



# **Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love**

**Congregation for Catholic Education**

## *Culture and Religion*

7. Another aspect to be considered is the relationship between culture and religion. “Culture is broader than religion. According to one concept religion can be said to represent the transcendent dimension of culture and in a certain way its soul. Religions have certainly contributed to the progress of culture and the construction of a more humane society.”[4] Religion is incultured, and culture becomes fertile ground for a richer humanity that measures up to its specific and profound vocation to be open to others and to God. Therefore, “it is time ... to understand in a more profound way that the generating nucleus of every authentic culture is constituted by its approach to the mystery of God, in whom alone does a social order centred on the dignity and responsibility of the human person find its unshakeable foundation.”[5]

8. In general, religion presents itself as the meaningful answer to the fundamental questions posed by men and women: “Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men.”[6] This characteristic of religions demands that they dialogue not only among themselves, but also with the various forms of atheistic, or non-religious, interpretations of the human person and history, since these latter are also faced with the same questions about meaning. Today, states and civil society, too, see how fundamental is the need for interreligious dialogue – meaning the broadest exchange among both individuals and communities, each with a different viewpoint. To avoid facile reductions and distortions in this sensitive field, it is opportune to highlight the following considerations.

9. Western society, which is ever more marked by multiculturalism, has an accelerating process of secularization, with the danger of an extreme marginalization of religious experience, seen as only being legitimate within the private sphere. More generally, in the dominant mindset, the anthropological question is quietly eliminated, i.e. the question about the full dignity and destiny of human beings. Thus, the aim is pursued of eradicating from culture all religious expression. However, awareness is lacking of how precious the religious dimension is for fruitful, proficient intercultural dialogue. In addition to this general mindset, there are other notable phenomena that also risk undervaluing the importance for culture of the religious experience. One can think of the spread of sects and of New Age, the latter being so much identified with modern culture that it is almost no longer considered a novelty.[7]

10. Religion emphasizes ultimate and definitive truths and, therefore, truths that lie at the basis of meaning, from which the prevalent Western culture seems to be distanced. In any case, religion is a decisive contribution to the building up of social community, in respect for the common good and with the intention of promoting every human being. Therefore, those who wield political power are called to judge carefully the possibilities for emancipation and universal inclusion demonstrated and effected by each culture and each religion. An important criterion for such evaluation is the effective capacity that the religions have for showing the worth of the whole person and of all people. Christianity, the religion of God with a human face,[8] carries a similar criterion within itself.

11. Religion can make its contribution to intercultural dialogue “only if God has a place in the public realm.”[9] “Denying the right to profess one's religion in public and the right to bring the truths of faith to bear upon public life has negative consequences for true development. The exclusion of religion from the public square — and, at the other extreme, religious fundamentalism — hinders an encounter between persons and their collaboration for the progress of humanity. Public life is sapped of its motivation and politics takes on a domineering and aggressive character. Human rights risk being ignored either because they are robbed of their transcendent foundation or because personal freedom is not acknowledged. Secularism and fundamentalism exclude the possibility of fruitful dialogue and effective cooperation between reason and religious faith. Reason always stands in need of being purified by faith: this also holds true for political reason, which must not consider itself omnipotent. For its part, religion always needs to be purified by reason in order to show its authentically human face. Any breach in this dialogue comes only at an enormous price to human development.”[10] Faith and reason, therefore, must recognize each other and enrich each other.

12. In the dialogue between culture and religions, due weight must be given to the discussion between faith and the various forms of atheism and non-religious humanist viewpoints. At the centre of this discussion must be the search for whatever favours the integral development of the whole person and of all people, without becoming bogged down in a sterile partisan clash. It also needs society to recognize the individual's right to his or her own identity. The Church, for her part, with the love that draws from the sources of the Gospel, following the pattern of the mystery of the Word's Incarnation, will continue to “proclaim that man deserves honour and love for himself and must be respected in his dignity. Thus, brothers must learn again to call each other brothers, to respect each other, to understand each other, so that man himself can survive and grow in dignity, in freedom and in honour. The more he suffocates the dialogue of cultures, the more the modern world is caught up in conflicts that risk being lethal for the future of the human civilization. Beyond prejudices, cultural barriers, divisions of race, language, religion and ideology, men must recognize each other as brothers and sisters, accepting each other in their diversity.”[11]

### *The Catholic Religion and Other Religions*

13. It is within this context that the dialogue among the various religions takes on a particular shape. It has its own profile, and particularly emphasizes the expertise of each religion's authorities. Naturally, interreligious dialogue, situated within the religious dimension of culture, touches upon some aspects of intercultural education – though not all, since the two things are not identical.

Globalization has increased the interdependence of peoples, with their different traditions and religions. In this regard, there are those who affirm that differences are by their nature causes of division and, therefore, at the most to be tolerated. Others even believe that religions should simply be silenced. “Rather, [differences] provide a wonderful opportunity for people of different religions to live together in profound respect, esteem and appreciation, encouraging one another in the ways of God.”[12]

In this regard, the Catholic Church feels that the need for dialogue is ever more important. Such a dialogue, starting from an awareness of one’s own faith identity, can help people to enter into contact with other religions. Dialogue means not just talking, but includes all beneficial and constructive interreligious relationships, with both individuals and communities of other beliefs, thus arriving at mutual understanding.[13]

Dialogue with both individuals and communities of other religions is motivated by the fact that we are all creatures of God. God is at work in every human being who, through reason, has perceived the mystery of God and recognizes universal values. Moreover, dialogue finds its *raison d’être* in searching for the patrimony of common ethical values found within the different religious traditions. In this way, believers can contribute to affirming the common good, justice and peace. Therefore, “since many are quick to point out the readily apparent differences between religions, as believers or religious persons we are presented with the challenge to proclaim with clarity what we share in common.”[14]

Furthermore, the dialogue cultivated by the Catholic Church with other churches and Christian communities does not stop at what we have in common, but tends towards the highest goal of rediscovering lost unity.[15] Ecumenism has as its goal the visible unity of Christians, for which Jesus prayed for his disciples: *Ut omnes unum sint*, that they may all be one (Jn 17: 21).

14. There are various ways that believers can dialogue: there is the dialogue of life, with its sharing of joys and sorrows; the dialogue of works, collaborating to promote the development of men and women; theological dialogue, when this is possible, with the study of each other’s religious heritage; and the dialogue of religious experience.

15. However, this dialogue is not a compromise, but rather a framework for reciprocal witnessing among believers who belong to different religions. In this way, one gets to know the other’s religion more deeply and better, as well as the ethical behaviours that derive from it. From direct and objective knowledge of the other person, and of the religious and ethical expectations that derive from his or her religious beliefs and practice, grow respect and reciprocal esteem, mutual understanding, trust and friendship. “In order to be true, this dialogue must be clear, avoiding relativism and syncretism, while at the same time it must be marked by sincere respect for others and by a spirit of reconciliation and fraternity.”[16]

16. Clarity in dialogue means especially faithfulness to one’s own Christian identity. “Christianity proposes Jesus of Nazareth. He, we believe, is the eternal Logos who became flesh in order to reconcile man to God and reveal the underlying reason of all things. It is he whom we bring to the forum of interreligious dialogue. The ardent desire to follow in his footsteps spurs Christians to open their minds and hearts in dialogue (cf. Lk 10:25-37; Jn 4:7-26).”[17] The Catholic Church

proclaims that “Jesus Christ has a significance and a value for the human race and its history, which are unique and singular, proper to him alone, exclusive, universal, and absolute. Jesus is, in fact, the Word of God made man for the salvation of all.”[18] Therefore, this being the indispensable condition for interreligious dialogue, it is also the indispensable condition for adequate intercultural education which is not divorced from one’s own religious identity.

17. Catholic schools and institutes of higher education are important places for this education. What marks an educational institution as being “Catholic” is its addressing the Christian concept of reality, “its Catholic quality, namely its reference to a Christian concept of life centred on Jesus Christ.”[19] Therefore, “Catholic schools are at one and the same time places of evangelization, well-rounded education, inculturation and initiation to the dialogue of life among young people of different religions and social backgrounds.”[20] Pope Francis, addressing an Albanian school, which “after the long years of repression of religious institutions, resumed its activity in 1994, accepting and educating Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim children as well as several pupils born into agnostic milieus”, declared that “the school is thus becoming a place for dialogue and serene exchanges to encourage attitudes of respect, listening, friendship and a spirit of collaboration.”[21]

18. In this context, “education must make students aware of their own roots and provide points of reference which allow them to define their own personal place in the world.”[22] All children and young people must have the same possibilities for arriving at the knowledge of their own religion as well as of elements that characterize other religions. The knowledge of other ways of thinking and believing conquers fears and enriches ways of thinking about the other person and his or her spiritual traditions. Therefore, teachers are duty-bound always to respect the human person who seeks the truth of his or her own being, as well as to appreciate and spread the great cultural traditions that are open to the transcendent and that articulate the desire for freedom and truth.

19. This knowledge is not sufficient in itself, but opens up to dialogue. The more abundant the knowledge, the more it can sustain dialogue and co-existence with people who profess other religions. In the context of an open dialogue among cultures, different religions can and must make a decisive contribution to forming an awareness of common values.

20. In turn, dialogue, the fruit of knowledge, must be cultivated for people to co-exist and build up a civilization of love. It is not a matter of playing down the truth, but of realizing the aim of education which “has a particular role to play in building a more united and peaceful world. It can help to affirm that integral humanism, open to life’s ethical and religious dimension, which appreciates the importance of understanding and showing esteem for other cultures and the spiritual values present in them.”[23] Within intercultural education, this dialogue aims “to eliminate tensions and conflicts, and potential confrontations by a better understanding among the various religious cultures of any given region. It may contribute to purifying cultures from any dehumanizing elements, and thus be an agent of transformation. It can also help to uphold certain traditional cultural values which are under threat from modernity and the levelling down which indiscriminate internationalization may bring with it.”[24] “Dialogue is very important for our own maturity, because in confronting another person, confronting other cultures, and also confronting other religions in the right way, we grow; we develop and mature ... This dialogue is what creates peace”, affirmed Pope Francis.[25]