

Generations of Faith, Keynote Address

November 10, 2012

Dialogue of Life: Celebrating our Commonalities, Understanding our Differences

I. Introduction

A. I would like to thank the following: firstly, the Paulist community and staff for hosting us today; secondly, the staff of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the USCCB for coordinating the event; third, my colleagues in interreligious dialogue who serve as leaders from a variety of faith traditions in the greater metropolitan area and who are known and respected on the international scene – thank you for your tireless dedication to this work and for your commitment to the formation of the youth gathered here!

Finally, and most of all, I would like to thank you, young adults, for participating in this event – you are the future of this important work of interreligious dialogue. The network of relationships you are building, which will no doubt be expanded by today's encounter with your peers, will be the key to building greater trust and understanding and mutual cooperation in the public square in the coming years! It is good for us to be here together on this special day."

We have high hopes for you – for you are the future hands and feet of God in the world! This task of interreligious dialogue, a task that requires your hands and feet, that is, your commitment to interreligious service and cooperation, as well as understanding and solidarity, is of immense importance at this point in history. Let me explain:

On the one hand, it is obvious to all that the world is quite small now and that interaction amongst peoples from around the globe is literally, a mouse click away. This phenomenon of immediacy means, like never before in human history, that one is almost guaranteed to encounter people of different races, languages, cultures and religions. Being exposed to such difference is integral, therefore, to positive interactions in this new world. And to that end, the art of engaging well in interreligious dialogue is, I would dare to say, a necessity.

On the other hand, it is equally obvious that while people your age and older have always craved knowledge of God and of truth. There is a special, urgent, cry of the human heart in this age—an age in which God has been pushed to the margins of cultural forms and expression—to know and experience God. People need to know that despite the palpable sense at times of God's absence as well as the presence of suffering and sadness in the world, God IS -- and that God cares for each of us and calls us to himself, and to one another, in the hope of establishing love and mutual respect among all His children.

The modern era presents one answer to the question of how to accommodate an increasing diversity of religious belief and expression in western culture, a diversity that sometimes may lead to tension or conflict. It is the approach of secularism – the pushing of those with religious belief to the margins of or completely out of the civic space. However, there is another approach which is more effective and respectful of the reality of the spiritual dimension of life – it is what we engage in today – dialogue, which has as its fruit understanding and mutual respect.

To that end, interreligious harmony is an important way, indeed a necessity, to facilitate rather than hinder the deepest need of every human heart, that is, the need of having the joy and love of God brought to all people. You must strive to cultivate a dialogue with “the other” such that you can help bring about a culture where the pursuit of God is celebrated, and not hindered, because of the differences of religious expression amongst us.

I believe that the young people of the present generation have qualities which are most conducive to fruitful dialogue. Some of you may have heard of the generational theories of Neil Howe and Bill Strauss, historians and social scientists who have written extensively on generational issues. They list seven core traits of what they have named the Millennial Generation – those at present who are roughly 30 years of age and younger. These traits include being Special, Sheltered, Confident, Team Oriented, Conventional, Pressured and Achieving. I believe that two of these qualities serve well in dialogue –first, the confidence that is expressive of optimism about yourselves and your future. This positive outlook I believe makes you more open to dialogue. Second, team orientation gives this generation an instinct for collegiality – and a strong desire to not leave anyone out of participation in the culture. Also, being a very diverse generation, many the children of immigrants, you are use to dealing with a diversity individuals in school and in other circumstances.

I think the words of Pope Benedict XVI, in his recent trip to Lebanon in which, at one point, he addressed the youth of all religions, captures well this sentiment:

“(We must) strive to be open to others, even if they belong to a different cultural, religious, or national group. Making space for them, respecting them, being good to them, making them ever more rich in humanity and firm in the peace of the Lord...(This kind of) brotherhood is a foretaste of heaven!”

Seeing you, hearing your stories, and witnessing the seeds of friendship that you are planting among one another, I take heart that this important ministry of interreligious dialogue will thrive in your generation -- and in ways rarely seen before!

For Catholic Christians, we are invited by the Pope, indeed by Christ himself, to cast our nets in search of truth, as well as to proclaim that truth which we have discovered in our own faith – but also to recognize and appreciate the expressions of truth that we perceive in other religious traditions!

The Declaration on Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, (Nostra Aetate) proclaimed by Pope Paul VI in October 1965 and published among the documents of the Second Vatican Council

expresses this thought this way: “The Church therefore, exhorts her sons (and daughters), that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among (them).”

Now, I would like to address some remarks to you on the meaning of today’s theme – namely, “dialogue.” I would then like to speak briefly to the subtitles - “Celebrating our Commonalities” and “Understanding our Differences.”

II. Body of Speech

The importance and urgency of effective interreligious dialogue is an obvious fact of modern life—one need only consider religious tension that intensified in some places after 9/11. Obvious also, at least for professional ecumenists and interfaith officers in the church, is the fact that such dialogue must be focused on the building and maintaining of relationships before any serious conversation, say, over the nature of competing notions of divine revelation, can emerge. More specifically, for those who are tasked with the leadership of faith communities - this will mean you in the near future— the dedicated cultivation of relationships will allow for a space of trust to emerge that will not only facilitate authentic and fruitful theological debate but, more importantly, serve as an effective engine for positively connecting individual members of different faith traditions—one might say that good interpersonal relations amongst leaders produces tangible fruits not only among those in formal dialogue, but also for ordinary faithful Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists and Jews.

That being said, one might ask what then makes for effective dialogue between leaders and, ultimately, between the faithful of different religions? However, before answering this question, it is helpful to begin with a consideration of the meaning of the word “dialogue” itself.

The word “dialogue” is derived from the Greek dia-logos. Dia is a preposition meaning “through” while logos is a complex word meaning many things but generally denoting reason, thought, mind, or word. When dia is prefixed to logos the word conveys the sharing of speech between two people that brings to expression the content of thought and so serves as a powerful vehicle for the disclosure of truth. In short, dialogue is an event that discloses truth (or, sadly, untruth) between people. It is essentially the sharing of what is in my mind with an “other” who shares what is in his or her “mind.” Right away one can see that this interpersonal dynamic is a fragile business, a balancing act one might say, between human beings as agents engaging in an exchange of truth that will shape our understanding of the other and, perhaps, determine our actions. Dialogue requires, therefore, the willingness to present oneself as vulnerable to another. One must choose to disclose oneself, one’s “truth,” to another in the hope that what is shared will be received with welcome, with care, with the feeling of safety.

For example, speaking from my own limited experience in interreligious dialogue, a Muslim or a Jew who cherishes a radically transcendent monotheism that precludes belief in the very possibility of

Incarnation (God become flesh) must feel that his or her non-Muslim partner in dialogue will receive his or her (Islamic or Jewish) belief with an openness that suggests that his/her (Islamic or Jewish) belief will not be mocked, dismissed, pilloried, or, at least at first, challenged.

“You, my Muslim dialogue partner, will be listened to with respect,” one must say. “You will be given a space to disclose your mind and heart. I will listen. I want to listen. I want to know you, and I promise to respect your thoughts as they unfold to me the recipient of your trust.”

Furthermore, “I” as the privileged subject-recipient of what you hold to be objectively true from your faith perspective, i.e., the content of your heart and mind, must also make a choice. In this case, I must choose to conduct myself with integrity by being an active listener that is perceptibly patient and warm. I must listen and not speak, at least not at first, and not until I am invited. I must, perhaps above all, present a welcoming countenance and mean it. I am, as it were, the active agent of the other before me—beckoning them to present themselves, that is their true feelings and ideas, without fear, by means of the outward welcoming disposition of a trustworthy companion.

One can see how effective and true dialogue unfolds as an exercise in what Catholic thinkers would call the shepherding of being; that is to say, the drawing out of the shadows (in this case, the inner world of the dialogue partners) the true, good, and beautiful that we hold as dear, as precious, as inviolable, and which, when given a space, can bring about the positive transformation of the world. The Christian example, of course, is Jesus the Good Shepherd who welcomed others into the gift of the triune life of God, including especially those on the margins of that society who received him with trust and so were willing to share their own lives with him without fear—think, for example, of the martyrs, saints, and countless legions of followers down through the centuries, not to mention his own contemporaries—who were able to serve as agents for the establishment of the church in the world.

In short, a good way of describing the nature of dialogue is to study the interplay between humans acting as subjects of the logos-word and objects of the logos-word. On the one hand, I as “subject” find myself to be in the position of one whose job in dialogue with another is to draw out of the other, the truth; and so, in a sense, I by virtue of being the subject find myself to be a shepherd of the truth.

On the other hand, I as “object” find myself under the gaze of the subject who is asking me to bear the truth of what I hold within. In short, will I, by virtue of being in this case that object, entrust my thoughts, my truth, to the other? Just as Christians are called in the first place to accept the invitation of Our Lord to trust him and so share our whole life with him so too, in the same sense, we Christians are called to imitate his act of welcome to us by extending it to others.

As a Christian, one might suggest that true dialogue between humans is a representation of God’s love communicated to us through (dia) Christ (the Logos). If one accepts this interpretation of dialogue, then one might further suggest that engaging in dialogue—precisely in the way I have outlined it here—is in fact mandated by God. Therefore, we strive to create a space for authentic dialogue in our families and in our friendships, but also, and especially, in the public square with the other, the stranger and the

person of a different faith tradition.

This give-and-take world of dialogue, therefore, can be thought of as a defining moment in the lives of individuals. To welcome the other, to encourage him/her to love and share his/her life with the world, and so to bring people into the light and out of the world of loneliness and fear, is the basis for transforming the world into an ever-greater sphere of positive action that will lead to the formation of healthy minds and the building of culture. In other words, dialogue is the key not only to bringing people from our own traditions closer to one another and to those “outside” our particular group, but also, and especially, to opening up the realm of grace, which alone brings healing and understanding, creativity and fruitfulness.

Since some might say that people of all religious traditions, especially those of us gathered here today, acknowledge that the grace (or gift) of God heals the divisions that separate us from one another, it is equally true that our choice to engage in authentic dialogue is a sign of our cooperation with God’s grace to bring about such healing, and so dialogue is, to be sure, the key to making a space for God to bring about ever greater healing in the world.

Our commitment to an authentic and robust dialogue will foster understanding and peaceful coexistence. With respect to the tensions between faiths nowadays, one might assert that interreligious dialogue, practiced by ordinary Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, Jews, and Buddhists can serve our nation and the world in ways that professional diplomats cannot.

B. Celebrating our Commonalities

With respect to my main theme of “dialogue,” it is clear that each of our traditions places a premium on the importance of cultivating a listening disposition in order to attain greater understanding that makes possible the emergence of an area of trust between persons.

To listen - to be mindful and attentive to the other is, I am convinced, a common thread to any successful dialogue in all the great faith traditions of the world. But what does this mean exactly?

My understanding of the notion of mindfulness and attentiveness is that they make possible a kind of “authentic recognition” of the other – that is to say, they manifest in me, the listener, a real commitment to the other, a commitment to providing a space in which you can disclose yourself. In disclosing yourself, you are therefore showing me your inherent dignity or worth, which Christians believe is a manifestation of the presence of God and therefore commands respect and reverence from me.

C. Understanding our Differences

Dialogue in many ways presupposes difference (personal, spiritual, etc) and these differences become the occasion for dialogue as well as the source of the matters addressed in dialogue. A recognition of

difference is tied to our own identity and integrity as a distinct human person. We perceive the distinction between “I” and “thou.” In dialogue, differences are explained to better reveal which differences are essential, which are accidental and which are illusory.

Of critical importance for effective dialogue is the capacity to understand our differences, which requires the prior disposition of being a good listener. One cannot understand difference without listening and listening well. Listening, therefore, has the potential to produce tremendous fruits in dialogue – not least of which is the fruit of trust.

In other words, for one to know that you are truly listened to- is a real gift – the gratitude for which usually entails ever-greater disclosure in direct proportion to an ever-greater degree of trust. Listening, therefore, is a sacred gift that leads to the goal of dialogue, namely, a deeper communion that has the potential to emerge in a space of trust.

So what about our real differences? Rather than talking directly to our differences, which is not the point of this event, I would merely say this: that when one listens well to another, that is, listens with real compassion and attentiveness, then there is the possibility of trust. When there is trust, there is the potential for friendship. When there is friendship, there can be an honest discussion of differences. And, frankly, it should be our goal to reach this point of the dialogue. Why? Each of us holds his or her faith tradition to be the authentic revelation of God and truth for the world. This belief is the source of our hope and joy – why wouldn't we want to share this news with our friends? And so, while this advanced sharing should not be the first thing we bring to dialogue, it cannot be relativized or ignored.

In short, true dialogue, as I have tried to describe it from my own faith tradition, involves the prior disposition of listening, which leads to trust, which matures in friendship. This process makes possible, an understanding of differences that does not lead to strife and discord.

What I mentioned earlier in my presentation bears repeating. The quote from The Declaration on Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, (Nostra Aetate) “through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, (we) ... recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among ...men.”

Conclusion:

For Roman Catholics, Pope John Paul II was an important figure for an entire generation of young people. Again and again he exhorted young people to draw closer to God, to learn to see Him in all things, and so to take heart and to have hope, great hope, in a world that seems at times to have forgotten God.

But the search for God, John Paul taught, required that we see him in the human person – that is, that

we acknowledge His abiding presence in each person regardless of class, culture, race, and religion. This is the world, he believed, that God desires...

To this Pope, it was as though this particular vision of what the world can look like, and ought to look like, is most realizable in youth, that is, in you. For you have likely not been habituated to the ideas and behavior which militate against such an openness to the other.

On that note, I would like to conclude by referring to John Paul's 1985 speech to young Muslims in Morocco:

"You are charged with the world of tomorrow. It is by fully and courageously undertaking your responsibilities that you will be able to overcome the existing difficulties. It reverts to you to take the initiatives and not to wait for everything to come from the older people and from those in office. You must build the world and not just dream about it." (JP II, Address to Young Muslims, ch. 6. Address delivered in Morocco, August 19, 1985)

With that, I commend the interreligious task with all of its joys and possibilities to you. May God bless you, show you His light, protect and guide you in all you do for Him, and extend that blessing to your families and friends. Thank you.

Auxiliary Bishop Barry Knestout

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