Draft Script for the Interreligious Dialogue Forum

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# Table of Contents

What is Interreligious Dialogue 1

Nostra Aetate 2

In the Context of Japan 2

Respect for Minority 3

“Being Together” – Not about “Juxtaposition” 3

Dialogue Must Be A Process of Mutual Empowerment 4

Difficulties to Overcome 4

Various Challenges 5

From Debate and Discussion to Dialogue 5

Peace Message and Interreligious Dialogue 6

Cultivation of Inner Peace: Indispensible to Building World Peace 7

If You Are Looking for Peace, Go and Meet the Poor 7

To Build Peace in the World needs Cooperation of All Religions 7

Interreligious Dialogue in Today’s World 8

Prayer 8

# What is Interreligious Dialogue

I come from India and the tradition of dialogue among religions goes back to a very long long history. It is already 200 years before Jesus Christ, perhaps 200 years after Shakyamuni Buddha, that in India, a Buddhist emperor by name of Ashoka, who propagated the ideas that religions and the followers of different religions must live in peace, friendship and harmony. (Myoken, 2014)

He erected several stupas. On one of the stupas, he clearly wrote:

*King Ashoka honours members of all religions, whether that of ascetics or lay, by gifts and honours. But more important than gifts and honours is his support of the essential message of all religions. The essential message varies from religion to religion...So, one should keep in check praising one's own religion and criticizing another's religion... By doing so, one strengthens one's own religion, and does a disservice to the others. Whoever honours his own religion and disparages another's, whether from blind loyalty or intending to show his religion in a more favourable light, does the greatest harm to his own religion. Concord is best, where each person listens to and respects the teaching of others...The result is the progress of one's own religion, and the illumination of the Dharma" (The Twelfth Rock Edict).*

Interreligious dialogue simply means making efforts to relate to people of other religions. Religion could be considered a language, our own mother tongue. We speak our language which the other may not understand. How do I speak to someone who does not know my language? There is no reason to feel frustrated; we should make every effort to communicate and communication is not simply uttering words by our mouth. It could be done in so many other ways than just using the sound of words. First of all it is an attitude, a basic disposition of oneself, wanting to reach out to the other, wanting to understand the other, wanting the other to understand oneself.

# Nostra Aetate

Nostra Aetate is a pastoral document promulgated at the Vatican II which declared the attitudes of the Church towards other religions.

Short but articulated, *Nostra Aetate*, has brought about an important and significant change in the attitudes of Christians towards other religious traditions and their respective followers. With the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church officially proposed for the first time in history a positive, constructive, and fraternal dialogue with the followers of other religions of the world.

The Catholic Church, through *Nostra Aetate*, states: “In her task of fostering unity and love among men, and even among nations, the Church gives primary consideration in this document to what human beings have in common and to what promotes fellowship among them (*NA* 1). The objectives of *Nostra Aetate* are not to enter into polemic and create a debate and futile discussion between religions; through dialogue the Church wishes to enter into the very depth of the life of all people. The Church wishes to create a climate of cordiality and trust between Christians and followers of other religions, so that all people may be able to dissipate mutual prejudice and ignorance and establish fruitful contact among them in order to collaborate on questions of common concerns. *Nostra Aetate* invites Catholics to build bridges of friendship across religious boundaries.

It is not so much cerebral discussion on religions that *Nostra Aetate* suggests but rather it encourages promotion of relationships between peoples of different religious traditions. Interreligious dialogue is all about one believer encountering other believers. Not only is this an interesting and enriching experience but it is, above all, necessary today if we want to build and cultivate world peace.

For me, Inter Religious Dialogue is (*building the*) ability to relate, ability to relate with one another. Thus, dialogue takes place on all levels of my life, whether I’m silent, whether I’m walking with you, whether I’m eating with you, whether I’m having a glass of wine with you. It can take place on many levels.

Dialogue continues even when I’m only with my Catholic people, my attitude, my ideas about Buddhism will come out, when I speak to my catholic people. If I’m a closed man, If I don’t like Buddhist, somehow or the other indirectly it’ll come out, when I’m praying in my catholic church or when I’m talking to my catholic people. So my dialogue always continues, whether I’m with you or not with you. It always continues.

# In the Context of Japan

Perhaps, you might say that in Japan the majority population belongs to mainly two religions, namely Shinto and Buddhism. Christians are a minority population and Muslims, perhaps, very few. But since interreligious dialogue is a question of attitudes both Shinto and Buddhists must learn to relate to people of other religions. There is also need for Buddhists to learn to relate with Shintoism and also to learn to relate to Buddhists of other denominations. In fact, man or woman of religion must also reach out and relate to someone who does not believe any religion.

So far we have been happy with religion of our own. But our world is going fast ahead and we people of religion need to guide this world that is going forward so fast. People are coming together easily through the Internet, coming together through phones, through travels, in our days.

Obviously, nobody can say that we don’t need Inter Religious Dialogue today. You’ll agree with me, there are so many problems in the world. There is problem for example, of children being exploited, there is problem of plight of immigrants. There is a big problem of poverty, sometimes there is a natural disasters like Fukushima in Japan. So there are many problems in our World.

In this world of problems, what is our attitude like? Do I have this new attitude of dialogue? Do we value the attitude of dialogue, I as a Catholic and you as a Buddhist?

# Respect for Minority

What are the difficulties still to overcome in our relationship with the followers of other religions? What are the challenges for the future? Dialogue with people of other religions in countries where people of one religion are a majority and other religions are in minority there, interreligious dialogue should be based on respect for minorities.

I would like to give an example of this in the context of Europe: to the new Ambassador of Denmark to the Holy See, Pope John Paul II, now a Saint, said that respect for minorities is one of the elements that those responsible for public policy in Europe should take into consideration in order to have a strong moral foundation in view of stable security.

According to him “…respect for minorities, whether they be minorities deriving from different ethnic identities or different religious beliefs (is the third element). In the face of the repeated and continuing attempts to suppress minorities in Europe through this century, it must be stated unequivocally that such groups have a right to maintain and develop their own culture, and that Europe will only be a strong and secure to the extent that this is so” (16 December 1999).

# “Being Together” – Not about “Juxtaposition”

Nostra Aetate stresses the fundamental unity of the human race: “All men form but one community.” It (NA) insists on having a clear idea of “being together” or living in harmony. This is important to take note of because there are also confused and incorrect conceptions of “being together” or living in harmony when it comes to the religious world.

In the concept of “juxtaposition” all religious expressions are considered equally valid. In this case differences are simply juxtaposed. Far from inducing mutual respect, this attitude encourages indifference. *Nostra Aetate* promotes the respect due to every human being. It also asks us to discern in all religious traditions “a ray of that Truth” which enlightens all people, although these religious traditions may not contain the fullest expression of the truth. An uncritical attitude towards other religions does not contribute to the cause of unity.

Another tendency or rather a temptation is to want to achieve unity by choosing the best from every religion and by creating a sort of “do-it-yourself-religion”. In this era of globalisation, for example, there is a tendency to emphasise global ethic. Only the common elements of religions are selected. This then becomes a sort of reductionism.

Finally, those seeking a quick path to the union of religions often seek to create their new religion by taking elements from all others (fixing one’s own buffet plate). In this way they not only try to destroy the other religions but they fail to create a new one, because they deny the basic inspiration which is at the heart of every religion.

# Dialogue Must Be A Process of Mutual Empowerment

There are principles for genuine dialogue among religions: “Dialogue must be a process of mutual empowerment, not negotiation between parties who have conflicting interests and claims.

In dialogue we affirm hope. In the midst of the many divisions, conflicts and violence there is hope that it is possible to create a human community that lives in justice and peace. Dialogue is not an end in itself. In dialogue we nurture relations to build one community where people of different religious communities exist.

Dialogue takes place in concrete settings. Awareness of such realities as historical experience, economic background and political ideologies is essential. Further, differences in culture, gender, generation, race, and ethnicity also have an important impact on the nature and style of interaction. The purpose of dialogue, once the context is taken seriously, is not to remove or run away from differences but to build confidence and trust across them in people who belong to different religions.

In dialogue we strive towards mutual respect. Respecting others has to be nurtured; it does not happen by itself. Trust and confidence comes from allowing partners to define themselves. We need to allow difficult questions in dialogue; we should not make propositions for dialogue too simplistic.

# Difficulties to Overcome

Difficulties in dialogue also stem from the problem of language. It is important to find out what our partners in dialogue are saying or trying to say and what they are not saying. It is important in dialogue to come to a proper understanding of the partner’s religious teachings. Listening to what my partner in dialogue has to say is very important.

A Catholic friend of mine, who is engaged in dialogue with Buddhists, gave me this example of how a partner in diaogue was not listening: “A Buddhist nun was invited to speak to a group of Roman Catholics about the relationship between meditation and compassion in Buddhism. Later the nun complained that the Catholics learned little about Buddhism that evening because they kept telling her that her practice of compassion is due to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The nun knew very well that Christians and Buddhists have their own ways of speaking about what Catholics call “the dynamics of the spiritual life”. In this case, a problem of understanding arose because of the Roman Catholics’ preoccupation with an *a priori* theological interpretation of Buddhism. The Buddhist nun was trying to talk about compassion (*karuna*) in terms of Boddhisattva practice and its implications for meditation. Unfortunately, the Roman Catholics “didn’t get it”, according to the nun, so eager they were to recast everything she was saying in terms of their own fulfilment theology of religions”. My Catholic friend asked, “At what point does our theology of religions so interfere with our ability to listen to our dialogue partner that we fail to understand what they are saying on their own terms?”

Dialogue will be impossible, or at least extremely difficult, where minds are closed. If there is a conviction that only I have the truth, and that the other person is completely in error, then there can be no true meeting of minds. Such a closed mentality will have to be overcome. This does not mean that I have to give up my own convictions or act compromisingly on essentials of my religious tradition.

# Various Challenges

With the increasing fear of terrorism which has spread and which is active through global networks throughout the world, the Governments in many countries have taken keen interest in the promotion of interreligious dialogue. Security of the State is their prime objective in these undertakings. One must be aware that there can be a shade of difference between the call of different religions to promote interreligious dialogue and the religious harmony which Governments encourage, often under the control of the State. Religion must never be allowed to be instrumentalised for any vested interests.

In the post-modern Europe there is also widespread phenomenon of New Age, manifestations of which are many and different. Often at the heart of the New Age worldview is a false opposition between spirituality and religion.

Finally, the list of difficulties to overcome in interreligious dialogue cannot be complete without the mention of widespread indifferentism, which, sad to say, is found among followers of all religions. The problem of indifferentism is closely related to hedonistic culture. Whereas classical culture was focused upon God, modern culture on man, the post-modern culture is focused on self. The sources of authority are no longer external and objective, but personal and subjective. The truth is ‘what you make it’ and this leads to the moral relativism.

# From Debate and Discussion to Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is not merely an intellectual discussion; neither is it a fruitless conversation. Interreligious dialogue is not a game of dialectics and aimless argumentation.

In an effort to relate one to the other, dialogue enables each person to recover the totality of presently fragmented human person and the world at large. To save unity from the danger of mere uniformity interpersonal relations are essential in society.

Dialogue is born out of deep respect for human person. Dialogue does not reduce “the other” to one’s own apriori categories. True dialogue is a meeting or an encounter of two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant in dialogue to learn from the other so that both partners in dialogue can change and grow. It is not, therefore, a debate but an excercise in listening with openness and empathy. The aim of debate is showing superioirty of one over the other and to win the other over or to come to total agreement or reduce all diversity to uniformity; whereas, the aim of dialogue is understanding and recognition that both partners are equals.

The ideal in dialogue is to communicate in order to bridge the gulf of mutual ignorance and misunderstanding and to let the other speak out his/her insights in his/her own language (that of his/her religion) and idiom. Dialogue serves the useful purpose of laying bare our own assumptions and those of the other, thereby giving us a more critically grounded convinction of what we hold to be true. Dialogue originates from a sincere and insatiable desire to know Truth more and more. Dialogue does not aim at shaking the convictions of the other but rather aims at confronting more vividly with Truth each of the participant in dialogue. In dialogue I am obliged to consider the other as a subject like myself and not make him/her an object.

Interreligious dialogue is a purificatory excercise for persons of all religions in their relationships with each other. Today, nothing significant can happen anywhere that does not concern all. The whole of mankind faces one common stream of destruction or renewal; in other words, we either walk together the path of life or we all perish. It would be naive to pretend for one religion to think that it can alone solve gigantic problems such as poverty, hunger, corruption, war, pollution of eco-system, etc. People of all religions are faced with common problems. It will be foolish for followers of all religions to merely debate and engage in just a futile/speculative discussion when faced with dangerous predicament of our world and our society.

“Dialogue is understanding among committed followers of various religions who agree to meet and accept one another and work together for common ideals in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. Not superficial meeting but an encounter at the core of their respective faiths for they are confident that not only what they have in common but also those things in which they differ can provide a motive for coming together” (R. Panikkar *Intrareligious Dialogue*, Paulist Press, New York, 1978).

# Peace Message and Interreligious Dialogue

Like in other religions the theme of peace is central to Christianity.

For us Christians, Jesus Christ, in whom God is revealed completely, is referred to as the “Prince of Peace”. After his resurrection from the dead, the first gift Jesus imparts to his disciples is the “gift of Peace”, not as the world gives but as God himself gives it.

The edifice of peace stands on many pillars: prayer, love, justice, solidarity, respect, forgiveness, development, etc. The problems of our world – drought, disease, the equitable use of the earth’s resources, poverty, ecology, displacement of person(s) – do not respect a religious divide. They affect people of all religions. There are fields here open for Christian-Muslim (Buddhist, Hindu and other religions) cooperation.

Peace is not so much a superficial balance between diverse material interests; rather, we must look at it as essential good, in fact, as God’s gift which is entrusted to us. Peace is the fruit of morality and virtue. Since God is the primary Fountain, the essential Truth and the supreme Good of all beings, search for peace and efforts to build peace must begin with God. In this sense peace comes from God; God is its foundation. And, peace in this sense is our responsibility.

# Cultivation of Inner Peace: Indispensible to Building World Peace

Let us not forget that peace is born in the heart of a person. One can hardly bring peace in society, in the world, if there is no peace within oneself. Cultivation of inner peace is indispensable if there is to be peace around.

Let us remember St John Paul II who said in Assisi in 1986: “…there exists another dimension of peace, another way of promoting it… it is the result of prayer, which, in the diversity of religions, expresses a relationship with a supreme power that surpasses our human capacities alone (Opening Address at the World Day of Prayer for Peace, Assisi 27 October 1986).

To pray is not to escape from history and the problems which it presents. On the contrary, it is to choose to face reality not on our own, but with the strength that comes from on high, the strength of truth and love which have their ultimate source in God. Faced with treachery of evil, religious people can count on God, who absolutely wills what is good. They can pray to have courage to face even the greatest difficulties with a sense of personal responsibilities, never yielding to fatalism or impulsive reactions.

# If You Are Looking for Peace, Go and Meet the Poor

From the Justice of Each Comes Peace for All. Unless you seek the good of one and all, peace is placed in jeopardy. Respect for rights of every human person is the foundation of peace.

Phenomenon of globalization is being imposed on people, especially the poor, without respect to solidarity among all people. Is everyone able to take advantage of a global market? Will everyone at last have a chance to enjoy peace? Will relations between States become more equitable, or will economic competition and rivalries between peoples and nations lead humanity towards situation of even greater instability? The challenge before us is to ensure a globalization in solidarity, a globalization without marginalization.

People are subjects of true development and they are also the aim of true development. The integral development of people is the goal and measure of all development projects. How about promoting values that truly benefit individuals and society? It is not enough to reach out and help those in need. We must help them to discover the values which enable them to build a new life and to take their rightful place in society with dignity and justice.

# To Build Peace in the World needs Cooperation of All Religions

The human longing for peace is expressed by every religion.

The meeting in Assisi in 1986 confirmed that peace is not only the result of skilful political and diplomatic negotiations or a compromise between economic interests, but peace depends in a fundamental way upon the One God who knows human hearts and guides and directs the steps of all humanity.

Religions have an important role to play in establishing lasting peace in society. Religious leaders need to motivate their respective co-religionists in understanding the original tenets of their own religious tradition. Religious believers are “messengers and artisans of peace”. The human longing for peace is expressed by every religion. If that longing is fundamental and essential to being human, then believers of every religion should support it, whether they be politicians, leaders of international organizations, businessmen and workers, associations and private citizens.

# Interreligious Dialogue in Today’s World

More than ever people in many parts of the world live in societies which are marked by tension and conflict between and within religious communities; there is widespread distrust and fear, and a climate of helplessness and resignation. Interreligious dialogue and cooperation at all levels of society, from local to international, is desired by many people.

Relations across religious boundaries need to be cultivated. Friendships need to be constructed. Bridges of understanding and respect need to be built. Let us not forget that dialogue among believers of different religions is not a fire brigade to be called only when a crisis arises. One need not wait for crisis situation to arrive. It is precisely when relations are good that we should multiply our efforts to strengthen and widen them. Interreligious dialogue is a never-ending and an ongoing task.

By our meeting and collaborating with people of other religions we are not seeking the advantage only of our own religous group, but the good of all people. In this way interreligious dialogue can truly be a contribution to peace in the world.

# Prayer

All this may sound very idealistic. We have to take people as they are. Nevertheless we have to keep ideals before us, we have to maintain a vision, otherwise we shall just resign ourselves to constant conflict.

The world needs peace, the world ardently desires peace. Take new initiatives for the spread of peace. Given the increased number of conflict situations, it is necessary to develop new energies of peace, for which religions are a valuable resource.

“May no hatred, no conflict, no war be kindled by religion! War can never be justified by religion. May the words spoken by religions always be words of peace! May the way of faith lead to dialogue and understanding! May religions guide hearts to bring peace on earth! May religions help all men and women to love the earth and its peoples both great and small!”

(3,832 words: 21 min x 184 words/min)