

Religiões e laicismo na Europa

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In my brief intervention, I would like to give some key points that seem to me important to situate the current role of religions in Europe (but in fact, not only in Europe) in a context of secularization of our societies, a phenomenon that is difficult to distinguish from the globalization currently in progress. Indeed, one cannot isolate Europe from the rest of the world, nor speak of "European religions" at the present time. For this reason, my talk will go far beyond the European territory, and will seek above all to give fundamental elements for understanding the origin and the practice of the relationships between religions - what we call "Interreligious Dialogue" - as it has been at work in the Catholic Church for about 60 years.

In today's tumultuous world of multiple crises, Pope Francis' October 3, 2020 Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti* on fraternity and social friendship points to a middle path for learning to live together with our cultural and religious diversities: "Some people attempt to flee from reality, taking refuge in their own little world; others react to it with destructive violence. Yet between selfish indifference and violent protest there is always another possible option: that of dialogue" (FT, 199). Today, as in the past, we cannot understand Europe or the world without religions. But if, in other times, religions flourished in regions relatively separated from one another, today they often find themselves in the same territory coexisting or confronting one another, because of the ever greater interactions between peoples. This is why the current globalization and the acceleration of international communications make interreligious dialogue a crucial issue.

Yet, this intuition of the dialogue that is absolutely necessary in a "complex world" (Edgar Morin) was not born today. As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, it is rooted in the ecclesiastical texts of the conciliar period, at a time when people became aware of the ineluctable rapprochement of cultures and peoples. Dialogue was then identified as a privileged tool but also, apparently, the only way that would allow people to live together, and the promotion of peace would be its standard, as

demonstrated in particular by the event of the Assisi Meeting of October 1986. But interreligious dialogue itself would have to be brutally re-worked because of the multiple fundamentalisms and wars that would bloody the world (not only Europe), afflicting a serious denial of the initial enthusiasm. It became more humble and, at the same time, more "real", forced to face concrete, even legal, questions, such as religious freedom and diplomatic relations with States.

It is good to begin by recalling the fundamental steps that led to the introduction of official interreligious dialogue into the Church's reflection, discourse and pastoral practice (*praxis*). Let us say, as a preamble, that they are intimately linked to the awareness of the unity and "interdependence [...] in the whole human family", that is to say, of the fact that, despite our differences, "we are all in the same boat", in the recent words of Pope Francis (FT, 127.30). At the opening of the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962, St. John XXIII - "the precursor of dialogue" - explicitly invited, in his inaugural address, to promote not only the unity of the human family and of all Christians, but also a unity based on "esteem and respect" for all followers of other religions (John XXIII 1962, 8.2). At the same time, a few months later, in the Encyclical *Pacem in terris*, Pope Roncalli pointed out the diversity of opinions and invited everyone to respect the dignity of each person.

Moreover, before the publication of the Encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* in 1964 - considered the *magna charta* of dialogue in its various forms - even before the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 and the proclamation of, among other things, the Declaration *Nostra aetate* on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions, in the midst of the Council, St. Paul VI created the Secretariat for Non-Christians (now the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue) with the *Motu Proprio Progrediente Concilio*, which was necessary "especially in these times of varied relations between people of every race, language and religion". This was the second stage - fundamental and institutional - of the Church's taking seriously the transformations of our societies. The specific object of the activity of this new Service in the Church will be "the religious man", whoever he may be, as Paul VI explicitly stated in his speech of 25 September 1968 to the Members and Consultors of the Secretariat: "The Secretariat must assert itself [...] in the Church as a visible and institutional sign of dialogue with non-Christians, and carry out an action that inspires, stimulates, guides,

and insofar as possible, coordinates, in this delicate terrain, where every danger of irenicism and syncretism must be prevented, and every false idea of the equal value of the various religions must be removed."

The globalization of technologies is not enough, the Council tells us; respect and fraternity are also needed. Not only material comfort and worldly facilities, but spirituality, the search for truth and for the meaning of life. But what about the Catholic Church's vision of other religions and their relationship to each other? Note that the conciliar document *Nostra aetate* is not titled, in a very significant way, "Declaration on non-Christian religions", but "Declaration on the *relation of the Church with non-Christian religions*" (*Declaratio de Ecclesiae habitudine ad religiones non-christianas*). It could also be translated: "Declaration on *the Church's way of being in relation to non-Christian religions*" (on the way of being of Christians in their relations with the followers of other religions). The most important paragraph of this Declaration is the following:

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. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (NAE 2).

Thus, the document emphasizes the requirement of "respect" for what "is true and holy" in other religions. However, we should immediately add, based on other parts of the Declaration, that this respect should not only concern what "is true and holy" but should also characterize *the attitude* towards other believers themselves, in a new European and world context, and this is the major insistence of the document in its first and last paragraph. This message of *Nostra aetate* remains current, as Pope Francis will recall on October 28, 2015, during the Interreligious General Audience on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the promulgation of the conciliar declaration: the growing interdependence of peoples, the human search for meaning in life, the common origin and common destiny of humanity, the oneness of the human family, the importance of religions as searches for God or the Absolute, the Church's benevolent and attentive gaze upon religions, the respect and esteem of believers of all religions, the openness to dialogue with all and the fidelity to Christ on the part of the Church, all of this concerns each one of us, and "religious man" in particular, with whom the Church is eager to enter into relationship.

Another important point is that by paying attention to what the "other", in a context of increasing globalization, has in common with Christians, dialogue has introduced into the conscience and practice of the Church a new way of looking at people who do not share the Church's faith. The other is no longer an "object of mission", as the old missiology treatises considered, but a *subject* to whom I address myself in order to form a wider "we":

In other words, we passed from the abstract to the concrete, from the essential to the existential, from abstract indifference to living relations of solidarity. Suddenly, all the theological debates on non-Christians in the theses on *De salute infidelium*, *De possibilitate rationali cognoscendi Deum*, *De vera religione*, in which non-Christian religions were studied only to demonstrate their falsity, appeared insufficient. The Declaration *Nostra aetate*, on these religions, expressed itself in terms of sympathy, existential and personalist, emphasizing the common ground of humanity from which they proceed (Pietro Rossano).

The political and social changes of the years 1940-1965, especially decolonization in all the countries with a non-Christian majority in Africa and Asia, certainly had an impact on this ecclesial reorientation. But one should not underestimate the emergence of a new, more dialogical way of thinking that emphasized the person and man as *subject*, which for too long had been sacrificed in European culture to the impersonal systems of idealism, marxism, neopositivism and nihilism:

The introduction of "dialogue" into the Church caused something comparable to the breaking of a dam. There was the impression of a new beginning, which started on the ruins of a colonial world and mentality. It was the end of the Eurocentric era: new horizons were opening up for the Church's mission in the world, especially with regard to the great religions (Rossano).

So much so that Paul VI, in his opening address to the 1974 Synod on Evangelization in the Modern World, declared that non-Christian religions should no longer be considered as rivals or obstacles to evangelization, but as places of lively and respectful interest, and even "of future and already begun friendship". In this sense, the mission was rapidly undergoing its *aggiornamento*, ridding itself of its colonial mentality marked by anthropological pessimism and monoculturalism in which non-Christians were considered pagans, idolaters or infidels. The nature and style of the Church's evangelizing mission could no longer do without dialogue, with the theological consequences that this new mentality implied: "The Council had the courage to make a positive judgment not only, as did Vatican I, on man's

capacity to know God, but on religious experience and on the response that man gives to it, in fact, in the various societies that we know" (Joseph Goetz, SJ)

This is what we must remember: all the traditional holy activities of the Church - called evangelization, mission, witness, teaching, catechesis - are called today, in our context, to be carried out in a "style of dialogue", that is to say, in a fraternal way, respectful and attentive to what the Spirit of God makes the Christian understand in his encounter with the religious or non-religious "other". What are the privileged themes of people who have integrated dialogue into their way of being and living? For the religious person, they are of course prayer, but above all peace, then freedom, the promotion of human rights, truth and justice in social relations, the spiritual horizon of mankind, the abolition of violence, solidarity, preferential love for the poor, the safeguarding of the environment and the sobriety of life. Because of the coming together and the mixing of cultures, it is first and foremost the question of living together, of peace, which will concentrate all the efforts of the different believers to respond to the temptation of withdrawal, of fear and of the violence that the encounter with the unknown other provokes, in the first instance. In reality, interreligious dialogue and the search for peace in our current context are so linked that it is difficult to imagine separating them.

Hence the World Days of Prayer for Peace in Assisi from 1986. We even speak of the "spirit of Assisi" to underline the conviction that religions are called, in a special way, to cooperate with all people of good will (that is, also with non-believers) to consolidate peace in the world. Religions, precisely because of the relationship with the Divinity that they promote and cultivate, can and must facilitate the encounter and understanding between people, even if they come from different cultures, traditions and philosophies, especially in our increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-confessional societies. At the dawn of the year 2000, John Paul reiterated during the concluding ceremony of the Interreligious Assembly of October 28, 1999, also in Assisi, that it is the "duty" of men of faith to show that religions are not the obstacle that prevents humanity from living in peace, that any use of religion to support violence is an "abuse" of it. "Religion and peace go together: to wage war in the name of religion is a blatant contradiction. Religious leaders must clearly show that they are pledged to

promote peace precisely because of their religious belief." The task ahead, then, will be to promote a "culture of dialogue".

Insofar as our world and our European societies are increasingly marked by a greater cultural pluralism and are constantly on the move, the coming years will see the Church commit herself even more to respond to the great challenge of dialogue. This will become the "grammar" of human coexistence today and tomorrow, where, as *Nostra aetate* already said, it will be a matter of looking attentively at our common humanity and the demands of fraternity. And because transformations often lead to violence, believers have the responsibility to pray and work together for peace. The mere presence of diverse believers in the same territory and their participation in society and in public debate reminds us that "man does not live by bread alone". Moreover, the conviction of the promoters of dialogue is that the exclusion of religion and spirituality from the public domain, as well as religious fundamentalism, prevent a true encounter between people, and their collaboration for the progress of humanity.

Believers, while remaining faithful to their religious convictions and without falling into irenicism, have the vocation to dedicate themselves to a sincere, humble and frank dialogue with the followers of other religious traditions, in order to eliminate intolerance and misunderstanding. In a fragmented world like ours, in the face of the many conflicts that disfigure our humanity, they know - and especially the Christians - that another logic is possible. As Pope Francis said to the Roman Curia on December 21, 2017:

"The only alternative to the civility of encounter is the incivility of conflict" (*Address to Participants at the International Peace Conference, Al-Azhar Conference Centre, Cairo, 28 April 2017*). Dialogue is grounded in three fundamental lines of approach: The duty to respect one's own identity and that of others, the courage to accept differences, and sincerity of intentions. The duty to respect one's own identity and that of others, because true dialogue cannot be built on ambiguity or a willingness to sacrifice some good for the sake of pleasing others. The courage to accept differences, because those who are different, either culturally or religiously, should not be seen or treated as enemies, but rather welcomed as fellow-travelers, in the genuine conviction that the good of each resides in the good of all. Sincerity of intentions, because dialogue, as an authentic expression of our humanity, is not a strategy for achieving specific goals, but rather a path to truth, one that deserves to be undertaken patiently, in order to transform competition into cooperation.

Because we need to think and live another new and creative logic of relationships between people of different traditions, we all need a change of mentality. This is what Christians are invited to do, thanks to the current reflection on the Educational Pact and synodality, in the light of the latest documents of the Church, from *Pacem in terris* to *Fratelli tutti*.