide whether what is said is true or false. In this matter there is a

great contest between the truth placed in reason and the human intelligence: what reason can demonstrate as false, the intellect cannot judge to be true."⁴¹

In Asia numerous efforts are made to "balance individual needs with the solidarity of all in the common good". Even in the struggle for life, the common good in health and health care is given priority in many countries of the Asian Continent.

Education is viewed as an important instrument for stimulating the integration of people especially minorities and promoting their social opportunities. The growing need for better-trained people makes it essential for the education system to be opened up to those to whom the language and cultural barriers are too high. In this way the common good can be promoted. Levelling down of cultural barriers, bridging the marked difference between home and school environment, encouraging inter-cultural and inter-religious encounters are all valid means to create awareness in students on how common good is the concern of all. Allowing "Dialogue of life" (RM, 57) to lead the way of interreligious dialogue is one of the most challenging adventures in the field of education. Scholarly studies on religions and cultures and comparative studies are very essential.

"Scholarly comparative study takes the dialogue further. In our institutions and centres such academic studies must be undertaken. The guidelines further affirm: 'Finally there is a specialized form of this scholarly dialogue whose main object is new research into the tenets of religion, and which is concerned with the comparative study of religion. [...]. Research Institutes and scholars should be encouraged to enter into this area with humility and seriousness' (n. 80/81- Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue issued by C.B.C.I. Commission for Dialogue and Ecumenism October, 1989-Second Revised Edition). Such an intellectual dialogue among representatives of different religions is required to dispel ignorance and prejudice which are wide spread among people."⁴²

A careful analysis of the common good and social pluralism undoubtedly will help to highlight the necessity of a healthy and dynamic inter-cultural dialogue. The Compendium of the Social Teachings of the Church is clear when it states that:

*"The common good depends on a healthy social pluralism. The different components of society are called to build a unified and harmonious whole, within which it is possible for each element to preserve and develop its own characteristics and autonomy. Some components –such as the family, the civil community and the religious community respond more immediately to the intimate nature of man, while others come about more on a voluntary basis."*⁴³

The dimension of transcendence

The necessity of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue to promote the common good becomes a fascinating challenge in Asia because people of Asia are well aware how they need to pay attention to the dimension of transcendence. The common good and the dimension of transcendence are very closely linked. The Asians are looking much beyond a merely historical and materialistic vision. Openness to the transcendence is a lived reality in Asia. "A purely historical and materialistic vision would end up transforming the common good into a simple socio-economic well-being, without any transcendental goal, that is, without its most intimate reason for existing." ⁴⁴

Urged by Solidarity

Both inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good has a solid foundation which is based on the fact that we are all responsible for each other.

*"Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people (but)... a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and to each individual, because we are all really responsible for all."*⁴⁵

The world today is becoming ever more conscious of how interdependent we are. We are all really responsible for each other and our cultural and religious values spur us on to commit ourselves to the good of all.

*"For us, as for Jesus, sharing in the life of a community is not just a preliminary mission but is the very core of mission. For it is our solidarity with others which is the basis both for our openness to receive what they have to offer and for our willingness and eagerness to share with them the gift of faith in Jesus and the other gifts we have been given".*⁴⁶

Offering models of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue

"Concern for our neighbour transcends the confines of national communities and has increasingly broadened its horizon to the whole world."⁴⁷ Asians who are committed to inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue can enrich the world by offering models of dialogue. According to Robert Schreiter, *Ministry in a multicultural world* has the following goals: "The implicit goal is reducing conflict. The three progressive goals are recognition of the other, respect for cultural difference, and healthy interaction between cultures"⁴⁸. Well planned and wisely carried out pastoral ministry in the multicultural and pluri religious contexts of Asia can help to offer models of dialogue for common good. "To guide those engaged in the process, the Synod suggested that a directory on interreligious dialogue be drawn up".⁴⁹

In John Paul II's words: "It is therefore important for the Church in Asia to provide suitable models of interreligious dialogue evangelisation in dialogue and dialogue for evangelisation and suitable training for those involved".

Mystics/contemplatives in the modern supermarkets

Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue carried out in the genuine spirit of love and service and aimed at promoting the common good will certainly produce unexpected results. It will bring to the forefront the contemplative dimension that is so very part and parcel of the Asian being. The characteristic note of contemplation is that God's presence is experienced. Pope John Paul II had a stupendous intuition when he affirmed: "My contact with representatives of the non-Christian spiritual traditions, particularly those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation." ⁵⁰

*"God touches us with a touch that is emptiness and empties us. He moves us with a simplicity that simplifies us. [...] You seem to be the same person and you are the same person that you have always been: in fact, you are more yourself than you have ever been before. You have only just begun to exist. You feel as if you were at last fully born. You have sunk to the center of your own poverty, and there you have felt the doors fly open into infinite freedom, into a wealth which is perfect because none of it is yours and yet it all belongs to you. And now you are free to go in and out of infinity."*⁵¹

Starting locally and going beyond

What may prove fruitful for inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good is to start locally. Philip Jenkins draws attention to another important aspect:

*"If in fact the bulk of the Christian population is going to be living in Africa, Asia or Latin America, then practices that now prevail in those areas will become even more common across the globe, This is especially likely when those distinctive religious patterns are transplanted northward, either by migration, or by actual missions to the old imperial powers, to what were once the core nations of world Christianity."*⁵²

There are a number of initiatives, local stories and ways of living that have proved effective and successful. And these provide marvellous opportunities for inter-religious and inter-cultural reflection. Discernment at any case is a must when efforts are directed towards common good.

*"The 'laboratory of life' still offers testimony; and grace, building on nature-open-to-and-hungry-for-grace, can cause 'local stories' to burst to life through their intersecting with the Great Story of what God did for us in Jesus. So it is important to be aware of where signs of life are concretely present and to see how far these are able to bring us. The movement has to be from small to great, from local to global; culturally we must take that much from post-modernity."*⁵³

A careful study of the "local" and the "global" can offer a wider frame to understand what the local provides and the global is not able to offer. They are: a sense of

belonging or identity, a source of moral authority for guidance in life, and a framework of meaning to explain life's events.

"In his studies of minority cultures and ethnic enclaves, educational theorist James A. Banks has hypothesized that ethnic communities provide three things that are often lacking in majority or dominant cultures. They are: a sense of belonging or identity, a source of moral authority for guidance in life, and a framework of meaning to explain life's events.⁵⁴ The larger society (or putative global culture) may hold out options for these three but generally cannot deliver a configuration of them that will be satisfying. To the extent that larger cultural units cannot do this, local cultures persist."⁵⁵

Efforts have to be made to find the significant similarities that link different religions and the differences that distinguish them. In every religion and culture there is something that can enrich the other.

"In spite of Heschel's emphasis on the profound differences among some of the most basic assumptions of Judaism and eastern thought, he argues that Judaism would be enriched if dialogue would occur 'between the river Jordan and the river Ganges.'⁵⁶ He believed that it was vitally important... for Judaism to reach out into non-Jewish culture in order to absorb elements which it may use for the enrichment of its life and thought."⁵⁷

In a world in which we are bombarded by blown up images of intolerance, we need to prepare men and women who will document for us the blossoming of new forms of inter-religious and inter-cultural cooperation and commitment for common good. The process of learning and discerning calls for the task of integration.

"The process of learning and discerning calls for a third task, that of integration. The critically evaluated and articulated truth or practice, derived from another religion, needs to be integrated into the whole of the Christian mystery whereby this truth or practice will appear in a new perspective, and it in turn will shed new light on the Christian mystery itself."⁵⁸

For an appropriate integration of fact and theory in a global context comparative sociology becomes crucial. Today instead of holding on to multiple, mutually oriented centers or to the center-periphery model it is needed to "Know locally and in historical depth, speak currently and globally!"⁵⁹ For a harmonious integration of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good we need to practice dialogue locally and in religious and cultural depth, verbalize our experience and speak globally. Building up of new forms of solidarity and community are fundamental today. It is interesting to highlight that distances are not a barrier today neither for communication nor for relationships.

“The study of mechanisms of social solidarity remains as essential to sociology as it ever was, but the new forms of solidarity are not captured by these distinctions. For example, the creation of ‘intimacy’ in post-traditional emotional relations today is neither the Gemeinschaft nor Gsellschaft. It involves the generating of ‘community’ in a more active sense, and community often stretched across indefinite distances of time-space. Two people keep a relationship going even though they spend much of their time thousands of miles away from one another; self-help groups create communities that are at once localized and truly global in their scope.”⁶⁰

A new religious and cultural identity

A person’s identity is marked by growth and characterized by dynamicity.

“[...] Christian identity becomes clear today only as it is compared with other possible identities. If this comparison is made only through the eyes of Christians of earlier times, it will be distorted. Christians must repent their sins in this regard. They can hardly form the new identity of repentance if they know of other religious identities only vaguely. The study of other attractive religious identities, therefore, is essential to shaping a healthy Christian identity today.”⁶¹

Constant interactions between people of different religions and cultures necessitate the development of a new religious and cultural identity, including doctrines, rituals and codes of behaviour and ethics which would ascertain and maintain his/her special place in the world as a corporate entity. This identity favours the growth of dialogue of spiritual experience. Writing on ‘Dialogue of Spiritual Experience’, Agnelo Gracias highlights:

“In this dialogue, adherents do not deny their own religious identity – on the contrary, real dialogue is only possible if one is a convinced believer in one’s faith. This is true of all forms of inter-religious dialogue.”⁶²

In the Asian context it is necessary to bear in mind that our dialogue partners are culture-specific and religion-specific, and at the same time under a humanitarian perspective they are all part of the one goal the common good.

“[...] Now it seems to me that we theologians must be as interested in Asian though as the early Church was in Greek questions; Africa should interest us as much as the Celtic concerns that freely entered earlier Christian conversations. I think also of how Martin Luther King brought the Declaration of Independence into his own preaching. I remain interested in fragments and forms from all the great traditions.”⁶³

The World today is witnessing a sharp shift in the movement of Christianity from Northern to Southern continents. This leads to challenging theological, inter-

religious and inter-cultural reflections taking shape in the South. Kenneth Fleming, in his book *Asian Christian Theologians in Dialogue with Buddhism*, attempts to understand better the theological issues faced in the Asian context to which the three Asian theologians: Kosuke Koyama, Choan-Seng Song and Aloysius Pieris “relate and the challenges that emerge from it.”⁶⁴ The author affirms:

*“Through their work the three theologians argue that the minority status of the Christian community can be a starting point for rich theological reflection, which seeks to grapple with some of the thorniest and most challenging areas of theology today such as religious pluralism and socio-economic liberation. Their dialogue with Buddhism, it will be shown, relates to the wider social concerns of ordinary Asian peoples, not simply or even primarily to issues of religious belief and doctrine.”*⁶⁵

A new spirituality

Inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good, if carried out in the spirit of humility and genuine openness can truly help us to recognize the “mysterious presence of God in the wisdom of all religions.” The more we enter into dialogue with human reality, with cultures and religions; we commit ourselves to build up that unity between action and contemplation.

*“In sum, Christian mission is nothing more or less than ‘participation in God’s existence in the world’. It is about a respectful, dialogical crossing of cultural, religious, personal, racial, class and even geographical boundaries, it is a ‘single but complex reality’, of proclamation and witness, liturgy and contemplation, efforts at inculturation, participation in interreligious dialogue, commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation, and engagement in reconciliation.”*⁶⁶

This new spirituality that strives for unity between action and contemplation reminds members of various religions to become aware of the “pedagogical function” of other religions.

*“But the proper object and product of Inter-Faith Dialogue is mutual understanding and exploration. [...] However, the only commitment likely to be reached by the dialogist is to further dialogue and not to a change of faith-commitment in either of them. And this outcome of furthering comprehension and exploration has to be the Dialogist’s intention, by which this Species is distinguished.”*⁶⁷

Encounter with other cultures and religions calls for dynamic interaction and constant spiritual discernment. “The Council’s guidelines—set forth in *Gaudium et Spes* and other documents of open, respectful and cordial dialogue, yet

accompanied by careful discernment and courageous witness to the truth, remain valid and call us to a greater commitment."⁶⁸

*"The most productive way to arrive at the truth is to intercommunicate the truth that one holds with truths that others hold. The result of such dialogue could be an enlargement of the truth held by each engaged in such a dialogue"*⁶⁹

To promote a constructive conversation between religions, cultures and contemporary thought dialogue and interaction are necessary. On the basis of the new spirituality there should open a view of the world, a foretaste of its essence, an assessment of its values, a determined way of responding to modern day challenges. Inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good should enrich the world's understanding of religions and cultures because from the world and its problems questions are raised to religion. In this ever dynamic and ever new, transforming encounter, a fruitful illumination of human existence is attained.

*"A new consciousness of the world-wide Church and the interdependence of humanity had begun to raise questions about some of the assumptions, which theological education in the Western world was built. Cross-cultural awareness made those in the West conscious that their culture and religious view of the world were no longer normative. Theological schools in North America were faced with the challenge of educating students who would have a new global mandate within a global Christian community, confronting the realities of religious and cultural pluralism, demanded answers."*⁷⁰

Join the dance of life

*"Today, the dialogue of the Christians in Asia should be as an insider. We take our Asianness seriously as the context of our being Christian, fully involved in the joys, sorrows and struggles of people in the construction of their nations in the light of the Gospel values. The dialogue should be concerned about the evolving consumerist culture. Christians in Asia must actively participate in creating a new world order of civilization where the good values of Asia challenge the consumerist and market oriented values of capital. For this the Asian Christians have to be rooted both in their Christian faith as well as their culture."*⁷¹

The changes of the religious and cultural self-comprehension on the level of society, of the faith community, of the individual express themselves in changing and ever new patterns. It will be utter waste of time to pretend to have a fixed and neat ready-made schema that will offer us a clue on the various expressions of the changes of the religious self-comprehension. Migration, inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue has set the music for us and we need to enter into the dance of life. Lead by the Spirit and in constant openness to that inner voice that calls us to put on the heart of flesh, we need to make time to listen to real life

stories. Stories of our neighbours, their daily struggle for survival and their burning desire to respond to the call of the other.

*"I think that any search for cosmic or universal communion should be based on inter-religious understanding. At that level every religion can contribute certain universal perspectives. A dialogue between them can lead to mutual understanding, enrichment and collaboration. Globalization based on such foundations will certainly lead to cosmic harmony."*⁷²

Conclusion

Leadership for common good may sound strange but it is needed to promote effective inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. Leadership inspires and mobilizes others to undertake collective action in pursuit of the common good. Strengthening relationships with believers of other religions and cultures is possible in the company of leaders who are able to motivate and set the example. Remember: A boss says, "Get going!" A leader says, "Let's go!" No one can aspire to leadership who does not delegate authority. This is the true test of leadership and also the prime compliment to those to whom authority is delegated. Delegation in the field of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good will also favour the building up of healthy human communities. The most important concern of a leader is the other person, the person he/she leads. Within the context of our theme, this concern becomes a delicate and responsible task as it has to deal with people of different religions and cultures. "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader" declares John Quincy Adams.

Hans Küng ⁷³ presents dialogability as a "deeply democratic virtue which can only survive under the umbrella of a positive intellectual, cultural, and religious pluralism, under the reign of liberty, equality, and fraternity."⁷⁴ The stress no doubt is on the attitude that prompts dialogue and the way the other is viewed:

*"Those leading dialogue do not want to impose their will on others; they do not perceive others any longer as threat, but as an enrichment to life, not as competitors but rather as partners. Actually, how many crises, catastrophes, and human miseries could have been avoided, had this virtue of dialogability not been continuously kicked about?"*⁷⁵

Leaders with a contemplative slant are in a better position to lead dialogue and guide others to the common good. The task of discerning God's saving work in the here and now of our history necessitates that we are tuned to read the signs of times in which we find ourselves. From this springs forth the urgency to encourage more collaborative and interdisciplinary reflections in the field of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good.

*"Only a humanism open to the Absolute can guide us in the promotion and building of forms of social and civic life-structures, institutions, culture and ethos-without exposing us to the risk of becoming ensnared by the fashions of the moment. Awareness of God's undying love sustains us in our laborious and stimulating work for justice and the development of peoples, amid successes and failures, in the ceaseless pursuit of a just ordering of human affairs. [...] God gives us the strength to fight and to suffer for love of the common good, because he is our All, Our greatest hope."*⁷⁶

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