

Learning the Art of Dialogue

Brother Richard

If our Church is to be, indeed, "catholic," then we all, hierarchy and lower-archy, have to have the courage to leave our secure perches beneath obscuring Summas, that pretend to contain all truth within the confines of their syntheses, doctrines, definitions, and formulas. We have to shake off our dislikes and deeper prejudices that constrict our hearts and make them so unlike the universally loving heart of our Master. We need to have courage ...to take off the shoes of our customary ways and walk among our brethren...one with them in a common search for peace, harmony, and spiritual enlightenment. It will do us little good to have the right dogmatic answers (the devils know the truth, too) if we do not have that experience of the truth that calls forth from us a complete "yes," that calls us forth from our everyday earth-bound consciousness into the clarity of a compassionate, universal love. So long as we do not love - and love involves respect, acceptance, and appreciation - any one single human person then we do not love Christ, we are not Christian, for "whatever you do to the least, you do to me." ¹

M. BASIL PENNINGTON, OCSO

On Wednesday, October 12, 2005, Brother Placid and I participated in a meeting at Assumption College, Worcester, MA, with the Catholic bishops and the leadership of monastic and religious communities of men (CMSM) from the New England region. On Tuesday evening before the meeting, we were offered hospitality by our Cistercian brothers, the monks of St. Joseph's Abbey, Spencer, Massachusetts. In the midst of their gracious welcome of hospitality and prayer, we had a moment to visit the grave of Fr. Basil Pennington, a monk of Spencer and friend of our community for many years. He had died on June 3, 2005, from complications due to serious injuries incurred in an automobile accident.

During the visit to Spencer, I was reading a passage from one of Fr. Basil's recently published books, and I was struck by the text quoted above. It seemed relevant for the meeting with the bishops on the following day. He was addressing the heart and spirit of all dialogue: the mutual search for truth, guided by a love that "involves respect, acceptance, and appreciation" for one another as valued and equal partners-in-dialogue. Knowing Fr. Basil, he is not dismissing the teaching ministry of the Church; but he is putting this ministry into the Gospel perspective of Jesus' summation of the Law and the prophets: the love of God united in the love for one's neighbor.

Every few years the leadership conference of monastic and religious communities of men from New England has arranged a dialogue with all the bishops of the region to reflect

together upon the nature of our lives and our calling as monastic and religious communities witnessing to the Gospel today. Mutual concerns and different approaches to Gospel life, reflected in the charisms of our communities, have provided a focus for the exchange. The bishops have been supportive and listening, and have shared from their perspective an appreciation for our communities' presence in the local and universal Church. The basic document for the dialogue has been *Mutuae Relationes* (Mutual Relations: Bishops and Religious in the Church) written and published by the Vatican in 1978.

Archbishop Henry Mansell of Hartford, Connecticut, speaking on behalf of the bishops, highlighted the call to “communion” found in *Mutuae Relationes* and other church documents written in more recent years. Fr. Richard Myhalyk, the provincial of the Society of St. Edmund from here in Vermont, and representing the monastic and religious communities of the region, addressed both our mutual concerns and some differences in understanding. Being seated in small groups at round tables for discussion of the presentations seemed symbolic, in that it enabled us easily to go around the pointed corners and rough edges that can sometimes hinder a dialogue. The presentations and discussions have stimulated some further reflection that I would like to share.

The call to “communion” in the Church must have the character of love and mutual respect for one another. The awakening clarion call of the Spirit is inviting “real newness” and “freshness” ² in our common life and its witness to the Gospel for our times. St. Paul, in the letter to the Romans, reminds us: we are “one body and, as parts of it, we belong to each other.” ³ The challenge of dialogue and communion is such an important Gospel imperative for present-day relations within the Church and all its members; between the Churches; in interreligious dialogue; and finally widening out into the social and political realities of our world-especially with the poor, who are the fertile ground from which the Reign of God is emerging.

Dialogue is growing to know and appreciate one another; but it is much more than being cognizant of facts about the other. It is entering into the experience of the other, and seeing from within as the other sees. It is “leaving our secure perches,” as Basil says, “tak[ing] off the shoes of our customary ways and walk[ing];” ⁴ crossing over to meet the other where he or she is, and then returning home fully renewed and enriched. Such a journey will never leave us the same! It is an experience of conversion. And the rich diversity that emerges is what makes us truly “catholic,” i.e., open and embracing all.

The different gifts and forms of community witness do not divide but mutually complement one another. The international character of many of our communities brings with it a rich diversity of charisms, cultures, theologies, and ecclesiologies. We must learn to respect and celebrate these differences for the sake of the “one communion and mission of the self-same Body.” ⁵

Some of us will emphasize more the institutional and sacramental aspects of the Church; while others will be guided more by the vision of the Church as the Body of Christ (Mystical Body), a school of communion, herald of the Reign of God, and/or the servant model. The question today is, How can we respect the concern and perspective of the one and, at the same time, find ourselves enriched in the creative vision of the other?

In our communities of men (monastic or religious), we are *brothers* first and foremost, with clear equality among all the members. Today, an excessive emphasis on priesthood and clerical life mitigates the universal call to holiness and discipleship of the whole Body. The lay character of our monastic and religious life is a gift to the entire Church as the role of the laity comes more and more to the fore as the locus of God's Spirit calling us into the future. Our community life, as religious or monastics, witnesses to an alternative vision and option for living the Gospel in our world today.

Dialogue is an art that we learn in the humility so central to the Gospel message and to the Rule of Benedict. We acknowledge that we do not have all the answers; and we respond simply to the challenge to live the Gospel mandate of love honestly with God and neighbor. The questions posed, and the creative art to be learned, continue to engage our monastic life as we faithfully listen to God speaking in the heart of each and all of us, and as we joyfully await together the advent of God's Reign breaking-in among us. ☩

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1. M. Basil Pennington, OCSO, *Engaging the World with Merton*, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2005) 31-32
 2. *Mutuae Relationes*, chapter 1, section 2, (Washington, DC: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops) May 2004.
 3. Romans 12:5
 4. Pennington, *op. cit.*, 31-32
 5. *Mutuae Relationes*, chapter 1, section 2.
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