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*Photo Fr. Max Mizzi OFM Conv. ©
Fr. Max Mizzi and Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, Founder of the Rissho-Kosei kai, in Japan in 1990*

Genuine Faith in One's Own Religion and Interreligious Dialogue

By Fr. Maximilian Mizzi OFM Conv.

*Interreligious dialogue involves risks, but religionists
must refrain from committing the sin of confining
themselves within walls of dogma and self-satisfaction*

The "interreligious dialogue" concept came into use in recent decades with the Second Vatican Council, during which many references were made to the relationship between the Catholic Church and the non-Christian religions. The word "dialogue" was first used by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* ("His Church," August 6, 1964). Since then it has been very often used in Church documents. Since the World Day of Prayer for

Peace, observed in Assisi on October 27, 1986, the concept of interreligious dialogue has gained currency among followers of the world's religions everywhere.

That coming together of representatives of the world's religions gave fresh stimulus to interreligious dialogue. It was not the first gathering of its kind to discuss world problems, especially peace. But it was the first time for representatives of all the Christian churches and of all the main religions of the world to come together to pray under the leadership of Pope John Paul II, who had invited them to Assisi.

For the first time in history, representatives of all the Christian churches and of all the religions of the world came together in peace and in harmony. For the first time the barriers between them fell down. For the first time the representatives of the world's religions came together as brothers and sisters united in the bond of prayer. They did not come together in conflict or to argue with one another. They didn't even come together to discuss peace. They came to pray for peace in the spirit of God, in the spirit of love and reconciliation, in the footsteps of Saint Francis.



Photo by Fr. Max Mizzi OFM Conv. ©

*Shinto priest and religious leaders at the Basilica of St. Francis
World Day of Prayer for Peace held in Assisi on October 27, 1986*

That meeting of the world's religions in Assisi had a tremendous impact on the whole world. It changed the course of history of the world's religions. After that historic event, the religions of the world came very much closer together. They started to collaborate with each other with greater enthusiasm and mutual respect.

It is a matter of fact that in the world there are many religions and many faiths. Their origin goes back thousands of years. In times past, the followers of the different religions of the world used religion as a pretext for conflict, war, and persecution. Unfortunately, some still do, even in our time. Today the followers of these same religions, however, have a different attitude towards each other. This change of attitude is due mainly to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, especially with the Council document *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Times). Moreover, this attitude of respect for each other's religion and open dialogue with each other was greatly revived and took on new meaning at the meeting of the world's religions for peace in Assisi. It is now commonly called "*the Spirit of Assisi*".

During these last decades we are acknowledging more and more the fact that "there is only one community and it consists of all peoples". That "they have only one origin, since God inhabited the entire world with the whole human face. And they have one ultimate destiny, God, whose providence, goodness, and plan for salvation extend to all."¹ The Catholic Church believes and teaches that Jesus Christ is "the way and the truth and the life."² "But it rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions."³ This is very positive thinking and teaching and opens the door to great respect for non-Christian religions. In times past we tended to reject the "other" religion because of the rooted concept that only "our" religion was good and holy. Today we have no difficulty in accepting the fact that in all the religions there are so many common elements. Interreligious dialogue should focus first and foremost on the elements that are common to all religions.

A basic element of very genuine dialogue, including dialogue with adherents of other religions, is honesty, sincerity, and faithfulness to one's own culture, to one's own religion. Those who lack faith or are not deeply rooted in their own religion cannot offer genuine thoughts and reflections on their faith to the people with whom they are called to dialogue. They must realize that they are called to assume a very important role that requires a great sense of responsibility. If those Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Shintoists, and so on who are called to this task are not convinced, or if they are ignorant of their own religious tradition, they cannot offer to the followers of the other religions the spiritual richness of their own religious tradition and culture.

That followers of the world's religions come together does not imply any intention of seeking a religious consensus among themselves or of negotiating their faith convictions. "Nor is it a concession to relativism in religious beliefs, because every human being must sincerely follow his or her upright conscience with the intention of seeking and obeying the truth".⁴

In this encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II writes: "Those engaged in this dialogue must be consistent with their own religious traditions and convictions, and be open to understanding those of the other party without pretense or closed-mindedness,

but with truth, humility and frankness, knowing that dialogue can enrich each side... Dialogue leads to inner purification and conversion which, if pursued with docility to the Holy Spirit, will be spiritually fruitful.”⁵

Furthermore, for genuine dialogue we are required to have respect not only for the follower of the other religious tradition but also for the religious tradition and religion of the person with whom we are called to dialogue. This means that interreligious dialogue is not proselytism, which is not to be confused with evangelism, but the genuine search for the truth. In the document “Dialogue and Proclamation”, interreligious dialogue is first considered “at the purely human level, which reciprocal communication, leading to a common goal or, at a deeper level, to interpersonal communion. Secondly, dialogue can be taken as an attitude of respect and friendship, which permeates all those activities constituting the evangelizing mission of the Church. This can appropriately be called “the spirit of dialogue”. Thirdly, in the context of religious plurality, dialogue means “all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment.”⁶

Dialogue between religious leaders today is a great means to unity. It is a great richness, on both a spiritual and human level. It is a means for the followers of the different religions of the world to get together in order to overcome the centuries-old prejudices, to learn from each other, to enrich each other with the spirituality and richness of their own faith, and ultimately to reach that full truth that unites. Dialogue between the various religions of the world is very new and not well established yet and, in some ways, still in a confused or unclear state. We are at the first stages of dialogue. And yet there is enthusiasm about it, there is good will on the part of most of the religious leaders.

Here again the document “Dialogue and Proclamation” quoted above offers some other forms of dialogue between the followers of the world’s religions:

1. The *Dialogue of Life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
2. The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
3. The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values.
4. The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons rooted in their own religious traditions share their spiritual richness, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God and the Absolute.⁷

To these we can add:

5. The *dialogue of spirituality* and the spirituality of dialogue.⁸
6. The *dialogue with God*.⁹

Saint Francis of Assisi was the first Christian ever to go to non-Christians – the Muslims. It was at the time of the Crusades, when Christians and Muslims fought each other in fierce battles. He went to them not to argue but to convey the message of love, the message of Christ, in all humility and simplicity. Saint Francis is a typical example of how the proclamation of the word of God and the dialogue of life should be carried on by the followers of Jesus Christ. “The brothers who go to the Muslims can behave themselves among them in two ways. One way is to avoid quarrels or disputes and “be subject to every human creature for God’s sake” (1 Peter 2:13) so bearing the fact that they are Christians. The other way is to proclaim the word of God openly, when they see that it is God’s will.”¹⁰

The last twenty years, in which I have been involved in various interreligious dialogues, have been a very enriching experience. First of all, my prejudices with regard to the faith, religious practices, spirituality, and culture of the followers of other religions have disappeared. Following the example of Saint Francis, whenever I met people of other cultures and religions, with different opinions from mine, I had no difficulty accepting them as brothers and sisters. This attitude of mind is rooted in my faith in God the Creator, in whom every man and woman, whether Christian or non-Christian, whether black or white, is a brother or sister. In this context Saint Francis considered not only men and women as his brothers and sisters, but all creatures.

Through interreligious dialogue my esteem for those who belong to other religions has increased. I have met religious leaders endowed with great insight and wisdom, deep spirituality, a spirit of prayer and meditation, self-renunciation, and great honesty, sincerity, and generosity. Holiness is not confined to only one or to a few sections of the human community. It is not confined to only one or to some religions. Holiness is the work of the Holy Spirit.

In our meetings and discussions we have always showed great respect for each other, including discussions of matters on which we couldn’t reach a common consensus. But I can say in all honesty that during and after every interreligious meeting I have always felt at ease, happy, and relaxed, and I have wished that all meetings, especially political meetings, could be carried on in the same spirit and with the same attitude as interreligious ones. There is always something, or many things, to learn during these meetings of interreligious dialogue and in personal encounters with each other.

In my experience I have found that the dialogue of action, in which the religious representatives come together to cooperate in helping to solve the world’s problems, has proved to be a very important factor in bringing the religions of the world together. During these last years, religious leaders from many parts of the globe have been sitting together around the same table to discuss world problems such as obstacles to peace, justice, and the integrity of Creation and the problem of poverty.

That sort of dialogue is making the world’s religions more conscious of their great responsibility in taking some common action as regards the problems of the world. They cannot shrink from their role to help solve the many problems that threaten our generation and the generations to come. The Parliament of the World’s Religions, which

met in Chicago in 1993, is a clear example of what I am saying. At the end of the meeting the religious leaders offered the world an elaborate document, “Global Ethics”, which can be used as a guideline for further studies and action. In December 1994 I was one of sixty religious leaders who took part in the interreligious conference organized by UNESCO and UNESCO Catalunya in Barcelona, Spain, on “The Role of the World’s Religions for a Culture of Peace”, which produced a document on the subject.



*Photo by Fr. Max Mizzi OFM Conv.©
Hindu representatives at the Parliament of the World Religions, Chicago, 1993*

The dialogue of theological exchange is a most important aspect of interreligious dialogue. But, of course, it is only at its first stages. At the moment we are dealing only partly with theological dialogue. Representatives of the world’s religions are dealing mainly with theological exchange. We have not reached the stage yet of facing a deeply committed theological dialogue with all religions. At the moment, not all the representatives of the world’s religions can sit around a table to discuss theologically such themes as God, prayer, the Communion of Saints, the revealed Word, life after life, and so on, in the same way as Christian theologians of the different Christian churches and denominations. Furthermore, theological dialogue is bound to be undertaken by relative few experts. I am very confident and hopeful that it won’t be too long before this sort of deeply committing dialogue starts. Today everything is moving so very fast!

The dialogue of theological exchange is a big step forward, though; let us hope it will lead to deep theological dialogue. One of the great achievements in this area has been that monastic walls are no longer barriers between members of religious communities, so that Christian monks can share their monastic traditions and community life with non-Christian monks and vice versa. For this reason one can see Christian monks and nuns living in Buddhist monasteries. This has led to a series of deep and serious conferences

and symposiums on Christian-Buddhist monastic life. The same could be said of the practice of meditation. Today many followers of the different religions can share deep moments of meditation and spirituality.

Spirituality within the different religions is a factor that should be taken into consideration very seriously. The Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue held November 20-24, 1995, dealt with the theme “The Dialogue of Spirituality and the Spirituality of Dialogue”. His Holiness Pope John Paul II, in his address to the participants of the Plenary Assembly, said: “The “spirituality” which is at the heart of your reflections, involves the concept of man’s quest for a personal relationship with God, a relationship that can give life and substance to his relations with others who follow a different religious tradition. “Spirituality” is more than knowledge and discussion. It is inseparable from the search for holiness, which, in the absolute sense, belongs only to God, but which through his tender mercy, is given also to man as a gift and responsibility”.¹¹

Further on the Pope said: “Such a dialogue of spirituality requires a spirituality of dialogue, i.e. a vision capable of sustaining the efforts to promote good and harmonious relations between the followers of different religions.”¹²

During my trips to India I have discovered that the Hindus, for example, have practiced asceticism and mysticism for centuries. I met some very holy people. The same can be said of the asceticism and mysticism practiced by Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and adherents of other religions. Many books have been written on the subject. Some non-Christian writers on mysticism mention great Christian mystics such as Saint John of the Cross, Saint Teresa of Avila, and Saint Francis of Assisi. Saint Francis is certainly the favorite Christian saint, who is loved and venerated by followers of all the world’s religions. He is often referred to in meditations and talks by spiritual leaders of other faiths. His simple prayer “Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace” is very well known and is recited in every part of the world.

Another aspect of interreligious dialogue is the dialogue with God that takes place when people of different religions come together to pray. This is the most important and effective of all dialogues. It is the dialogue of the mind and of the heart that unites in a spiritual bond those who come together in prayer to God. The human family has its origin from God and will be fully united in God through prayer. I have heard both prominent speakers at congresses and individuals in private meetings say that there is only one God. People of different religions are growing more and more aware of that. They are becoming more and more familiar with the concept of God.

What changed the course of the world’s religions in a positive way was the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi in 1986. It was the coming together of the world’s religions in prayer that gave a new impetus to interreligious dialogue and made the followers of the religions aware of this concept. The term “interreligious dialogue” had been used by the Church in official documents many years before that historic meeting in Assisi. And yet many Christians and other people of different religions were not quite aware of it and of the importance of interreligious dialogue. Now the followers of the world’s religions not only are very familiar with interreligious dialogue but also are coming together in prayer.



Pope John Paul II with some of the religious leaders at the Porziuncola in Assisi during the World Day of Prayer for Peace, October 27, 1986

This is one of the “signs of the times,”¹³ the beginning of a new process that is leading the religions of the world toward the unity of the human family in God. Sometimes people ask me to whom the followers of the non-Christian religions pray. I find it difficult to answer such a question. I am not an expert on all the religions of the world. In recent times I have been wondering whether people, independently of the religion to which they belong, turn their minds and hearts, when they pray, to the same one God, either directly or indirectly. On some occasions I have met persons who told me that they had a special devotion to this “god” or that “goddess”. When I asked how many gods there were in their religious tradition, they raised a hand toward heaven and answered: “There is only one God!”

I have had some very deep experiences with interreligious prayer. One of my first meetings with adherents of other religions was about twenty years ago when some Buddhist and Hindu monks asked to share our Franciscan way of life and prayer at the Sacred Convent in Assisi. We were very happy to have these Buddhist and Hindu brothers with us for a few days sharing our Franciscan way of life and prayer. One evening I asked them if we could share some moments of prayer at the Tomb of Saint Francis. They gratefully accepted the invitation. I must say that we spent a most spiritual hour with songs, meditation on readings from the Bible and the teachings of Saint Francis, and some spontaneous prayers. After the prayers, one Buddhist monk, a very holy man, said to me: “During the prayers I felt very strongly the presence of God.” A few days later I received a letter of thanks from one of the Hindu spiritual leaders who took part in that prayer meeting. He wrote: “During the prayers at the Tomb of Saint Francis, it was as if the whole place was filled with the Holy Spirit.” For the first time I realized that interreligious prayer can be very deep and committing, both to God and for the participants toward each other and the whole world. I also realized that prayer is the most efficacious means to bring people of different faiths closer together in God.



Photo by Fr. Max Mizzi OFM Conv.©

Buddhist monks praying in Assisi in 1999 to celebrate the Twinning between the Basilica of St. Francis and the Saikyoji Temple in Japan

About a year ago a very holy Hindu spiritual leader, Swami Chidanandaji, was in Assisi for an interreligious conference. He asked if he and a group of followers could spend some time late one evening in meditation and prayer at the Tomb of Saint Francis. We spent about an hour in deep meditation, and I still remember that occasion with gratitude. But what made the experience unforgettable for me was the time we spent together in deep prayer. The chanting of a mantra with Christian words such as Jesus, Ave Maria, amen, and alleluia, and moments of silence turned the prayer meeting into a moment of very deep spirituality, and the presence of God was, one could say, tangible.

I have had contacts with Rissho Kosei-kai members for over twenty years. Since my first meeting with some of them in Assisi, I have always been impressed by their yearning and searching not only for ethical values but also for spiritual values. I was very much impressed when they told me that they do not come to Assisi as tourists but as pilgrims to share with us the Christian experience of faith.

I feel that the spiritual experiences I have just mentioned give a good panorama of a very important side of the interreligious dialogue that is known as “the dialogue of spirituality”.

Sometimes people (very few, actually) with whom I share my experiences of interreligious dialogue wonder where all this is going to lead us. The great majority of the people are very enthusiastic about it, more for ethical than religious reasons. They believe

that it will lead to peace, understanding, justice, respect, and collaboration among the followers of the world's religions. That certainly is true and positive. Others feel that it will lead to more sharing of spiritual values among people of different faiths. Some look at interreligious dialogue with suspicion, fearing that all it means is bargaining away one's own faith and that it is just false irenism,¹⁴ the fruit of compromise. I cannot deny that there are risks. But there are risks in almost everything we do and say. There are risks even when we keep silent or when we do nothing. We risk committing the sin of omission. I am afraid that we tend to commit more sins of omission than of deeds.

Those who are involved in interfaith dialogue and relations are relatively very few indeed. That is either because people are not interested or because they think that such work is to be undertaken only by experts. It is true that interreligious dialogue on a theological level should be reserved for experts. But no one needs to be an expert in order to be an "instrument of peace and reconciliation" among the followers of the religions of the world. No one needs to be an expert in order to be a "bridge that unites" rather than a "ditch that divides." Everyone can share in interreligious dialogue for social action, such as peace, justice, mutual respect, the safeguard of Creation, and religious understanding, or in dialogues of exchange within different interreligious communities. Furthermore, every person can be involved in the dialogue of life. All this could be called "grass-roots' interreligious dialogue."

As for myself, I have no doubt that dialogue among the followers of the world's religions is part of God's plan, and as such, it must be undertaken with a sense of great responsibility, faithfulness, and respect for one's own religion and for the religions of those with whom one is called to carry on the dialogue. I have no doubt that God, in the fullness of time, will lead all the people of the earth to the fullness of truth. I have no doubt that God, one day, will reveal himself to the whole world through the Holy Spirit, who is the spirit of life, the spirit of light, the spirit of wisdom.

Before I end this short article I would like to share with you a vision that has been in my mind and heart for some time. Until a few years ago I used to look in the different religions of the world as if they were many different rivers flowing in parallel direction. Now I can see them as changing their course in order to flow in the one direction that leads into one big river. And this one big river will flow into the great ocean.



Photo by Fr. Max Mizzi OFM Conv.©

*Rissho-Kosei kai members praying for peace on August 9, 1987
at the epic centre of the atom bomb in Nagasaki, Japan*

¹ *Nostra Aetate*, 1; John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p. 78

² John 14:6

³ *Nostra Aetate*, 2

⁴ John Paul II, "Welcoming Address to the Heads and Representatives of the Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the World Religions," 2 (Assisi, October 27, 1986)

⁵ *Redemptoris Missio*, 56

⁶ "Dialogue and proclamation," Section 9

⁷ "Dialogue and Proclamation," Section 42

⁸ Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. November 20-24, 1995

⁹ Maximilian Mizzi OFM Conv.

¹⁰ *Regula non Bullata*, 16

¹¹ John Paul II, "Address to the Participants of the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue," November 20-24, 1995

¹² *Idem*, 3

¹³ Expression taken from Matt. 16.3, very much in use after the Second Vatican Council to indicate new events that are interpreted in the light of the Gospel

¹⁴ From the Greek *eirene*, "peace"

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