

Seeing the Face of God: A Monastic Dialogue

In 1960, when Pope John XXIII received a group of more than 100 American Jews at the Vatican, he surprised them as he welcomed them with open arms, saying warmly in Italian, "Sono io, Giuseppi, il fratello vostro!" (I am Joseph, your brother!).

Pope John was making reference to the biblical story of Joseph told in chapters 37 to 50 of the book of Genesis. During the famine in the land of Israel, the brothers of Joseph had to travel to Egypt in order to buy grain to feed their families. Since Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of the granaries, the brothers had to address him with their request. Joseph recognized his brothers after the many years of separation, but his brothers did not recognize him. On the brothers' second visit, Joseph could no longer control his tears and broke down, weeping for the estrangement and separation they had over the years and with joy to see them again. He motioned to his brothers to come closer, and he said to them, "I am Joseph your brother." (Gen. 45:4)

The spirit of this reunion of Joseph with his family is captured in the greeting of Pope John to his Jewish visitors; and it was later reflected in the important step taken at the Second Vatican Council that issued in the document, *Nostra Aetate*,¹ "The Relationship of the Church to Other Religions." Pope Paul VI promulgated this epoch-making document on October 28, 1965, two years after the death of Pope John, the anniversary itself of Pope John's election in 1958. This year we celebrate the 40th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*! Our brother, Abbot Leo Rudloff, was a member of a commission that formulated the direction and helped compose drafts of the document. His own input and experience came through his relations with the Jewish people. This relationship was a passion of his life!²

The conciliar document, *Nostra Aetate*, proclaims that all the peoples of our world "comprise a single community and have a single origin" and that they all "look to the various religions for answers to those profound mysteries of the human condition which, today as in olden times, deeply stir the human heart..."³ In the midst of the present-day famine caused by division and disunity in our world (like in the days of Joseph and his family), the quest for sustenance and peace remains the longing of the human family and lies at the heart of the monastic search for God. The human heart needs to uncover again our common origins and unity in God. We need to recognize one another as truly brother and sister. And we must face honestly and with humility the painful reality that religion can still be a basis for division and war and violence in our world. Like Joseph, we can no longer hold back our tears.

In the apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* ("At the beginning of the New Millennium")⁴, John Paul II imaged the Church as "the home and school of communion ...responding to the world's deepest longing."⁵ He spoke of the fidelity of the Church in its commitment to the "great challenge of inter-religious dialogue." He wrote,

"[T]his relationship of openness and dialogue with the followers of other religions... must continue. [I]t is obvious that this dialogue will be especially important in establishing a sure basis for peace and warding off the dread spectre of those wars of religion which have so often bloodied human history. The name of the one God must become increasingly what it is: *a name of peace and a summons to peace.*"⁶ He exemplified this commitment on October 27, 1986 when he invited the representatives of world religions to come together in Assisi and pray for peace.

In January of this year, the annual meeting of Benedictine Abbots and Priors from the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Central America invited Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald to lead the reflection days. Archbishop Fitzgerald is the President of the Pontifical Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue, a member of the religious congregation, the Missionaries of Africa, and a Christian authority on Islam.

Archbishop Fitzgerald began his reflections by stressing the important role of Church, and especially monastic communities, to foster relations with the other religions in the world. His starting point is that all persons are touched by the love of God, and the Spirit of God works in the depths of all consciences and cultures, in all traditions and rites. The role of the Church is to humbly listen and respond to this movement of the Spirit.

The Church's mission is to be in dialogue with all peoples and to offer itself in service to build up the one human community. In the Commission's document, *Dialogue and Proclamation*⁷, published in 1991, the term chosen to define dialogue is "relations," clarifying that dialogue does not only mean verbal exchange but includes the many kinds of human interaction. The goal is first of all "mutual understanding," that is, understanding others as they want to be understood. To be in a relationship of dialogue each person has to be open, ready to listen, to put aside preconceived and prejudicial notions, and to be willing to truly learn from the other.

Archbishop Fitzgerald explained the different forms that this dialogue can take: the dialogue of life, growing to become neighbors, sharing the joys and sorrows of the human situation; the dialogue of action, collaborating for the integral development and liberation of the human family; the dialogue of formal (theological) exchange; and the dialogue of religious experience. Monastics are especially called to the dialogue of religious experience, to share the richness of their prayer and contemplative tradition in its search for God or the Absolute.⁸

Continuing with his reflection, Archbishop Fitzgerald pointed out that the presence and survival of monastic life has been essential to the full flowering of any religion, including Christianity. He then asked the question: why is the monastery such an important place for such dialogue and the developing of inter-religious relations? He mused and answered his question saying that the monastery is "a different sort of place;" it is engaged with the world but not caught up in ways of the world. It is a

place of welcome that points to what is basic and essential about human life. The monastery provides an atmosphere of silence that is not absolute nor threatening; and, at the same time, it creates an environment of poetry and celebration that communicates, beyond words or concepts, to those who may not otherwise understand. And more so, because of the stability of the community, a monastery can offer the solid ground for dialogue and for the growth of human friendship - a stability that generally an individual alone cannot offer.

Addressing the Monastic Inter-religious Dialogue⁹, on the occasion of its 25th anniversary, Archbishop Fitzgerald wrote, "On the basis of your experience of life and of your hospitality to others in prayer... the inter-religious dialogue takes up and enlivens the search for God to which you are called by your Benedictine vocation."¹⁰

Inter-religious dialogue is not an attempt to bring a unity of belief, some new universal religion, nor is it a desire to change the other; rather it brings a hope to discover the common elements and deeper unity that we already share. Following the movement of the heart, persons engaged in dialogue learn to respect one another as they come to know each other and thereby know themselves. They grow in love for others and truly search together for truth, humbly recognizing that no one possesses it all. They are on a pilgrimage that the Spirit is leading; and for monastics, as well as for the whole Church, they cannot look for success as much as to recognize that it is God's initiative to which they have been called to respond.

The days of reflection with Archbishop Fitzgerald concluded with an exploration into the growth of present-day, modern religious fundamentalism among all the religious traditions, its causes, and its misuse of religion in public life. He also shared a sensitive appreciation for the depth of spirituality in Islamic faith and culture that he drew from his personal study and life among the Muslim peoples of Africa. Possibly we will have the opportunity to explore these important dimensions in future bulletins.

The Gospel image and challenge of Jesus to Peter and the other disciples rings as true today: "Put out into the deep..." In all humility, Peter responded that they had worked hard all night and have not succeeded, but "if you say so, we will again lower the nets"(Lk. 5: 4-10). As the conciliar document, *Nostra Aetate*, says, "the Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions... but even more so looks with sincere respect upon their teachings that often reflect a ray of the Truth that enlightens all [persons.]"¹¹ The monastic vocation is this search for Truth in all persons and to find all persons in this Truth.

Thomas Merton, in his monastic search through the dialogue with other religions, challenges us to put out into the deep and not to separate ourselves in a self-sufficient individualism, but to discover the other in ourselves and ourselves in the other¹². Raimon Panikkar¹³, an author and scholar who has long been involved in the inter-

religious dialogue for years and who has spoken of the "monk" in us all, said in an interview with the French periodical *Le Monde*:

If I do not discover in myself the terrain where the Hindu, the Muslim, the Jew, and the Atheist may have a place - in my heart, in my intelligence, in my life - I will never be able to enter into a genuine dialogue...¹⁴

As we "put out into the deep," we must set out like Abraham and Sarah, leaving behind all our certainties, and journey to a new land where, in the ineffable mystery of life, we discover our common humanity. In taking the step of reconciliation with his brothers, Joseph may have remembered the example of his father, Jacob. For when Jacob encountered his brother Esau after a long time of separation and estrangement, he rejoiced that they had found one another again, and he humbly exclaimed, "Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God." (Gen. 33:10)

Brother Richard

1. *Nostra Aetate*, "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," in Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed.. *Documents of Vatican II: Translation and Notes*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 660-8.
2. See the book: *Benedictine Legacy of Peace: The Life of Abbot Leo A. Rudloff*, by Brother John Hammond (Weston, VT: Weston, Priory, 2005), 183-5. Note the enthusiasm he had that the document *Nostra Aetate* was promulgated by the Council, as well as his disappointment with what he considered a "watered-down version" of the original draft submitted to the Council.
3. Cf. *Nostra Aetate*, (section 1), in Abbott, ed.. *Documents of Vatican II*, 660.
4. Apostolic Letter: *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Pope John Paul II, Rome, January 6, 2001, section 43.
5. Cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, section 55.
6. Ibid.
7. *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection And Orientation On Inter-religious Dialogue And The Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, Rome, May 19, 1991.
8. Cf. *Dialogue and Proclamation*, section 42.
9. The Monastic Inter-religious Dialogue (MID) is a group of Benedictine and Cistercian men and women committed to fostering inter-religious and inter-monastic dialogue at the level of spiritual practice and experience among contemplatives of the diverse religious traditions. In 1974 the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians contacted Abbot Primate Rembert Weakland to encourage the Benedictines to become involved in the inter-religious dialogue since "monasticism is the bridge between the religions." An official commission for North America was organized in 1978.
10. "Reflection by Mgr. Michael Fitzgerald on 25 Years of MID," *Bulletin 70 (March 2003)* Monastic Inter-religious Dialogue.
11. Cf. *Nostra Aetate*, section 2, in Abbott, ed.. *Documents of Vatican II*, 662.
12. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, (New York: Doubleday Image, 1989) 143f.
13. Raimon Panikkar is a theologian, author, and priest of the diocese of Varanasi in India. He was raised in Spain by a Catholic mother and a Hindu father. He has made inter-religious dialogue his life's work.
14. Henri Tincq , "Eruption of Truth: An Interview with Raimon Panikkar," translated by Joseph Cunneen, *Christian Century*, August 16-23, 2000.