

Interreligious Dialogue and Adoration¹



*St. Francis of Assisi
Basilica di San Francesco*

By Fr. Maximilian Mizzi OFM Conv.

The director General for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue in Assisi, Italy, Fr. Maximilian Mizzi, OFM Conv., is a crusader, striving to spread the noble message of interreligious dialogue the world over. He travels worldwide, giving discourses and participating in international-level conferences. Here's a pleasing presentation from Fr. Mizzi on interreligious dialogue as adoration.

Towards Interreligious Understanding

Until not many years ago we Christians would never discuss anything pertaining to spirituality with the followers of the other world religions. The reason was very clear. We Christians thought that we had nothing in common with religions that are not Christian. "How can we talk with non-Christian people about God, about prayer, about spirituality", we would argue, "if we have nothing like that in common?"

I remember that many years ago, soon after I arrived in Assisi from my native Malta, I was living in Rivortorto, a small village just outside Assisi. It is a very holy place. St. Francis had lived in Rivortorto with his first disciples for three years. That was in the very beginning of the Franciscan Order. One afternoon when I was in the small church I saw a Hindu monk there and I wondered why he was there. As if reading my mind he came

¹ Article in "Prabuddha Bharata" January 2002, a Monthly Journal of the Ramakrishna Order started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896

towards me and asked me to tell him something about the mysticism of St. Francis as compared to the mysticism of the Hindu saints: “Oh?” I said, “there is nothing to be compared,” and I left him like that. That happened in 1960 – 42 years ago. Now after all these years I feel very sad about my behaviour towards that Hindu brother.

By means of interreligious dialogue my approach to the other religions has changed radically. God gave me the grace of meeting with hundreds of religious spiritual leaders and with thousands of people of other faiths. By meeting these people I have learned many things about their religious beliefs. I have come to respect them, to appreciate them, and to love them as they are for what they are. Above all, I have learned to appreciate their spirituality.

Religion and Spirituality

After the World Day of Prayer for Peace which was held in Assisi by invitation of Pope John Paul II in 1986 a local paper referred to Buddhism as a “religion without God”. I felt very uneasy about those words. I thought that those words do not do justice to that religion. Since then I have asked myself several times whether it is possible that there can be a religion without God.

Two years ago the Tibetan community in India organized a round table conference on “Religion and Spirituality” with the participation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I had the joy of being a member of the panel. When I went to the podium to share my reflections my first remark was: “Is there any religion without spirituality? Spirituality is for religion what the soul is for the body. Take away spirituality from religion and religion will fall into pieces”.

Religious leaders have been coming together to talk about many crucial problems such as world peace, justice, mutual respect, the safeguard of creation and other very important issues. This has proved to be very important indeed. On other occasions religious spiritual leaders met to dialogue about spiritual matters such as meditation. I think that it's time that religious leaders come together to talk more about spiritual and religious matters such as God, adoration, prayer, life after life, etc., which are of great importance and can open new windows into the religious beliefs of the world religions.

The attitude of every religion towards God differs from one religion to another. I can only speak about the attitude and belief of the Christian religion towards God.

God in Christianity

A Christian is a follower of Christ according to his teaching in the Gospel. First of all, Christians believe that God is one, that he is eternal, that he has no beginning nor end, that he is the creator of man, that he sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, who became man from a virgin mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary. They believe that Jesus Christ died for the salvation of humanity but he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Christians believe that God sent the Holy Spirit to give life and sanctity to those who accept God in their life and want to be faithful to God.

Christians believe that God is the creator of man and woman, he is the creator of the animal world and of all that is seen and unseen. They believe that life continues after

bodily death. For this reason they believe that those who were faithful to God on earth will continue to live in the fellowship of God in peace and all purity for all eternity.

God is the God of love; he is a loving God and a loving father (and mother). As such he takes care of his children. Because he loves his children he sent Jesus Christ, his Son, to redeem the world and save the world from eternal damnation by offering himself as a living sacrifice for us.

For this reason God deserves our praise, our gratitude, and our thanksgiving. He is the God of justice and will punish the evil-doers. But he is not to be identified with cruelty or punishment because he is the God of compassion, of mercy and of love.

St. Francis of Assisi loved God with all his heart and mind and he loved every human being independently of race or creed. In the time when the Crusaders and Saracens were killing each other in fierce battles, Francis called the Muslims “brothers”. He had a very deep spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ whom he adored as the Son of God, the redeemer. He prayed and meditated day and night; he fasted for long periods of time and did penance. For the love of God, in the imitation of Jesus Christ, Francis gave up a very rich life and lived in absolute poverty. He humbled himself and called himself the vilest of all human beings who deserves no respect. For the love of God he took care of the sick and the lepers.



*St. Francis preaches to the birds
Basilica di San Francesco*

Relationship with God

God, being the God of love, is to be more loved than feared. Christians believe that God, besides being their creator, is also their father (and mother) who cares for them, who protects them and who loves them. Because Jesus Christ taught them to call God their father they have a very close relationship with God. They pray to God in their needs, they praise him in their joy. Adoration of God is an essential part of their religious practices. Adoration is reserved to God alone. This is the supreme honour they give only to God.

Because Christians believe in only one God they can never worship (adore) another deity. During the first centuries of the Christian era many Christians suffered cruel death and persecution rather than worship the emperor as God or his deities.

Prayer is a means to keep in contact with God. There are many ways to pray. Christians pray with their lips, but also with their heart. When they do some good deed, they do it for the love of God, like, for example, when they help someone in need that becomes an act of prayer. When they are in need of help Christians resort to prayer. They believe that God is Almighty, that he can help them in their spiritual needs as well in the physical and material needs. Prayer is a help in need, it brings joy in sorrow, trust in despair, light in darkness, comfort in tribulation.

Praise and thanksgiving are considered to be another aspect of prayer. Francis of Assisi used to call himself “God’s troubadour”. He gave thanks and praise to God all the time of his life. Two years before he died, when he was gravely ill and blind, he composed the famous “Canticle of Brother Sun”. It’s a song of praise for the sun, the moon and the stars, for the wind, the fire and the water and, indeed, for all the creatures. In this song of joy and praise he calls all the creatures “brothers” and “sisters”. The earth he calls “Sister and Mother Earth”.

Some Christian mystics like St. John of the Cross, St. Theresa of Avila, St. Francis of Assisi prayed all the time. They lived in the world but they were not of the world. These mystics have come into a very deep relationship with God through prayer, meditation and ascetic practices such as fasting, self-mortification and penance.

Common Roots

Of course, not Christians alone pray. I have always been very impressed when, on many occasions, I saw Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Sufis, and others deeply wrapped in prayer and meditation in private and in public. The same can be said of ascetics. Poverty and fasting are common to all the world religions. Interreligious dialogue can be of great help by bringing into the open these great spiritual treasures common to all the world religions.

The world religions have originated from the same source, God. They have their roots in the same, one God. Only God, through the Holy Spirit, can inspire the wise and holy teachings and practices, which are found in all the religions. All that is good and holy comes from God. From time to time, God in his infinite mercy sends prophets to instruct the people in the way of justice and holiness. Christians believe that Jesus Christ was not simply a prophet but the Son of God and himself God.

The Catholic Church teaches that the seeds of the words of Jesus Christ, the rays of that truth which enlighten all people, are found in the religious traditions of humankind. In his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (The Mission of the Redeemer), John Paul II says (26): “Through dialogue, the Church seeks to uncover the “seeds of the Word”, a “ray of that truth which enlightens all men”; these are found in individuals and in the religious traditions of mankind”.

In the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, on the relationship of the Church to non-Christians Religions of the Second Vatican Council, we read: “From ancient times down to the present, there has existed among diverse people a certain perception of the hidden power which hover over the course of things, the events of human life; at times, indeed, recognition can be found of a supreme Divinity and of a supreme Father, too” (*Nostra Aetate*, n. 2)

No Lack of Respect for Other Faiths

Jesus once said: “I am the way, the truth and the life” (*St. John*, 14.6). The Christian belief that Jesus is the only way to God has hurt, and still hurts, the followers of other religions. The recent Vatican declaration *Dominus Jesus* (Jesus the Lord) caused a great turmoil and dissatisfaction among the followers of the world religions in many parts of the world. It caused suffering and division. That was very sad indeed. Certainly this statement was not meant to hurt anyone, much less to discredit the other religions. It was not meant either to minimize the holiness of any of these religions. That is to be taken for granted.

First of all, this declaration that Jesus is the Lord reflects the Christian belief. Some time after the issue of the declaration, Pope John Paul II explained that its purpose was “to invite all Christians to renew their fidelity to him (Christ) in the joy of faith and to bear unanimous witness that the Son, both today and tomorrow, is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (*St. John*, 14.6; Pope John Paul II, Angelus Message, 1 October 2001).

Every religion has its own belief, which does not always reflect the belief of another religion. Sometimes that belief contradicts some of the beliefs of another religion. Christians believe that God is one in three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is what we call the Holy Trinity, which is not accepted by some of the other religions.

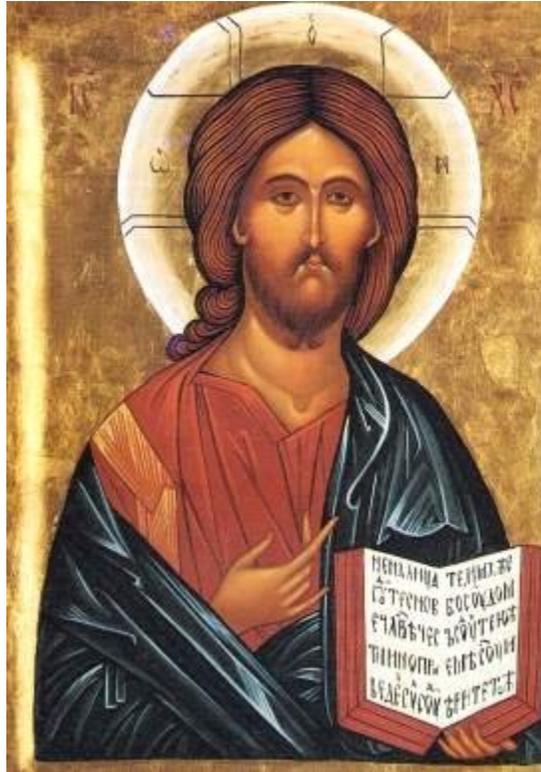
One day Jesus was asked by his disciples to teach them how to pray. Jesus taught them to pray in these words:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil” (*St. Matthew*, 6.9-13)

Here Jesus Christ taught the Christians to pray to God as their father. According to some religions it is offensive to God that people can address him as “Father”.

One day I was talking with a very holy spiritual leader, a follower of another religion. Among other things I said to him that God loves us in a special way. He created us in his image: “God created man in the image of himself” (*Genesis*, 1.27). He loves as a mother does her children, because we are his children. The spiritual leader immediately answered: “How can a human person be God’s child if God has no wife, if he is not married?” I tried to explain to him that Christians believe that through Jesus Christ they become God’s children. That gave rise to a wonderful conversation. I am not sure

whether he understood all that I said, nor that I understood all that he said to me. But it was dialogue. It was not a conflict. We didn't argue. It was dialogue, which were carried on in all respect, understanding and love.



Jesus Christ the teacher

The Role of Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue has a very important role to play with regard to religious matters and matters of faith. There is still a great deal of misunderstanding concerning the religious beliefs and practices that pertain to the different religions. There are still too many prejudices and ignorance concerning the world religions. For these reasons there is much need for the representatives of religions to meet, to explore the spiritual heritage which they have in common and to dialogue about those beliefs on which there is no common consensus.

Interreligious dialogue is needed in the first place to avoid conflicts, secondly to dissipate misunderstanding and prejudice, and thirdly to have a better knowledge of each other's religion.

If you talk to the man in the street about a religion which is not his own, you will notice that he knows very little about it. What is even worse, he may tell you strange things about that religion. He might describe Buddhism, for example, as a God-less religion, Islam as aggressive, Hinduism he might call pantheistic, Christianity disdainful of the other religions.

Many people think that the world religions have nothing to share with each other and they differ so much from one another that they have absolutely nothing in common. It

will be through interreligious dialogue that people will have a better understanding of each other's beliefs and practices. It is through interreligious dialogue that they will discover the spiritual heritage of every religion.

Being aware of the importance of interreligious dialogue the Catholic Church tells Christians not to be afraid to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths. At the same time, the Church insists that people who engage in such a dialogue should do so with a great sense of responsibility, that they have a clear idea of what they do and say, that they should be honest and sincere about their own faith and that they treat the other religions with respect. In order to avoid confusion all forms of syncretism, which leads to nothing, must be avoided. In this way interreligious dialogue will give people a clearer idea about the spirituality and religiosity of the other religions. It will also help them discover those other beliefs and practices which they have as a common heritage.

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ASSISI MISSION

c/o Bente Wolf

Via Fortini 7

I-06081 Assisi (PG)

tel. (0039) 075 8155 278

E-mail: bente@assisimission.net

www.assisimission.net

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