

Hope Through God Working in Us

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"... becoming acquainted with other people and other culture is always good for us, it makes us grow. And why does this happen? It is because if we isolate ourselves we have only what we have, we cannot develop culturally. But, if we seek out other people, other cultures, other ways of thinking, other religions, we go out of ourselves and start that most beautiful adventure which is called "dialogue." Dialogue is very important for our own maturity, because in confronting another person, confronting other cultures, and also confronting other religions in the right way, we grow - we develop and mature... This dialogue is what creates peace. It is impossible for peace to exist without dialogue.¹

This is what Pope Francis said in August 21st, 2013 to the students and teachers from the Seibu Gakuen Bunri Junior High School of Saitama, Tokyo (Japan) when they visited him at the Vatican. At our age it seems that it is not only sensible but also really imperative for us to dialogue. If my memory serves me right, it was not like these decades ago, at least from a Filipino Catholic point of view.

I was a child of the 70's just when the teachings of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) were slowly being disseminated to the expectedly resisting Catholics. Growing up in a Catholic school environment all my life, I was assured that I was "protected" from the teachings of Protestants, other Christian churches and ecclesial communities, and even Islam that were present in the city where I grew up. (Cotabato City, a fair mixture of Christians and Muslims in the southern Philippines). I had a normal childhood. What I was not aware of was the interreligious consciousness that was slowly developing in me. Yet with it goes my prejudices and biases because I do not really know them. What we had were simply hearsays and false impressions that unfortunately we have grown to believe.

When I entered the seminary I realized that I had that hunger to

¹ Address, St. Damascus Courtyard in the Vatican, Wednesday, August 21, 2013.

discover and learn more about the peace process that we have long been yearning for, first only in Mindanao, then later on the Philippines and the world. All my writings in the seminary and after were about the Catholic relations with the Muslims, namely: 1. (Philosophy) Tillich's Faith and Ultimate Concern in the Light of Terrorism Activities of Muslims in Mindanao, 2. (Theology) The Spirituality of Dialogue: Its Dimensions towards a New Era of Christian-Muslim Relations, and 3. (Licentiate) Understanding Islamization. During those years of discovering, learning, reflecting, and meeting people, I realized I was ignorant about dialogue and relations with people of other religions. Even the Orthodox Church, the closest to the heart of the Catholic Church, was foreign to me.

The first international conference I attended *alone* was the 45th International Ecumenical Seminar in Strasbourg, France in July of 2011. At the registration, I learned with horror that with about eighty participants, only five were Catholics. What's more, after writing my name, a Lutheran pastor from New York good-humoredly remarked, "Let us take care of this Catholic!" Even when I knew he was teasing I really felt a chill down my spine. With almost two years studying Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue, I thought I was already free of prejudices, specifically with Protestants. Yet that disturbing feeling was telling me otherwise. My judgments are still present. After less than a day of being with the Lutherans, I said to myself: "*They are good people, too!*" The experience allowed me to challenge my childhood understanding of who the Protestants really are. I grew up in the time where the Church was shielding her members from learning non-Catholic interpretations and teachings. I understand that. The incident, however, changed my way of looking at people and their faith.

When I started teaching Ecumenism (with Interreligious Dialogue) at the San Carlos Seminary (Makati, Philippines) in 2013, I made it a point not to focus only on lectures and ideas. I made sure the seminarians meet people of other faith and other Christians - not only Catholics. In that way they see a real person whenever they think of a Muslim, a Lutheran, a Buddhist, or a Mormon, or a person different from them.

The Roman Catholic Church through Vatican II was very clear with her teaching on people of other religions when she said, "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She

regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. “²

I was under the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) missionaries for my primary and grade schools. Now I slowly understand why when we study Religion, my Muslim classmates would move to another classroom for their instruction in Islam. We were so impressed because they can write in Arabic. In high school I was with the Marist Brothers and they had always encouraged the Muslims to pray after we pray - in the school assembly and in the classrooms, giving us the opportunity to learn and respect each other’s faith, practices and traditions. In fact, even if we tease them with food during their fasting, it was no issue. No one became furious because of it. This is the reason why it confused me knowing that it was so peaceful then in the classroom and yet it was not automatically carried over in the community – there were kidnapping, extortion, killings, and bombings in many areas in Mindanao. Where was the peace in the classroom? Where was the respect that we genuinely shared? Were they limited only to the boundaries of the schools?

Admittedly the response of many in the Catholic world to the *new* teachings, specifically on Ecumenism and Interfaith dialogue, was not at all enthusiastic. Celebrating fifty years of Vatican II, Mark Kernel of the Washington Times said, “Not everyone in the pews received the teachings of Vatican II in the same way. Many Catholics, particularly in the United States and Europe, took a much dimmer view of Rome’s claims to central authority, leaving some lay members — and their children — confused.”³ George Weigel of the National Review, on the other hand, said, “... the truths that Vatican II taught remained bitterly contested in the 15 years immediately following the Council... The council was one dramatic event in a much longer “moment” in Catholic history: a moment that stretches over more than a century and a quarter; a moment in which the Church underwent a deep and difficult process of reform; a moment in which the curtain slowly fell on the form of Catholicism that was born in the 16th-century Counter-

² Second Vatican Council. Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, no.2 (28 October 1965).

³ Kellner, Mark A., *50 Years Later, Vatican II Still Divides*, The Washington Times, October 10, 2012, www.washingtontimes.com/.../pope-calls-for-year...

Reformation, and the curtain slowly rose on the Catholicism of the Third Millennium — the Catholicism of what John Paul II and Benedict XVI have called the “New Evangelization.”⁴ That is just a glimpse of the first fifty years of reform in the Catholic Church.

Now I realized how much blessed we had been because of the Oblates and the Marist Brothers. They embraced right away the teachings of Vatican II and tried as much as they can to incorporate them in our school system. Still it was not only in that part of the Philippines that was responding. The Archdiocese of Manila was also updated in integrating the new teaching to the people. Jaime Cardinal Sin, the then Archbishop of Manila, was committed to dialogue with the Protestants, Muslims and people of other faiths, and invited them in his palace. It was during this time that the Ministry for Ecumenical and Interfaith Affairs (MEIFA) of the archdiocese was formed. In 1999, he invited in his residence the president of the Lutheran Church in the Philippines to celebrate the first anniversary of the signing of the Agreement on Justification between the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation.⁵ According to the same report, he once allowed his Muslim visitors to pray in the palace when they asked permission to leave so they can do their fourth prayer for the day. The Cardinal also was the first bishop of Manila to send a priest to Rome to study Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue. Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales, having been assigned in a diocese in northern Mindanao and had a first hand experience with the Muslims, continued to support dialogue with other faith. In 2009, he sent me to Rome to study Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue. Today we continue their legacy of dialogue.

The MEIFA continues to do its mission with the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) in connecting with Christian leaders and leaders of other faith. In 2012, H. Em. Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle was elevated to the College of Cardinals. That started the tradition of the *Breakfast with the Cardinal* where we invite religious

⁴ Weigel, George, *Vatican II: Fifty Years Later*, National Review, October 11, 2012.
www.nationalreview.com/.../vatican-ii-50-years-la...

⁵ Co Chua, Eddy, *A Man of Dialogue*, New City Magazine, August 2, 2005.
www.newcityph.com/archive/0508/update.htm

leaders in and out of the metropolis to have a chance to engage with the archbishop of Manila. It became an annual event; now coinciding with the World Interfaith Harmony Week celebrated every first week of February adopting the General Assembly Resolution 65/5 of the United Nations.⁶ In 2013, the *Uni-Harmony Partners Manila* with the *Religions for Peace* and the *Silsilah Dialogue Movement* stressed the commitment with the message:

We commit ourselves to respect the dignity of every man and woman as a creature of God.

We commit ourselves to uphold the right of each person to express his or her belief in accordance with the tenets and traditions of their faiths.

We commit ourselves to experience and promote interfaith Harmony as fruit of our faith and belief in the love of God and love of neighbor and the love of the common good.

We commit ourselves to love and serve God and neighbor.

We have continued, since then, *The Breakfast with the Cardinal* series in initiating private meetings of religious leaders meaning to meet him and dialogue with him. In 2013, Cardinal Tagle met with the members of the Turkish foundation, Pacific Dialogue Foundation, Inc., the Buddhists of Fo Guang Shan Mabuhay Temple in Manila, and the Buddhist Rissho Kosei-kai of Japan. The year after, he welcomed at the Residencia del Arzobispo the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran and company. The *Breakfast* introduced us with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints this year. That gave our office the chance to engage with them, meet them in the flesh and not simply stare on them when we get to see them walking by two's in the streets of Manila. I also had the chance to see the movie, "Meet the Mormons" with my parishioners. For many of them, it was their first time to meet the Mormons without skepticism, judgment, and maybe apprehension.

The archbishop continue to connect with the dialogue groups as he encouraged us to participate in the 48th International Ecumenical Seminar in Strasbourg, France, the 8th General Assembly of Asian Conference of Religions for Peace in Incheon, South Korea, and the 1st Interfaith Dialogue on Religious Leaders for Peace in ASEAN

⁶ www.un.org/en/events/interfaithharmonyweek/

Community in Ayutthaya, Thailand.

With the highly delicate and elusive Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) of Mindanao, the CBCP and MEIFA do not tire of supporting the Filipino people in finding ways to benefit Filipinos in the affected areas of the BBL. In fact a conference on Interreligious Dialogue with the theme, "Multi-Religious Leaders Action and Solidarity for Peace in Mindanao" was held last September 21, 2015 in Manila. Here the religious leaders gathered to express their solidarity and continuing advocacy for the peace of Mindanao and the whole country. It was a way of sending the message to the government about the urgency of passing the BBL and the need for prudence in the final crafting of its substance into law. Likewise, it hoped to convey the message to the Filipino people of various faith traditions that religions have key role in promoting peace. In the same conference the *Interreligious Council of the Philippines*, that will continue to implement dialogue of action for peace and justice, was launched.

Many times we only see what is happening in the surface, the events that transpire in the city and we do not realize the struggle is really inside, even our families. A devout Muslim friend of mine who is married to a Catholic shared how he struggled with the questions of her young daughter. It is already a practice in the home that they pray, saying first the Muslim prayer being led by the father, and then the child recites her Catholic pray. But one time after praying the Muslim prayer led by him, her daughter said, "Now let us pray the Catholic prayer *together*." He told her he cannot do it and her daughter asked, "Why can you not pray the Catholic prayer with me when I prayed the Muslim prayer with you?" His daughter cried until she was tired and went to sleep. He said that it was the most painful moment of his life, seeing his daughter grieve because he cannot explain why they cannot pray together.

We do not really know what is ahead of us. We do not know if there is a ray of hope anytime soon yet forces from many areas, even individuals, propel people to find ways to achieve harmony and peace.

St. John Paul II reminded us when he issued the document, Dialogue

and Proclamation in May of 1991, "It must be remembered that the Church's commitment to dialogue is not dependent on success in achieving mutual understanding and enrichment; rather it flows from God's initiative in entering into a dialogue with humankind and from the example of Jesus Christ whose life, death, and resurrection gave to that dialogue its ultimate expression."⁷

What is important is the chain of ecumenical and interfaith activities pushed by people of various faith groups who tirelessly work for peace. When we are able to stop and listen, think and reflect, apologize and forgive, it means we believe we are still able to love. When we are triggered, angered, and moved to act by people who hurt others, it means we do care. When we feel mercy and compassion for the other, it means we still experience the presence of God in our midst. It means we silently listen to Him. Because He is present in the midst of all this pain and struggles, we can hope. We know things will be better, in God's own time. I believe Silver Birch sums it up with these words: "The greed of your world must be replaced by love because love is an expression of the spirit. Love has many aspects, compassion, service, friendship, co-operation. You are all parts of one another, whatever you are, whoever you are and wherever you may be."

There is hope because God unceasingly works in us.

⁷ Dialogue and Proclamation #53, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 19 May 1991.