Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations

What Can They Offer Each Other?

Peter Drilling

In recounting the pastoral situation of an ecumenical prayer service at Thanksgiving the author reflects upon how interreligious concerns add new complexity to the already complex work of ecumenical sharing. He proceeds to examine the ways in which the two dialogues (ecumenical and interreligious) can complement one another while they remain distinct. He offers some closing reflections about contemporary soteriology and how this interreligious concern is being addressed today.

“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways....” Francis Thompson’s poetic take on fear of the mystery of God is applicable to the mistrust that for centuries religious people have had of religious people different from themselves. Rather than embrace the mystery of God, people of faith preferred to be secure in their perception of control of God and of God’s will and of God’s action. One way to do this was to lionize one’s own religious tradition and demonize the tradition of the others. It seemed safe that way. But in our day the churches and the other religious communities are more ready, even confident, to follow the labyrinthine ways of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in search of the mystery of God. It is surely a moment of grace.

As the Catholic Church attempts to respond to this opportunity of divine grace, not only new initiatives but new structures have been launched. As it happens at the present time, many dioceses designate one and the same person to be

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the ecumenical officer and the officer directing interreligious affairs. Not surprisingly, just as it would be problematic always to combine interreligious and ecumenical prayer, dialogue, and other events, so there are problematic dimensions when the interreligious and the ecumenical officers are one and the same. On the other hand, just as it is opportune in various settings and at various times to combine ecumenical and interreligious events, so it can be opportune that the same officer guide a diocese’s engagement in ecumenism and in interreligious affairs. However, when ecumenical and interreligious dialogue are somehow connected, complications must inevitably be expected.

For the last several years I have been researching interreligious dialogue regarding the divine. Thus, when my bishop asked me about a year and a half ago to oversee the merger of two parishes in a neighborhood that is heavily Muslim, it was not difficult to foresee that, in addition to the pastoral task of bringing together two widely divergent Catholic parishes into one cooperating community, I was also faced with the challenge of implementing in practice some of the interreligious issues I have been working on in theory.

After several months of undivided attention to my new Catholic community, dealing with the opportunities and obstacles to the formation of one new parish from two, I felt that things were moving along well enough for me to begin to reach out to the Muslims. I was pleasantly surprised by the eagerness with which the leaders of the Muslim congregation (almost exclusively Yemenite) responded to my invitation to meet and discuss matters of mutual interest. I was also pleasantly surprised with the welcome I received at Friday prayers at the mosque just a few blocks from the parish church, although I notice that some Muslims are still hesitant to greet me when we meet on the street.

\textit{A Pastoral Concern}

A complication arose in November when an ecumenical Thanksgiving service of prayer was planned by several local Christian congregations, including three Catholic parishes, three African-American Baptist congregations, a Methodist congregation, and a Presbyterian congregation. I was not part of the planning committee, but several of my parishioners did sit on the committee. The service was a fine blend of biblical proclamation, stirring song, and inspiring reflection. The reception afterward offered everyone the opportunity to meet and mingle. It was a true celebration of shared Christian faith.

During the reception, two people approached me, one of them one of the planners from our Catholic parish. The two were uneasy because a major segment of the religious community was absent from our effort to sanctify Thanksgiving week. The Muslims had not been invited to participate. Apparently, the planning
committee had discussed inviting the Muslims, and at some similar services in the past the Muslims had participated. But their presence brings complications.

If the Muslims were invited to participate, then the prayer service could not simply be a joyful celebration of faith in Jesus. The specifically Christian hymns so dear to the participants at the ecumenical service could not be chosen to be sung. The biblical readings would have to be chosen from a different perspective, and selections from the Qur’an would have been appropriate. No. Better to limit the participating communities to Christian congregations.

One can certainly understand the position of those organizers who wanted to limit the Thanksgiving service to the wide range of Christian faithful. No one would dream that every dialogue should include everyone. Christians must regularly dialogue among themselves in search of that unity among his disciples for which Christ prayed. At the same time, one can understand the position of those organizers who did not feel comfortable leaving out the Muslim segment of the religious community who presumably would also happily join with their Christian neighbors to pray at the Thanksgiving holiday.

Besides, while it is a delicate balancing act, relating to both ecumenical and interreligious partners is beautifully expressive of Catholic faith in the economy of the triune God as that is understood in the contemporary Church. To understand this application of the divine economy in the particular circumstances of the present scene, it is useful to review again the pertinent teaching of Vatican II and move from there to the present. Our question is: How does Catholic doctrine and theology guide the connection of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue?

Ecumenical and Interreligious: Making the Connection

First, the Church teaches the unity in the one body of Christ of all who have been baptized. Possessing the Spirit of Christ the baptized are justified by faith and thus share in the riches of communion with Christ Jesus. This is true although, as the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church teaches, the “Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him” (Lumen gentium, n. 8). For the Catholic Church acknowledges that “many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside [the Roman Catholic Church’s] visible confines. Since these are gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, they are forces impelling towards Catholic unity” (ibid.). Prayer and dialogue with other Christians is an essential duty of contemporary Catholics because, with our sisters and brothers of the other Christian communities, we make up the one body of Christ.
Indeed, we share *koinonia*, communion with one another which is analogous to the communion shared by the three divine persons. Communion among Christians, whatever their denominational affiliation, is specifically and explicitly related to incorporation in the body of Christ which all Christians share by virtue of their baptism. This communion is qualitatively different from the bonds which Christians share with the members of non-Christian religions, which is why ecumenical dialogue is quite a different matter than interreligious dialogue.

Nevertheless, Vatican II’s appreciation of persons who express their religious faith outside the body of Christ is no less fundamental for contemporary Catholic life than is appreciation of persons and communities which are Christian. The other religions themselves are appreciated with a holy reverence. Thus, *Nostra aetate* announces that “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 everyone” (*Nostra aetate*, n. 2).

*Gaudium et spes* is even more explicit. In number 22, after describing the way in which the indwelling of the Holy Spirit conforms Christians to the image of Christ, the pinnacle of human perfection, the text goes on: “All this holds true not for Christians only but also for all people of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.”

If anything, these Catholic convictions expressed in Vatican II have been *more strongly* stated in official Catholic statements in the years since the council. While reflecting on the meaning of the 1986 international day of interreligious prayer for peace at Assisi, Pope John Paul II celebrated the radical unity which already exists among all the world’s people, no matter how great our religious divisions, because the human race has a common origin in its creation by the living God and a common destiny in the universal divine will to save everyone (1 Tim 2:4). In addition, all who seek the true and the good do so because of a universally shared presence of the Holy Spirit. And so John Paul praised the Assisi gathering since it was a “visible expression of the hidden but radical unity which the divine word, ‘in whom everything was created, and in whom everything exists’
(Col 1:16, Jn 1:3), has established among the men and women of this world . . .
(John Paul II, 561, n. 3). The Pope goes on: “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” (John Paul II, 563, n. 11).

In 1997, a little more than a decade after the Assisi Day of Prayer, the International Theological Commission published a paper entitled “Christianity and the World Religions.” The paper concerns itself with the theoretical issue whether other religions can have salvific value. “. . . one finds elements of truth, of grace and goodness not only in the hearts of people but also in the rites and customs of peoples, although all must be ‘healed, elevated and completed’ (Ad gentes 9; Lumen gentium, 17). Whether the religions as such can have salvific value is a point that remains open” (International Theological Commission, 161, n. 8). However the theoretical issue is resolved the paper issues a strong practical directive: “Today’s Christians, respecting the diversity of religions, must learn to live a form of communion which has its foundation in the love of God for all and which is based on God’s respect of human freedom” (International Theological Commission, 164, n. 102).

In summary, the theological foundation for the close connection of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue is the economic activity in human history of the triune God. By the grace of God Christians share communion in the body of Christ, although it is an imperfect communion, which inspires our dialogue and prayer for full communion. By the grace of God Christians share God’s salvific activity in the Holy Spirit with the members of other religions. From our perspective as Catholics the entire dynamic is grounded in the creative and reconciling love of the one and triune God for all humanity. The contemporary Church recognizes God to be at work in the various branches of the Christian tradition as we never have before: somehow every baptized Christian belongs to the body of Christ. Likewise, the Church recognizes God to be at work in the other traditions besides Christianity: somehow the Holy Spirit is at work in many, maybe in all, of these traditions. No area of theology can be pursued without taking into account this universal salvific activity of the triune God. Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, liturgiology, moral theology, and the other areas of theology are impacted by this new vision.

Summarizing this point a bit differently Bishop Michael Fitzgerald comments that “part of the spirituality of dialogue will be to let oneself be guided by the

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relations within the Blessed Trinity and by the relations of each divine Person with human beings throughout history.” Among other things this means that “every person encountered,” not just Christians, “is to be seen as a brother and sister of Christ and is to be treated with respect on this account” (Fitzgerald, 632).

So, not only does the Catholic Church want to keep both the interreligious and the ecumenical dialogues going, but it may be particularly advantageous for one diocesan officer to oversee both dialogues, considering them perhaps to be complementary parts of one dialogue within the trinitarian dynamic of Christian faith. For, of course, there is only the one God, the one Lord Jesus Christ, and the one Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of the Father who proceeds for all eternity through the Word. The Word is the Word of the Father who became flesh uniquely in history by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Different Dialogues**

What this means practically is that three projects need to go forward simultaneously. First, with our fellow Christians in the *oikoumene* (household) of the baptized, faithful prayer and dialogue continue in the direction of the unity for which Christ prayed. Second, rejoicing in the common inspiration of the Holy Spirit, prayer and dialogue continue with all engaged honestly in the religious quest to search out what can be shared communally, whether it be doctrine, worship, or moral values. Third, on the basis of unity already recognized, efforts on the part of all the dialogue partners can be promoted to serve the good of the civic community.

Because the relations of Catholics with these many different groups vary according to what we share, it is a complicated dialogue in which we are engaged. In dealing with our fellow Christians, usually we have an easier time of it with Lutherans and Episcopalians on so many issues than we do with evangelicals of various sorts, although there is no value to be gained by minimizing difficulties in this area. Think how difficult it was to get the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation finally to sign on to an agreed statement on justification by faith although both groups had claimed publicly to be in basic agreement.

From ecumenical tensions we move on to the interreligious. On the interreligious front there is the peculiar relationship of Christians with Jews. The bond shared with the Jews is qualitatively different than that shared with Buddhists and Hindus, for the Jews are our elder sisters and brothers in the Judeo-Christian tradition. On the other hand, Buddhists and Hindus offer their own unique possibilities for dialogue with Catholics. One might think immediately of the Hindu doctrine of the incarnation of the divine and of the divinization of the world providing a fruitful area of conversation with Christians who believe in the incarna-
tion of the divine in the Word made flesh and in the indwelling of the Spirit within the world. Thus, many dialogues need to be going on simultaneously.

Even before dialogue partners take up specific issues to be discussed together there is the problem of the meaning of dialogue itself. The very title of the 1991 statement on “Proclamation and Dialogue” hints at the difficulty. Catholics never eschew the need for proclamation of the saving work of Jesus Christ in the Gospel. Proclamation is intimately linked with dialogue. This can scare away some potential dialogue partners, whose memories recall insensitive Christian practices of proselytization. But what would be the value of anyone’s participation in the dialogue if they were not convinced of the truth of their own faith, and if they were not intent upon giving witness to it? Here I am reminded of a recent visit to Saturday evening Mass at my parish church in Lackawanna of one of the “elders” of the local Muslim congregation. I had introduced my friend to the congregation, and during the homily I presented the Church’s positive teaching on Muslim-Christian dialogue. After Mass, several members of the congregation gathered around to welcome our guest. He, in turn, was most gracious but soon began teaching his greeters a variety of the fundamentals of Islam. The greeters, in turn, responded by stating their Catholic beliefs. It was all spontaneous and cordial. It was a practical instance of combining proclamation and dialogue.

**Pastoral Concerns Revisited**

This brings us back to the ecumenical Thanksgiving service I mentioned earlier. There is a legitimate value in the coming together of Christians for a celebration of our common faith, and there is a legitimate value for an interreligious service of prayer, although here I echo a caution of Cardinal Francis Arinze. Reflecting on what was happening at the World Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi, the cardinal claimed that “[s]ince the beliefs are different, the formula chosen for the celebration was ‘being together in order to pray’, not ‘praying together’” (Arinze, 1987, 139). The cardinal raises the enormously important issue of avoiding reductionistic and syncretistic approaches to dialogue. The facile response to the call for dialogue, one which is often heard, is that, after all, we all worship the same God. True enough. But presumably there are correct and false ways to conceive of and to relate to the one God. Interreligious dialogue and prayer need to be quite attentive to the context created by Cardinal Arinze’s distinction.2

Since Thanksgiving is a civic holiday celebrated by all Americans of all persuasions, that occasion might be optimal for an interreligious prayer service. But perhaps it could be arranged in such a way that “being together in prayer” be joined with “praying together” so that each group could express its distinctive beliefs in its prayer, while some form of prayer together could also be expressed.
At one point each group would be present with an open spirit while the other group offers prayer distinctive of its tradition. At another point both groups would pray according to commonly held beliefs and mutually acceptable rituals. Clearly this is a complication which would require some skill to handle. But imagine the possible rich results, spiritually, educationally, and socially.

Here I might add that I have been impressed to read from time to time about what might be named the dialogue of religious experience. I remember an instance from the 1970s when Buddhist and Benedictine monks gathered at Mt. Savior Monastery near Elmira, New York, for a dialogue lasting a couple of weeks. They never felt more united in faith than when they prayed side by side in wordless meditation.

Sometimes strictly ecumenical prayer is desirable rather than interreligious prayer. If Thanksgiving might be better observed interreligiously, Christians of the area might look for another occasion more specific to the Christian experience. Thus, a community service of lessons and carols during the Advent or Christmas seasons might be appropriate. Or perhaps something at the start of Lent. This would work well with at least some Christian denominations. I remember several years ago approaching the local Lutheran pastor. He and I had been looking for an occasion to invite our congregations to pray together. We observed that Lutherans and Catholics alike are eager to celebrate the beginning of the season of Lent. My Lutheran friend and I were pleased that the new book of worship provided in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America includes the option to bless and distribute ashes. So we put together an ecumenical Ash Wednesday service which members of both congregations attended in droves. The following year the Presbyterians joined us. The Bible Church was not interested in an Ash Wednesday service, but they willingly joined the other three congregations for an old-fashioned hymn sing on a beautiful August Sunday afternoon on the lawn of the Presbyterian Church, followed by supper al fresco.

There is a further point to propose. Diocesan ecumenical and interreligious officers may want to take this process a step further. The official documents cited suggest the conclusion that it is not feasible to do Catholic theology in an adequate way today apart from consideration not only of the diverse Christian interpretations of the Christian Gospel but also of the plurality of world religions. For we can only discern God’s saving economy at work in the actual world order in which we find ourselves.
world order in which we find ourselves. It is quite possible that to reflect on the
divine economy only from within the confines of Catholic appropriation of the
Scriptures and from within Catholic, indeed Christian, development of the tra-
dition is too narrow and will miss the point of God's salvific will as it actually is
at work. Thus, ecumenical and interreligious officers may find themselves in the
position of needing to encourage the theologians in their dioceses, and other
ministers who regularly engage in theological reflection, to broaden the base of
their reflection.

A Soteriological Question

U nderlying all that has been proposed thus far, and inserting itself into the
conversation inevitably, is the question of the role of the triune God in sal-
vation and, in particular, the role of Jesus the Savior. As I review all the points I
have made in the previous paragraphs, this question is implicitly present
throughout for the Christian partner in dialogue, both ecumenically and inter-
religiously. For while all Christians agree that Jesus is the Savior, we obviously
disagree on the particulars of Jesus’ Gospel. Let me close by addressing briefly
this pervasive question.

The 1997 essay of the International Theological Commission states that the
question of whether the Catholic Church is to acknowledge that some or all other
religions are salvific in some way is an open question. Those who engage in dia-
logue, however, cannot simply ignore the question. At least it has to be alive in
the background of interreligious discussion. And how the question is to be an-
swered will surely affect that conduct of ecumenical dialogue.

Currently there are Christian theologians, including Catholics, who are search-
ning for new concepts and new language that will successfully retain the Christian
tradition, but will also meet the exigencies of the new moment. One theologian
who is widely read, at least in the United States, is Paul Knitter of Xavier Uni-
versity in Cincinnati. Knitter takes the position that Jesus is truly, but not the
only, Son of God and Savior. To arrive at this position Knitter leaves aside a
christology from above and chooses to concentrate on the historical Jesus, his
historicity as a human person, his role as Savior in his humanity. On this basis,
Knitter concludes, no human being including Jesus can be the absolute Savior.
Jesus is best understood as representative but not constitutive of God’s salvific
will. Thus room is left for saviors in other religious traditions, such as Buddha
and Lord Krishna (Haight and Knitter).

Knitter’s proposal unfortunately rejects the achievement of the council of
Chalcedon (451 A.D.). The context of that council is the patristic conviction that
only God can save human beings from sin. The council of Nicea proclaimed, and
the First Council of Constantinople reaffirmed, that in his pre-existence the
eternal Word is divine as the Father is divine, and the same is true of the Holy Spirit. The eternal Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. Chalcedon consolidates the doctrine by affirming that the person of the Word become flesh is divine, and that this divine person functions by both a divine and a human nature simultaneously. Thus, Jesus is Savior not just in his humanity but in his divinity. Even more, Jesus could not be Savior only in his humanity, for only God can save humanity. Jesus is Savior of the world objectively, not just subjectively, for those who have come to believe in him.

Jacques Dupuis, S.J., suggests an approach which would recognize Jesus’ uniqueness in his salvific role as constitutive and relational. By constitutive Dupuis means that the death and resurrection of Jesus has a universal significance, constituting “the privileged channel through which God has chosen to share the divine life with human beings.” By relational Dupuis means that a “reciprocal relationship . . . exists between the path that is in Jesus Christ and the various paths to salvation proposed by the religious traditions to their members” (Dupuis, 305).

A problem with the relational approach of Dupuis is that Jesus’ role as unique Savior seems to be diminished. Is there a more adequate way to express that God’s salvific will is being done in the other world religions, but that the effectiveness of these religions, from a Christian perspective, remains bound to the paschal mystery of Jesus because Jesus is uniquely Son of God incarnate and therefore uniquely and, indeed, absolutely the Savior of the world? The language I suggest comes from Karl Rahner’s essay “One Mediator and Many Mediations.” Rahner was writing in a different context, demonstrating the relationship of Mary and the other saints to the one Mediator, Jesus. But perhaps the terminology can be extended to the salvific role of other world religions. Thus, Jesus is the one and only Mediator of God’s salvific will, but there can be other mediations in other world religions of what Jesus alone has accomplished.

My purpose in moving into this contentious area is not to attempt to close the question of whether the other religions are salvific, and then to state how. It is rather a proposal that the question cannot be ignored. For as Christians pray and work together to resolve church-dividing issues so that the unity for which
Christ prayed can one day be achieved, the same Christians must take into account that God's salvific will is not active outside of but within the doctrines, customs, and prayer of the other world religions. The Church already teaches this doctrine in some way.

Conclusion

Who can say where dialogue will lead? The way to follow seems clear. Diocesan officers of ecumenical and interreligious affairs, pastors and the appropriate committees of congregations all enjoy the Church's blessing to exercise their imaginations in service of the promotion of prayer and dialogue and common efforts among the religions, all to the glory of God. It is an extraordinary opportunity. So often the world's religions influence oppression and violence in society. Now they have a newly discovered vocation to work together to be a force for global harmony.

Notes

1 This essay was originally a workshop presentation at the annual meeting of the National Association of Diocesan Ecumenical Officers, May 1999. It is reprinted here with minor changes.

2 I am grateful to Dr. John Borelli, director for interreligious relations for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, for alerting me to a useful comparison, or perhaps a contrast, between the opinion expressed by Francis Cardinal Arinze that proclamation of the Gospel and dialogue with members of non-Christian religions can coexist comfortably (Arinze, 1998, 595–96), and the rejoinder of Rabbi Irwin M. Blank that "to this observer it seems that church statements continue to claim superiority. That this is a stumbling block in Jewish-Christian relations is clear" (Blank, 47).

References


Second Vatican Council. “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” (*Nostra aetate*).

_______. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*).

_______. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*).