

Colleagues and friends, I'm delighted to have this opportunity of sharing with you the Good News of my encounter in daily life with people of faiths different from my own.

Nostra Aetate, the document we commemorate, hints at some of the realities underlying the dialogue of daily life: namely, the common humanity of peoples, the search for answers to life's mysteries and the recognition of the Divine pervading our lives. It wants to personalise some of these realities by looking at the simplicity of daily dialogue and the opportunities that I have had; and more importantly, to reflect on that experience and how it has changed me. T. S. Eliot captures something of the excitement of engaging with the other in the following words:

But let me tell you that to approach the stranger

Is to invite the unexpected...

It is to start a train of events

Beyond your control... (The Cocktail Party, Act 1).

The simplicity of the dialogue, rather like prayer, lies in just *being*, in the art of being aware, being present, being open to wonder, to what is; and then responding to it. There's no method, as such, no right way. I sometimes simply let it happen, at the bus stop, at the checkout or in the corner shop. So I greet, or smile or make a remark as appropriate. I note too what's happening around me: the early morning movement of Muslim men towards the mosque and the daily ritual of a Hindu man on his front steps as I make my way to prayer. I sense a deep solidarity with them but keep my distance. At times approach takes on more the character of a ritual and it reminds me of the dialogue between the fox and de Saint-Exupery's Little Prince.

'What must I do to tame you?' asked the little prince.

'You must be very patient,' replied the fox. 'First you will sit down a little distance from me – like that – in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to me every day...'

Each day over a period of time I would leave the house for work and within minutes meet a young Asian woman and a small boy walking towards me. After some days the woman and I began to acknowledge one another with a nod; next the child began to smile at me; the

following week we exchanged greetings and after a time remarks about the weather. It was she in fact who first stopped me to initiate conversation.

I've begun to notice too how perceptive and intuitive some of my other-faith acquaintances are and how they tend to trust me. There was the Sikh woman with whom I was studying in Birmingham who sought me out in the canteen to confide in me because she said she could tell I was a person of prayer. Then there was the young blind Muslim who thought I'd make an honest tenant for his father's property and sought me at my workplace to coax me and bargain with me. How could I refuse? The same young man asked me to drive him and his brother to visit their newborn nephew. It was quite a pantomime having two blind youths navigate as I made my way to an unknown destination. On the return journey they talked of their feelings about holding a baby for the first time. I suspect it was something they might not have been able to express at home. So I'm beginning to understand something afresh, namely, the primacy of being over doing, the importance of personal integrity and presence rather than of any specific work done. I am coming to believe that who I really am and what I radiate is my life's mission and I dare to hope that I may become God's manifestation and instrument. So I practise this simplicity of dialogue and allow the Spirit the freedom to do the rest.

Please don't get the impression that I just *be* all day, it's not quite like that; rather I bump into things. Life has been particularly generous with opportunity as I've tried to follow in obedience to my religious calling the still small voice within. My eleven extraordinary years with an interchurch community (*Columbanus Community of Reconciliation*) in Belfast were filled with such a wealth of experience that it was only afterwards I realised how much interfaith engagement there had been. Sabbath worship at the local synagogue was as much part of my routine as a Sunday service at a Baptist Church but had the added allurements of transporting me back two thousand years. The Buddhist monk who joined in our community life for six weeks gave me a glimpse of something different through meditation. When part of our community quarters was given over to serve as a gurdwara on the occasion of a Sikh funeral it was the equivalent of the big bang. This experience exposed me to a deluge of queries and questions, from the practicalities of how many mattresses a room could take, to the nature of the afterlife and the mysteries of God. These and other compelling influences led me to do some interreligious studies in Birmingham.

The Spirit's mystery tour then guided me in 2003 to seek out the Columba Community with its desire to build bridges of hope between faiths in Bradford. Within a week there I was, shoulder to shoulder with anarchist, atheist, Muslim and Christian, flanked by mounted police, taking part in the protest against the proposed war with Iraq. I chose to rent an inner city house so as to live in a Muslim-Hindu area. Renting can be rather like a marriage where the landlord's family comes with the package and sometimes even the whole neighbourhood. Putting out the washing is a social occasion; indeed just as the clothes line is shared so too is our wheelie bin; but the favour is repaid with a friendly eye on the car. Teaching English to the local women has given me great insight into their otherwise private lives and has truly enriched me. When I'm critical of their submission to what I see as cultural oppression I become aware of my own oppressed state as a woman in the Church and know that we are in solidarity in our common struggle to live out today the ancient exodus from slavery.

The festivals such as we had recently provide great opportunities for greetings, card giving, visiting and making new acquaintances. I have, however, learned not to make too many visits on Eid day as Muslim hospitality knows no bounds and it's rather rude to refuse food. Even a few bars of chocolate to Hindu neighbours at Diwali were rewarded with a bottle of wine at Christmas. With Asians I never win on hospitality. In fact I've come to the conclusion that success is not a word that applies to interfaith activity. Inactivity is more the order of the day: there's so often the element of unknowing, uncertainty about what to do or what's to happen; waiting for people, for food to arrive and for functions to start; loitering around places of worship; the time it takes to pay a visit, even to pay the rent; and the falling of both questions and answers on deaf ears. When I become discouraged I remember the words of the fox to the Little Prince, not just about patience, but about priorities: 'It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important.' So it was with a tear of joy that after months of visiting and hours of fragmented conversation I listened to a man say: 'You'll be delighted to hear that I'm a much better Muslim now; I say my prayers five times a day and I have a much happier family.' I try to remind myself of the fox's wisdom each month as I make time to help with the preparations for our monthly Columba House interfaith meeting when more than thirty people from various faiths come together to pray for peace. It is a moving testament to the Oneness of God and a eucharistic experience of the unity of humanity as we partake of our shared food

afterwards. Following the July bombings I was returning from King's Cross for our usual monthly prayer and stood awhile at the makeshift memorial ground. There I held in my heart the compassion and prayers of those I would meet that night; my gesture was met with gratitude and with an easy acceptance that I could pray on behalf of all.

My fascination with 'the other' has helped expand my sense of God and of self. It keeps my mind and heart open in wonder and amazement and brings home to me the awesomeness of the Other that is the transcendent God. The wider web of relationships draws me into larger totalities, into the unbounded life of the One who is the Source of Life itself. I am beginning to discover my true self in the context of the divine Self, knowing that God does not want me or anyone else as outsiders but as collaborators and co-creators.

Yet paradoxically I do suffer the experience of being an outsider, a Stranger. This puts me more in touch with the Incarnate God, the one who came from a faraway country, who came to his own though they refused to receive him. Although I have chosen to live in a ghetto, among those who would never darken the door of Columba House, and although I am gradually becoming better acquainted with some of my neighbours, I am increasingly aware of the sense of not belonging. This is not to say I am not welcome here, quite the contrary. But I look different from those around me, I dress differently; I eat different food and I live a different lifestyle. More peculiar still I am not married and don't have children. In the absence of such commonality what is there to talk about? My neighbours and I don't speak the same language; we don't watch the same the channels. We do not share common religious understanding or practice; we do not have shared cultural links. You may be thinking: we always knew that. So did I, but I hadn't experienced the living of it. I have begun to understand, from the other side, so to speak, the loneliness and isolation of this situation; the sense of being shut out without ever a hope of belonging; the guilt around reluctance to learn another language; the effort it takes to explain and to understand anything; the silence in face of questions about terrorism and the London bombings; the misunderstandings around lifestyle, privacy and relationships between men and women; the wariness and lack of trust around motives and intentions.

In short, in this alien ambience I become a stranger to myself. This raises questions about how I see myself and how I relate. Must I be British because I live here? Must I behave

like Muslims because I dwell among them? Why should my Irishness or my Christianity be a barrier to my being a good citizen? This experience of being the Stranger, well known to the ancient Hebrews, to Jesus himself and to millions of fugitives today, is that of being on the margins, on the edge, a rather uncomfortable place, I find. Part of the anguish of this experience is the vulnerability of always having to explain myself, of being laid bare to the gaze and curious questioning of those who do not understand my ways. Many people I meet feel this; they're bewildered as they straddle two cultures, yet belong to neither; confused as they come to terms with a religion cradled in the East but not yet fully at home in the West. This new experience of being a stranger is causing me to be more compassionate. It makes me, as a member of the dominant culture and religion, want to reach out unconditionally to those who feel, that because of their ethnicity or their faith they don't fit neatly into the accepted societal norms.

So, to conclude, I try in my ordinary daily living to engage in a simple dialogue with those who appear different from myself; I seek out opportunities of forging links and building trust wherever I can, especially with people of faith. Then I reflect on my experiences and let them change me in the hope that I may be able to say to 'the other' with my heart: 'You are no longer strangers or foreigners but fellow-citizens with the holy people of God and part of God's household' (Eph 2: 19).

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