



Célébrer le 27 octobre :

**Journée sma pour le dialogue œcuménique, interreligieux et interculturel**

## **La beauté exigeante du Dialogue pour la mission de l'Église**

*par Sr Marie-Hélène Robert, nda*

The dialogue was widely relayed by missiologists and missionaries, thanks to the impetus given by the Second Vatican Council. After the Council, there was a period of enthusiasm characterized by multiplications of commissions, proliferation of texts and commitments, of concrete initiatives in favor of the dialogue between believers of various religions, of various Christian traditions, as well as with any person of any culture. Through his 'envoys' God enters into dialogue with the world. The Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesiam suam* of Pope Paul VI (1964) durably marked the missionary conscience of the Church. Now, it seems impossible to envisage the mission of the Church without the dialogue dimension, without the spirit and methods of dialogue. Dialogue implies the respect and consideration of others, it demands courage. The hymn of charity of Saint Paul in 1 Cor 13 appears as the charter of dialogue. I propose to begin to re-read it with the word dialogue and a lived experience in mind.

### **The foundation**

*Though I command languages both human and angelic -- if I speak without love, I am no more than a gong booming or a cymbal clashing.*

*And though I have the power of prophecy, to penetrate all mysteries and knowledge, and though I have all the faith necessary to move mountains -- if I am without love, I am nothing.*

*Though I should give away to the poor all that I possess, and even give up my body to be burned -- if I am without love, it will do me no good whatever.*

*Love is always patient and kind; love is never jealous; love is not boastful or conceited, it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, it does not take offence or store up grievances.*

*Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing but finds its joy in the truth.*

*It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes.*

*Love never comes to an end. But if there are prophecies, they will be done away with; if tongues, they will fall silent; and if knowledge, it will be done away with.*

(Translation: The Jerusalem Bible)

It is in the name of charity and according to the modalities of charity that dialogue is founded. Faith and works bow to it. Charity is recognized through the behavior of people who are always striving for a life geared toward holiness, despite the difficulties. What seems to make our glory (prophecies, languages, knowledge) does not have the perfection of charity and these realities will "pass".



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Charity "excuses everything" and yet charity "puts its joy in the truth". Dialogue in charity is not a naive discussion between persons of a good society, governed by an etiquette. It requires commitment, endurance, patience. In dialogue "the union of truth and charity, intelligence and love is realized" (*Ecclesiam suam*, n° 85).

Great witnesses of dialogue can be mentioned here. They are remembered for their extraordinary ability to love their fellow men and women.

### **Witnesses**

Francis of Assisi, Matteo Ricci, Louis Massignon, Charles de Foucauld, Christian de Chergé, and many others, were figures of charity, reflections of the attitude of Christ engaging conversation with anyone who approaches him.

The attitude of Christ is in turn a reflection of the attitude of God: it is a dialogue of communion which founds the Trinitarian relations of all eternity; but also, God, from the moment of creation, enters into a Covenant with humanity through the witnesses he chooses. God commits his people to live in tension between his inalienable consecration, and his mark of service in the world. The fact that enemies speak to each other and manage to love one another is a sign of the action of the Holy Spirit in the people he created in his own image, called to live according to the highest gifts of God.

The dialogue witnesses demonstrate the importance of the process in the dialogue: a first step shows the importance, the interest for the future partners of dialogue. Then the stage of healing memories, reconciliation, allows to become aware of what makes the dialogue difficult and demanding, but also full of promises. The stage of mutual recognition can then lead to the stage of the exchange of gifts, spiritual, gracious, theological.

### **Challenges and fine-turnings**

However, in the West, since the years 2000, the question of the dialogue seems to become problematic. The context of religious pluralism can invite either to a soft dialogue that no longer seeks the truth, or to a refocusing on the specificity of one's faith, a refocusing so strongly that the partner of the dialogue is seen not as not a partner to love, but rather as an enemy to avoid. Both tendencies exist in the Church today and do not do justice to the spirit of dialogue which is being challenged.

These two tendencies come from the "the disappointed ones of dialogue", frightened by the rise of fundamentalisms and religious violence. But most often they emanate from new generations who criticize the "generation of dialogue" for failing to transmit the Christian faith. It is true that several theoreticians and experts of dialogue had come to disqualify the proclamation of the Gospel. The direct proclamation of the Gospel was denounced as incompatible with the dialogue because the partners accused the Christians of having behind the mask of dialogue an indirect desire to convert others. It was therefore necessary to "choose one's side". But such a position is not in line with the mission of the Church called by God to announce the Good News of salvation in the spirit of dialogue and charity, but also called to dialogue in order to spread the Good News.



The encyclical of Pope John Paul II (1990), *Redemptoris missio*, is the reference magisterial text that I retain for this question. He asserts that many have the right to know the richness of the Mystery of Christ; the Church therefore has the mission to propose it to them and man is free to decide whether or not to convert. The conversion proposal requires the respect of consciences (*RM* 7, 8 and especially 39). *RM* therefore reaffirms the supremacy of the direct (verbal) proclamation of Christ for the conversion of persons and cultures, but without improper proselytism: the proclamation of the Word of God, inspired by faith, "is ordained to Christian conversion, that is, full and sincere adherence to Christ and his Gospel by faith" (*RM* 28). Conversion leads to repentance, baptism and entry into the Body of Christ, the Church. As for those who follow other religions, they can receive the grace of God and be saved by Christ outside the ordinary means that He Himself instituted. But this does not cancel the call to faith and baptism that God wants for all peoples (*RM* 10 and 55). There is no other mediator than Christ.

In the Encyclical, the interreligious dialogue is valued in these terms: "Through dialogue, the Church intends to discover the "seeds of the Word ", the "rays of truth that illuminate all people", seeds and rays that are found in the people and in the religious traditions of humanity. Dialogue is founded on hope and charity, and it will bear fruit in the Spirit. Other religions are like a positive challenge to the Church today; indeed, they incite the Church to discover and recognize the signs of the presence of Christ and the action of the Spirit, and to deepen her identity and to testify to the integrity of the Revelation of which she is the depositary for the good of all. The difficulty is to hold these threads together.

In sum, in a context of religious pluralism, the mission must position itself against the negation of differences (holism, relativism), and against a dualist, Manichean vision of the world. On the other hand, it advocates a reconciliation, which only God can achieve, to which He associates His Church, which does not lose sight of the eschatological horizon of the mission entrusted to her.

The question of dialogue is at the heart of Christian relations to the world and to other religions when the Church faces diversity. In a pluralistic context, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue are attempts to go beyond the mere juxtaposition of entities. It is not surprising that the Catholic Church continues to defend the need for dialogue, against adverse winds, despite the partners' lack of response or experiences of disenchantment. For it is part of his special grace: to work with God to bring humanity together in His Kingdom of with peace and truth in charity.

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