

**St. Joseph's Theological Institute - Cedara**  
**Morning Reflection – 27 October 11, 2017**

**Interreligious Dialogue and its Importance to our Ministry**

Dear Reverend Fathers and Sisters, Brothers and Students of St. Joseph's Theological Institute,

Thank you for the invitation to spend this morning among you. I am very happy to be here on this occasion which gives us the opportunity to reflect on a very important topic for the life of the Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that: "There is not, never has been, and never will be a single human being for whom Christ did not suffer." (N. 605). This means that as Catholics we can never be self-satisfied, or inward looking. Every human being of whatever race or creed is a brother or sister with whom I am called to enter into relationship. In relating to others our first task is to be authentic witnesses of the "Good News". To evangelize means to be a bearer of this "Good News". However, it does not mean proselytizing. We are not in the business of enticing people to come into the Catholic Church simply to boost our numbers. Instead, dialogue is the essential form of every authentic relationship. In the First Letter of St. Peter we read: "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect*" (1Pet. 3:15). Here is what Pope Francis says about what is required for dialogue to take place:

"Dialogue is born from an attitude of respect for the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It assumes that

there is room in the heart for the person's point of view, opinion, and proposal. To dialogue entails a cordial reception, not a prior condemnation. In order to dialogue, it is necessary to know how to lower the defenses, open the doors of the house, and offer human warmth." (*On Heaven and Earth, Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2011*).

This holds for all forms of dialogue which we undertake as Catholics, be it with Christians of other denominations, with other religious traditions like Islam or Hinduism, and with those who don't profess any religious creed. This morning I would like to focus on interreligious dialogue. My reason for doing this is that it seems to me that one of the great challenges facing the world today is that we are in danger of being engulfed by two extremes: on the one hand there is a militant form of secularism which wants to eliminate the presence of any trace of religious values and practices in the public square; on the other hand, there is the rise of religious fundamentalism, particularly in its Islamic form. But if we look at countries like India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar there are worrying trends of Hindu and Buddhist extremism. We have also begun to experience episodes of Christian Extremism. This is very disconcerting. When it comes to religious fundamentalism there is no doubt that in Africa groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria, and Al-Shabaab in East Africa pose great threats to peace and stability.

With regard to secularization, for the moment this is particularly the case for countries which are part of the so-called "Western world": North America, Europe, Australia. But if we examine what is happening in the continent of Africa we can see that more and more, financial aid is being linked to commitments by African countries to implement a secular agenda in areas such as "gender" ideology and so-called "reproductive health" (which unfortunately now means providing universal access to abortion and contraception). In documents published by for example, the

UN Population Fund, both religious and traditional cultural practices and values are highlighted as obstacles to achieving the aims and goals of its programs.

Given this situation, it becomes ever more urgent for the Church to reach out to the other religions so as to cooperate in dealing with common areas of concern such as secularization and fundamentalism, as well as the pressing issues of rampant consumerism, corrupt governance, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the destruction of the environment, the plight of refugees and migrants, the threat of large-scale military conflicts in areas like the Middle East and North Korea. We must never forget that the mission of the Church is not just to minister to its own members, but also to be a “Lumen Gentium” a “Light to Nations”, a moral and spiritual guide for the whole human family.

To understand the dialogue the Church is called to engage in with the other religions we can take as our starting point the Second Vatican Council Document, *Nostra Aetate*.

As I prepared for this talk, I looked at a lot of academic information on line and elsewhere. I must say volumes have been written about this document. And during the 50th year celebration in 2015 and since then many other volumes have added. So, I began to ponder “what could I say that had not already been said”. Very little I am afraid. However, that is when I noticed that a lot has been noted about what the document has contributed to where we are today but not so much has been written regarding what the document offers for tomorrow.

Therefore, I have decided to talk a bit about tomorrow and how we as men and women of different religions can use *Nostra Aetate* as a type of model or archetype for our discussions with those of other religions.

*Nostra Aetate* was a reflection of the Catholic Bishops at the Second Vatican Council to bring about reconciliation and mutual understanding. We become and actively choose to change our religious culture for the better by analyzing and discussing the document. We are choosing to bring about reconciliation and peace for the past, the present and tomorrow.

I believe we can all agree that there has never been a period in which religions were more scrutinized than now. Furthermore, I believe there have been very few times in history when religious communities have been called to break down barriers and have frank and open discussions about who we are, what we stand for and where we are going. We are all called in our own particular ways to be beacons of peace and reconciliation in a suffering and torn world. It is our duty to future generations to ensure that we create honest and sustainable dialogue in order to increase mutual understanding and find ways that we can work together to avoid and thwart the misunderstandings that in the past, and unfortunately in the present, have caused so much suffering. One cannot help but remember the horrors of the Shoah, nor can a person ignore the violence perpetrated against so many today because of their religious beliefs.

At this point, I wish to quote a passage from *Nostra Aetate*:

*“Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.”* (n.4)

Although the statement refers to the Jewish faith I want to apply it to dialogue among all the religious traditions. It speaks about:

- Fraternal dialogues
- Biblical and theological studies
- Mutual understanding
- Respect

Let me address each of these items.

### Fraternal Dialogue

Fraternal dialogue implies an underlying bond based on our common humanity under the Almighty. In the words of NA, *“One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth.”*(n.1) We are all made in His image and likeness. In effect we are one human family and are really and truly related to one another as brothers and sisters. Our actions towards one another can be judged according to the degree that they reflect this relationship.

However, we also know that in the course of history a variety of religious traditions have developed, each of them with its own set of beliefs, values, moral teachings, devotional practices. To say, as it is sometimes said, “that all religions are the same” is to do a grave injustice to the unique “genius” of each tradition. It can also result in a tragic loss of the individual patrimony of each of the religions, some of whom stretch back millennia in time.

We should not be surprised if in past centuries – and today as well – tension, disputes, and unfortunately even violent conflict have been part and parcel of the encounter between religious traditions. No religion is above and beyond cultural, social and political forces. Historical analysis can tell us that many so-called “religious wars” have been fueled by underlying conflicts about power, wealth and territory. Like all encounters with an “other”, a faith tradition encountering another faith tradition has two main avenues open to it: to enter into conflict with the other, or to enter into dialogue with the other. At this stage in human history it’s clear that conflict is not, and should never have been, an option. However, we should not feel that dialogue is a strategy that is forced upon us only to make us seem "reasonable". Dialogue has a long tradition in human history. It is the noble choice of people of faith.

The Bhagavad Gita – one of the classic texts of Hindu Scripture – is written in the form of a dialogue between Arjuna and Lord Krishna. Greek philosophy gave rise to the famous method of Socratic dialogue, a form which Plato used in his most celebrated works. Islam too has within its fold various philosophical schools which have used the power of reason as an exegetical tool for interpreting its own texts both scriptural and pertaining to its tradition. The Christian tradition holds dear the episode of St Francis of Assisi who sailed across the Mediterranean to the Egyptian court of al-Malik al-Kamil. St Francis spoke to the Sultan about Christ and was in turn edified by the Muslim call to prayer five times a day. The great Jewish scholar, Maimonides used Aristotelian categories for a philosophical understanding of his Biblical faith.

Dialogue is one of the expressions of the Divinity just as much as love, mercy, compassion. One of the etymological roots of the word dialogue is the Greek word,

*logos*. It can have various meanings but its deepest meaning is that of “truth”. To dialogue means to encounter each other in the divine, eternal “Truth” which transcends us all.

Trust in the good will and openness of the other is intrinsic to dialogue. This also means that we need not fear stating our beliefs clearly. Diplomats are often forced to hide their real thoughts and intentions because of underlying suspicions and hidden hostilities between nations. As sincere believers we are not limited by these restrictions. Christians believe that Jesus is consubstantial – of one being – with the Father. This belief is not held by the Islamic faith. Certain Hindu beliefs about the Deity are not shared by the Jewish or Christian faith. But in no way should this prevent dialogue among our traditions. Indeed, fraternal dialogue brings about reconciliation and understanding and leads to the foundations of authentic search for peace and harmony. One of the greatest services we can perform in interreligious and ecumenical dialogue is to explain clearly and with conviction what we believe and why, not watering down our religion. But, at the same time, we must always have a spirit of deep respect for others’ traditions which lead us to listen attentively and with a loving heart to their experiences.

### Biblical and Theological Studies

*Nostra Aetate* speaks of Biblical and theological studies as instruments of dialogue. We can add to this all of the Books considered sacred by our various traditions. The Christian who wants to dialogue with Muslims must get to know the Koran, likewise the Buddhist with the Bible. Mahatma Gandhi remained a Hindu all his life while at the same time being more familiar with the teachings of the Gospel than many Christians. Professor Paul Murray of the University of Durham in England has initiated a new methodology for dialogue among the various Christian

denominations which he has termed: “Receptive Ecumenism”. It means encountering one another not in terms of what we can teach one another but on what we can learn from one another. I believe this can be applied to inter-religious dialogue as well. If another person has had a genuine experience of the Divinity, then that person has something to say to me. To reject such an experience is tantamount to turning my back on dialogue. So too, inter-faith and shared biblical and theological studies bring about reconciliation and make us bearers of peace.

### Mutual Understanding and Respect

The third and fourth pillar go together. What counts in dialogue is the growth in mutual understanding. Otherwise, there is the danger of us attributing to another religion beliefs and practices, which in fact are not part of that religion. Mutual understanding and respect, therefore, go hand-in-hand. The more we understand each other’s belief systems, the more we are able to respect them; the more we show respect, the more we understand each other.

At the General Audience on Wednesday, 28 October 2015, commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, and in the presence of representative groups of the great religious traditions, Pope Francis said:

*“The dialogue that we need cannot but be open and respectful, and thus prove fruitful. Mutual respect is the condition and, at the same time, the aim of interreligious dialogue: respecting others’ right to life, to physical integrity, to fundamental freedoms, namely freedom of conscience, of thought, of expression and of religion.”*

We can also say that because of the current situation of social and political turmoil in many parts of the world, more than ever there is a need for dialogue among the different faith communities. Violence is a dominant feature of today's world. There is the shocking violence of the barbaric killing of people in the name of religion. But there is also violence in secular society: political assassinations, violence against women, xenophobic hatred, the burning of property and looting of shops, the violence against the common good in the form of privilege, power, and greedy self-interest.

In Europe and the Western world in general the dominant social and cultural paradigm can trace its roots back to the Age of Enlightenment which, with great optimism, looked forward to a future where a combination of scientific development and the rational self-government of individuals would give rise to a reign of ever-increasing peace and happiness. A kind of "paradise on earth"; but one built by belief in human genius instead of the action of a divine Creator. It's now clear that this paradigm has failed with tragic, indeed horrific consequences. A character in one of the novels of the Russian writer, Dostoyevsky summed it up: "If God is dead, then everything is permitted." There is a well-known graffiti which reads: "God is dead." –Nietzsche; there is another written: "Nietzsche is dead." –God. It is only the conviction that we are responsible to a higher power that sustains the moral obligation to respect the value and dignity of every human being irrespective of race or creed.

As governments become more desperate due to their inability to control ever increasing levels of violence and the general breakdown of social order, there are signs that they are now willing to turn to faith-based groups in the attempt to bring back peace and harmony to communities. This is particularly true for the problem of

peace in the Middle East. It's clear that a military or political solution is not going to be sufficient. The resources of justice and peace, love and compassion, mercy and forgiveness that are needed to bring peace are to be found only within the core beliefs and practices of the great religious traditions.

But that also puts the responsibility back to us as religions. Divided among ourselves we are easily conquered. In fact, one of the main factors contributing to the secular project for society which began in Europe in the Eighteenth Century was a reaction against the horrors of the "religious wars" of the Seventeenth Century. Mutual understanding and respect cause us, assist us, to become instruments of peace and reconciliation in our own communities and in other communities outside of our own, they give us the strength we need to go forward.

At the same General Audience we have mentioned above, Pope Francis said:

*"The world, looking to us believers, exhorts us to cooperate amongst ourselves and with the men and women of good will who profess no religion, asking us for effective responses regarding numerous issues: peace, hunger, the poverty that afflicts millions of people, the environmental crisis, violence, especially that committed in the name of religion, corruption, moral decay, the crisis of the family, of the economy, of finance, and especially of hope."*

Turning to concrete actions the Pope continues:

*"Dialogue based on confident respect can bring seeds of good that in their turn may bud into friendship and cooperation in many fields, especially in service to the poor, to the least, to the elderly, through welcoming migrants, and attention to those who are excluded. We can walk together taking care of one another and of creation. All*

*believers of every religion. Together we can praise the Creator for giving us the garden of the world to till and keep as a common good, and we can achieve shared plans to overcome poverty and to ensure to every man and woman the conditions for a dignified life.”*

Here in South Africa there has been a long tradition of cooperation between the faith communities, particularly with regard to the struggle against Apartheid. In some ways this form of cooperation has diminished now that that particular struggle has come to an end. However, the need for joint witness to religious values is still very much present. Together the faith communities can make their voice felt when it comes to defending the sanctity of life in all its stages, in speaking out for the need for moral integrity at all levels of the political sector, in calling for humane and compassionate treatment for refugees and all those who are on the margins of society. In sum, through personal discipline and the utilization of our respective faith traditions and culture, we can use our free will to become beacons of peace and reconciliation without negating or denying the genius of our own religious traditions.

Finally, it is essential as people of faith that we avoid superficiality in our dialogue. I think that because for many years now people have seen dialogue as an obligation and not as a privilege and a grace which allows us to speak to others about our faith and truly learn about theirs. It requires commitment, openness, and a desire to “dig deep”. Otherwise our dialogue risks becoming simply a series of cocktail parties, dinners and social events with professional colleagues.

I have been talking about what can be termed the four pillars which sustain interreligious dialogue. My hope is that what I have said may be of some relevance to the various contexts in which you will exercise your ministry. In the next session,

we would like you to break into groups so as to have a chance to open up a conversation among yourselves and share your thoughts, ideas, challenges regarding this topic. I would ask each group to choose a person to take notes and to report back to the plenary session which we will have after we come back from the tea-break. In the final session we can conclude with an open dialogue during which I am happy to answer any questions, give clarifications, but also to hear from you about your concerns and your own personal experiences in this area as well as hearing about the situation in your country of origin.