



## THE SPIRITUALITY OF DIALOGUE.

*ACTA exists to help its members and supporters in parishes and communities “supply channels of free and frank dialogue”. Its members aim to include all in this dialogue so that all voices are heard and no issues are ignored. This process rests on an understanding of a spirituality and theology of dialogue and its practice. Here we explore the spirituality of dialogue. Other papers address its theology and practicalities.*

The work of dialogue to build up the “loving communio” of our Church communities ( Pope JP 11 in NMI) is not a short term measure to be achieved once for all but a process which is, like education, a life-long one. Relations between some clergy and laity are marked by a profound sense of dialogue, which rest on a mutual respect shared between priests and people, a mutual appreciation of a spirituality of dialogue and a relationship with and in Christ. However the evidence is that this climate of dialogue is lacking in some places and parishes. It will take generations to overcome that mind-set which has too often moulded relations between clergy and laity (despite all the graced relations which co-exist with it) and which may be described as “clericalism”. This can hold both clergy and laity as victims in its thrall and has been best described by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* in Para 102:

*“Lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the people of God. The minority – ordained ministers – are at their service.... A clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places. In some cases, it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because in their particular Churches room has not been made for them to speak and act, due to an excessive clericalism (my italics) which keeps them away from decision-making.”*

It is vital, as the Pope says, that the laity be given that education (“formation”) in the spirit of dialogue which they need to take on important responsibilities. The basis of that formation must include an understanding of the spirituality and practice of dialogue. This understanding is also necessary if the laity are to successfully find that room to speak and act, up until now denied to them by “an excessive clericalism.” It is also vital since without it clericalism may simply be replaced by an equally perverse “laicism” – though that may be less likely – given that clericalism is an aspect of an abuse of that power which resides mainly with the clergy.

It comes as no surprise to hear that Pope Francis chose as the theme for his general prayer intention for November 2015 the word “DIALOGUE.” The word is the flavour, not just of the month, but of much he is trying to achieve in the Church – in his desire to balance primatial with synodal governance and the connected exercise of subsidiarity. The word emerged over the last 50 years partly from the field of interreligious relations, given such a renewed direction and emphasis by the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council. In the Vatican document “Proclamation and Dialogue” (1991) both words were given joint status as twin aspects of evangelisation and even the tone of proclamation was argued to be “dialogical”.

In 2012 when the letter in the Tablet called for a renewed dialogue in the Church, to reawaken the spirit of Vatican 2, the title given to the letter was “A Call to Action”. This title has caused problems



for some. It smacked perhaps of an aggressive militancy mixed with undertones of direct action – non-violent certainly but angry and fearful. This led to members of ACTA being caricatured as “middle-class liberals” and the movement being typified as a “pressure group” dissenting and disloyal to Church teaching and disobedient to Church leadership. But a simple reading of ACTA’s mission statement gives the lie to this categorisation:

*“We are a group of Catholics, many of whom are ordained, brought together by our love of Christ’s Church and our anxiety about its future. Still inspired by the Second Vatican Council we want to contribute fully to the life of our church so that we may be a more effective sign of the Kingdom of God. To do this, we believe that an atmosphere of openness and dialogue both with each other and with our church leaders needs developing. Accordingly, we aim to supply channels of free and frank communication. We desire to help create a climate of trust and respect for all where this dialogue may be fostered.*

ACTA may incorporate into its mission statement some such “vision statement” as:

*We are a group of Catholics in England and Wales, some of whom are ordained, brought together by our love of Christ’s church & our concern for its future.*

*Inspired by the Second Vatican Council and the vision of Pope Francis, we want to contribute fully to the life of our church so that we may be a more effective sign of the Kingdom of God.*

*Our vision of the church we want to help to build is that portrayed in *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si’*. It is a church characterised by love, joy & enthusiasm, openness & inclusivity, partnership & collaboration, a preparedness to change and always, the practice of mercy and compassion. It is a church which is bold and creative in its commitment to spreading the joy of the Gospel, and is engaged with the community and the world in pursuit of the common good and the care of our common home.*

*In working to attain this vision, we believe that an atmosphere of greater openness and dialogue both with each other and with our church leadership needs to be developed.*

*Our mission is to promote channels of free and frank communication, and to help to create a climate of trust and respect for all where this dialogue may be fostered.*

This might well go some way to clarifying what exactly is the shape of Church it envisages. Dialogue is not an end in itself but may be better described as the way a community develops its members as “missionary disciples”. It must reflect the dreams and visions for the Church which Pope Francis describes in EG. The vision must be underpinned by a spirituality of dialogue and to that we can turn.

#### TOWARDS A SPIRITUALITY OF DIALOGUE

In 1999, Cardinal Francis Arinze (then President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue) wrote a short note to the Presidents of the Bishops’ Conferences on: “The Spirituality of Dialogue” as applied to the dialogue of interreligious relations. We can however apply its content usefully to our own “Intrafaith dialogue” – the dialogue we need to build up **within** the Church as the constant springboard for our missionary dialogue with all those outside the church.



## THE FRAMEWORK FOR DIALOGUE

1. GOD IS LOVE AND COMMUNION. *“Dialogue flows from and is nourished by faith. We believe that God is love and communion. The Trinitarian mystery of love and communion is the eminent model for human relations and the foundation of dialogue”.*

Put it another way. We are beginning to realise that dialogue can best describe our on-going life in Christ with the Father and the Holy Spirit, together as a community in the Church. To the extent that we can understand it this way, we are simply catching up with that dialogue of loving power, energy and overflowing love which created us and in which we all share. We may have come late to this realisation. We are always part of a divine dialogue. We fulfil ourselves by dialogue with God in Christ and then with one another and then with every other human being. In that sense we can never regard any other human being as somehow not related to us. We are all one. We are all one in Christ. We are all one in the embrace of the Father.

*“We are called to activate our part in the divine-human dialogue.”*

2. GOD IS DEFINED AS DIALOGUE. God communicates himself to humankind. *“Out of his bountiful love God decided to communicate himself to the human beings that he had created”.*

Or: God who is love had no choice, if his love was to be effective, but to “become” one of us so that we could become one with him. But nothing could convince us, despite the long history of the divine-human dialogue which is the Old Testament, of the nature of this God of love, unless and until God became incarnate in Jesus and emptied himself (kenosis), became a servant and became obedient unto death on a cross. See the passage in Philippians (2: 5-8). What is the lesson for us? : If we are to follow Christ in this dialogue – we must be prepared to follow the path of “kenosis” or of self-emptying. To do that we must first of all develop a relationship (dialogue) with God in Christ. As Pope Francis says in the first sentence of *Evangelii Gaudium*: “the joy of the gospel flows from an encounter with Jesus”.

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- 3 REALISING THE GOD WITHIN. *“The Christian who wishes to enter into contact and establish collaboration with others must strive first of all to be converted to God.”*

Dialogue with others best springs from openness to the action of the Holy Spirit within us. The “royal road” to this openness and awareness is through the steady practice of some form of contemplative prayer. We must learn how to discern the will of God and be ready to do this will once known. Dialogue with others rests on awareness that we all share the Divine indwelling. Someone has said that the nearest we can get to God (this side of the grave) is another person. We have perhaps been slow to realise the enormity of the fact that the incarnation reveals that the physical has always been enmeshed, intertwined with, shot through with the so-called “spiritual”. God is with us. The Kingdom of God is within us. We are invited to become active partners in a divine-human dialogue which began at the first instance of our creation and will never end.



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#### 4 REALISING THE UNIVERSAL SALVIFIC WILL OF GOD

Effective dialogue rests on the deep conviction that God wills the salvation of all. As Israel could only "merit" any title such as "the chosen people of God" if it was understood that this election did not rest on any notion of "merit" but was only valid only in so far as Israel considered itself as a conduit for the passage of the mercy and love of God to all others "outside" Israel. (Hence the vision of the prophets like Isaiah: "*all nations* shall stream to the Holy Mountain") God has no "chosen people" as if there is a division between those human beings "chosen" and those "not chosen". God chooses everyone to be saved without exception. But since we are human beings and God cannot dialogue in any way other than the way which respects and honours our humanity, when God enters dialogue – it perforce has to be with us as individuals, then through them to communities and then through them to the whole of humanity. Any other manifestation of the God-in-dialogue with humanity would destroy the humanity which God is aching to save. God is bound by the limits of our created but self-contained "human-ness"! As Israel, so the Church. Christians sing of themselves as the "people of God". This only makes sense if it is a recognition of election for a purpose. God chooses a "people" so that his dialogue of love, grace and mercy can be "spoken", transmitted, delivered to the whole of humanity. Christians are by definition "missionary disciples" "chosen" only insofar as they transmit the message of the love of God to the whole of humanity.

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#### 5 CHRIST THE DIALOGUE (WORD) BECAME MAN.

Dialogue is best practised against a deep appreciation of its origin as part of our understanding of the nature of God and of the long story of the outpouring of that divine nature in a conversation with humanity which culminates in the enfleshing of that dialogue in the person of Jesus Christ. The Word of God (Dialogue) becomes man. The medium becomes the message and the message becomes the medium. This long story is recorded and laid out in the Old Testament. It is also laid out and recorded in the sacred writings and oral traditions of all the world's religions. Exactly because Christians believe that God was so pressured to have humanity as a partner in the dialogue of saving love, that it led to that dialogue taking on the flesh of our humanity, therefore it respects and honours that same story wherever it can be found in the sacred writings of all those in human history who respond to that same "pressured" God.

If we were to write a commentary on the Old Testament from the point of view that it is the record of a divine-human dialogue – we would find abundant evidence of the slow "entrapment" or seduction of humanity in the ever mesmerising realisation that God desires unto death the closest relationship with us. So close does the Divine desire this dialogue to be that God then has no choice, as the story reaches its inevitable climax, but to become one of us. The incarnation is the last culminating "loving gasp" of a God who is as close to us as we are to



ourselves. This is forever the revelation of the Man Jesus. The story then unfolds as God has to show us what extent He/She is prepared to go to have us realise how much we are loved. There is an unfathomable logic to the story. We are loved to death by God in Jesus. There then dawns on us the abiding and steady truth – that we are part of so close a union of dialogue that all we need do to achieve the reign or the kingdom of God is to find that we possess it within ourselves (“the Kingdom of God is within you.” ) Or better that we are possessed by it and our task is to be still and know that God is within. St Paul said it best: “I live now not me but God lives in me.”

Our practice of dialogue can rest on such a secure foundation as this.

Since we know that the divine dialogue (Word of God) has become one of us – a person alongside us – we can be convinced that each human being likewise is to be honoured and respected as an “incarnation” of the divine. All flesh has been called to be divinised by virtue of the one incarnation in Christ. This is but another way of saying that “*God wants all persons to be saved (Tim 2:4)*” (Cardinal Arinze p3)

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## 6 EVANGELISATION: PROCLAMATION AND DIALOGUE

*“In dialogue the Christian is called to be a witness to Christ, imitating the Lord in his proclamation of the Kingdom, his concern and compassion for each individual person and his respect for that person’s liberty.” (Arinze p 3)*

Proclamation and dialogue are the twin related elements of all we do in the name of the Gospel – it is called “evangelisation”. Proclamation aims at conversion to the “good news” of Christ and then becoming a member of the Body of Christ – the Church. Dialogue aims to find and understand the other in a mutual search for God who is at work in the hearts of all. The spirit or attitude of dialogue should also mark and pervade the ways in which we proclaim the Gospel. Our model here is Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels. He was caught up in a love-affair with the “kingdom of God”, his Father. He had an unquenchable compassion for the marginalised, the sick, anyone unable to realise the gift of the compassionate dialogue being offered by God. Jose Pagola, in his book: “*Jesus, an historical approximation*” (Convivium Press 2011) has two beautiful chapters on these aspects of the life of Jesus. He calls Jesus: “*A Poet of Compassion*” and “*A Healer of Life*”. Our parish dialogue and our dialogue of evangelisation must be marked by these qualities. Thus will clericalism be vanquished! It cannot but fall if priests and laity are compassionate poets and life healers!

*“Dialogue presupposes conversion in the sense of a return of the heart to God in love and obedience to his will, in other words, openness of the heart to the action of God.” (Cardinal Arinze)*

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## 7 DIALOGUE – A SPIRITUALITY LIVED OUT IN FAITH, HOPE AND CHARITY



*“The spirituality which is to animate and uphold dialogue is one which is lived out in faith, hope and charity.” (Cardinal Arinze)* Our common faith is in the one God who is slowly revealed through the great dialogue which is recorded in the Biblical account and reflected in the other great “book” of revelation – the vast creation from its origins 13.8 billion years ago. We share a faith in the God which is revealed there as the God who is mystery we cannot penetrate but we can say is love so unimaginable that creation cannot but be a constant overflowing and a constant return to its source in God. Hence the “dialogue” between creation, humanity and God can have only one outcome or ultimate expression – God whose sole imperative is to be “God-with-Us” and so becomes incarnate in the Son of Man – Jesus. Our faith is henceforth demonstrated to have always been an incarnational one – in a God who is as close to us as we are to ourselves. The mystery becomes a man – the dialogue is given a human tongue and voice.

This leads on to the hope that is ours. Despite all we encounter in the journeys of our individual partnering in our personal dialogue with God the Father, we share and can express the hope that is in us. We do not demand immediate results. The growth of the Kingdom within us is slow and hidden. Likewise the growth of the kingdom in the world will be slow and hidden – its seasons and times unknown to us.

Then the love which “guides the stars” (Dante) and the love we find in Jesus comes to us through the Holy Spirit and it is gratuitous. God loves us not because we are worthy but as we are. This gratuitousness gives us the motive for being the missionary disciples we are called by baptism to be. God desires to be in dialogue with, in love with all – our God is the God of all – inclusive, universal and all-embracing. We share love gratuitously since we have received it thus.

The purpose of this dialogue lies outside itself. We take the call to act for dialogue not as an end in itself. The divine-human dialogue is our model. That dialogue was always with the loved individual so that the whole of humanity could be enfolded in it. We are partners in dialogue and find our true, real selves, by thereby being conduits for the greater dialogue with all others. Dialogue with humanity flows out from the heart of this Christian faith.

#### 8) DIALOGUE – NOURISHED BY PRAYER AND SACRIFICE

The spirit of dialogue rests on prayer. This links us to the goodness and power of God. Without prayer we can do nothing and without prayer we can achieve no permanent spiritual good. We can argue our way to change in the Church, but this change will be merely superficial and temporary if it does not have a secure basis in prayer. Some form of the practice of contemplative prayer seems to be the surest way into discovering our true nature and our true self. The mystics bear witness to this truth. The changes Cassian, Benedict, Bernard, Francis, Dominic, Ignatius, Teresa, Therese, Catherine and many more brought to the Church rested on the prayer of silence or contemplation. Some form of this will save us from simply replacing any form of clericalism with forms of laicism! This form of prayer is linked to that sacrifice of self which Paul describes in his letter to the Philippians. It is the self-emptying of Christ. The love of God becomes incarnate in the Son of Man. But that love inexorably has to be out-poured in a love unto death. A divine logic leads from incarnation, an emptying of divinity, to a self-



sacrificial emptying of humanity to the final degradation and suffering of death on the cross. This then leads us to the hope and expectation of the resurrection.

#### THEORY INTO PRACTICE.

How do we translate this spirituality into practice in our own particular circumstances? The paths will be as diverse as our circumstances. But there are some pointers or directions common to different paths. Such may be useful to place alongside your own experience of attempting dialogue in parish, group or organisation in the Church.

See: “ A SAT-NAV FOR DIALOGUE” for some practical ideas on the practice of dialogue.