



50 YEARS IN THE SERVICE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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Your Eminences, Excellencies, Honoured Guests and dear Friends,

It is a privilege for me to present to you some important parts of the history of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, now in its milestone of fifty years and of which I am the Secretary for almost the past two years now. It is a pleasure to share with you this journey of half a century years which is certainly not that long in the two thousand year history of the Catholic Church but at the same time is rich in its significance. In my opinion, this period witnessed the opening of, to use a word so dear to Pope Francis, mercy with which the Church has protected and continues protecting the life of this world.

The Vatican II Council, in asking us to listen to a rapidly changing world, called for adequate responses, making use of appropriate means, to witness to the Gospel of Jesus so that it reaches even those frontiers that seem insurmountable and more complicated: i.e. in the hearts of men and women who practise other religions in their friendly encounters with others and that is dialogue.

First of all, I apologize for this extremely brief and incomplete account of the fifty years of service to interreligious dialogue. However, I hope to be able to give at least an idea of the work done in this respect all these years.

I would like to recount, quickly, thus not exhaustively, some salient lived moments of the history of this Dicastery, thanks to all who beginning with the Presidents have worked hard to make manifest the will expressed by the Church to enter into dialogue with the believers of other religious traditions.

1. The Secretariat for Non-Christians (1964)

As is well-known, the Secretariat for Non-Christians was instituted by Pope Paul VI on 19th May 1964 with the Apostolic Letter *Progrediente Concilio*, to promote friendly relations between the Church and the followers of non-Christian religions. Following this, the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (6 August 1964) and later on the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra aetate*, whose 50th anniversary we shall commemorate on 28th October 2015 provided the fundamental theological foundation for the work of the Secretariat. The Apostolic Constitution *Regimini Ecclesiae Universae*, (15 August 1967), defined the structure of the Secretariat and spelt out its objectives: “To search for methods

and ways of opening a suitable dialogue with non-Christians. (It) is concerned about therefore that the non-Christians are known well and are justly esteemed by Christians and equally so they too may know and equally appreciate Christian doctrine and life” (*Regimini Ecclesiae Universae*, 99).

On 22 October 1974, by the desire of the same Pope Paul VI, the Commission for *Religious Relations with the Muslims* was established to promote and to strengthen relations between Muslims and Catholics.

1. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (1988)

In 1988, as part of the reorganization of the Curia carried out with the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* (28 June 1988), the title of the Secretariat was changed to *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* (PCID). In the same Constitution, in paragraphs related to the tasks entrusted to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (§ 159 and 160), we read:

Art. 159 — The Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue fosters and supervises relations with members and groups of non-Christian religions as well as with those who are in any way endowed with religious feeling.

Art. 160 — The Council fosters suitable dialogue with the followers of other religions and encourages various kinds of relations with them. It promotes appropriate studies and conferences to develop mutual information and esteem, so that human dignity and the spiritual and moral riches of people may ever grow. The Council sees to the formation of those who engage in this kind of dialogue.

1. The first twenty-five Years (1964-1984)

1964-1973

In the first decade, (1964-1973), during the Presidency of H. Em.Card. Paolo Marella when Rev.Fr. Pierre Humbertclaude was the Secretary; the Secretariat was concerned with establishing the right foundation for a fruitful dialogue. Experts were invited and with their help a whole series of guidelines on dialogue with the Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and the followers of African Traditional Religions, along with theological and pastoral reflections were published and were made available to the public through the publication of the Bulletin *Secretariatus pro Non Christianis* (later renamed *Pro Dialogo*). The first issue was published in 1966 with a presentation by H. Em. Card. Marella and for the first and the only one time, with an article in Latin on “*Quid de non Christianis Oecumenicum Concilium Vaticanum II docuerit*” signed by Mons. Pietro Rossano. Until 1974, the *Bullettin* was published in English and French which were later on unified. In 1967, for the first time, a message with best wishes addressed to the Muslims for the end of *Ramadan* was sent. In 1971, two new sections within the Secretariat were created: for Asian religions and Traditional Religions alongside the already existent section for Islam. Not only the Secretariat but the entire Catholic Church, following the directions given by the Vatican II Council was developing its dialogue activities in every part of the world in a manner that was unprecedented. This period also saw the first meeting with the Office for Interreligious Dialogue of the World Council of Churches.

1973-1980

From 1973-1980, during the Presidency of H. Em. Card. Sergio Pignedoli with H.Ex. Mons. Pietro Rossano (1973-1982) as Secretary who was the former Undersecretary, there was a great expansion of contacts with religious leaders in different parts of the world. There were many trips and visits to Rome. Formal meetings were organized both with Episcopal Conferences and with representatives of other religions to encourage the path of dialogue. It is also worth remembering that in 1979, he organized the first Plenary Assembly of the Secretariat for non-Christians. This was an occasion to take stock of the situation of dialogue in the world and to plan for future work. A questionnaire on Dialogue was sent by the Secretariat to all the Consultors and some experts; the responses received in Rome were the subject of discussion of the Plenary Assembly. The numerous meetings, the visits of personalities of other religions and the warm reception of these guests at the Secretariat, together with theological reflections guided and directed the Dicastery in the method and content. Among the many visits during this period, I consider the visit of a Saudi delegation from 24th to 27th of October 1974 particularly important. The delegation was received by members of the Secretariat and the Commission for Justice and Peace and there was some discussion on issues of human rights. The most solemn moment of the visit was the Audience with Pope Paul VI. The visit was a success and was given wide coverage by the Arab Press.

1980-1984

It was a time of reflection and consolidation during the Presidency of H. Ex. Mons. Jean Jadot. Until 1982 H. Ex. Mons. Rossano was still the Secretary; later replaced by H.Ex. Mons. Marcello Zago. The reflection found its expression in the first official document published by the Dicastery: The attitude of the Church towards the followers of other religions. Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission (1984), known as *Dialogue and Mission*. The document which places interreligious dialogue in the context of the wider mission of the Church, drawing from the theological foundations of Vatican Council II, is divided into three parts: 1) Reflection on the mission of the Church; 2) the reasons for dialogue (nos. 29-35 distinguish various forms of dialogue); 3) reflection on the relationship between dialogue and evangelizing mission of the Church. During the same time, the local Churches were encouraged to establish appropriate structures for dialogue.

Permit me please at this juncture to speak about two of my predecessors who were prematurely called to the House of the Lord. They are H.Ex. Mons. Pietro Rossano and H.Ex. Mons. Marcello Zago, both of whom are well-known to you. These two Secretaries, thanks to their tireless, generous and deeply scientific style of work, have greatly contributed to the development of reflection that accompanied the early years of the Dicastery setting the stage for future work. H.Ex. Mons. Pietro Rossano worked at the Secretariat for non-Christians from 1965 to 1982; from 1967 to 1973 as the Undersecretary and then as Secretary until 1982. It is a well-known fact that the rich production of texts was due to him. Among the many texts, I remember the first one which was a concise but essential presentation of Christianity to non-Christians titled, "The Hope that is in us" which was translated into forty languages. It was not a casual choice but one that was dictated by the conviction that introducing Christianity could help in laying the foundations for a fruitful and sincere dialogue, free from ignorance and prejudice.

Essentially, it was also the contribution of H.Ex. Mons. Marcello Zago, the Secretary from 1983 to 1986. As has already been indicated, the first document of the Secretariat for non-Christians, Dialogue and Mission which saw the light in 1984 was the result of the reflection and guidance by Mons. Zago, known not only for his knowledge of religions but also for his missionary sensibility. I also remember that he was one of the major architects of the interreligious meeting in Assisi on 27 October 1986. Precisely on that day of Assisi, Mons. Marcello Zago took leave of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue as he had just been appointed the Superior General of the

Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Although called to other responsibilities, both Mons. Rossano, and Mons. Zago continued to enrich the work of the Dicastery with their suggestions and reflections.

The last three decades (1984-2014)

1984-2002

Under the guidance of H. Em. Card. Francis Arinze (1984-2002), there was in-depth studies on the theological foundations of interreligious dialogue. The Council had also established an extensive network of contacts with people of different religions, with particular attention to the needs and responsibilities of the local Churches. Right from the start, H. Em. Card. President, together with the Secretary H. Ex. Mons. Michael L. Fitzgerald and the then Undersecretary the late Rev. Fr. Giovanni Bosco Shirieda began to promote a variety of activities making numerous trips and participating in various meetings. Among the most important documents during this period, I would like to mention about two letters addressed to the Episcopal Conferences: *Pastoral Attention to African Traditional Religions* (1988), and *Pastoral Care and Attention to Traditional Religions (America, Asia, Oceania)* (1993). They deal with the issue of dialogue between faith and culture that involves those who coming from a background of traditional religion are welcome to the Christian faith. It also takes into account the case of those who do not wish to accept the Gospel message but to remain in their own religious traditions.

Together with the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, the PCID published the second document titled *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991) in which the relationship between the proclamation of salvation in Christ and dialogue with people of other religions was clarified. The document is divided into three parts: the first develops the theme of interreligious dialogue and reflects on the references made in the Vatican Council II about the Traditional religions; the second part confirms the priority of proclaiming Jesus Christ and the third speaks of the relation between proclamation and dialogue the two aspects of the Church's evangelizing mission which are inter-related but certainly not interchangeable.

Moreover, in this period, there were numerous dialogue activities promoted by Pope John Paul II, in which the Dicastery was involved. For example, H.Em. Card. Arinze, accompanied the Holy Father during his historic visit to Morocco in 1985, which culminated in the meeting with the young people in Casablanca.

The Council then was engaged in the organization of the Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi together with other Dicasteries of the Roman Curia.

The first 'Assisi meeting' in 27 October 1986, was organized on the occasion of the International Year of Peace. The Holy Father, for the first time, invited people of other Christian communities and other religions to pray for peace. The representatives of other religions (Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Shintoism, Traditional Religions) were all thirty in number.

The second time, again in Assisi in 1993, it was Prayer for Peace in the Balkans in which Jews, Christians and Muslims from Europe participated.

Finally, the last World Day of Prayer for Peace promoted by John Paul II was that of 24 January 2002. In the wake of attacks on Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001, the Holy Father wanted that representatives of Christian communities and other religions come together again to

Assisi to pray for peace. About a hundred official representatives of various religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Shintoism and Traditional Religions) accepted the invitation of the Holy Father.

It is not possible for me to do justice here to all that was done during this period. All the same, I cannot forget the Interreligious Assembly held in Rome from 25th to 28th October 1999 on the eve of Jubilee Year 2000. Pope John Paul II, in *Tertio Millenio Adveniente* (no.53) expressed the desire that in the third preparatory year, dedicated to the Father, interreligious meetings are held. The Interreligious Assembly organized by the Council had “On the eve of third millennium, collaboration between different religions” as its theme. About 200 people belonging to various religions participated in the closing ceremony held at St. Peter’s Square in which the Holy Father too joined.

In 1989, a new sector for the study of New Religious Movements was created within the Pontifical Council. The Church’s attention towards the new alternative groups or sects as well as the creation of a new sector for the same in the Council led to the forming of a working group by some Dicasteries of the Roman Curia for research and reflection on the subject.

Again under the Presidency of H. Em. Card. Arinze, the *Nostra Aetate Foundation- Scholarships* was instituted in order to help students and scholars of other religions to deepen their understanding of Christianity.

With regard to Islam, we witness the creation and development of Liaison Committees with various partners like *The Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (I.C.R.O.)* of Iran (1994); *The Muslim World League (Rabita)*, *The World Islamic Congress (Mu’tamar)*, *The International Islamic Council for Da’wa and Humanitarian Aid and the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (I.S.E.S.C.O.)* (1995); *The Permanent Committee for dialogue with Monotheistic Religions of Al-Azar University* (1998); and the *World Islamic Call Society* of Libya (2002).

With the Buddhists, there were three meetings at the level of theological exchange. The participation of the Dicastery in the annual Prayer for Peace at Mount Hiei (Japan), an initiative promoted by Etai Yamada, the then Patriarch of Tendai Buddhism in 1987 in remembrance of the Day for Peace at Assisi in 1986 is also worth mentioning here. is also worth mentioning.

Similarly, initiatives were taken to promote more regular dialogue with Hindus and Sikhs in collaboration with the Episcopal Conferences.

Finally, in addition to the message of greetings to Muslims for the end of Ramadan, it was decided in 1995 to send similar greetings to the Buddhists for the Feast of Vesakh and from 1996, the Hindus too began to receive greetings on the occasion of the Feast of Diwali.

2002-2007

Under the Presidency of H.Ex. Mons. Michael Fitzgerald, from 2002 to 2006, and then of H.Em. Card. Paul Poupard, until 2007, with Secretary H.Ex. Mons. Pier Luigi Celata, the already developed work got further expanded.

In a period marked by international events that unfortunately did not help in building a climate of dialogue and understanding among religions, the Dicastery promoted various interreligious meetings on the theme of peace. In particular, I remember two of them: *Spiritual Resources of Religions for Peace* (Rome, 16-18 January 2003), which was attended by 40 representatives of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism; *Resources for Peace in Traditional Religions* (Rome, 12-15 January 2005) during which 24 Catholic experts from Africa, America, Asia and Oceania deliberated upon the theme.

In 2004, a Guide for teaching African Traditional Religions, Islam and formation in interreligious dialogue was published. This is being used now in many seminaries in Africa. The seminaries also organize programs for the formation of youth in interreligious dialogue.

As regards the sector for New Religious Movements, following the publication of a study “Jesus Christ, the Bearer of Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on New Age” in 2003, an *International Consultation on New Age* was held in the Vatican from 14th to 16th June 2004. The Consultation was organized in collaboration with the Congregation for the Evangelization of the Peoples and the Pontifical Councils for Promoting Christian Unity and Culture.

In 2006, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi, this Dicastery, in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Friar Minor Conventual, organized both in Assisi and Rome, an interreligious meeting of young people from 4th to 8th November. The theme of this meeting was, “Lord, make me an instrument of peace”. Of the 100 participants from 30 countries, about half the number were Christians of various churches and communities while the rest belonged to 12 different religions.

2007-2014

Under the Presidency of H. Em. Card. Jean-Louis Tauran from 2007 to until now with H.Ex. Mons. Pier Luigi Celata, as the Secretary till 2012 and for the past two years myself, there have been numerous trips during which there have been meetings with leaders of other religious traditions besides the members of the Episcopal Conferences of countries visited. Great attention has been paid to religions in Asia with travels to India, Japan, Korea, Indonesia etc. initiating structured dialogue with Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh and Jain organizations and by sending for the first time, full-fledged messages to Jains on the occasion of *Mahavir Jayanti* and to the Sikh community on the occasion of *Prakash Diwas*.

So also, while continuing to encourage the tradition of training workshops in the seminaries in interreligious dialogue in Africa, the Dicastery also promoted dialogue there with the visits of the Card. President to Nigeria in 2012 and most recently to Benin (2014).

Dialogue with the Muslims too advanced in a more structured manner. As a result of a letter addressed to Pope Benedict XVI by 138 Muslim leaders in 2007, the Catholic-Islamic Forum was established in 2008. From 31 October 2012, the Holy See is represented in the person of the Secretary at the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), Vienna (Austria). The Holy See is a ‘Founding Observer’ at the

'Council of Parties' as well as a member of the "Board of Directors" on behalf of the Catholic Church.. From 2013 collaborative ventures have been started with the Ministry of Religious Affairs (*Dyanet*) of the Government of Turkey and with the Shiite, Sunni, Christian, Yazida and Sabea Endowments of the Ministry for Religious Affairs of the Republic of Iraq.

It is also important to remember the historic World Day of Prayer for Peace convoked by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in Assisi again on 27 October 2011 on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary. It was a day of reflection, dialogue and prayer for peace and justice in the world with the theme, "Pilgrims of Truth, Pilgrims of Peace". In this initiative in which the Pontifical Council collaborated, about 180 representatives of various religions participated.

In the context of ecumenical collaboration, the PCID, the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance, together brought out a document in 2011 titled, "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct".

The reflections and discussions held during the last two Plenary Assemblies in 2008 and 2013 respectively have resulted in the publication of the document "Dialogue in truth and charity. Pastoral Guidelines for Interreligious Dialogue"

To conclude, kindly permit me to thank again all those who have given their services and made available their expertise in order to establish good relationships and for a fruitful collaboration with the believers of other religions. In a very special way, I wish to thank, on behalf of all the collaborators in the Council, H. Em. Card. Jean-Louis Tauran, our President, for his skilled and effective guidance to the Council with human face, particularly his qualities of kindness and sympathy with which he establishes friendly relationship with everyone he comes across.

Conclusion

Although I am completing only two years as the Secretary of the Council, I can vouch for, from my own personal, daily experience, the huge amount of work in the Dicastery and the dedication with which it is done by all concerned.

I cannot afford to miss in any way expressing my filial gratitude towards the Holy Father Pope Francis who following in the footsteps of his predecessors, has himself become an ardent promoter of dialogue and encourages us to continue on the same path. From our everyday experience at the Council, we can be witnesses to the ever growing interest, on the part of our partners in dialogue, in the Catholic Church.

As a conclusion, I wish to make the words of H.Ex. Mons. Zago my own. Mons. Zago, describing the scene of the groups of different religions which were heading towards the square in front of the Basilica of St. Francis on 27 October 1986 amidst the cheering crowd, wrote in his personal diary, "The procession that I was guiding suddenly reminded me of the Council of Ephesus. The people of that time joyously welcomed the Council Fathers who recognized Mary as the Mother of God and thus ratified the dogma. Here in Assisi, it seemed to me that people, mostly Catholics drawn from

different parts of the world, not only cheered those who had come but also approved of dialogue and ecumenism promoted by the Church since Vatican Council II” »*.

Thanks again, for your patient hearing!