

# The Changing face of Europe

## Challenge/Opportunity for the Church

### A. Europe: a new reality in a changing world

The rapidity of movement and the lightning speed of communications have considerably changed mentalities. Events happening in one part of the world are immediately transmitted all over the planet and impact each one of us in our sensitivity and beliefs to such a point that we become less “spectators” and more participants in what human beings are doing or suffering a long way away or nearby.

The century that has just come to an end was one of World Wars, deportations and massacres. Peoples fell under the yoke of terribly oppressive structures. Others liberated themselves, not without experiencing the atrocities inherent in guerrilla warfare, revolutions and colonial wars. The appearance, in many parts of the world, of a concentration camp universe capable of dictating its law to the conscience of its inhabitants, just as the extraordinary power of seduction of advertising and the apparent ineluctability of globalisation have made the less lucid aware of the threat of conditioning that now weighs upon all groups and all individuals.

At the same time, the proliferation of cultural exchanges: newspapers, all sorts of publications, radio, television, Internet, etc. allow everyone to receive a variety of messages, life experiences, images and values that are often heterogeneous and incompatible. Everything has become relative: even the sacred texts, the most “absolute” Word of God... is, *de facto*, proclaimed or listened to at the same time as others, or after others. It is therefore placed “in relation with” these other sources. As such, it is thus perceived as being “relative”, “comparable” or “incomparable” with others.

The most faithful of believers can no longer believe a message without having had to consciously “re-choose” it, removing from his mind and heart other images, other messages also offered to him. No religious authority, of any faith whatsoever, can claim that it isolates its followers from the world-wide scrambling of these multiple messages. A “protected” society would be a society artificially kept away from the rest of the world by a ferocious police constraint and at every moment. Some countries, like Communist Albania, have tried to do this. It only served to plunge the country into a tragic cultural and material backwardness, bringing incredible suffering to its population before imploding under the pressure of life.

#### *1. Dimensions of the current evolution*

A new awareness has therefore been brought to light.

#### **a) Inner life and privacy**

In Christianity, as in Islam, an increasing number of believers seem to be living their faith with an awareness of their personal dignity and their inner freedom. Of course, a large number of non-theological factors are involved in modifying the perception a believer has of himself, and of the relationship he has with the message his religion offers him.

Among all these factors, the dislocation of all traditional societies under the impact of urbanisation and the resettlement of populations, it is globalisation which, through cultural and economic exchanges, influences, more or less every inhabitant of the this earth. More and more, as stated above, individuals find that they have to choose, in their beliefs and in their actions without being pre-determined in their choice by society or institutions. In the end, a given individual will have to choose and decide. – “*What is religion other than one’s own relationship with God? It is an intimate thing, a philosophy to which one adheres or not.*”<sup>1</sup>

Inner conviction, an accent on the spiritual dimensions of the faith, such an evolution

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<sup>1</sup> L. de Courcy, « Ils attendent des adultes une parole vraie sur la religion », in *La Croix*, 19/07/97, p. 8.

does not go without a certain “privatisation” of one’s religious affiliation. For a growing number of people, religious affiliation is increasingly a private affair which concerns no one but oneself, in any case, neither the State nor the official institutions. Of course, this evolution has its counterpart: the personal and private decision to believe obviously brings the possibility that the decision may be “not to believe” or “to believe differently”.

### **b) the “democratisation” of religious institutions**

In fact, the development in education has closed the gap that had appeared between the clerics and the faithful, between the ulemas and the mass of believers. The former customarily used to “define the doctrine” while the others would “accept it”. This is no longer sufficient, as expressed by an Indonesian Muslim:

*I do not yet understand what Islam really is. So far I have only understood Islam according to Hamka, according to Natsir, according to ... and frankly I am not yet satisfied. What I seek I have not yet found, not yet discovered, and that is Islam according to Allah who made it. How can I do so? By direct study of the Qur'an and the Sunna? I can try. But others may think that all I will end up with is Islam according to myself. Never mind. The important thing is the conviction in my sound mind that the understanding I achieve is Islam according to Allah. This is what I have to be sure of. [28 March 1969] p. 27.<sup>2</sup>*

In the face of the empowerment of this adult “laity”, the great religions are rediscovering, in a new way, that all religious institutions are at the service of the faith, and not the opposite. Religion is made for man and not man for religion.

Specialists of “religion” are sometimes upset, wrong-footed and may invoke the argument that only those who have really been trained can interpret the revealed texts.

But, on the whole, a new theology is emerging: in the Catholic Church – the most hierarchical, perhaps – the Second Vatican Council made the centre of its attention the “People of God” for the good of which all ministries were conceived. In actual fact, however, even this desire to serve can encounter the reticence of those concerned. As a youth chaplain explained:

*The young people I am in contact with regularly refuse to be integrated. They refuse all bodies or services, whether civil or religious, and every project. When they have the impression that I am going to restrict their freedom, they run away, they desert our meeting places, or they greet me and are off immediately to some inexistent appointment. Sometimes I must wait for 1 or 2 years before they or some friend (or girl-friend) of theirs come back to see me...*

*From me they expect absolute gratuitousness in my approach. They refuse to be “trapped” or remote-controlled.<sup>3</sup>*

The interventions of religious authorities – of whatever religion – are thus received with reticence. While it is quite understandable that a certain competence may result from years of specialized study, “grass roots” believers also claim a competence that comes, not from bookish study, but from the experience of life in a modern world of which they perceive the doubts, the questions and the problems, often new ones unknown by religious scholars:

### **c) need for coherence**

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<sup>2</sup> Extract from the personal diary of a young Indonesian, *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> L. Séguier, *Jeunes des banlieues mes frères, les musulmans, les chrétiens et les autres* (F.X. de Guibert, Paris, 2001, 184 pp.), p. 149.

It is another aspect of this new climate that we need interpretations of the revealed message that provide meaning to the world in which we live. The purely theological or exegetic religious language is received as a closed circuit dotage if it bears no relevance and influence as regards the doubts and sufferings of "ordinary people".

Now, it is a fact that the modern world is changing so rapidly that we have a multiplicity of serious ethical problems. It is not only a question of the problems posed by all the new medical and biological techniques about which believers... and non-believers are asking many questions, but it is also a question of new ways of life in society: within families, the roles of each individual are no longer conceived according to the traditional schemes; religious and cultural pluralism draws us to new ways of handling differences between human beings; the world economy, both in its competitiveness and its solidarity needs to be rethought... On all these points, it is becoming impossible to build a life together based on the rules transmitted by a religious tradition in a distant past. It has even become impossible to base oneself on the data of a single religious tradition: whether one regrets this or rejoices about it, all human beings will have their word to say on these matters. No peoples, no individuals will be able to isolate themselves, as in a vacuum, to find an answer to these problems. A Muslim thinker from Tunisia notes:

*"Today there is a supra-community, of a new nature, which, before our very eyes is casting its nets worldwide. The great communities of faith that, in the past, were so all-embracing, so angular and so exclusive will have to smooth their edges. They will have to find their place and their function within it, in a new harmony that is to be defined and assumed consciously so as to avoid rejections and internal haemorrhages of great consequence. Religions must accept the evidence: their reciprocal empires, whose boundaries were for so long fixed, are crumbling both inside and outside. Movement has replaced immobility; frontiers are moving; something new is brewing; and in God's plan, in fact, this cannot be bad. We must therefore emerge from our reassuring categories and accept movement; each faith must ask itself, on the basis of the new data, what is its place and its mission in the new universal order, and explore its own Tradition for factors of renewal."*<sup>4</sup>

Setting off on this adventure, believers are obliged to invent a new language, not the language they use between themselves as the faithful of a same religion with a dogmatic or legal vocabulary carefully refined over the ages, but a way of expressing themselves that is loyal to the original message and yet may be understood by other believers or even simply by other human beings wishing to build a more just and inhabitable world:

*"Today religious communities do not restrict the expressions of their ultimate concern to their own members. Under the pressures of religious and secular forms of pluralism and through the engagement of urgent issues, which involve more than a single community, representatives of religious communities are now learning to speak a secondary language of moral care beyond their particular circle of believers. Many religious communities now feel compelled by their own sense of the truth and universal relevance of their central stories to "speak their concerns" in the public square by translating, or better "transposing," the ethical sensibilities which are rooted in their respective primary languages into a secondary public language."*<sup>5</sup>

In this area, the road is unmarked. Success can only be the fruit of the inventiveness of truly believing and truly free consciences, where the founding life-spring of the origins has been reborn.

#### **d) Rules or values**

This new common language that we see evolving cannot be, purely and simply, that of

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<sup>4</sup> Mohammed Talbi, « Une communauté de communautés – le droit à la différence et les voies de l'harmonie » *Islamochristiana*, 4 (1978), pp. 11-25.

<sup>5</sup> Dr William F. Vendley, "Religions as public actors". Lecture given on March 21, 1999, before the French section of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, at the Catholic Institute of Paris, published in *Encounter*, N. 268, Oct. 2000.

the dogmas or truths to be believed. Past centuries have clearly shown that the different religious traditions confronted each other in this field without any possibility of compromising or negotiating on the essentials.

Nor can it be based on precise rules like those that organise details of behaviour and religious rituals. Those rules, besides, cannot always be detached from the historical context that gave rise to their formulation in the first place.

On the other hand, all religions now face the same challenge: the struggle against poverty, suffering, under-development, oppression, etc. and in all religions, a certain convergence seems to be forming as regards the ethical values that inspire these rules and dogmas and that seem to be omnipresent in the original revealed message.

Truth, indeed, is sufficient unto itself to win the adherence of intelligence. Constraint, the trickeries of propaganda and of advertising induce one to believe that the product, in fact, is not capable of convincing by itself. Isn't this, basically, the reasoning of so many "cradle Christians" who move away from the Church due to the misdeeds of the Inquisition in past centuries, which they secretly suspect persist on account of what they judge to be the clumsy interventions of the present hierarchy? The "*laissez faire*" of Gamaliel (Acts 5:34-40) seems to them to be more trusting in God's truth than condemnations and "fatwas".

## **2. What is at stake for religious institutions?**

This new deal – "believe, yes, but freely!" – does, in fact, pose real questions to religious leaders, at whatever level they operate. What is at stake is not the content of the message of which they are the witnesses and the guardians, but the manner in which they assume their functions. It is not the message that should be modified, but the way it is served and defended. We may say that it is less serious! In fact, whether they are Christian, Muslim or other, it is much more worrying and irritating to the professionals of the "religious".

### **a) The pastoral power of heritage?**

Over the centuries, the different religions have followed rather similar paths: demanding, to begin with, a personal conversion on the part of the individuals they encountered, rapidly setting up a system for the transmission of the faith by founding families of believers, assuming that the faith could be passed on, from parents to children, through family education.

In Christianity, for example, while maintaining the practice of the catechumenate and the baptism of adults, children began to be baptised "in the faith of their parents". Parents and god-parents answered the questions normally asked of adults: "Do you renounce evil? Do you believe in God? etc."

Islam organised itself around the patriarchal family, a real backbone of society. If a father is Muslim, his children are automatically considered to be Muslim, and of course, he must see to the proper religious education of his children.

This was how an idea of the transmission of the faith, and education in the faith, through "family heritage" developed. Generations and generations of human beings were thus incorporated in a religion given at birth: people began to "belong" to a religion as one "belongs" to a family or to a nation. Changing religion became synonymous with treason. Groups actually protected themselves against it by fostering social cohesion and closure to others.

This cohesion was blown apart by the entry of all societies into the age of communications. Nations, societies and even families were unable to create a coherent environment around themselves to ensure the transmission of a single way of thinking: on the contrary, human beings encounter very diverse and mutually incompatible ideas, values and systems today at all stages of their development and formation.

It is therefore urgent for the religious authorities, of all religions, to question themselves on this state of affairs: the transmission of the faith through "heritage" is going badly, and worse and worse. With each generation, religious groups loose a considerable number of faithful who are listed as "Catholics" or "Muslims" but whose apparent conformity

conceals an exit from the group and the relinquishing of their faith.

### **b) How is the faith transmitted?**

Counting only on family and social pressure to keep people in the faith of the group risked letting the liberty of individuals assert itself as a reaction to the environment and the faith it wanted to transmit.

How many people from religious milieus admit that they don't want to hear another word on religion because they have had too much of it? This raises the essential question of education in the face of the growing awareness of freedom in young people approaching adult life.

Besides, the proposal of the faith is not made in a vacuum: young people are bombarded by other proposals that come from their friends and the media. If they have not learned to choose freely, they will only escape the faith of their ancestors by falling into the clutches of fashions, advertising, slogans, fake movements and fake gurus and emirs. The real problem of teachers of religion is perhaps not that of transmitting a pre-digested and ready-to-use faith, but to help young people to develop into persons capable of adult choice, who will receive, in the hubbub welling up from our media-driven society, God's call, in the same way as it reached the first converts, as God made it resound, each day, in the intimacy of their hearts.

The role of the family, in this context, is not diminished from what it was in the past. It is different, and perhaps infinitely more important and crucial than in the past. Forming free persons, capable of resisting ideological conditioning is much more difficult than merely transmitting family traditions. If in fact there is now a crisis of the family, it may come precisely from the incapacity of many to resist a conditioning which undermines, with adults, the values of marital service and fidelity.

In the future, only those whose education will have prepared them to be non-conformist will be able to become (or remain) a believer. Only those who have enough inner freedom will be able to resist the influence of a world where the indoctrination techniques are becoming more and more efficient and clever. Believers through heritage run the risk of becoming non-believers by environmental contamination, unless they have become believers by personal choice.

### **c) Finding new forms of socialisation**

The passage from an inherited religion to a religion freely chosen is linked, for the believer, to a new way of placing oneself in relation to one's religious community.

How will it be possible to build this sense of community, to live as "Church" or as "Umma", while accepting this individualisation of belief? The desire to belong freely to a believing community does exist, but unity can no longer be built in an authoritarian way or by social pressure. We must therefore find new ways of fostering the exchange of words, consultation and the fine-tuning of one another gradually to bring about a sense of unity and a feeling of togetherness.

The temptation would be to manipulate the group in other ways: one of these, in particular, is especially dangerous. It consists in unifying the group *against* another group, provoking an identity fixation against another reality that one designates as an opponent. In certain parts of the world, we have seen new outbreaks of inter-community hatred that serve no other purpose than to weld the unity of a given group, without reviewing or building anew the ties that could unite believers who are less gullible than in the past.

In the long run, however, this kind of tactic risks emptying group membership of all meaning: indeed, very rapidly, where hatred serves as a solder, the religious identity is more and more defined by its opposition to "the other", to the detriment of the positive content of the faith.

### **d) To witness? To teach? To teach by bearing witness!**

The media, advertising and cultural exchanges of all kinds may well spread mass culture to

all the continents of the earth; the jeans and rock fashion may well seduce followers of all races and nations; nonetheless people find themselves more and more isolated in the face of the great existential choices and less and less equipped in the face of the trials of our human condition. Giving life, facing death, suffering or sickness, require an answer or a reaction that social conformity no longer suffices to provide.

Fashion and advertising impose themselves but family education and schools, churches and mosques can only ultimately propose choices and values. In critical moments, human persons find themselves alone in making their choices. But for the first time in thousands of years, these people have an *embarras du choix*: there is no single solution, no infallible system, no religion perceived as possessing all the answers; whatever some people claim,... individuals still perceive in the background other voices, other propositions, other Revelations, other Scriptures... Today, man is sceptical in the face of teachings, ideologies and messages. On the other hand, he seems avid for testimonies, confidences and memoirs... and for all things that show him how some well-known figure or other makes his essential options or choices.

For the great religions, as for all societies, teaching must become witnessing, or it will not work: *“contemporary man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, or if he listens to teachers, it is because they are witnesses”*<sup>6</sup> The religious authorities, of any religion, have frequently been wont to remind their faithful of what they should believe or do by means of declarations or “fatwas”. They speak in the name of timeless, eternal and absolute Christianity or Islam. More and more, ordinary believers refuse an “absolute” presentation of the message in which they think they perceive a confusion between the eternal Word of God and... what religious leaders, poor and rather ordinary men, think they have understood from this Word!

An idea of this kind calls upon the authorities of any religion to reflect on the way they operate. A declaration could be tinged with an element of testimony: *“What I am telling you... is what I truly believe to be an essential part of Revelation...”* Is a certain unanimity of belief lost because of this? Perhaps! In any case, one avoids the risk of proposing as the divine message a specific, human interpretation of this message, which ultimately would only be a form of idolatry. This de facto situation does not necessarily lead to theoretical relativism where everything is only subjective interpretation, but we do realise that objective truth is always received within the subjectivities that interpret it.

Old fashioned unanimity has given way to *“à la carte religion”* where all individuals recompose the content of their belief in accordance with the emergencies and needs of their own lives. The best can sometimes jostle with the worst. After a longish period of dispersion and fragmentation of beliefs, will we see a decanting and regrouping of religious choices? This should not be ruled out: history has indeed known periods of disintegration of affiliations and other times when people rallied to certain messages or certain institutions. The most urgent thing for religions, is to find a new way of proclaiming their message that reaches our contemporaries in their spiritual thirst.

### **e) To serve people and not to enslave them**

People, today, change in their idea of religion and the way they relate with their faith community. Whatever our fears as regards these changes, the aspiration to greater religious freedom should not be considered as a flat refusal to believe in God or to submit to Him.

Some, of course, live it in this way. Others – and there are many – while claiming a new autonomy in this respect oblige religious officials – clerics or ulamas – to place themselves, in turn, in a real perspective of service to their brethren. Indeed, these “new style” believers defend the authenticity of their relationship with God: they are aware that no one, no master, no guru, can stand between God and themselves to domesticate their act of faith.

In the secret dialogue God has with each human person, the “specialists” of the religious such as pastors or ulamas, cannot substitute the divine Guide or interfere. They are only servants whose advice or knowledge is sometimes sought, but whose interference is

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<sup>6</sup> General audience by Paul VI (2 October 1974) ; AAS 66 (1974), p. 568.

perceived – more and more often – as an indiscretion.

None of us is the master of the spiritual life of his brothers and sisters. Whether they set off in the same direction as us or whether they follow paths that are unknown to us, we are faced with the extraordinary freedom... of God, who guides everyone as he wills. It is He who sparks off in the heart of each individual this aspiration to do His will as fully as possible.

## **B. What is at stake for Christians?**

All we have said, so far, concerns all religious bodies, and particularly, Christians and Muslims. Does this new situation affect Christians in specific ways ?

### **1. Stripped of our props**

In formerly Christian Europe, the Church enjoys a privileged position. Its legal position may vary from one country to another, but, by and large, Christianity is still recognized by many as an important – if not central – dimension of national identity and Culture. Christian influence is felt in traditions, language, music, monuments and all levels of life in society.

We may be tempted to use all that to keep the Church influential and powerful. And yet, year after year, we discover that we, Christians, are not the owners of national Culture and identity. There are other – non-Christian – ways to be a British citizen, a French citizen, a German citizen... and this is normal and legitimate. We cannot act as if ours was the truly good way to be a citizen in our own national community. Should a Portuguese immigrant in France become culturally French to feel at home in French churches? As these cultural props are kicked from under us, we discover that our real power does not lie in human means and advantages but in the dynamism of the Holy Spirit. Is our trust really in Him? Or do we go on clinging to remnants of a glorious past?

### **2. The true meaning of evangelization**

In recent years, Catholics have been speaking of the need for a new evangelization. The word itself, traditionally, implies an attempt to transform groups or persons and turn them into Christians. Obviously, non-Christians – unbelievers or followers of other religions – have reacted strongly to such a programme. No fish enjoys being caught in fishing nets, no animal enjoys being hunted! No human being accepts becoming the target of a drive to change his (or her) identity and values.

Recently, catholic priests in France received by mail a missionary booklet inviting them to convert to Islam and leave the errors of Christianity. Many felt offended and even insulted!

But what is our true mission? Jesus does not send us to recruit the whole world in our group but to give the world... good news, the Good News. And this good news is not that they should join the Church and be obedient faithful kneeling on church pews. The good news, basically, is that *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ...not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him”* (Jn 3,16-17)

This shift of emphasis means that the Church is called by God to express a message that is offering happiness – true, lasting happiness – to the human beings we live with: *“whoever you are, God loves you... He wants your happiness... now and here... “If only you knew God’s gift to you”* (Jn 4,10). Of course, it means a real effort, on the part of the messenger to learn how this gift fits with the longings and aspirations of the people he speaks to. God sends us to meet people... where they are, and not where they should be nor where we believe they should be.

### **3. Our message is not first a doctrine,...it is an experience**

Meeting with Muslims means that, times and again, one listens to declarations that clash with our beliefs and dogmas. First and foremost comes the discussion about God: *“we*

*believe in one God, and you, Christians, speak of three persons, three gods*". For more than 14 centuries, Christians and Muslims have argued against one another on this important point of doctrine... often with complicated terms borrowed from Greek philosophy to explain that a Trinity of persons does not mean a plurality of gods. Regularly, nobody gives way to the viewpoint of the other, and no progress has been noted in mutual understanding.

This repeated failure in dialogue obliges us to re-discover our own identity in a deeper, and I believe, a truer way. For ages, Christians tried to explain the doctrine of the Trinity to Muslim partners.

But, in fact: this word "Trinity" and the dogmatic definitions about the Trinity are absent from the earliest formulations of Christian faith: the New Testament gives no doctrinal definition. These only came with the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325). What came first was experience: at Pentecost, the disciples received the Holy Spirit, they experienced His presence: He prayed in them, saying 'Abba- Daddy', they realized that: "*it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*" (Gal 2,20). Christianity spread because people "felt" God's presence in this way and taught one another how to receive that experience as a free gift. Doctrines were only defined in order to preserve the experience and not the reverse.

When meeting people of other faith, I suggest that we are not called to defend doctrinal definitions, but to bear witness to a spiritual experience which is our specific heirloom: the Trinitarian experience. When turning to God, we are caught in a dialogue that does not start with ourselves: we are filled with Christ's presence, as He turns to God calling Him 'Abba-Daddy', and we are filled with a love and tenderness given by the Spirit; we are blessed with the joy of perceiving the Father blessing us: 'you are my beloved son, my beloved daughter'. We are not meant to explain but to bear witness. Is this experiential dimension of our faith kept alive in our lives? Does it happen that some Christians never discovered it? If so, Christian-Muslim dialogue makes us discover our own, true, identity.

The same could be said about the centrality of forgiveness in Christ's preaching leading us to examine whether, in actual fact, our life is based on the free gift of salvation or on the perspective of a severe judgement. Paul's struggle concerning the choice between Law and Salvation can become part of our interfaith concerns.

#### **4. New formulations for traditional beliefs**

On questions such as those, encounter with other faiths leads us to discover that our traditional explanations fitted a world no longer existent. New Testament writings tried to explain the impact of Christ's death and resurrection on our sinful mankind, making use of categories borrowed from sacrifices, blood of victims, etc. How can Christ be shown as our Saviour to a Culture where there is no Temple and no sacrifice (in Islam, for example, even the killing of an animal, on the Great Feast, is not a sacrifice, but a simple reminder of Abraham).

One may, for instance, describe Christ as an incarnation of God's motto: "*My Mercy will always be stronger than my anger*" (Islamic tradition). Does not this sentence describe Christ's mission and His being: even on the cross, he lets God's mercy reach our violence and our sinfulness, revealing through His death and resurrection that God inaugurates in our history a new era, that of complete, free, divine pardon and that nothing we can do can change his decision.

Theologians know how many theories were devised in the past about this point of doctrine. It is possible (hopefully) to present the same truth, i.e. Christ saves us, in terms that make sense to people brought us in another religious world. Modern theologians have endeavoured to do so in the context of modern rationalism or scepticism. We must do the same in the context of the various religions present in our world.

#### **5. Changing focus**

For most of us in the clergy, work means, first, service of the Church: most of our time is spent in preparing Sunday services, preaching to parish congregations, visiting our parishioners, giving the sacraments, teaching catechists... As our numbers decrease, our work

load gets heavier. Quite naturally we tend to consider interfaith dialogue as, at best, spare time activity. It remains on the periphery of our vision.

For most of the faithful, on the contrary, interfaith encounters are becoming a central dimension of daily life. They meet the “others” at work, in the streets, the busses and the trains; young people study and relax in the same places. It is rather Church activities that remain, at best, on the periphery of their vision.

Do we realize that most of our Christian children will live their married lives in a “mixed marriage” situation? Do we prepare them for it? Or do we go on describing married life as an all-Christian affair?

Most of our Christian youth is confronted daily with questions, challenges, criticism coming from non-Christians, Muslims for instance. Does our religious instruction provide them with the necessary preparation, not in ready-made answers they could dish out like parrots, but with in-depth re-appraisal of the Christian message in relation to other faiths and ideologies?

In a word, our Church life must help the faithful live in that new, pluralistic, world, and this really needs “a programmed response” such as that offered, at the National Conference of Priests, last year, by Mgr Michael L. Fitzgerald, president of the Pontifical Council for Interfaith dialogue<sup>7</sup>. What is needed is not a collection of new tricks of our clerical trade, but a deep change of focus in our clerical outlook.

## 6. Learning from others

The Vatican Council has stressed the importance of a new relationship between the Church and the modern world. In the context of this religiously plural world, this means that we must learn from the others: the most obvious being, of course, that we try to know what they believe and practise in their religion. Our judgements on others often betray that we are abysmally ignorant of their doctrines and values.

Are we equally ignorant of the new Culture which is emerging in our cities and suburbs of Europe? New vocabulary, new accents, new values, new musical preferences, new ways of living in society... Many good Christians live in places which are not yet touched by this new world. Hymns sung in our churches may not have much likeness to the singing and dancing which forms the cultural context in which so many of our young contemporaries think and feel.

Is Christ to be preached only in middle class traditional Culture? Do the Christian send people to live and express Christ in the new context?

Finally there is a deeper way to learn: while listening to Muslims – for instance – explaining their beliefs and values, we may discover so many common points: sense of God’s presence, adoration, praise, thankfulness, humility, prayer, repentance, efforts at self-amendment, etc... that we need not attempt to set our own faith in opposition to theirs. In the line of *Nostra Aetate*, we may find, on the contrary, that their witness reminds us of God’s call as experienced in Christianity. Their witness is an incentive to us to be better believers.

If there is a purpose to interfaith dialogue, it might be that: one hopes that, at the end of our encounters, God may be loved better. Is not that the content of THE prayer left to us by Jesus: *Hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done?* This, of course goes both ways: in meeting people of other faiths, we may call one another’s attention to God’s voice as He guides each human being in the secret of his or her heart.

## 7. Loving them in God

Finally – I could have started with this – if we really believe that the Church is a sacrament, it means that the Church is born to let God’s love shine through her. If we really believe that God is – really IS – Love, our encounters with other believers are not primarily

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<sup>7</sup> “A programmed Response to Pluralism”, *Westminster Interfaith Supplement*, January 2005, 8 pp. Conference given at Digby Stuart, Roehampton, on Sept. 8<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

destined to clarify points of doctrine but to let God express His fatherly love to all of us.

Instead of talking of the struggle of Good (ourselves) against Evil (the others), instead of dividing mankind into two mansions: ours and that of war, we must dig into the sources of our faith and religious experience to re-discover our one-ness in the eyes of God.

Can our dialogue, resolutely invite our fellow-believers to spend time reflecting on the way in which God has willed each human being into existence: He loves each human person in a unique way. Should not our faith-experience invite us to forget all else and see each man or woman as the object of an extraordinary act of love on God's part? None of us should ever meet his brothers and sisters without, first, spending some time, contemplating God's love for them, God's smile over his children.

If our assemblies do not breed in us that sort of mystical imitation of God's love for human beings, what is their use? It is on that foundation alone that we will overcome the tensions and enmities existing among us.

Our encounter with others may take the form of intellectual exchanges, spiritual sharing, good neighbourliness or common action at the service of the common good. It may blossom in beautiful friendship or, lead to apparent failure. Love may lead to the Cross. We may see it as a challenge or as an opportunity – it is both. We may fear the future.

Relax – impossible though it may appear – God really wants to use us to let His love reach each of his children.

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