

□ CHAPTER FIVE □

*The Catholic Church
and Interreligious Dialogue*

JOHN BORELLI

IN 1994 THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL for Interreligious Dialogue, which was established as the Secretariat for Non-Christians in 1964, produced an 875-page volume, *Interreligious Dialogue in the Pontifical Magisterium (Documents 1963–1993)*.¹ The text of *Nostra Aetate (NA)* and selections from other documents of the Second Vatican Council specifically related to interreligious relations account for nearly 40 pages by themselves. Documents and excerpts from the solemn Magisterium of Paul VI and John Paul II take up another 60 pages. To this the editor has added over 500 pages of speeches, letters, and communications of the popes in the past 30 years and 150 pages of texts issued by offices of the Holy See. Thus, when one studies the Catholic Church and interreligious dialogue in the era of the Second Vatican Council, one must do considerably more than read a single seminal document and note references to it in subsequent addresses and statements of the Holy See. Interreligious relations and dialogue constitute one of the significant new ministries that the Catholic Church has taken up vigorously as the renewed Church of the Second Vatican Council. Over the last 30 years, this new ministry has blended thoroughly into the life and mission of the Church.

From *Ecclesian Suam* (the encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the Church, 1964) to *Tertio Mellennio Adveniente* (the apostolic letter

on the third millennium, 1994) or perhaps *Ecclesia in Africa* (the apostolic exhortation on the Church in Africa, 1995) — the two most recent major documents of the Holy See that incorporate interreligious dialogue and relations into specific embodiments of the mission of the Church — one finds a clear, ongoing record of the Catholic Church's formal commitment to interreligious dialogue. In the history of Christianity before the twentieth century, astute teachers had argued through every age for interreligious understanding. One can think of numerous illustrious examples beginning with Justin Martyr and the Alexandrian school of theology. Major encounters with Muslims, for example when Arabic Christian theology thrived in the eighth and ninth centuries in the Middle East or during the times of Ramon Lull and Nicholas of Cusa in the West, produced learned pleas for interreligious understanding and careful theological inquiry directed towards the teachings of Islam. The European age of discoveries brought many surprising accounts of the enlightened wisdom of Hindus, Buddhists, and Chinese, especially from the Jesuit missionaries who had immersed themselves in the languages and cultures of Asia. They had discovered teachings similar to those of Christianity but bearing no apparent historical influence from it. However, it was the Second Vatican Council that formally recognized interreligious understanding and broadened it to include interreligious dialogue as an explicit teaching with universal status.²

The Second Vatican Council and Interreligious Dialogue and Relations

For the Catholic position regarding interreligious relations and dialogue, everyone moves quickly to the Council's *Nostra Aetate* (the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) as if it were square one — that is, the place to begin. The declaration, taking its name from the first two words of the Latin text “in our age,” was issued in 1965 near the end of the Council. Actually, *Lumen Gentium* (LG) contains important passages and was issued a year earlier (1964). Passages in *Ecclesiam Suam*, a truly influential encyclical of Paul VI, promulgated earlier in 1964,

foreshadow certain lines in *Nostra Aetate*. Recall too that Pope Paul VI made pilgrimages to the Holy Land in January 1964 and to India in December of that year. The year 1964 was truly a prelude to the conciliar consensus found in *Nostra Aetate*. Pope Paul VI was giving expression to a confident new spiritual outreach to peoples of other faiths in his addresses and in *Ecclesiam Suam*. A number of conciliar texts would reflect aspects of a growing consensus among the Council Fathers. Therefore, one must look at the whole context of the Second Vatican Council with its re-examination of mission, its commitment to the restoration of unity among Christians through ecumenical activity, its deliberations on the nature the Church, its dedication to religious liberty, and its renewal and revitalization of the liturgy and the whole life of the Church by encouraging updating, inculturation, and the increasing role of the laity as well as by the speeches and encyclicals of John XXIII and Paul VI and the establishment of secretariats to handle the new ministries, especially in ecumenical and interreligious relations.

The exact origin of the idea of *Nostra Aetate* as a text might well have originated when a Jewish scholar, a Frenchman, Jules Isaac, met with Pope John XXIII in 1960, and asked him to do something at the upcoming council about the teaching of contempt for the Jews.³ That private meeting between scholar and pope was indeed a moment of grace. Pope John had been a Vatican diplomat to Bulgaria, Turkey, and France, where he had close experiences with Jews and peoples of other faiths and had been kept informed of the Nazi persecution of Jews and the extermination camps. Perhaps Jules Isaac elicited in Pope John a concrete idea. Later in 1960 he asked Cardinal Augustin Bea, whom he had already charged to begin the official work of the Holy See towards the restoration of unity among Christians, to prepare a draft on the relation of the Church to the people of Israel.⁴

Pope Paul VI wrote eloquently on the relation of the Church to peoples of faith in *Ecclesiam Suam*, issued about three months before the third session and before *Lumen Gentium* was finally approved by the assembly. In his encyclical Pope Paul VI presented a lengthy meditation on the "dialogue of salvation" and

then, in the spirit of John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, sketched "a series of concentric-circles around the central point in which God has placed us" (96). These circles are individually described as follows: first the immense circle of the whole of humanity, the earth community, and including in particular those of goodwill who do not profess God (104); second, another circle "vast in its extent, yet it is not so far away from us" of Jews, Muslims, and "the followers of the great Afro-Asiatic religions" (107); and then "the circle which is nearest to us, the circle of Christianity" (109).

The Council Fathers agreed with this refreshing way to unite functionally the nature of the Church and its salvific mission in *Lumen Gentium*:

For the church is driven by the Holy Spirit to do her part for the full' realization .of the plan of God, who has constituted Christ as the source of salvation for the whole world . . . The effect of her work is that whatever good is found sown in the minds and hearts of men or in the rites and customs of peoples, these not only are preserved from destruction, but are purified, raised up, and perfected for the glory of God, the confusion of the devil, and the happiness of man. (*LG* 17)⁵

In the preceding paragraph of *Lumen Gentium* (16), there is mention of specific believers in a certain order of relationship to the Catholic Church: 1) Jews, "a people most dear for the sake of the fathers"; 2) Muslims, among those in the first place "who acknowledge the Creator" and "who profess to hold the faith of Abraham"; and 3) others who "in shadows and images seek the unknown God."

There is a resounding theme in the document on the Church and in other texts of the conciliar period that all of humanity is orientated towards God's universal call to salvation. One can find such an idea implicit in Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis* (1943, sect. 100). The texts of the Second Vatican Council go a step further; they express appreciation for those who seek God in

the ancient ways of their ancestors, the great religions of the earth. Thus the laity are encouraged to cooperate with persons of other faiths working towards the common good and agreeing on commonly recognized values (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* 27). Recognition of worthy spiritual values and aspirations found within religious traditions is at the basis of the Second Vatican Council's monumental reflections on religious liberty:

It is in accordance with their dignity that all, because they are persons, that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore bearing personal responsibility, are both impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. (*Dignitatis Humanae* 2)

The Declaration on Religious Liberty lists dialogue among the particular factors in the search for truth (3) but more importantly argues from the basic position that religious freedom should be guaranteed and protected for all who aspire to know God and live justly according to their consciences. The Council Fathers clearly declared that they believe that the one true religion continues to exist in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, entrusted with the mission to spread the Good News abroad (*Dignitatis Humanae* 1); nevertheless, by combining mission with respect for the honest and good aspirations of all, best expressed in sincere interreligious encounter, they would generate an intense exchange within the Church on the relationship between mission and dialogue for decades to come.

The Council's document on mission thus attempted to couple this universalistic approach, we could call it, with the Gospel imperative. It teaches that all Christians should behave with respect: "They should be familiar with their [fellow citizens'] national and religious traditions and uncover with gladness and respect those seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them" (*Ad Gentes* 11). Echoing a passage from John XXIII's *Princeps Pastorum* (an encyclical on missions, native clergy, and lay participation, 1959), the conciliar decree on missionary activity advised

seminaries to prepare candidates for the priesthood to “understand and appreciate the culture of their own people” and to “examine the relationship between the traditions and religions of their homeland and Christianity” (16). The decree, sounding revolutionary to a church needing to be reminded of its own history of inculturation, recommended that religious orders “should carefully consider how traditions of asceticism and contemplation, the seeds of which had been sown by God in certain ancient cultures before the preaching of the Gospel, might be incorporated into the Christian religious life” (18). There are other passages which offer guidelines for careful and honest ways to situate the Church in the cultures of Asia, Africa, and elsewhere that are more sharply defined through another religion or set of religions (22, 26).

Pope Paul VI inaugurated the Secretariat for non-Christians on Pentecost Sunday (May 17, 1964), although he had already announced his intention eight months earlier in a letter to the Dean of the College of Cardinals (September 12, 1963) and sketched an idea for it in an address to the second session of the Council (September 29, 1963). In 1964, on the day the Church celebrates the reception of the Holy Spirit and the foundation of the Church, Paul VI dwelt on the idea of catholicity in his address to the world. He drew attention to the work of the Council, now taking specific direction after two sessions, and concluded this reflection by praising the effort of the Church to bring closer together, even by means of simple human contacts, those belonging to other religions. He then announced, so that it would have the tone and significance of Pentecost, that he shall institute in Rome a Secretariat for non-Christians, which shall have very different functions but the same structure of the Secretariat of Christian Unity. No pilgrim, Paul VI said, shall ever again feel wholly a foreigner in Rome. He ended by saying that there can be no catholicity if it is not linked to the unity of the Church and, likewise, an edifying catholicity must spring from the interior, spiritual life, nourished by silence, prayer, love, and grace. In this way, the theme of interreligious relations would outlast the Council and was linked to the same kind of conversion of heart required for authentic ecumenism.

Officially, according to the Brief, *Progređiente Concilio*, dated

May 19, 1964, the Secretariat for non-Christians was to be a sign of the concern of the Church for the spiritual needs of all peoples, a vehicle for dialogue with other believers, and a proof of the catholic dimension of the Church. The Secretariat for Christian Unity, which was established a few years earlier, was already shepherding the conciliar draft on the Jews that would eventually become *Nostra Aetate*, and circumstances did not change with the establishment of the second secretariat. The Secretariat for Christian Unity would eventually house the Commission for Religious Relations with Jews. The Secretariat for non-Christians was established for the post-conciliar period and could not make proposals to the Council itself. It would eventually oversee the Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims. That distinction in specific missions for relations with Jews, on the one hand, and with Muslims, on the other, would continue after the Council so that Catholic-Jewish relations would be held generally distinct from interreligious relations.

As asserted earlier, *Nostra Aetate* cannot be taken by itself as marking the revolution in Catholic teaching on interreligious relations that the Second Vatican Council generated; nevertheless, there had been nothing like it in the history of the Church, nor has any church followed with a document that has had a similar effect on a Christian vision of interreligious relations. Approved in the final session of the Council, when eleven of the sixteen conciliar documents received final agreement, *Nostra Aetate* resulted from a somewhat complex process. *Nostra Aetate* began as a draft decree on the Jews and the Church's relationship to them. Besides the theological and scriptural debates that took place in its preparation, there were also political, social, and ecumenical controversies surrounding its preparation. In the second session of the Council, it was appended as chapter four to the draft of the Decree on Ecumenism, just as the future Declaration on Religious Liberty was appended as chapter five to the same decree. For many reasons, including developments after Paul VI's pilgrimage to the Holy Land, a separate draft declaration on the Jews and non-Christians was prepared for the third session of the Council. Indeed, most of the history and controversy surrounding *Nostra Aetate* pertains to its fourth and largest section on Jewish relations.⁶

Nostra Aetate specifically names Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus in addition to noting the “deep religious sense” among all peoples whose way of life is religious. The unity of the human community and the openness of every human person to the experience of the divine are foundational ideas in the text: “Men look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence” (1) and “throughout history even to the present day, there is found among different peoples a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of human life” (2). Then there is the famous “ray of divine truth” passage:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn 1:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 Cor 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life. (NA 2)

Nostra Aetate recognized a specific gift of each of the identified religious traditions to either the history of salvation or to promoting a general religious sense among all people. To a general group that could be identified as “traditional religions” or the ancient ways still practiced by traditional peoples, the text uplifts the “certain awareness of a hidden power,” which is even recognized as supreme being or a father. Hinduism is extolled for its rich myths and philosophical traditions, which direct people to seek “release from the trials of the present life” through asceticism, meditation, and devotion to God in confidence and love. Buddhism is noted for how it “testifies to the essential inadequacy of this changing world” and for its way of liberation through effort and “divine help.” Other religions are

acknowledged, though unnamed, for their ways of calming hearts and outlining programs of life. What is true and good in these then are what the Catholic Church does not reject, and she expresses her high regard for their reflecting a ray of divine truth.

An entire section is devoted to Muslims, for they worship the "one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men." The text acknowledges that they too look to Abraham, "to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own." They are also raised up for honoring Jesus and his virgin mother, though not as God and as the mother of God. Finally, the Islamic belief in the final judgment and the afterlife and how these are linked to a notion of divine justice and an upright life are underscored. In a distinct paragraph, the "many quarrels and dissensions" over the centuries are acknowledged, and a plea to forget and "to achieve mutual understanding" is made. A confidence that Muslims can promote with Christians "peace, liberty, social justice and moral values" concludes this second paragraph.

The lengthiest section then follows, including the extremely important statements on the relationship of the Church to the people of Israel, acknowledging the Jewish origins of the Church, the endearment of the Jews to God, that the gifts bestowed by God on them are in force, and that "neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during [Christ's] passion" (4). The text concludes with a condemnation of religious bigotry and discrimination based on race, color, condition in life, or religion.

The approach of the Council clearly was influenced by Karl Rahner, and thus a certain positive anthropological approach pervades much of the documentation. The Catholic focus during the early phase of this ministry would be on the relationship of peoples of faith and their religious traditions to the Church, and this attitude was founded on the view of the unity of the human family and its orientation towards God. Of course, this idea has a rich history in theology captured in the symbolization of the journey to God in the work, for example, of Augustine and Bonaventure, to name two authors who synthesized theological currents of their day through the spiritual journey.⁷ *Lumen*

Gentium opens with this rich symbolism, describing Christ as the light of humanity, a related symbolism, and expressing the desire of the Church to bring this light to all. The Church is seen as on pilgrimage herself, seeking to restore unity among her members, just as all humanity is on pilgrimage to God.

The overall attitude resulting from the Council and directing the first fifteen years of formal relations was aptly summarized by Pietro Rossano, the second to serve as secretary of the Secretariat for non-Christians:

At this point a query arises on the relationship of the church to other religions. *Nostra Aetate* represents the first time in its history that the Roman Catholic Church has faced this question in such an official way. This declaration in many ways implies a new mentality, and in it we can distinguish two approaches. There is, first of all, a global approach to the world religions. In comparison with the attitude prevalent in many past centuries, this approach is certainly new and uses such terms as esteem, respect, dialogue, 'proclamation, witness. Second, there is a differentiated approach to the individual religions according to the nature of each; this had already been delineated in *Lumen Gentium* (n. 16).⁸

Bishop Rossano demonstrates rather tersely for us the importance of studying at least these two conciliar texts together. We have looked even more widely at encyclicals, speeches, addresses, and even those documents establishing the Secretariat for non-Christians.

A Secretariat Continues the Work of the Second Vatican Council

In an address to Cardinals on June 23, 1964, a month after he had inaugurated the Secretariat for non-Christians, Pope Paul VI enumerated these three roles for the new Secretariat: 1) to create

a climate of warmth and cordiality between the Catholic Church and other religions; 2) to dispel and dissipate errors, misconceptions, and misinformation about other religions, especially among Catholics; and 3) to establish and organize meetings and deepen discussions with representatives of different religious traditions. The first president of the Secretariat, Cardinal Paul Marella, had served as apostolic delegate to Tokyo during the Pacific War and brought to this new position an interest in culture and ethnic studies. He was assisted by Father Paul Humbertclaude, who served as the first secretary of the staff. While the Second Vatican Council was still in session, they held informal meetings with bishops of Asia and Africa. The first members, all of whom are bishops, were appointed in 1969, although they would not meet in plenary session until 1979. In 1967 the Secretariat was given a permanent role in the Roman Curia in the reform of the Church's central administration (*Regimini Ecclesiae Universae* 96ff.)

From the beginning, the Secretariat staff sought the assistance of scholars and persons with expertise in various fields of study and a number of formally recognized consultants. In 1967, the Secretariat began the annual practice of sending greetings to Muslims worldwide at the conclusion of their month of fasting, Ramadan, and this practice was expanded in 1995 to sending greetings to Buddhists celebrating Vesakha, the Spring festival honoring Buddha Shakyamuni, and to Hindus celebrating Diwali, the Autumn Equinox festival for Hindus. The Secretariat also undertook a publication program, starting a *Bulletin* that would appear three times a year containing statements of the Pope, documents of the Roman Curia, reports of events and relations around the world, articles, and reviews — all related to interreligious relations and dialogue. In 1994, with Bulletin 85, the publication was renamed *Pro Dialogo*. Between 1967 and 1971, a number of separate publications were issued explaining reasons for dialogue and introducing Catholics to African religions, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Not only were these specific religious traditions explained, but also points of contact, similarity, and mutual concern were presented by a number of recognized Catholic scholars. One could summarize then that during the Marella years (1964–73), the Secretariat launched a wide program of education

and encouragement for Catholics to learn about the peoples of faiths of the world and to initiate dialogues with them. This was a period of enthusiasm for learning.

Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli was the second to serve as president, from 1973 until his death in 1980. He was assisted by the able Bible scholar, Pietro Rossano, later an Auxiliary Bishop of Rome. During their time, the first plenary of bishop members was held, and on many occasions consultors were gathered to reflect on some of the large issues surrounding interreligious dialogue. The president and secretary were known for their journeys to all parts of the world, fostering friendships and participating in conferences. I recall meeting Cardinal Pignedoli at Fordham University in 1976, where I was completing my doctoral studies in the history of religions. At a brief roundtable discussion, someone asked the cardinal how is it that he carries on his work, and he replied that he was no expert on any of these traditions with which he is responsible for maintaining contact. But, he said, I have made many, many friends around the world, and I write to them all the time. Interreligious dialogue requires trust and friendship, and the period of Cardinal Pignedoli was important for the longevity and credibility of the Secretariat.

Cardinal Pignedoli was followed for a brief period by Archbishop Jean Jadot (1980–84), who had served as apostolic delegate to the United States. Now assisted by Fr. Marcello Zago as secretary, Archbishop Jadot emphasized an ecclesiology of the local church, suggesting that the Roman Curia, in matters regarding interreligious relations, should not act independently of the needs and concerns of local churches. The Secretariat was put at the service of local churches, and its staff attended meetings and dialogues organized over the whole world. Bishops of various countries were consulted when they were in Rome on their *ad limina* visits. In certain parts of the world, for example in India, enormously important steps were taken to ensure regular contact with representatives of other religions. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences began its special institutes for interreligious affairs and a series of seminars on interreligious dialogue. With so much activity now fermenting in the local churches of territories that are also known as mission fields, there was a growing need

for reflection on the relationship between mission and dialogue. Such a task Pope John Paul II had charged Archbishop Jadot's predecessor to take up as an activity of the Secretariat. With wide consultation from Catholics engaged in interreligious activity in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere, the Secretariat's plenary gave its final approval in 1984 to perhaps the most significant text up to that time in the brief history *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*. The greatest achievement of this text was how it gave expression to the heartfelt understandings and hopes of many engaged in interreligious activity. The respect and good will that they fostered and the common spiritual undertakings with peoples of other faiths that they were forging were now given expression by the Holy See.

The stage was now set for a truly vibrant period in the history of the Secretariat, from 1984 to the present, combining unprecedented initiatives of Pope John Paul II and the able leadership of Cardinal Francis Arinze as president and Bishop Michael Fitzgerald as secretary. In the 1988 reorganization of the Roman Curia (*Pastor Bonus*), the Secretariat was renamed the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Its twin roles of promotion of interreligious dialogue and relations and the formation of Catholics for such work were reiterated. New to its place within the curia, the Pontifical Council must consult with the Congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith, for the Oriental Churches, and for the Evangelization of Peoples when the subject matter requires it.⁹

Developments in the United States as an Example

After the Second Vatican Council, Catholics with training, academic, or pastoral interests, or for purely personal reasons set themselves to the task of promoting interreligious relations. Episcopal conferences, especially in those countries where Christians represented a small minority, for example in India and Japan, appointed staff, held conferences, and added the study of religions to the curricula of their seminaries. For example, by 1977 the bishops of India issued guidelines encouraging interreligious

dialogue. Interreligious activity, noticeably hand in hand with inculturation of liturgical and other forms of Christian life, was far more crucial in many parts of Asia to the lives of Catholics than ecumenical activity, which was no less essential. In Africa the interaction between indigenous cultural and religious traditions was often quite personal because many Catholics had only been baptized as adults or had family and friends still identified with the ancient ways of their land. Dialogue was often an internalized experience for those who did not feel separated from their traditional ways. For Europeans and North Americans, encounters with representatives of other faiths became more and more frequent as the numbers of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs grew in towns and neighborhoods.

While in Rome during the third session of the Council (1964), the bishops of the United States established the committees that would constitute the blueprint for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Among these was the Bishops' Commission for Ecumenical Affairs. Two years later, in 1966, with some ecumenical dialogues already in progress, the commission was reorganized into the committee it is today, the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (BCEIA). The work of the BCEIA was expanded to include the undertakings of the Holy See, especially in Jewish relations and interreligious relations. At the time, however, only staff members for ecumenical and Jewish relations were hired. A whole national conference was taking shape, and it was decided to begin gradually and capably to address those churches and communities of size in the United States. Even today the United States has the largest Jewish population in the world.

Diocesan bishops appointed ecumenical officers to handle locally these new sets of relations, and diocesan workers soon organized themselves into a support group, the National Association of Diocesan Ecumenical Officers (NADEO). In certain dioceses — for example, Detroit, Los Angeles, Honolulu, San Francisco, Chicago, Houston, New York, and Newark — large populations of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and others were already present and growing significantly. Relationships and, in a few cases, dialogues were being established. In 1982 NADEO

mandated a committee of ecumenical officers and historians of religions to provide support and information to the dioceses. They immediately began planning seminars for annual meetings of diocesan workers in conjunction with the National Workshop on Christian Unity and also drafted and published a handbook.¹⁰

So successful was the work of the committee, which continues to meet annually and develop projects in support of interreligious relations on the diocesan level, that by 1986 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops voted to expand the staff to the BCEIA so that special competence for interreligious relations would be available. The BCEIA chairman, who is elected every three years and at that time (1988) was Archbishop Francis Stafford of Denver, appointed Bishop Joseph Gerry, formerly a professor of philosophy and then abbot and chancellor of St. Anselm's Abbey and College, to serve as episcopal moderator for interreligious relations. In 1991 Bishop Gerry, by then head of the Diocese of Portland, Maine, was named by Cardinal Arinze to be the United States bishop to serve as a member of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The United States scholars and bishops' conference staff had served as consultors to the Secretariat/Pontifical Council for many years, but now the episcopal conference membership was linked formally to the membership of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

Soon after I began serving as the first staff member for the bishops' conference in the field of interreligious relations, with the assistance of those scholars, monastics, missionaries who had returned home to the United States, and diocesan officers, we began holding a series of consultations on relations with Muslims, Buddhists, and Native Americans. Enthusiasm for interreligious relations and a desire to serve the Church in this ministry were easy to find. We also continued to remain in contact with those national institutions that were pursuing interreligious and multireligious relations in one way or another. Eventually, formal relations with Muslims were pursued through the existing national Islamic institutions.¹¹ Buddhist relations have been developed along a different model. First, there is the personal attention the episcopal moderator and I have given to Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, which I will further explain below. In addition, I have

been fortunate to interact with Buddhists in a number of settings, including an international Buddhist-Christian theological encounter group and meetings of the United States chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace.

Finally, in the field of Native American relations, the same important phenomenon exists for many Native American Catholics as occurs for African Catholics. So many are very close to their ancient roots and the religious ways of their people. At present, the National *Tekakwitha* Conference convenes annually for Native American Catholics, and any formal outreach on a national scale would be dependent to some extent on the success and accomplishments of that conference.¹² In several dioceses relations between the Church and particular tribes are quite developed.

One lesson is clear to me after nine years of consultations, dialogues, publication projects, special reflections within ecumenical circles, academic conferences, and spiritual retreats and workshops in meditation: the local level and the national level have to be linked both closely and imaginatively. Interreligious dialogue moves ahead with trust and friendship, and these best thrive through regular and frequent personal contact. We have found that diocesan workers vary in the sort of relationship they encourage among scholars and religious leaders in their communities from bilateral dialogues to multilateral committees, but one locale can learn from the experiences and results of another. The best place for scholars and experts to serve is at the local level, where the church is living a daily relationship with particular groups. At the same time, national and international events and crises have considerable impact on local communities. Sometimes the expertise that a national office can gather and direct towards a certain topic can help bring communities together and aid understanding, and even prayer. This was definitely the case during the 1990-91 Gulf crisis and war.

One of the momentous events in the history of post-Vatican II interreligious relations was the first Asian East-West Intermonastic Conference in Bangkok in 1968. It was an occasion for dialogue and reflection on interreligious relations as part of Catholic monastic life, but it will be forever remembered as the time when Thomas Merton met his untimely death. The conference

was an opportunity for Merton to travel to Asia, to meet with Buddhist and Hindu representatives, and to carry on his own reflections on interreligious relations.¹³ His accidental death at the conference made the event even more significant, for the whole work of Thomas Merton was uplifted among monastics the world over. In 1977 Cardinal Pignedoli encouraged Catholic monastics to meet and form an agency for interreligious, intermonastic dialogue. In 1978 a North American body was formed, which today is known as Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. A newsletter was started, which continues to this day.¹⁴ A program of hospitality was inaugurated, which has passed through several phases, including visits of Buddhist monastics to North American monastic houses and visits of Benedictines and Trappists to Buddhist communities in India, Nepal, and even Tibet.

A new level of exchange was reached in July 1996, when Monastic Interreligious Dialogue hosted an encounter at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky, where Thomas Merton had lived as a monk. For six days, Catholics and Buddhists, most of whom were monastics, lived in spiritual retreat, following a schedule of prayer and dialogue, and addressed together the topics of prayer, meditation, and contemplative life. Nearly twenty-five Buddhists and twenty-five Catholics engaged in the formal sessions of dialogue, and more than one hundred attended the whole Gethsemani Encounter. For the participants it was an extraordinary occasion of mutuality, respect, and spiritual depth and communion. Some have said that it was the best interreligious experience of their lives.¹⁵

From time to time, questions of an interreligious nature have emerged in the work of theologians and scholars. An extensive body of literature on Christology and world religions, for example, now rests on library shelves.¹⁶ A number of academic societies now exist in the United States that bring together Christian scholars with Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim scholars. One such body, the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, holds major national conferences every three years and meets annually at the American Academy of Religion. Catholic scholars are among the members of these organizations promoting academic study and scholarship in conjunction with interreligious dialogue.¹⁷

Important Steps During the Pontificate of John Paul II

The Second Vatican Council was an epochal step for Catholics in interreligious relations, but the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi in 1986 was its boldest implementation up to that point in post-conciliar times. It was an event that connected the ecumenical, the interreligious, and the social missions of the Church, so boldly defined at the Council, and displayed them to the world. The generous response of Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious leaders to join Pope John Paul II in fasting, walking, and praying for peace made October 27, 1986 an historic date in the history of interreligious relations. At the end of 1986, the Pope described how much that single day influenced him personally, calling it the greatest religious event of the year, a moment when the hidden and radical unity of humanity found visible expression, and an event so significant that it invites deep reflection.¹⁸ In the same place he noted the lessons of Assisi, and among them was the reassurance that “we can indeed maintain that every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person.”

Those who were present at Assisi have given similar testimonies. A few who spoke to the Pope or observed him have relayed how much he was personally moved by happenings. It is an experience that has occurred countless times to those who have engaged wholeheartedly and faithfully in interreligious encounter. I believe that the Assisi event underscored a model for persons of faith to come together respectfully and genuinely to pray and to listen. That single day as an event has influenced interreligious relations more than any other single event. A Church opened its doors and placed its supreme leader and symbol of unity in the midst of representatives of churches and religious traditions so that they could stand together and witness cooperation, understanding, and prayer.

In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (RM, 1990), John Paul II again described the impact of that experience and provided the Catholic Church with a very clear statement of its importance. He again offered reflections on the work of the Holy Spirit in every human heart. He also made this very personal observation:

The missionary must be a “contemplative in action.” He finds answers to problems in the light of God’s word and in personal and community prayer. My contact with representatives of the non-Christian spiritual traditions, particularly those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation. (RM 91)

He again stated very clearly that the Catholic Church not only respects every individual for being open to God and the action of the Spirit but also understands that God works through other religious traditions: “[God] does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression.” (RM 55). In my mind, this text moves beyond a statement of respect for all religious persons and a belief that all humanity is directed towards God. This passage states explicitly a respect for religions in themselves.

The work of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has expanded enormously as Pope John Paul II has invited people of faith to join him and has traveled to their countries and cities. The journal of the Pontifical Council has fattened with documentation and reports. Various Buddhist, Muslim, and other scholars have been published in it. In 1991, the Pontifical Council completed work on an extremely important document, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, which it issued jointly with the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. In it the relationship between mission and dialogue was addressed once again, concluding that dialogue and proclamation are both authentic elements of the Church’s evangelizing mission. They are both necessary and legitimate, intimately related though not interchangeable. Various kinds of dialogues and accomplishments, gained from over twenty-five years of experience, are listed. In my mind, one of its most significant passages is found in the reflection on spiritual experience:

Interreligious dialogue does not merely aim at mutual understanding and friendly relations. It

reaches a much deeper level, that of the spirit, where exchange and sharing consist in a mutual witness to one's beliefs and a common exploration of one's religious convictions. In dialogue Christians and others are invited to deepen their religious commitment, to respond with increasing sincerity to God's personal call and gracious self-gift, which, as our faith tells us, always passes through the mediation of Jesus Christ and the work of his Spirit. (40)

Dialogue and Proclamation also summarized the forms and goals of dialogue and offered inspiration for those who wish to take up interreligious activities. The text not only drew together insights of previous texts and accomplishments of the Pontifical Council but also linked the work of the Pontifical Council within the whole work of the Church. A discussion was not laid to rest, however, with this text. Though an endorsement of its earlier 1984 reflections on dialogue and mission, *Dialogue and Proclamation* left somewhat unresolved the personal synthesis every Christian needs to determine between mission and dialogue. By placing dialogue within the work of evangelization, the specific goals of dialogue need to be carefully discerned.

The Future

We can expect multireligious gatherings to swell in importance and number in the decades ahead. The celebration of the Great Jubilee Year 2000 will provide occasions for peoples of faith to gather. Multireligious organizations, such as the World Conference on Religion and Peace, whose sixth assembly Pope John Paul II opened in 1994; will gain the formal support of religious bodies providing a forum for dialogue that guarantees respect for differences and opportunity for successful cooperation. Monastics will continue to increase their interreligious contacts and will provide rich resources for those seeking to grow spiritually. Scholarship will increase exponentially as the tools for accessing information and sharing it improve beyond even our present amazing capacities.

What does all this mean for the Catholic Church? The example of Pope John Paul II in meeting time and again with religious leaders and gaining the respect of Muslims has moved interreligious dialogue front and center in the life of the Church. To stay there, it needs the dedicated efforts of Catholics. The experience of religious pluralism is growing, and they will need to respond to it.

Who will be doing the work of interreligious dialogue for the Catholic Church in the years to come? Unless there is a reversal of current trends, fewer and fewer priests will be specializing in this field for their bishops and religious superiors. More and more men and women will fill the positions for official contact with religious groups. NADEO and the BCEIA have agreed to co-sponsor an institute for interreligious leadership for summer 1997. They have been sponsoring institutes for ecumenical leadership since 1981. The few scholars who have acquired competency in both theology and the study of the history of religions will need to be replaced by a competently trained new generation. No single graduate program at a Catholic university in the U.S. now offers specialization in the study of another religious tradition in the context of theology. Similarly, spirituality programs with adequate resources in Christian spirituality and for study of another religious tradition will be needed to train competent spiritual guides.

To those of us who remember well the Catholic Church before the Second Vatican Council, the few developments in the past thirty years outlined in this study may still seem somewhat incredible. Interreligious relations take time. Only in 1994 was a permanent liaison committee formed between the Pontifical Council and international Islamic organizations, although there has been informal contact for several years. Only in 1995 was the first international Buddhist-Catholic dialogue held under the sponsorship and with the participation of officials of the Holy See. We are still at the beginning, even as one generation of pioneers gives way gradually to another. While few among us can recall the events surrounding the drafting of *Nostra Aetate*, we perhaps should ponder what the state and condition of interreligious dialogue will be when few will be able to recall the 1986 World

Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi. It is my firm belief that the major steps taken by the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council in the area of interreligious relations and dialogue and the continuing real development of its teaching and outreach in the past thirty years have placed the Church in a position of commitment so that this work will remain central to its life and mission.

Notes

1. Francesco Gioai, ed., *Il Dialogo Interreligioso nel Magistero Pontificio (Documenti 1963-93)* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994); published in English as *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1996).

2. For an account of the history of the Catholic response to religious pluralism around the question of salvation outside of the Church, see Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *Salvation Outside the Church?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).

3. This story is told by Claire Huchet Bishop in her biographical introduction to Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), 13ff.

4. For an account of the role of Jules Isaac's audience with the Pope and other petitions in leading to the decision for a document that would eventually address interreligious relations, see John M. Oesterreicher, "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, vol. 3 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 1-17.

5. All texts of the Second Vatican Council are quoted from Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1975).

6. See Oesterreicher, "Declaration," 17-129.

7. See the suggestions of Ewert Cousins, *Christ of the 21st Century* (Rockport, Mass: Element, 1992), especially chapters 3 and 5, where various theological syntheses, journey symbolism, and contemporary interreligious encounter are condensed into a theological and spiritual program for the future.

8. Pietro Rossano, "Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism in Roman Catholic Perspective," in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, ed. Anderson and Stransky, 106.

9. See Cardinal Francis Arinze, "Reflections on the Silver Jubilee of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue," *Bulletin* 72 (1989): 313-18.

10. John Borelli, ed., *Handbook for Interreligious Dialogue* (Morristown, NJ: Silver Burdett and Ginn, 1990).

11. See my articles on Catholic-Muslim relations: "The Goals and Fruits of Catholic-Muslim Dialogue," *The Living Light* 32, no. 2 (winter 1995): 51-60; "An Islamic-Roman Catholic 'National' Dialogue," *Ecumenical Trends* 22, no. 9 (October 1993): 10-13; and "This Rapid Growth of Development in Catholic-Muslim Relations," *Origins* 22, no. 33 (January 23, 1992): 535ff.

12. In July 1996, Bishop Donald Pelotte of Gallup, one of two U.S. Native American Catholics, attended an important colloquium sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and hosted in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Encounter of Traditional Religions." Reports of the conference will be forthcoming. Also attending from North America was Fr. Achiel Peelman, whose recent book provides a summary of both important information and theological understanding of Native American-Catholic relations; see *Christ is a Native American* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

13. See Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin, eds., *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1971).

14. *Bulletin of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue* 55 (spring 1996), Abbey of Gethsemani, 3642 Monks Road, Trappist, KY 40051-6102.

15. Reports will appear in MID's *Bulletin* and the Pontifical Council's *Pro Dialogo*. The papers will be edited by Donald Mitchell and James Wiseman and published in 1997 by Continuum Press.

16. Many titles can be found in the bibliography prepared by Angelo Amato, "Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior, and the Encounter of Religions," *Bulletin* 80 (1992): 217ff.

17. Three journals that give voice to this enterprise are: *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 15 (1995), University of Hawaii, 2530 Dole Street, Honolulu, HI 96822; *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin* 9 (1996), Centre for Studies in Religion & Society, University of Victoria, P.O. Box 3045, Victoria, BC V8W 3P4, Canada; and *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7, no. 2 (July 1996), Carfax Publishing Company, 875-81 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139.

18. Pope's Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, the World Situation Constitutes a Pressing Appeal for the Spirit of Assisi, 22 December 1986," published in *Bulletin*, Secretariat for non-Christians, 64 (January 22, 1987): 54-55.

