

The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Evangelizing Mission of the Church

FABRICE BLÉE

FABRICE BLÉE, assistant professor at Saint Paul University's Faculty of Theology, is author of the book, *Le désert de l'altérité: une expérience spirituelle du dialogue interreligieux*, Montréal: Médiaspaul, 2004.

Résumé

La mission chrétienne ne peut plus faire l'économie du dialogue interreligieux. Ce dernier est appelé à y jouer un rôle décisif. Ne pouvant se réduire à un simple moyen de conversion au service de l'annonce, il se présente plutôt comme le creuset d'où celle-ci saura trouver ses priorités et sa mise en œuvre en phase avec le monde actuel au bénéfice d'une Église occidentale renouvelée et de la paix entre les peuples.

"[...] we feel ourselves called to unity by God.
It is hence necessary to let God invent something new among us.
And this can't be done but through prayer."
A Muslim's comment to Christian de Chergé.

Introduction

Nowadays mission is under challenge: its relevance and role is increasingly questioned in the Western Christianity in crisis. The followers of Christ are becoming an ageing minority, vocations are down, priests are collapsing under the weight of administrative responsibilities and religious communities worry about their decrease in numbers. As for the believers, if they are still numerous, their understanding of God and of Christian faith is often vague and influenced by other religious beliefs. Is the West still Christian? For many, Christianity is foreign, even strange¹. Having become

1 In April 1999, Raimon Panikkar wrote: "Christianity is no more the religion of Europe. Money and technique count more. Without these, Europe would not survive. She lives practically without Christianity. Europe cannot dispense with religion, but Christianity is no more Europe's religion." However, he adds: "[...] Europe cannot detach itself from Christianity;

just a point of reference among others, Christianity shares the spotlight with atheists, agnostics, new religions, and the New Age movement or still with the world religions some of which have had certain success. Henceforth religious pluralism is a characteristic of our society.

As the de-Christianization of the West reached its climax, John Paul II called for new evangelization, reminding us also that mission is the responsibility of all baptized persons. In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, the Pope affirms that “missionary activity is a matter for all Christians”². Mission is hence not reserved to the religious orders, for it is the primary Christian vocation. Although this was plainly evident since long, one had to wait until Vatican II to affirm it clearly. This general appeal to mission present in *Ad Gentes* was, however, first launched in 1957 by Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Fidei Donum*. This initiative was taken at a tumultuous time when the Church was losing ground at all fronts in a changing world. She realized that it was impossible to act as has been done hitherto.

If Christians are summoned to mission, they need also ask what exactly mission is and how one works towards it. Now is the time for reflection and concerted action. The papal document *Dialogue and Proclamation* (DP) echoes this notion: “[...] the Church seeks to discover the right way to announce the Good News. She takes her lead from divine pedagogy. This means learning from Jesus himself, and observing the times and seasons as prompted by the Spirit” (DP 69)³. What does it mean to be a missionary in a society where all religions have the right to practise, and interreligious dialogue imposes itself as the only alternative to promote peace? How to integrate into mission this dialogue which with John Paul II has become the vocation of every Christian? The effort to meet the other in his or her faith and belief becomes thoroughly an ecclesial gesture. This is a great challenge indeed!

Cardinal Marella, President of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, had this to say in 1968 about the rapport between interreligious dialogue and mission: “Dialogue! This is the great and formidable slogan of our times”⁴.

she cannot blot that out from her history. Europe cannot undo herself of it; she is endowed with the profound [Christian] archetypes”. “Réflexion sur la religion et l’Europe”, www.globenet.org/archives/web/2006/; www.globenet.org/horizon-local/cultures/pannik.html, p.3.

2 JOHN-PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (RM), (Dec. 7, 1990), n. 2.

3 See also, “Dialogue et annonce. Réflexions et orientations concernant le dialogue interreligieux et l’Annonce de l’Évangile de Jésus-Christ”, in *Bulletin. Pontificium Consilium pro Dialogo inter Religiones* 77 (1991), p. 251-302.

4 See Jean COMBY, *Deux mille ans d’évangélisation. Histoire de l’expansion chrétienne* (coll. *Bibliothèque d’Histoire du Christianisme*, 29), Paris: Desclée, 1992, p. 295.

To deploy fully the interreligious logic, one needs revisit the main themes of Christian faith and capture the proclamation of the Gospel from a different perspective. According to Karl Rahner, the stake is such that it will be difficult to recognize the face of the Church to come⁵. Are we then ready to follow the ways of dialogue? It is impossible to say where these ways will lead us unless we commit ourselves first to walk them in total confidence. There is general agreement among theologians on the appropriate path to be trod by the Church that she may redefine her role in a pluralistic society, reaffirm her presence and assume once again her mission in a rapidly changing world. Yet one needs determine what is at stake with interreligious dialogue, what are the appropriate conditions to engage in it and to whom it is directed.

Within the framework of this brief reflection, the reader may not find any specific directive to be followed or any concrete measures to be taken. But there will be a certain number of questions and pointers, enabling the reader to discern more clearly one's own vision of personal mission. We shall argue that dialogue is not a technique at the service of a mission inherited from the past centuries, but is rather the creative space where proclamation may find new momentum in synchrony with the contemporary world.

Four points would suffice to substantiate this claim. *First* the new evangelization cannot be content with any superficial adaptation, where dialogue would be nothing but a means among others. In order to be counted as new, dialogue needs be rooted in a vision of proclamation attentive to the signs of the times, and based on welcoming acceptance of the religious otherness. This in itself is demanding; yet other conditions have to be met before proposing any new strategies of action. *Second* interreligious dialogue is the noblest attitude thanks to which Christians may comprehend the demands of the *kerygma* and revisit its priorities, conditions and applicability. We shall attempt to capture the impact of dialogue on proclamation by reflecting on its origin, objectives and conditions. *Third* interreligious dialogue is viable only if rooted in the silence of the Spirit, without which it is reduced to simple discussion or diplomatic activity. Only if anchored in contemplative silence, full of divine presence, dialogue becomes the privileged space for new evangelisation. *Fourth* interreligious dialogue and contemplation are the two axes at which junction emerges the space for renewed missionary activity which is expressed through the metaphoric image: desert of the

5 See Richard BERGERON, "Les religions sont-elles des demeures de Dieu ?", in Jean-Claude PETIT (ed.), *Où demeures-tu ?* (Jn 1, 38). La maison depuis le monde biblique. Hommage au professeur Guy Couturier à l'occasion de ses soixante-cinq ans, Montréal: Boréal/Fides, 1994, p. 472.

otherness. It is in the desert of her most critical moments, that the Church often found the means to renew herself. In an innovative manner the monastic movement for interreligious dialogue bears today testimony to this phenomenon. Though known only to a few, by showing a new manner of being Christian, it opens up promising avenues for all. Finally, we shall end this presentation with some remarks on the rapport between dialogue and proclamation.

1. Prerequisites for a Renewed Vision of Evangelization

In his letter to the Congregation published in January 2007, the General Superior of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Wilhelm Steckling, admits that lack of vision is harmful; it could “spill over down to the community level and put brakes on our personal missionary renewal”⁶. This is why adaptation alone would not be advantageous to mission. If one aims beyond simple ecclesial restoration, one needs reassess the vision along with its foundations; for this alone, would enable mission to respond to the contemporary world, especially with regard to the need to enter in dialogue with other religions. Gilles Routhier argues for re-founding the mission that we may recover its core values for “a profound change of our referential system or global comprehension of the reality linked to the historical situation we are in”⁷. In order to achieve this, certain conditions need be met. We mention three of them: to know when to stop, to distinguish between mission and proclamation, and to have no fear.

Knowing when to stop

Often when one reflects on mission and its pertinence today, the general tendency is to look for the means for more efficacious mission, and to envision practical solutions that help restore the sense of Christian faith among one’s contemporaries. But it may be profitable to ask as Wilhelm Steckling does: “Due to the pressure on us, have we become too hectic in our missionary work?”⁸ Undoubtedly it is necessary to commence with a pause and self-questioning even before asking how to make one’s message attractive to the multitude. “Where there is no vision the people get out of hand” (Pr 29, 18). Certainly, in the past mission was often motivated, in view of their

6 Wilhelm STECKLING, “Oblate Mission Today. A letter to the Congregation from Father Wilhelm Steckling, OMI, Superior General”, *Documentation* 275 (January 2007), p. 5.

7 See Gilles ROUTHIER, “Les défis de la mission dans les sociétés sécularisées. D’un projet d’adaptation à celui d’une refondation”, in *Mission* 13/2 (2006), p. 161.

8 W. STECKLING, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

salvation, by an urgency to baptize the largest number of souls faced with the impending menace of world's end. Although it led people to repent and to proclaim the saving power of the living God, this zeal has also provoked endless sufferings and devastation within numerous cultures whereas the mission served political interests and was carried out in a spirit of conquest. To recognize this and to ask for forgiveness, as was done in many cases, is not sufficient if the intention is not accompanied by cessation.

The urgency to proclaim the Gospel remains valid also today; humanity has never been as threatened as it is now at the beginning of the XXI century. Instead of jumping out to action in haste, the situation demands that one pauses and reflects. We live in a period of transition where it's necessary to grasp all its implications⁹. Let us not hurry out prematurely off this period lest we become prey to easy solutions. For, this could become the pretext to resume mission without confronting the real issues that often disturb and embarrass us. What exactly is the Christian mission? What are we called to proclaim? Why am I so eager to save my neighbour? What is my interpretation of the message of Christ? What does being Christian mean? What is specific to a Christian in contrast to a humanitarian worker? These are some of the issues to be addressed; they may seem evident at first, but are veiled in doubts and claims which, if not resolved in time, may have grave consequences in the practical sphere, even fatal ones considering especially the current situation of the world.

Distinguishing Between Proclamation and Mission

The proclamation of the Gospel is intrinsic to being Christian: "Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28, 19) is the last instruction of Christ to his apostles. The papal document *Dialogue and Proclamation* reminds us that the proclamation of the Gospel has priority over all other ecclesial activities. However, one should not forget that proclamation has had many and diverse forms over the course of history, each having different consequences. The mission inherited from the last centuries is one of them. Raimon Panikkar argues that Christians from the apostolic times to today have defined themselves mainly in five ways which corresponds to *kairological*, not chronological periods, that is to say, the preceding epochs may run into the following ones¹⁰. In the primitive Church, the self-under-

9 "Times of crisis, writes Henri LE SAUX, "are provided by divine Providence to free man from unnecessary ties or crutches.", "The Depth-Dimension of Religious Dialogue", in *Vidyajyoti* 45 (1981), p. 205. Henceforth: Le Saux 1981.

10 R. PANIKKAR, *A Dwelling Place for Wisdom*, Westminster: John Knox Press, 1993, p. 115.

standing of the Christian was as a witness. One did not consider oneself as an adept of a new religion, but essentially bore witness to what has transformed one's life and remained with him as a supra-historical event interpreted from very early on in various ways. When Christianity established itself as a social and political reality in what was still a heathen world, it was the idea of conversion which dominated. Membership of a religion became official: the true follower was someone who manifested his conversion by a change of life; and that was the monastic slogan. The true Christian becomes a monk. Thereafter, as a consequence of the conflictual relationship with Islam begins the period of Crusades. Herein emerges the notion that Christianity is the true religion at the exclusion of all others. Against this background appears the next Christian attitude, namely mission, which would prevail from XV to XX centuries.

In the XIII century, the decline of the Crusades paves the way for a spiritual venture against the infidel. On the issue of mission volunteers and missionaries proclaiming the Gospel, Jean Comby reminds us that "the idea to send potential specialists by centralized organizations came up only in the XIII century"¹¹. Ramon Llull attempted to promote a peaceful campaign against Islam and set up the first school to prepare for mission. However, it was mainly with the discovery of America that mission would change the face of Christianity and nurture its ambitions of a universal religion. Henceforth the missionary is the Christian *par excellence*, and the zeal of conquest intensifies with him. All on a sudden his activities meet the interests of the European powers anxious to extend their influence over the globe. Political and military conquests are hence often justified by the evangelization of new lands; and conversely mission develops under the protection of the settlers¹². This situation runs out of steam in the XX century when Europe loses its authority following the two World Wars, and the consequent death of millions, the decolonization as well as the accompanying reaffirmation of Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim religious identities, without even taking into account the countercultural movements in the West challenging the traditional norms. Add to these the expansion of atheism, increased interdependence between nations, cultures and religions, and the rights of men and women. Under these circumstances, Christians became aware that they do not any more possess the means to convert the whole world. Thus began a new Christian era under the banner of dialogue. Henceforth the emphasis has been on respecting the differences, mutual understanding, acknowledge-

¹¹ J. COMBY, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

¹² "[...] the words mission and missionary obtain the technical sense they currently have since XVII century (in 1631 according to *Robert's Dictionary*): missionary is the person sent by a superior for the specific task of evangelization", J. COMBY, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

ment of the possibility of salvation outside Christianity, and the will to put the Gospel at the service of peace among peoples.

This brief historical overview suffices to show that proclamation cannot be reduced to mission in the sense it was employed before Vatican II. At the same time, it demands us to take a stand with regard to the usual definition of terms. According to the papal document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, evangelization "seeks to convert solely through the divine power of the Message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, their ways of life, and the actual milieu in which they live" (DP 8). Thereupon it establishes a distinction between "evangelizing mission", that is, evangelization in its broadest sense including the varied activities, and "proclamation", that is, in a more specific sense the clear and unambiguous proclamation of the Lord Jesus. Thus proclamation is one of the missionary activities along with witness, committed service towards the other, a life of worship and prayer, as well as interreligious dialogue (DM 13)¹³. Within the framework of this presentation, we have opted for a different approach. Our starting point is "proclamation" seen from the public life of Jesus: with his disciples and under the power of the Spirit, the calling to enter the Reign of God through repentance and baptism¹⁴. Hence we distinguish between "evangelization" in the general sense as explained above – we propose "evangelizing mission" as its synonym –, and "mission", understood in a more restricted sense: a concretely specific application of the proclamation characteristic to a given period in history. This approach is doubly advantageous as it liberates proclamation from obsolete missionary conceptions and practises, and captures fully the import of dialogue as a privileged space for the transmission of faith.

Not being afraid

We all know the exhortation of John Paul II: "Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ"¹⁵. Since his installation in 1978, the Pope expresses his vision of evangelization as follows: "to revalidate the good news of Jesus not alone among those who have not received it, but also among

13 SECRETARIAT FOR NON-CHRISTIANS, *The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, (May 10, 1984). Henceforth: DM.

14 On Reign of God as the centre of Jesus' life and mission, see Jacques DUPUIS, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997, pp. 330ff. Henceforth: Dupuis, 1997.

15 Pope John Paul II's *Homily at the Mass Beginning His Pastoral Ministry*, n. 5; see also, JEAN-PAUL II, "Homélie de la célébration solennelle au début de son ministère pastoral", 22. octobre 1978, in *La Documentation catholique*, 75 (1978), p. 915.

those who received it but have lost its meaning in their lives and in their life-world, as well as to promote a profound return to the gospel among the Christians themselves"¹⁶. We do agree: open our hearts to the Spirit of Christ is certainly terrifying! Further one needs understand what this opening signifies and implies. What is the fear we are concerned here with? Knowing it is important, for the response clarifies the direction towards which the lively energies of the missionary are directed. If the exhortation intends to defy prejudice, indifference, and even the ignominious action of a society reacting to its Christian heritage, and if it does this only to reaffirm the presence of the Church in the same spirit of conquest, then, it risks to continue the mission that would eventually exhaust itself and miss the opportunity of witnessing that proclamation bears its best results. The courage demanded from the Christians would be a sham if it is at the service of an inadequate conception of mission, only interested in promoting the supremacy of the Christian truth and of the Church. The Christian is a better witness if the Spirit is let in to work through him and is followed into unknown territories¹⁷, to wit, in the universe of other religions with their own faith and to discover therein the hidden dimensions of the mystery of Christ - a mystery which since centuries one has believed to possess. What fear would then one have to face? The fear of relativism, syncretism, loss of one's identity or further still that of being transformed under the dynamic Spirit of Christ, where caught by love our inner most being is delivered to death, the death of the "old man"¹⁸. Setting out on a path is never without risk; only immobility brings the illusion of a certain security, but at what price!? Panikkar writes: "Do not have fear! [...] It is imperative that there be a resurrection [...] this is what we lack at present, it is a resurrection into a new life which begins within us [...] it is an issue of transformation"¹⁹.

16 Giuseppe CAVALOTTO, "Avançons au large!" *La pensée missionnaire de Jean-Paul II*. Montréal: Missionnaires de la Consolata (Canada), p. 9. A vision of the mission inherent in 'new evangelization' is strongly identified with the pontificate of John Paul II. In fact, this notion appears in 1968 in the final document of the Latin-American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) held in Medellin. John Paul II first made use of the expression in 1979, during his speech given at the opening of the CELAM conference at Port-au-Prince (Haiti). See Michel DENEKEN, "La Mission comme nouvelle évangélisation", in *Revue des Sciences religieuses*, 80/2 (2006), p. 221. 224 [217-231].

17 "Christians must always be aware of the influence of the Holy Spirit and be prepared to follow wherever in God's providence and design the Spirit is leading them. It is the Spirit who is guiding the evangelizing mission of the Church" (DP 84).

18 "Every authentic call from God always carries with it an overcoming of oneself. There is no new life without death, as the dynamic of the Paschal Mystery shows [...]" (DM 37).

19 R. PANIKKAR, "Réflexion sur la religion et l'Europe", p.7.

Is not the Church too often a victim of her own fears? She wants renewal but clings to an image of herself, of her own making. She promotes interreligious dialogue, but reluctantly agrees to change herself on that account; she encourages inculturation, but defends the idea of a fundamentally European Christianity; she speaks about love but strongly denounces any "quietist" consequence; she encourages contemplation, but injects into it her own vision; she wants to serve, but dictates the rules of conduct and imposes herself as the only holder of truth. The list is long! Briefly, the Church wants to advance herself, but hesitates to take the necessary step, and this hesitation paralyzes her. We do well hence recall the words of Le Saux: "Man is liable to fear as long as he looks for stability at a level established by him. Once he has discovered in himself that deeper level of himself which is the Spirit, he becomes as unshakable as God himself" (Le Saux 1981: 218). Is this not precisely the perspective in which the exhortation of the pope is to be understood? - To liberate oneself from the reluctance in knowing how to renounce. Renewal in the Church is impossible without resolving these tensions which undermine her life-energy. Let us not be afraid of a life in the Spirit - which alone would show us the space of new evangelization - where love is called upon to reclaim its rights over structures and sanctuaries made by human hands (Ac 17, 24).

2. Interreligious Dialogue as New Christian Vocation

Within the span of a few decades, the dominant catholic attitude towards religions went from an exclusivist rapport, based on the axiom "outside the church no salvation", to an open and welcoming attitude in response to John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, enabling one to discover in cultural and religious pluralism a sign of the times (*kairos*), an invitation to humanity to reconcile with the divine mystery. Henceforth dialogue becomes the privileged attitude for the Christian. In 1981, John Paul II affirms: "All Christians must engage in dialogue with believers of other religions, in such a manner that their mutual comprehension and collaboration may increase; that moral values are strengthened; and God be glorified in all his creation²⁰". In the address to the members of the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions in 1984 he again observes: "All Christians are called to dialogue". In 1990, he writes in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*: "interreligious dialogue forms part of the evangelizing mission of the Church" (RM 55). Without limiting to the usage of a specific local Church in search of inculturation, this latter notion presents dialogue as the fertile soil from which the entire Church can profit for her renewal. It is within this

20 "Message aux peuples d'Asie", in *La Documentation catholique*, 78 (1981), p. 282.

new attitude that proclamation is called upon today to find new categories and priorities. In order to better understand the issue, we need ask whence originate this rapport to dialogue; what are its foundations, objectives, conditions and process.

Foundations and objectives

First of all, dialogue is intimately linked to the mission of the Church. In his encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (1964), the first official document to mention the word "dialogue", Paul VI presents dialogue as the élan of love thanks to which the disciples of Jesus go out and teach all nations. "The word apostle implies a mission from which there is no escaping. To this internal drive of charity which seeks expression in the external gift of charity, We will apply the word "dialogue" (ES 64). The sense in which the term dialogue is employed here is substantiated by the salvific dialogue between God and humanity: "In Christ's "conversation" (cf. Bar., 3, 38) with men, God reveals something of Himself, of the mystery of His own life, of His own unique essence and trinity of persons. At the same time He tells us how He wishes to be known: as Love pure and simple; and how He wishes to be honored and served: His supreme commandment is love" (ES 70)²¹.

In spite of the emphasis placed on love, the orientation of mission remains the same, only the mode of action is different: "Before we can convert the world - as the very condition of converting the world - we must approach it and speak to it" (ES 68). Other religions are not necessarily more appreciated for what they are²². It is always a question of transmitting the *true faith*, the difference now being that imposition is not henceforth the rule. For the first time since the first Council of Constantinople in 381, the Church recognizes the freedom of religion (see ES 73). However, it is necessary to mention that after the Second World War, as we have previously noted, the Church did not have the means to realize her ambitions. The general appeal to mission launched by Pius XII in 1957 did already manifest this anxiety and restlessness: it is necessary to act before it is too late, asserted the Supreme Pontiff, before Africa becomes impervious to the only authentic faith. By this, he confirms the expansionist ideal of the Church in the previous centuries: "We should spare no efforts in order that the Cross

21 *Encyclique Ecclesiam suam*. Introduction et notes par l' Action populaire, Paris: Spes, 1964, p. 118-121. Henceforth: ES

22 PAUL VI wrote: "Obviously we cannot agree with these various forms of religion, nor can we adopt an indifferent or uncritical attitude toward them on the assumption that they are all to be regarded as on an equal footing, and that there is no need for those who profess them to enquire whether or not God has Himself revealed definitively and infallibly how He wishes to be known, loved, and served" (ES 107).

of Christ in which is our salvation and life might cast its shadow over even the most distant quarters of the universe"²³. If this project is still fomented today, it cannot be envisaged now without listening and dialogue. Hence the prudence displayed by the other religions with regard to the Christian desire to engage in dialogue; there is a strong suspicion that dialogue is the new strategy adopted by the Church to assert her domination²⁴. But dialogue goes beyond this limited perspective. According to the pontifical document *Dialogue and mission*, "Dialogue does not grow out of the opportunism of the tactics of the moment, but arises from reasons which experience and reflection, and even the difficulties themselves, have deepened" (DM 20).

Since Vatican II, especially with the decree *Nostra Aetate*, many practices and theologies of interreligious dialogue have appeared, conveying a different view of the Church and her mission. One does not any more speak of "true faith" in opposition to erroneous beliefs. Respect for the other takes precedence over the desire of conquest and even conversion; further it guarantees henceforth the universal character of the Church: "the absence of opening to the truth of other religions would make Christian faith a simple particularistic faith with claims of absoluteness, but without universal significance except for this claim"²⁵. Dialogue is not a new strategy²⁶ but rather the space for mutual comprehension and enrichment. It redefines the Christian praxis on the basis of theological foundations such as those identified by Jacques Dupuis: the mystery of unity, the universal presence of the Spirit, the distinction between the visible Church and the Reign of God, and the religions as gifts from God²⁷. Here, conversion remains a priority, but refers less to the exclusive and definitive passage from a religious system to another than to the conversion of the heart, an indispensable requirement for the development of a culture of peace.

23 PIUS XII, Encyclical *Fidei donum*, n. 8.

24 See Atallah SIDDIQUI, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997, p. 50-51. Even Christian love is at times approached with suspicion, and compared to a cobweb, a stratagem for sly conversion; see Paulos M. GREGORIOS, *Religion and Dialogue*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, p. 220.

25 Gérard SIEGWALT, *Dogmatique pour la catholicité évangélique. Système mystagogique de la foi chrétienne. I. Les fondements de la foi. 2. Réalité et révélation*, Genève-Paris: Labor et Fides/ Éditions du Cerf, 1987, p. 127.

26 In *Redemptoris Missio*, JOHN PAUL II writes: "Dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity. It is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills" (n. 56).

27 Remarks made by J. DUPUIS while intervening at: 3ème Assises pastorales européennes (*Voies de l'Orient*) held in May 2003 in Brussels. See also: *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 358-390; *Christianity and the Religion*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis 2002 p. 218ff. Henceforth: Dupuis 2001.

Conditions and Process

Peace between religions has little chance of success solely on the basis of universal values detached from all contexts; on the contrary, it may have a real chance if one respects the specificity and coherence of each religious universe, and that too in a profound understanding of the mystery which while being the source also reveals its limits. This implies at least two things: to know the religion of the other from the inside and be ready to return [in order to integrate this knowledge] to one's own faith tradition.

Dialogue begins with listening. Above all, it is a question of understanding the other believer in his highest aspirations, faith and beliefs; respecting the other for what he is, as a person of dignity, integrity and freedom, - a respect so important to being human. It is a question of understanding, not to better rebut and convince the other of one's own ideas with the intention of making him a spitting image of oneself, but on the contrary to preserve the otherness and to discover in him the mode in which the Spirit works in ways yet unknown to me. For this, the intellectual approach is insufficient; it is also necessary to practise hospitality which demands that one is received before being able to receive²⁸; to be received body and soul in the religious universe of the other. Here is the first step towards knowledge from inside, the only way of grasping the other in a way that books and lectures cannot teach²⁹.

Whereas all agree that dialogue demands preparation, it is even further required in the case of interior dialogue which concerns more with faith than ideas. Having said this, the preparation does not consist in merely better knowing one's tradition, doctrines and rites. This would indeed be sufficient if dialogue were a contest of force wherein one participates apologetically with refined arguments and seasoned retorts. To prepare oneself for dialogue means also to commit one to experience the Spirit of Christ which at times demands that certain aspects of the religious institution be set aside. It is hence understood that everything has not been said in the Christian faith and that there exists still the possibility that Christ may reveal himself in the new intuitions. Jesus himself does not dictate a rigid interpretation of truth, but employs metaphors and questions; "Who am I?" he used to ask his disciples. Preparing oneself for dialogue amounts to a definitive dedication of space for a meeting of hearts where all become pilgrims in search of God's

28 See Pierre de BÉTHUNE, *Par la foi et l'hospitalité* (coll. *Cahier de Clerlande*, 4) Monastère de Saint-André de Clerlande (Belgique), 1997, p. 23

29 See Gérard SIEGWALT, "Le christianisme et le dialogue interreligieux: vérité et tolérance", in *Lumière et Vie*, 44/222 (1995), p. 51; J. DUPUIS, *Christianity and the religions*, p. 222.

mystery, the experience of which reveals that one is incapable, as one gets closer, to seize all His greatness.

3. Contemplative Silence as the Core of New Evangelization

According to Henri Le Saux, any word is inevitably suspicious unless rooted in the silence of the Spirit³⁰. Without this contemplative rapport to the divine, dialogue loses its depth by becoming a simple discussion, a means of communication totally removed from its envisioned end, and thus a space at the service of syncretism³¹. In doing so, it most certainly loses its prophetic³² dimension, incapable of being a salvific act as well as a privileged space for proclamation. On the contrary, the acceptance of religious otherness on the existential level encourages the Christian to renew his contemplative dimension. A human being cannot alone overcome the difficulties inherent in the encounter with the other. The Spirit alone enables us to outstrip the natural inclinations³³. It is through his love that we are able to love all, a fortiori our enemies. The more deep and interior one's dialogue turns out, the more necessary becomes the experience of silence.

Dialogue and Embodied Faith

Thomas Merton writes of the interior dialogue with Oriental religions practised on the basis of meditation techniques such as *Zen* or *vipassana*: "it should be reserved for those who have had trained themselves by years of silence and long habit of meditation. [...] for those who are very committed to their own monastic tradition and are in authentic contact with the history of their own religious community"³⁴. Contact with Buddhism and Hinduism in particular encourages the Christian to embody the faith if he wishes that the message resonate with his partners in dialogue. N. F. Goenka narrates the following story from his *vipassana* meditation retreats which were a great

30 "True dialogue originates in the silence of the Spirit, and ends in the same silence. Words and ideas, exchanged in the interval, are penetrated and enriched by this silence. A religious meeting which does not spontaneously lead, at least at the end, to moments of deep and felt need first to be prepared by a long fellowship in life and service", H. Le SAUX, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

31 "[...] only such a contemplative attitude removes from dialogue the danger of syncretism", H. Le SAUX, *Idem*.

32 "Prophetic" is meant to be understood as the quality of speech, word or action that calls for conversion of hearts, and denounces religious inaction and all forms of idolatry that prohibits the work of the Spirit of Christ in a person, or a community of faith working toward the edification of the Kingdom of God.

33 P. de BÉTHUNE, *Par la foi et l'hospitalité*, p. 80.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

success in the West: a lady approached him saying that she is a Christian because she believes Jesus is the Son of God. To this Goenka replied: "So what?" Buddhism confronts the Christian, obliges him to examine if he professes a blind faith, if it is tested and if it's not limited to an arbitrary repetition of a formula.

Of what value is the faith if the reality it represents is reduced to an idea, if it does not lead to a transformation at the very core of our being? Faced with this requirement, contemplative life reveals its importance, not as the sole prerogative of some visionaries, but as the centre of any authentic spirituality. According to Merton, "What we are now asked to do, [...] is not so much to speak any more of Christ as to let him live within us, so that people may feel him by the way he is living in us"³⁵. The impact of oriental religions in the West has in other respects fostered a contemplative renewal within the Church with the creation and expansion of groups such as those connected to John Main's Christian meditation, or to the *Centering Prayer* of Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington and William Meninger. Note that all these groups play an indirect missionary role, but not less important. Thanks to this, an increasing number of Christians who have distanced themselves from the Church does indeed rediscover the embodied sense of faith which hitherto has had little impact on their lives.

No Mission without Contemplation

Many in the Western world search for a greater interiority, and Christianity is at times, if not often, the last place where this quest takes place. In alluding to this situation, Marcel Dumais underlines that the poverty with which the missionary must confront is not only material but also spiritual³⁶. How then does one have an impact on others if one abandons the contemplative dimension of faith? John Paul II highlights its centrality: "Unless the missionary is a contemplative he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way. [...] the one who proclaims the "Good News" must be a person who has found true hope in Christ" (RM 91). And he adds: "For their part, missionaries should reflect on the duty of holiness required of them by the gift of their vocation" (RM 91)³⁷. Contemplation and holiness go hand in hand.

35 John MOFFITT, "Memories of Thomas Merton", in *Cistercian Studies* 14, (1979), p. 73.

36 See his unpublished presentation to the Members of the Council given at the Plenary Session of the General Council of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Rome in January 2007, p. 2.

37 The definition of a saint given by Joan CHITISTER confirms this relationship: "The saints view the world through God's eyes and react, wherever they find themselves, or through whatever means available to them, that Jesus who lives in them, may live through them", *Au*

The contemplative makes himself available to the Holy Spirit in such a way that he freely surrenders his entire being and that the will of God substitutes for his own will (See IT 75; DA 64).

Proclamation of the Good News rests on the Holy Spirit³⁸. It is he whom Christ has left us in heritage, and it is through him that Christ as well as the Father's Kingdom is revealed to us. However, one must ask if we do always capture all its implications. One often hastily invokes the Spirit to justify one's words and actions, to confer them the desired authority. But what place has it in fact in our lives? The Spirit is not an idea, a vague feeling, and even less an entity outside one's self which one may invoke at one's own reckoning. It is rather the personal interior power which stems from the depths of one's being and opens up one's heart in a process of transformation, better of deification, that implies the death of the old and the birth of the new 'man'³⁹. This process is at the basis of new evangelization, although often little highlighted, if not ignored. John Paul II sets out as a principle that missionary is a "contemplative in action" (RM 91). Wilhelm Steckling follows the same line of thought: "As persons and as a community, let us slow down more often for contemplation! This implies a change of attitude, of personal and communitarian life style, away from the 'messiah complex' and a culture of frenetic activity". And he adds: "If we take some time off for pure contemplation, we will become contemplative while at work and we will become more credible, fruitful and effective in our actions"⁴⁰. But do we really understand how demanding this can be? One does not become a contemplative simply by saying it! First of all, being contemplative cannot be ordered, it is a gift; no amount of preparation for mission can procure us this gift. Further, if to be contemplative is demanding, being so in action is

coeur du monde. Regard spirituel sur le monde d'aujourd'hui, Montréal: Bellarmin, 2006, p. 61.

38 "The church finds in the Spirit the source of her life, renewal and mission. Moved by the Spirit, she 'acknowledges that she doesn't exist for herself, but for Christ and for the salvation of the world' (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 17). Guided by the Spirit, the Church opens herself up to humanity and to the world [...] prepares the path to encounter Christ, collaborating permanently in this history of salvation in which God's action and human liberty are interwoven", G. CAVALLOTTO, *op. cit.*, p. 37. "It is the Spirit who "seals" Jesus' witness, authenticating it as true (cf. Jn 3, 32-35)" (DA 57).

39 According to R. PANIKKAR, salvation "signifies becoming divine and becoming divine is not possible but by uniting with the divine. If this *theosis* is not a mere allure but real 'participation in the nature of the divine', as St. Peter says, it is impossible that we become that but through Christ [...]". R. PANIKKAR, *Une christophanie pour notre temps* (coll. *Le souffle de l'Esprit*), Paris, Actes sud, 2001, p. 18. Henceforth: Panikkar 2001. See also J. B. SIMON-VERMOT, *Échos infinis du silence. Vers une spiritualité chrétienne ouverte à l'Orient*, Montréal/ Paris : Médiaspaul, 2006, p. 39-40.

40 W. STECKLING, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

much more demanding! It is far easier to be attentive and surrender oneself to the motions of the Spirit in stillness and meditation, than to be so in one's daily activities amidst the hustle and bustle of society.

If this attitude is central to the mission, why is it then not taken more seriously? It is not enough to evoke the Spirit to claim to be his follower or to be at his service. Simply affirming the importance of contemplation is far from sufficient⁴¹. One has to take the necessary measures. The lack of such measures is blatant. This is probably less due to negligence or ill will than to discomfort and malaise which such an issue would engender. One can hardly ignore the bad press directed to contemplative prayer in Western Christianity where it is often disparaged at the advantage of activism and humanitarianism. This can be explained in terms of the existing tension between power and authority, charism and institution, direct experience of the Spirit and juridical authority.

Within the framework of the new evangelization, the Church is called upon to restore the contemplative dimension at its proper place without limiting it exclusively to the visions of Christ whatever they may be⁴². As a preliminary measure, this demands one to quit the routine, seek the solitude, keep silence, be still, pay attention to the divine presence, and further to trust that this presence would permeate in one's life. These requirements hold true for most of us. Consequently, within the framework of a new evangelization, instead of envisioning new strategies, would it not be better to start by holding one's peace? The path of dialogue encourages the Christian to do so; it urges him to rediscover the mystic patrimony of his own Tradition. And it is all the more important to bear in mind that this return to Christian experience can be achieved today only by taking into account the religious experiences of humanity. It is in this profound sharing of spiritual experiences between all religious persuasions that the proclamation of the Gospel may succeed in finding an echo in the West, more and more torn between the challenges of religious pluralism and the quest for a liberating experience.

4. The Desert of Otherness: Space of New Evangelization

To restore one's vision with the missionary élan consists less in identifying the stages of an adequate response to specific problems than creating the space where proclamation will find its basic place in response to the

⁴¹ Joan CHITTISTER writes: "I do not think that someone can lead a contemplative life without discipline", *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁴² See G. CAVALLOTTO, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

contemporary world in which the missionary will have to take the initiative appropriate to each situation. Everything indicates that the space of evangelization is to be found today in the life of the Spirit, at the juncture of respect for the religious other and contemplative silence, of hospitality and interiority. Karl Rahner reminds us of this idea when he alludes to the future of Christianity. On the one hand, he speaks of global Christianity⁴³, of truly catholic, that is universal, Church, which is no longer dominated by the European culture, but attentive to diverse cultural and religious contexts. Interreligious dialogue plays a decisive role in this new phase of the Church, especially for the urgency and necessity it represents⁴⁴. On the other, Rahner remarks in 1966: "the Christian of tomorrow is a mystique [...] or there will be none"⁴⁵. Consequently, the future of Christianity belongs to those who experiment "something", namely this God who never lets Himself be totally understood and always challenges us, as well as remains open to other experiences and visions of the world, secular or religious. In other words, this Christianity is already a reality though still in its embryonic stage. For more than forty years now, Benedictines and Cistercians of both observances engage in a spiritual dialogue with the contemplatives of other religions, mostly with Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. Together they embody discreetly but with unequalled force and constancy this new alliance between dialogue and meditation grounded in missionary renewal⁴⁶. Thomas Merton, Henri Le Saux and Bede Griffiths are among the pioneers of this monastic interreligious dialogue.

The Monk: A Powerful Agent of Transformation

Some may ask if reference to this movement which is only a minority within the catholic monasticism has any relevance in rethinking mission in the West, for the figure of the monk is often little valued in our secular

43 See R. BERGERON, *op.cit.*, p. 472.

44 For this German theologian, dialogue is "the only possible mode of co-existence, a mode which did not exist before and one which will remain; for the world-views can never separate again into different historical spaces nor may one destroy the other by force nor does it even have a chance of doing this, nor finally is there any chance [...] that one will dissolve all the others by pure conviction [...]" Karl RAHNER, "Reflections on Dialogue Within a Pluralistic Society", in *Theological Investigations VI*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969, pp. 35-36.

45 As cited by Achiel PEELMAN, "Spiritualité et conscience planétaire", in Camil MÉNARD et Florent VILLENEUVE (dir.), *Spiritualité contemporaine*. Défis culturels et théologiques (coll. *Héritage et projet*, 56), Montréal: Fides, 1996, p. 28.

46 I deal with this new turn in monastic history, its relevance and importance for the whole Church in: *Le désert de l'altérité*. Une expérience spirituelle du dialogue interreligieux (coll. *Spiritualité en dialogue* 1), Montréal/ Paris: Médiaspaul, 2004.

society which lauds action and social commitment. What is of extraordinary can come from abbeys relegated by many to the rank of archaism? The general appeal to mission mentioned above is promising not because it mobilizes the maximum number of persons, but appeals to the baptized, though less numerous, who do not possess the proclamation of the Gospel as their primary charism. Next in line to the "professional" missionaries, are the laymen and the contemplative monks. One often tends to believe that the missionary renewal is anchored in a program - as ingenious and inspiring as it is - that it could be implemented in the parishes and that lay people would become its main actors. In spite of their numerous initiatives, we doubt that they generate a new momentum for the whole Church. Even if they are recognized as a living force of the present and future Church, in fact they have little room of manoeuvre: on the one hand, their initiatives are often limited by the clergy, and on the other, their dependence on the pervading social and cultural system with its routines, constraints and obligations is at times so strong that it is nearly impossible for them to effect profound changes.

On the contrary, one does not often think of the monk. He is both on the fringe and at the center of an established order, a position which makes him a powerful agent of transformation on the individual as well as social spheres, and as such a decisive actor especially at a time of profound crisis. He is the one who often throughout the history has enabled the Church to renew herself at critical periods. From the IV to the VI-centuries, the evangelical experience was kept alive, and survived the decline and fall of the Roman Empire thanks to the Desert Fathers. In the VI and VII centuries the monks of Saint Colomban and in the Middle Ages the Benedictine movement campaigned to establish the Christian message throughout Western Europe, thus helping it survive the barbarian invasion and lay the pillars of a new civilization⁴⁷.

Today, once again, Christianity is striving to survive, at least in the West, confronted with globalization, modernity and religious pluralism. Again the monks have mobilized themselves, and after centuries of silence, return vigorously to the missionary scene. Following the appeal of Pius XII, Benedictines and Cistercians have joined forces for the first time to witness

47 John Paul II has captured the import of monasticism in Europe's evangelization: "On 23rd March 1980 the Pope celebrates the mass at Norcia, the native place of Saints Benedict and Scholastica, to mark the XV centenary of Saint Benedict's birth, the Patron of Europe, which also represents for the Pope the birth of a new Europe", Ramon MARTINEZ DE PISON LIÉBANAS, "La 'nouvelle évangélisation': à partir de quels présupposés?", in *Sciences Pastorales/Pastoral Sciences*, 14 (1995), p. 81.

the risen Christ throughout the world. However from the very outset their perspective distinguishes itself radically from the spirit of conquest which prevailed hitherto, centering their mission on an attempt to understand from within the other cultures and religions so that the mystery of Christ which is at the source of everything reveal itself without being reduced to any. This activity does not target solely a minority, but aims at a change of consciousness within the entire Church for the sake of global peace. It seeks to lay the spiritual foundations of an emerging global society by returning to the core of religious traditions while recognizing the differences among them in terms of philosophical, ascetic and cultural coherence.

Reaching North-
America

Connectedness to the Other as a Space of Conversion

From a historical perspective, the return of the monks is not a simple fact; undoubtedly it foreshadows decisive changes for the future of Christianity and the mode of transmitting the evangelic experience. This renewal is not to be measured by numbers but by its empowerment to renounce and to reconnect to one's innermost being⁴⁸. Rahner reminds us that St. Benedict "did not know [...] that in retreating to Monte Casino with a few monks and in founding thus the monasticism, he would become the Father of the new Occident"⁴⁹. If Christian religion is to have a future in the West, it may be necessary to look for it where one would least expect to find it: in the desert. Let us not forget that the public life of Jesus was preceded by his sojourn in the desert. Further, as we already mentioned, the evangelization of Europe, in which the monks played a major role, has its roots in the deserts of Egypt. The mission of tomorrow will be no exception! The desert is the most adequate place to encounter the divine, to a return to the essential in retreating from the world. It is here, under the motion of the Spirit and moved by an intense desire to communicate with the divine reality beyond appearances and transitory phenomena, that the individual makes the deliberate choice to renounce everything by a radical plunge into the solitude in order to confront openly with one's own self and to place oneself in the divine presence here and now.

The monk urges us anew to the desert, aware however that retreat from the world is no longer considered the spiritual ideal. The current crisis is such that it is an issue of the survival of human race, as Thomas Merton writes, in comparing it to the situation of the Desert Fathers: "The danger

48 "The salvations of religions, even of cultures, in these critical times will depend on the renewal of man's awareness of that fundamental depth", H. Le SAUX, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

49 KARL RAHNER, *L'égglise a-t-elle encore sa chance?* (coll. *Contestations*), Paris, Cerf, 1953, p.71.

that we face is more disastrous, for we may have less time than we thought we have"⁵⁰. Hence the imperative: not to abandon the structures and institutions, but transform them beginning with a radical transformation of hearts in relation to them. Like it or not, we are committed to each other through thick and thin. We may ignore this reality and enclose ourselves against it, but then as Jean-Paul Sartre remarks, the hell is upon us, or we can accept the fact; in this case, it is the desert we are faced with. But now, the latter does not stand for a geographic place or even a monastery, but the space of connectedness with the other, specifically someone of a different faith, that is, the traditional enemy of the Christian. Herein lies the originality of the monks engaged in dialogue: opening up the paths of the desert of otherness to all the baptized according to their charism and proper contexts.

The challenge of the contemplative is then to find the solitude for one's quest, not in isolation but amidst the society, within the thick of cultural and psychological interchange with other believers. Letting the Spirit act freely within one's self does not thrust one to isolation, or worse to the rejection of the other, but to self-transcendence. It is in confronting the adversity and engaging with the egoistic tendencies that one better overcomes one's self. In the context of a pluralistic society, the Spirit leads the Christian into the desert of the other, into other religious universes, where it reveals in terms of these other ways, for the Spirit is the source of all authentic prayer. It is within the space of this relationship that the Christian is called, as was Jesus in the desert of Judea, to be tempted and to reaffirm his submission to God before proclaiming Him. The Spirit leads him to confront the adversity so that he reconfirms his choice between, on the one hand, self-centeredness and self-sufficiency, and, on the other, submission to the presence of God and the love of enemy.

Alike the desert, the space of connectedness is a place of tests and temptations precisely because it is the path to freedom and the Kingdom of God. This would not be accessible without passing the test which consists in turning away from the other kingdom, that of power and insubordination to Him. The other may throw us back to the fears and hopes which structure our personality. That is why confronting them is for us a source of suffering, which is still greater if the connectedness to them, is a profound love relationship. Here, the danger consists not in addressing the suffering, however difficult that it may be, for it is inherent to all relationship, but rather to break the relationship and to refuse ever to love again.

50 Thomas MERTON, *La sagesse du désert. Aphorismes des Pères du désert* (coll. *Spiritualités vivantes*, 65), Paris : Albin Michel, p. 36.

Love is a gift. It is not to serve one's own will and interests, but the communion in truth among persons, without expecting any recompense for one's actions. The desert of otherness is hence no space of death, devoid of love, or of indifference, condescension, or of compromises at any cost. Death is the refusal to fight with the angel, while the space of connectedness is the arena for a mutual revival at the service of the Spirit and in fulfillment of the Reign of God where "the Church has no monopoly [...]" (Dupuis 1997: 356).

Conclusion: Dialogue and Proclamation

In reference to Jesus' last instruction to his apostles 'to go and teach all the nations', Giuseppe Cavallotto writes: it is necessary to "rekindle this élan of the beginnings by letting invade the ardour of apostolic teaching which followed the Pentecost. We need relive in us the burning passion that Paul experimented: 'I should be punished if I did not preach it!'" (1 Cor. 9,16). Underlying this exhortation is the very real urgency to communicate what is for one the source of healing, salvation and life. Is it not then necessary to know how this urgency becomes reality in the space of connectedness with other believers? What is the link between dialogue and proclamation? How do they relate to each other?

Dialogue "cannot be reduced to a "means" for proclamation" (Dupuis 1997: 369); if this were the case, it would be an additional strategy at the hands of the missionary. In any case it would not then be a factor of change and renewal for the Church. By presenting dialogue as an accessory, one seeks to remain in control of it and limit the consequences. The same applies if one sees dialogue only as an element at the same level as that of proclamation in the mission of the Church (see DP 6). But dialogue and proclamation are not two opposite realities. It is not a question of knowing which has priority over the other (see DP 3). Indeed the one doesn't menace the other. Dialogue does not diminish the power of proclamation; and conversely, the latter does not hamper the development of rich and deep dialogue. Dialogue is the privileged space where proclamation may take shape in response to the current world and open for the Church the path of her future. Maurice Pivot speaks of this real necessity "in as much as it goes to the core of humanity, where the symbolic structuring of the emerging person takes place⁵¹". This does not mean that every missionary inevitably has to try to meet a Hindu, Muslim or a Buddhist. In a deeper and general sense, it means that one is asked to see in the religious otherness not a menace but a privileged opportunity to deepen one's own faith.

51 Maurice PIVOT, *Un nouveau souffle pour la mission*, Paris: Les éditions de l'Atelier/ Les Éditions Ouvrières, 2000, p. 42. Henceforth: Pivot.

It is useful here to return to the distinction made by the document *Dialogue and Proclamation* between dialogue as one of the missionary attitudes, and the spirit of dialogue which “permeates [...] all those activities constituting the evangelizing mission of the Church” (DP 9). Yet it seems that the attitude and the spirit of dialogue are presented here as two separate realities. On the one hand, dialogue as an attitude distinct from proclamation does not aim at conversion to Christianity; on the other, other believers are invited to become members of the Church in a “spirit of dialogue”. These two approaches seem to us to be hardly reconcilable, leaving further ambiguity over the end of dialogue in a missionary context. On our part, we would prefer to affirm on the outset that the attitude and the spirit of dialogue are intimately linked and are mutually conditioned. Dialogue practiced by a few feeds also the spirit of all. Conversely, the spirit of dialogue, by informing our vision of the world, engenders specific and effective encounters. Therefore, is not dialogue at the service of proclamation – though its past modes aren’t any more acceptable, but the basics remain the same? Conversely, we behold the spirit of dialogue as the crucible where proclamation of faith may truly be renewed. This does not revert to identifying dialogue with proclamation, but accepting that the former modifies the latter in its priorities and applications.

If, indeed, proclamation leads always to conversion, in the desert of otherness it is to be understood above all in a “mystical” rather than a juridical sense. For it is less a question of convincing the majority to join a particular Church at the exclusion of others. One need revise the notion that proclamation of the Gospel implies condemnation of the faith and belief of the other. The Christian has been defined too long at the expense of those who do not pray as he does. For Henri de Lubac, it is “a great evil [...] to have learned the catechism against someone”⁵². Proclamation has to be envisaged with respect for religious difference and not in its rejection. The Good News proclaimed by Christ unites much more than it divides. Panikkar writes: “For me, Christ is not an obstacle or a wall which separates but a symbol of unity, fraternity and love. Jesus is certainly a sign of contradiction, but he is it, not because he separates me from others, but because he challenges my hypocrisy, my fears and my egotism; he makes me vulnerable as he himself is. Rather than avoiding the others because they are pagans, unbelievers, sinners – while I am just – Jesus draws me towards them” (Panikkar 2001: 40). The Spirit serves not the interest of a few (see Le Saux 1981: 209); it is God’s love which discreetly teaches the humble

52 Henri de LUBAC, *Catholicisme* (coll. *Foi vivante*), Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1965, p. 199.

beyond the frontiers which one at times wants it to assign. Maurice Pavot writes: "The relation to truth cannot be of order or of conquest, nor of any possession or domination, or of quite and limited suffering" (Pivot 2000: 37). If there is unity, it would be in the diversity and not in assembling the multitude under the same banner.

What the humanity needs hence is a conversion of hearts on various realms: ecological, political, economic and above all religious. And it concerns all, believers of other faiths as well as Christians. Ramon Martinez de Pison Liébanas writes: "[...] the new evangelisation must be accompanied by a conversion of the heart"⁵³. For sure, the missionary holds on to Paul's exhortation: "I should be punished if I did not preach it [the gospel]!" But he responds to it not out of a sense of guilt or fear of damnation without which the proclamation would reduce to an egotistic quest for his own salvation through that of the others. The zeal expressed by the apostle is to be found in: "do in such a way that it is not I but Christ who lives in me!"⁵⁴ Without this requirement, the rest of the missionary activity has no meaning except creating situations for which our descendants would on their turn be obliged to ask pardon. How can one expect without union with Christ to sense the Spirit acting freely in oneself for the good of others in the edification of the Kingdom? If it is true that interreligious dialogue is rooted in faith⁵⁵, it can also be perceived as a result of conversion (*metanoia*⁵⁶), a sign that the Kingdom is already at hand in anticipation of the banquet to which peoples from East, West, North and the South would come together (Lc 13, 29). In that case, dialogue becomes an end in itself⁵⁷, the space where communication becomes communion⁵⁸, better still where love invokes love. In Pivot's words, it is "the horizon towards which we march; the path is long, which leads from encounter, from confrontation to true dialogue" (Pivot 2000:

53 R. MARTINEZ DE PISON LIÉBANAS, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

54 Ga 2, 619-20: I have been crucified with Christ and yet I am alive; yet it is no longer I, but Christ living in me. "Christians are not only to imitate Jesus, but to be closely united to him" (DP 86)

55 "The Church, however, feels itself called to dialogue principally because of its faith" (DM 22)

56 According to PANIKKAR, "*metanoia* does not consist in affirming that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah – Jesus' own refusal to acknowledge it points to this fact – but to confess that 'the mystery kept secret from the very beginning has been revealed through Jesus.'" *Une christophanie pour notre temps*, p. 20.

57 "[...] the encounter and exchange have value in themselves. They are an end in themselves. While from the outset they presuppose openness to the other and to God, they also effect a deeper openness to God of each through the other", J. DUPUIS, *Christianity and the religions*, p. 234.

58 Thomas MERTON, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions Books, 1975, p. 315.

37). Here, the Christian bears testimony to Christ, while he discovers new aspects of His mystery⁵⁹. He makes known the faith while he reveals the greatness to be found with the other believer. In other words, he shares what is most precious to him, and thus aids his partner to discover the source in his own heart (Le Saux 1981: 210). Faithful to this spirit, the American monks have engaged in dialogue with the Muslims since the Gulf War in order to “make known to West the profound spirituality of Islam”⁶⁰.

Dialogue is the space where the Spirit makes itself known to us and to others in a process of mutual understanding and reciprocal conversion⁶¹. Jacques Dupuis speaks of “mutual evangelisation” (Dupuis 1997: 383). The challenge for the Christian consists in reassessing the richness of his tradition in a spiritual dialogue, free of any overt stratagem and concern for efficacy regarding the expansion of faith. One does not thus weaken the Church, but renders her vulnerable, in the same way as Jesus himself allowed himself to be. This amounts to confiding in the Spirit and letting him the care to orient all results of our actions undertaken in his name. The Christian is thus equipped to meet the other without any reserve and in the greatest attentiveness – an opportunity given to affirm his unique role in the promotion of “the values of the Reign of God, namely justice and peace, freedom and brother- and sisterhood, faith and charity” (Dupuis on 2002: 249). If today’s mission consists of helping others to bring forth the Spirit in each person in an awareness of one’s most diverse gifts, it shall be done on the basis of cooperation with diversity and not with a “saviour complex”⁶². It is in dialogue with the other religions that mission would find the means of

59 In the early 1980’s, Armand VEILLEUX said: “In our day, if Christianity wishes to be faithful to the universal design of Christ Himself, it must know how to integrate the religious forms of the other spiritual traditions within the expression of its faith in Christ. In this regard, the western Christian has a great deal to learn from the mystical traditions of the East, in order to come to the full flowering of its own mystical roots. And in fact, to an even greater extent Christians are drawn to the prayer of silent adoration”, in *North American Board for East-West Dialogue*, 15, 1982, p. 10.

60 Unpublished letter of Armand VEILLEUX, dated April 20th, 1991 and addressed to Katherine Howard, secretary of *The North American Board for East-West Dialogue*.

61 “But Christians too must allow themselves to be questioned. Notwithstanding the fullness of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, the way Christians sometimes understand their religion and practise it may be in need of purification.” (DA 32); “Dialogue thus becomes a source of hope and a factor of communion in mutual transformation” (DM 43).

62 Le SAUX says of this notion: “It is in their own faith and in their inner experience of the universal presence of the Spirit that Christians will find the way to bring others, not necessarily to their own doctrine and institution, but at least to the joyful acceptance of the multiplicity of forms through which the divine Spirit brings men to the Father.”, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

her expression beneficial to the Church and humanity⁶³. After all, proclamation is not only an ecclesial activity (EN 60; DA 70) but also interreligious or "dialogical"⁶⁴: "The solution for the crisis of the world", writes Le Saux, "must be found in common by all people of good-will, by all men devoted to truth, in whatever way the truth may have manifested itself in the depth of their hearts. Their dialogue will be a searchlight which will probe the present societies of men, but will first scan the heart of those taking part in it. It will be the test of their allegiance to truth alone in their respective religious or humanist commitments" (Le Saux 1981: 210).

Abstract

Christian mission can no longer afford to treat interreligious dialogue as a luxury. From now on, interreligious dialogue must play a decisive role; it should not be considered just as a means to convert others or as merely at the service of proclaiming the Good News. Rather interreligious dialogue is to be understood as the crucible at which proclamation discovers its priorities; its application should conform to the real world in order to enable the Church in the West to renew herself and to promote peace in the world.

63: According to J. DUPUIS, "[...] Christians and the members of other religious traditions share together in the reality of the Reign of God and are destined to build it together through history into its eschatological fullness [...]", *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, p. 358.

64 The consultative commission of the FABC joins us in affirming the following concerning dialogue and proclamation: "Proclamation is the affirmation of and witness to God's action in oneself. Dialogue is the openness and attention to the mystery of God's action in the other believer. It is a perspective of faith that we cannot speak of the one without the other.

The Spirit calls all peoples to conversion which is primarily a free turning of the heart to God and his Kingdom in obedience to this word. Dialogue as a mutual challenge to growth toward fullness involves such a call to conversion. Dialogue, however, does not aim at conversion, understood as a change of religion. But proclamation includes a further call to discipleship to Jesus Christ in the Church. It is not proselytism but a mystery of the call of the Spirit and the free response of the person. Because of this double movement of freedom in the Spirit, proclamation itself is dialogical", *FABC Papers*, no. 48 (Hong Kong, 1987), 16; quoted from: J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 371-372. See also DM 6.

